

Racism and Prejudice

- responding to colour and culture

PERSONAL TESTIMONIES¹

Maria Emmanuel²

Some years ago I was interviewed for the post of head teacher at a South London inner-city, multicultural primary school. Fourteen months previously the school had failed an OFSTED inspection and was now considered to be a failing school and in need of 'Special Measures' to secure its improvement.

The school had been without a substantive head teacher for ten months, as the head teacher for the previous four years had retired, exhausted and extremely demoralised, after what we all thought was a harsh and unfair judgment by OFSTED. By the time the head teacher retired, I had been deputy at the school for approximately seven months. The school's governors had advertised for a new head teacher, but their endeavours to find someone to lead the school had proved to be unsuccessful. Morale was low and it was proving to be a very difficult time for all who were connected with the school.

Throughout this time, I tried to remain optimistic and felt sure that eventually God would find the right person to lead the school. I had not reckoned that that person would be me! When I finally applied for the post, it was only after months of refusing to entertain the notion that others had put to me, that I, could actually be the new leader of this school.

I took up my position as the new head teacher just two months before the school was reinspected by OFSTEAD and removed from the list of failing schools. We no longer required Special Measures, but far from being the end of a long and tortuous journey this, I soon came to realise, was only just the beginning.

When I qualified as a teacher, I never in my wildest dreams imagined that 11 years later I would be a head teacher. Nor could I have imagined the route that would take me there.

My schooldays were dogged with a deep sense of doubt and low self-esteem. My time at secondary school, in particular, was peppered with the memories of put-downs and insults from various teachers. I had an art teacher who once told me that I 'should go and swing on the trees like my friends and relatives the monkeys'. And why was I spoken to in this way? Because I had been talking in class. I had a careers teacher who, when at the age of 15 I told him that I wanted to be nursery nurse, told me that I was not clever enough and that I should aim for something a little less demanding. Then there was my A-level English teacher who accused me of being unable to speak English properly, when I was asked to read a passage from Shakespeare. I also had a chemistry teacher who, one parents' evening, told my mother that it was a fluke that I'd got over 60% in a test and that I would fail my O-level. I did.

¹ Shared in the late 1990's

² All the names have been changed



In fact, whenever I achieved well, it seemed to come as a surprise to most of my teachers. I soon rose to their expectation of underachievement and never really achieved anything other than mediocre while I was at secondary school.

After my A-levels I chose to study for a BEd at a College of Higher Education, as I did not believe that I had the mental capability to study at either a university or a polytechnic.

My four years away from home proved to be definitive in reshaping and changing my character. I again faced prejudice and racism, from a variety of quarters, but I was strengthened and encouraged by the new friendships and relationships that were formed during that time.

There were few black students and even fewer black lecturers, but we all had common experiences and personal histories, which we gladly shared with one another. Our stories, painful but true, inspired and strengthened our corporate and individual resolve to succeed, even though at times it felt as though all the odds were stacked against us!

I left college with an upper second BEd [Hons] degree. My first teaching post was at a primary school, on the frontline of Brixton, South London – an area that, a few years before, had been the focal point for civil disruption and unrest, the effects of which were still very much in evidence in this small, inner-city primary school. A year later I moved on to my second teaching post in Brixton. I remained at this school for a further two-and-a-half years. Then, I moved to the other South London. I hated it.

I had been appointed to the school as a section 11 teacher. My main responsibility was to help raise the standards of achievement for the African Caribbean children in the school. The school was over 90% black, yet many of the black children were failing dismally.

I was made less than welcome by the majority white staff and the majority black children. Staff were often openly hostile towards me. Children too, taking their lead, showed me little respect. My first year was indeed a very lonely, desperate and miserable time.

A year later, two black students joined the school for an eight-week teaching practice. Both experienced the prejudice and racism that I had faced for approximately a year or so. However, their presence marked a clear turning point for the history of the school and its pupils and indeed the friendship of one was to prove to be an integral part of God's plan for my life and teaching career.

Four years later the school advertised for a deputy head. By this time I was leading the infant department and had completed an MA in Education. Despite these achievements, I still had doubts about my own capabilities and strengths. Many of the staff [a number of the old staff had either retired or left] and personal friends encouraged me to apply for the post. But I had never viewed myself as management material and, furthermore, there was another member of staff who I knew desperately wanted the position. Nina [not her real name] had taught at the school for approximately five years and had been acting deputy twice. She had also been the main instigator of the hostility and prejudice that others and I new to the school had faced.

For a while I struggled with the idea of applying for the post and wrestled with what many of my friends said was God's obvious leading for my life. However, there was one particular Bible passage that was given to me by a friend that I could not shake off and today, I have learnt to accept it as God's will for my life: Joshua 1:1-9.

'After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord said to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant: "Moses my servant is dead. Now then, you and all these people, get ready to cross the Jordan River into the land I am about to give them – to the Israelites. I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. Your territory will extend from the desert to the Lebanon, and from the great river, the Euphrates – all the Hittite country to the Great Sea on the west. No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you: I will never leave you nor forsake you. Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their forefathers to give them. Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be wherever you go." '

When I first read it, I cried and thought God couldn't possibly mean this for me. Yet in the midst of all the confusion, it seemed quite clear that God was saying to me, 'I want *you* to lead these people' [i.e. the children in the school]. However, at the time, I still did not realise that God intended me to lead as head teacher and not just as deputy.

Three years later, after having held the position of deputy for two years, I am now the head teacher. One of the students, who worked at the school, is now my assistant head. God really does 'move in mysterious ways his wonders to perform'; Together we have moved from the 'bottom of the pile' to the top and we are both now in a position to make a real difference to the lives of the children who attend the school.

However, despite all that has gone before, I feel that for the staff, the children, and myself, the real journey to the mountaintop has only just begun.

Isobel Adebayo

I was born in South West England to Nigerian parents. The fifth of six children in my family, I was only the second out of the three who were actually born in England. I have four sisters and one poor brother, the eldest. My father came to England in the mid-1960s having won an engineering scholarship from British Rail. My mother followed shortly, leaving my two eldest sisters and my brothers in Nigeria with relatives. They found a very cool welcome on arrival in the U.K. Luckily they had church contacts from Nigeria who helped them to settle in and they became members of a link church locally. By the time I was born there were only a small number of black people in our town and to my parents' knowledge we were the only African family living there. My father was very anxious that his children should be well educated and his hope was that we all should return 'home' and



settle back in Nigeria eventually. Both my parents worked hard to try and fulfil this goal. My early childhood memories were happy ones. It was great being in a big family, and we also lived in a very multicultural street. Our neighbours were Italian, Polish, Indian and English. We used to go for adventure trips to the local parks, armed with bottles of diluted orange squash and paper bags full of pear drops and cough candy. By 'adventure' we meant crawling through the hedgerow to sneakily watch the local cricket matches and bowls; or playing 'hide and seek' in the large park that backed onto the local football ground opposite our homes.

However, growing up as a black person was very far from an idyllic country upbringing. A lot of our English neighbours were very unhappy about the presence of Caribbean, African and Asian families in what they saw as 'their' street. Their children, who had no qualms about repeating the racist remarks made by their parents behind close doors to our faces, frequently reminded us of this. 'My mum says black people come from the jungle', 'My dad says I shouldn't play with black people because they're dirty.' It was like a never-ending public information system blurting out every time we ventured outside the back gate. Some of our neighbours took great delight in coming out of their back gardens to remind us in colourful language that we didn't belong and that we should go back to our own country. Walking down the street we were stared at by the adults, and often a passing car would wind down its window and some delightful soul would shout out, 'Nig-nog', 'Black sambo', or some other charming term they had picked up from so-called television shows. The fact that these programmes were subtly mocking and deriding people who behaved this way totally escaped them.

School was to be more of the same; especially junior school. Out of a school of 240 there were only about 20 non-white children. That was an awful lot compared to the rest of the local schools. Fortunately I had an elder sister. But unfortunately this did not deter us from being constantly subject to racial abuse. The fact that we were African and not Caribbean made our predicament worse. There seemed to be a distinction made to our detriment. We were called 'natives' and 'monkeys'. Even children who we considered our friends would ask us if we lived in huts, if we ate with our fingers, did we eat bananas for dinner, why was our hair funny, why did we have 'rubber lips' and 'wire wool air', why were we 'shit-coloured'. I always had to justify my difference and explain everything about myself. Sometimes I feel that not much has changed in that respect. If it weren't for our small multiracial groups of friends, our school life would have been totally unbearable.

In the true tradition of most non-white parents at that time, our parents refused to act on our behalf. When we complained to teachers we were told we were too sensitive, or that it didn't matter, or worse still that we were lying and should stop making up stories. Some of our teachers were worse than the children. My father was finally moved to complain when the school suggested that my two eldest sisters who had arrived in the country with English as definitely a second language be sent to a special school. A similar suggestion was put to him when I started getting into fights with fellow pupils who were racially taunting me. People not wanting to hold your hand in circle games or sit next to you in class were a daily occurrence. Most painful for me at junior school was the fact that their parents told my close white and Chinese friends that they were not allowed to invite my sister or me to their birthday parties. We knew why and I think we felt acutely the embarrassment of our friends as they tried to justify this by saying they had too many people coming already.

Another bad time for us was during the screening of the TV series, *Roots*. Far from alerting people to the horrors and injustice of slavery, it seemed to incite adults and children alike to hurl more racist insults. I was hardly ever called by my first name for the duration of its screening. I was 'Kunta Kinte' or 'Chicken George' or some other character who had suffered a whipping the night before on the telly. But the series helped me. At the age of eight I spent most of my break times articulating to my peers that a native was actually someone who lived in their own country, that slavery was something that white people should be ashamed about and that I was proud that I was African. For the first time I wasn't ashamed of my African surname, because I knew it belonged to my family and had not been given to them by a slave owner.

As I grew older and developed stronger relationships with my peers I coped better with school. My sister and I did very well academically. We were in the orchestra at junior school and represented the school as part of a quintet in county-wide recorder competitions. We also played the violin and were good at sport. We earned respect and more and more of our white friends began to stick up for us and fight our battles.

By the time I was a teenager my parents had split up and my dad actually returned to Nigeria with half of the family. I lived with my mother. However, I spent one year in Nigeria at grammar school. I always remember the sense of relief. No one stared at me walking down the street. I didn't have to explain my colour, hair, food or surname. For the first time I was in a culture where people talked about black people as being beautiful. My teachers, the minister at church, politicians, doctors, university lecturers and bank managers – they were all black people and they were respected and listened to and not asked to continually justify their standing. At school it didn't come as big surprise that I did well to my teachers, as we were all expected to do well. It was while in Nigeria that all my sisters and I became committed Christians. It was a life-changing experience. All of my sisters and I returned to England to live with our mother.

We joined a local Elim Pentecostal church. We were all very strong in our faith and had greatly bolstered self-confidence. However, we found attending church often wearisome. My sisters had been involved in leadership and worship in our church in Nigeria. But at this church they always managed to find an excuse for not letting them take part. To all our annoyance the people at church, some of whom I attended school with, developed group amnesia when it came to remembering our names. We were just called the Adebayos. Conversation with us was always limited to the weather or food or our hair. The only time our presence seemed valued was during the yearly missionary focus when the pastor took great delight in asking all those people who came from another country to come and stand up at the front. Despite the fact that I was born in England and had spent all but 10 months of my life in that town, we were expected to join the parade. I remember a feeling of dread during Sunday evening services as I waited for the worship leader to say, 'Here's a song which all you from warmer climates will really enjoy', as the worship group started to play, 'Oh, give thanks to the Lord', or some other chorus in calypso style.

Not surprisingly, I couldn't wait to leave town. My eldest sister was at university in London and my brother was living in Sheffield. I got good grades in my A-levels and started a BA Hons in Geography at the University of London. I can still remember the youth group leader's face when I told him my A-level results. He seemed not to have computed the fact



that I had been studying A-levels even though I attended the youth group every Friday. He asked me not to tell everyone at church because some others hadn't done as well as expected and it would upset them. I felt very hurt. There was a tradition of sending people off to university or any study course with a big fuss.

At university I became part of a vibrant Christian union. We were very pro-active and I made many enduring friendships during that time. But despite being obviously intelligent enough to have been accepted on my BA course, I still felt I was always being asked to justify my presence. I was the only black student in the whole department. My personal tutor was my biggest obstacle. He was very young – in his late twenties. His first words to me were, 'Why aren't you doing social policy instead of geography? –an observation that was not wasted on me since the majority of the non-white students at the time were actually studying social policy. He proceeded to give me awful grades for all my assignments and to ridicule me in tutorials. On return from my Christmas break he told me I was heading for a third and should think about changing courses. I set out to prove him wrong. Luckily my academic tutor was very encouraging and he together with the course academic adviser who had actually worked in Nigeria convinced me that I had what it took to succeed. I left university with an upper second BA Hons in Geography. My personal tutor's parting words to me were, 'You will always be hindered by your writing; your English is terrible, it will always let you down.'

I am now assistant head teacher at a primary school. It is my second career move as I worked for the General Medical Council as a manager for three years before completing a one-year PGCE in primary education. I then became acting deputy, an irony that was not lost on me as I had experienced terrible racism from staff members at the school four years previously as a teaching-practice student at the same school. I believe it is no accident that I have ended up working in an inner-city majority black school with a black Headteacher. It was a fluke that led me to the school as a student, but having met her during that trying time and realising we were both committed Christians, we had both spoken of a dream where she and I would have our own school one day. She would be the head and I the deputy, in a place where all children would be protected from the evil that is racism and every single child would be given the opportunity to succeed. That dream came true. My first teaching job was at another school in, but I was drawn back to the other school. Things are very different at the school now for the children and the staff. We know that as black managers we are under close scrutiny and that, as usual, we have to doubly justify our positions of authority. We believe that we are just at the start of an exciting journey, which God is clearly at the helm of.

I attend an independant church in Southeast London, along with a significant group of friends who attended my university. They have become almost a second family to me and are very supportive. It is a multicultural church and is pro-active within the local community.

Emma Skerrit

I am the mother of two daughters, and grandmother to a 7-year-old grandson. I have lived in the UK for well over 30 years, spending all my adult life 'so far' here. This testimony has provided me with the opportunity to acknowledge what God has done for me over the years. The person that I am now is who I have become through the experiences and



encounters I have had, whether those experiences were positive or negative. Things I have learnt, and discoveries I have made I believe were ones I was supposed to make in spite of the pain and disappointments these events attracted.

Had my life gone the way I had planned it I am sure I would not be doing this now. I remember telling my mother at about the age of four that I wanted to be a nurse. She'd told me about the nurses who cared for her while she had a spell in hospital. I decided then that I wanted to be like those who cared for my much-loved mother and send people back to their loved ones too. I followed this decision through and at the age of 18 I went into nurse's training in Leeds. This is where the adage, 'Man proposes, God disposes', became real for me. Personal circumstances dictated that I left before my training was completed, and my life took a different direction, forking many times; and I now know, leading me to where I am now and in the future, where God wants me to be.

I was born in Jamaica, the first of two daughters. My mother, who was a Christian, died when I was five years old and my sister only two. Her sisters, who were and still are strong Christians themselves, stepped in and took us in, while our father sorted himself out. His way of doing this was to sell all his property and emigrate to England, where he intended to make a new start. We attended church as part of the traditions and expectations of the family. In fact, I became sick of going to church and as soon as I came to the UK I stopped. Bible-reading was a regular activity in our household, and strong discipline the order of the day both at home and school.

Jamaica is one of the many ex-slave colonies that Britain owned. I was nine years old when Jamaica gained its independence from Britain. However, for many, the ideologies of superiority and inferiority of the races still held sway; independence did not bring with it psychological freedom from slavery. Self-deprecation and a sense of inferiority in relation to our race or our past was an integral part of the traditions and customs in the Jamaica of my childhood. Jamaicans still looked to Britain as the mother country.

My family placed strong emphasis on education in order to 'make something of oneself'. I attended an all-age school, which took in post-infants and let them go at 18 years old. The system expected all to succeed. Those who were more able were encouraged to strive for further excellence, and to help those who were struggling in their class. Children were moved up to higher levels according to their ability and not according to their ages. Teachers' expectations matched those of our parents, who themselves expected us to do well in school; and our teachers took this as a challenge. This challenge bore fruit in my obtaining a full scholarship when I was 13 years old. However, as my sister and I were in the process of coming to England to join our father, it was decided to forego the place, and for the next few months I was placed in the class of 16-year-olds preparing for their Junior Cambridge Exams.

I celebrated my 14th birthday two months after coming to the UK. My father immediately enrolled us into school; my sister in the local primary school, and myself in the local secondary modern, girl's school. I was placed in the lowest form for my age group without assessing my ability. The assumption was that, being black and coming from a British, black colony where the education system was inferior, my level of achievement would be lower; and on this basis I was placed in the remedial class. I was very frustrated in that class. Another girl – who'd come from St Kitts a few months before me – and myself,

would complete all the classwork and start to talk to each other; we were both far ahead of others in most subjects. Homework would be completed within half an hour of reaching home. After completing one such homework I was asked by my teacher the next day, 'Emma Skerrit who did your homework for you?' I explained that I did it myself; there was no one at home who could help as I lived with my father and younger sister. I will always be grateful to that teacher. What she immediately did I was only able to grasp many years later, when I began to understand what had happened. She immediately left the room and consulted with the deputy head to arrange for my friend and I to be assessed. We were surprised to find, a few days later, that we were moved straight to the top, exam class – at that time the school only did CSEs. The lack of expectation and assumption of the futility of any aspirations I might have had did not end, however. One year later when I asked the same deputy head what qualifications I needed to become a doctor, her reply was, 'You can't be a doctor, so it's no use me telling you.' Again it was years later when I understood the assumptions in her statement.

As an adult, there have been areas in work and education where insidious racism and prejudice impacted my life and that of my children. I began to understand the ideology of racism and discrimination and to learn how to deal with it. I first had to educate myself. I needed to do this in order to progress, and to help my children progress. The urgency of this was demonstrated to me when my then 6-year-old daughter came home and told me that she never want to go to Africa because Africans live in trees. I was horrified to hear this from her and asked where she had got this information; she responded that her teacher had told her. What further added to my concern was that my attempt to put her right was met with resistance, because she believed in her teacher. It took me a long time to convince her that her teacher was totally wrong.

At the age of 22, I began to realise that black people wrote books, were inventors and history-makers, and positive role models. I learnt, for example, that before Florence Nightingale there was Mary Seacole, a black doctor from Jamaica, who served in the Crimea and whose work history makers ignore in favour of Florence Nightingale. I learnt also that the pioneer of blood transfusion was a black American, Dr Charles Drew, who died for want of blood transfusion in 1950 in front of a hospital in America; he was denied entry and treatment because he was black and the hospital was designated for whites only.

I had to teach my children these things, as there were no visible role models for them to look up to. I found books for us to read and become informed. On one occasion I was able to facilitate my youngest daughter's school project when she was asked to produce some work on a famous person. I encouraged her to do this on Mary Seacole in order to educate and encourage her contemporaries and her teacher.

My developing awareness stimulated my vigilance to prevent my children being short-changed in their education. The assumptions about black children's inherent inability to learn and achieving only at a limited level still persisted when they were going to school. For many it is still the case. Many children of immigrants failed because parents assumed that teachers had the same high expectations of them as they did in their home country. In the 1960s and 1970s there was a lot of talk about 'coloured children', as they were termed then, being sent to special schools. Parents thought that this was a good thing to be

happening to their children. They did not understand that children were labelled 'educationally backward' and were therefore being set up to be failures.

My 5-year-old daughter was labelled 'backward' and I was told she would be sent to a special school. I challenged this; not because I understood what going to a special school meant – I did not know then that special school was for those who were deemed to be educationally subnormal – but that I knew that she could read. I could read; I had taught her to read; she read at home regularly. However, she was extremely shy and found it difficult to read in front of the class. Additionally, she was afraid of the teacher who often told off other children in the class when they made mistakes.

My insistence that my child was a competent reader fell on deaf ears, and I was also made to feel that my own ability was called into question. I refused to give permission for my child to be sent away; and I was incensed at their temerity in assuming that they knew more about my child than I did. In the end it was suggested that an education psychologist see my daughter. I made sure that I was present when this took place and on the day of the test I took my youngest with me. We were placed in a room with the psychologist. My daughter played with her sister in the room, she felt safe and confident. The test went smoothly, after which the psychologist commented, 'I cannot find anything wrong with her. Why was she sent for assessment?' I removed my child from that school, and kept a watchful eye on my children's development.

I made myself known to all their teachers, and asked to be kept informed about their progress outside of parent-teacher's evening. At high school I was constantly told that my eldest was doing well when I asked about her progress, but she was not. It was only when I asked if her doing well meant well in terms of what a black child was expected to achieve, or well in comparison to the expectation she had of the white children in her class, that I was told, 'Actually she can do much better than she's doing at present, she needs to show more effort.' My response was to comment that my daughter was showing as much interest in her work as the teacher showed in her accomplishing anything. Furthermore her work was not checked, and she had nothing to gauge how much she was learning and progressing. She was not encouraged or stimulated towards excellence. Additionally, she was kept in a lower stream for English. I questioned this and was told that was her determined level. My insistence that she be moved up was met with constant resistance, and I was told that if she was placed in the O-level class against their advice I will have to pay for her taking the exam. I insisted on knowing the textbooks she was working from and bought them to ensure that she worked at home. She took the mock exams and passed. Her head of year told me this 'was a fluke'.

Throughout my experiences there have been those who exerted positive influences as much as those who demonstrated negative ones. We tend to remember those who have hurt us, who have exerted their power over us through their prejudicial actions. As God's people we need to acknowledge those who did not pre-judge, but interacted in a fair and equal manner. They deserve to be acknowledged, and serve as examples to encourage other teachers to keep the spark and enthusiasm in all children.

That teacher did this for me when she realised that my potential was being stifled and arranged that I was moved out of her remedial class.



My eldest daughter's teacher in middle school – challenged her to test her knowledge in history and English; and in high school the teacher who encouraged her to follow her dream and strive to achieve her best, did this. She is now a webmaster, writing and designing Web pages. This is the individual who would have been sent to a school for the educationally subnormal.

The teacher who recognised my youngest daughter's voracious appetite for books during primary school, and fed her with many stimulating reading materials during the long summer holidays. Her RE teacher in high school who, "made the subject interesting for me, made me think and encouraged me to always push myself to the limits of my ability". She is now working as a computer applications support specialist.

These are some of those who demonstrated aspects of God's character, although they may not know it. They were instrumental in encouraging growth and development in the ability of my children and myself. I am sure they have also positively impacted others.

DEFINITIONS AND TERMS

When looking at issues related to racism and prejudice it is important that everyone involved in the discourse has a common vocabulary, an agreed set of terms and definitions that are understood by all.

Prejudice

Prejudice means prejudging: making up your mind about someone or something when you have not considered the facts or the evidence. As one of the definitions of racism, Jody Miller Shearer, in *Enter the River* (1994), confirms that there is a difference between racism and prejudice; furthermore, these terms are 'frequently used interchangeably in a variety of settings'. She defines prejudice as 'an opinion, thought, or feeling based on assumptions made about an individual without getting to know him or her'.

Race

Many would say there is only one race – the human race – and there should be no compromise with those who want to speak of different races. Race is a political category rather than a biological one. However, Charles Husband argues that:

'When we operate with 'race categories' based on colour we evoke imagery with centuries of meaning which taps notions of purity, sexuality and Christian virtue dating to at least Elizabethan England, and notions to superiority embedded in centuries of British Colonial rule. It is the many interconnections with important values and beliefs existing in other domains of individuals' lives that make race thinking so tenacious.' (*Race in Britain*, 1982)

Racism

Racism is a belief that human groups can be validly grouped on the basis of their biological traits and that these identifiable groups inherit certain mental, personality and



cultural characteristics that determine their behaviour. Racism, however, is not merely a set of beliefs but is practised when a group has the power to enforce laws, institutions and norms based on its beliefs, which oppress and dehumanise another group [Banks, 1984b]. Racism exists in various forms; it can be personal, overt or institutional. Jody Miller Shearer supports this view, and adds further that:

‘Prejudice is only part of racism. The second part is power. In other words, racism is equal to race prejudice plus power. The effects of race prejudice, regardless of who holds it, create damage. Without power behind it, however, the damage is limited and immediate. Racism is far more pervasive, backed up by immense institutions and fuelled by often unexamined assumptions.’

Institutional racism

Institutional racism occurs when structures exist within institutions that suppress and subordinate individuals and groups with particular characteristics. David Haslam informs that this ‘can be observed in the effects of a combination of historical inequalities and an ideology of racial superiority – either covert or overt – which between them result in particular ethnic groups being discriminated against both in the opportunities offered and the sanctions operated within a given society’.

The Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) says that it arises when ‘an organisation’s structures, policies or practices result in members of ethnic minority groups being treated unfairly, often without intention or knowledge’.

The McPher - published after the inquiry into the death of black teenager Stephen Lawrence (1993) - calls it, ‘The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin’.

Anti-racism

This concept, which is primarily British, but is to some extent Canadian, describes a process used by educators to eliminate institutionalised racism from the school and society and to help individuals to develop non-racist attitudes. In the anti-racist educational reform movement in the UK, institutionalised racism is a primary focus, although race awareness workshops and training, which focus on individual racism, are also parts of this concept.

Ethnic minority

Ethnic minority groups are usually distinguished from an ethnic majority group by unique physical and/or cultural characteristics ‘which make them convenient targets of racism and discrimination, and by having little political or economic power within society. Ethnic minority groups are usually a numerical majority within their societies’.

Assimilation

Assimilation takes place when one ethnic or cultural group acquires the behaviour, values, perspectives, ethos and characteristics of another cultural or ethnic group and sheds its



own cultural characteristics. When assimilation takes place, the group completely loses its original culture. An individual as well as a group can experience the process of assimilation. An important question to ask, however; is: is it right that the culture and identity of a group be absorbed or subsumed by another?

Political correctness

'I am not aware of any evidence that the dominant national politics of Britain since 1981 has acknowledged the powerful phenomenon of institutional racism in our society or has set out to eradicate it from structures, policies, practices and processes and therefore achieve genuine racism-free organisations. Where such attempts have been made, these have been done against a background of hostile national context. In the case of a local authority or a school or college they would be condemned as "loony, or politically correct".'

(Sir Herman Ousley, CRE)

Being politically correct has, to a great extent, become a byword for the ridiculous, and therefore has taken away the important issue of using terms which carry with them positive focus for minority communities.

CAUSES OF RACISM

Sources

David Haslam, writing in his book *Race for the Millennium: A Challenge to Church and Society*, provides an excellent commentary on the causes and fruits of racism in British society. We have drawn on his writing, and those of numerous other commentators on the racial justice issue, to provide a much-needed overview of the seeds of racism in Britain today.

Haslam suggests that there are two main causes of racism: The macroeconomic [which can be traced back to slavery and colonisation] and the psychological. In reality, the psychological damning and the relegation to inferior status of a race developed out of the economic necessity of having slaves, and served as justification for the system of enslavement.

Historical Causes

The roots of British (and US) racism lie firmly embedded in the history of slavery and colonialism.

□ The Slave Trade

English and American racism was born of greed. It is important to recognise the sheer extent of the slave trade, its immense cruelty, the riches and wealth it created from human suffering, the foundation it laid for British industrial development and the justification for it by all social institutions – including the church.



Documented evidence shows that black people have been present in Britain since Roman times, when they formed part of the troops in the Roman forces of occupation. Their numbers were still very small. However, the significant growth in the numbers of black people in Britain commenced in 1555, when a wealthy London merchant and alderman first brought Africans to Britain as visitors to be displayed. African slaves were brought into Britain from 1571, although evidence suggests that they were only bought and sold in Britain from 1621. The slave trade would last for nearly 300 years and it would lead to both the untimely death, and the subjection to a life of immense suffering, of over 15 million African slaves. This number included approximately 1.5 million who died during transportation through harsh treatment, or being thrown overboard.

The cruelty and human suffering created by the slave trade was staggering; as African slaves were systematically crammed into British-built slave ships, shackled together in irons for the tortuous journey from West Africa to the West Indies and America. It was common for over half the slaves – men, women and children alike – to die during transportation in inhumane conditions, which we would not tolerate for livestock today.

The suffering did not end there. On arrival they were sold to slave owners who had no qualms when it came to wrenching apart families. Conditions on the sugar, tobacco and cotton plantations on which they were to work were brutal. Slave owners saw it as economically more viable to work slaves to exhaustion with little food, replacing them with new slaves when they died, rather than feeding and treating them well, so that they lived into old age [Haslam, 1996]. The price for those who tried to resist was torture or death. Thumbscrews, neck braces with inward protruding spikes, the use of castration, amputation of limbs, the throwing of slaves into vats of boiling cane juice, the murdering of children who were often considered a nuisance, rape and, of course, lynching were all considered legitimate tools in the practice of the slave trade. Family units were discarded, the women were raped, Children of slaves were born enslaved; and in some instances, stud farms were set up using the strongest and fittest male and female slaves. A visit to the Museum of Slavery, in Liverpool's Dockland, will provide ample physical evidence of these practices to anyone in any doubt.

The wealth of the port cities of Bristol, Liverpool and Cardiff were founded on the profits of the slave trade and its associated industries, including shipbuilding, and fired the development of the Industrial Revolution. The trade created vast employment opportunities and would significantly increase the riches and wealth of many individuals and the standard of living for British people as a whole. Britain abolished the slave trade in 1807, but the slaves had to wait until 1833 before they were granted their freedom. The now ex-slaves were turned loose to fend for themselves, while the already rich and powerful landowners were compensated for the loss of their enforced labour. Additionally, instead of employing and paying the now freed slaves, indentured labour was brought in from the Far East, which further disenfranchised the ex-slaves, making it even more difficult for them to survive. The ideology and practices of Britain have lived on in its attitude towards its many colonies and peoples.

□ Colonialism

In the 1700s Britain set out to build an empire. Africa, Asia, Australia and the Americas were being carved up by European powers, which claimed them as their sovereign



territories. The prize was the rich supply of raw materials, cheap labour and slave labour, which Britain and its European neighbours exploited freely to support their own industrial development. The question that begs to be asked is: how could people allow this and the depravity of the slave trade to go on for so long, without questioning its inhumanity? Surely some had troubled consciences? Haslam and other commentators claim the answer lies in theories of 'pseudo-scientific racism', which 'fortuitously' gained prominence in the 1730s, just at the time that Britain's push to expansion and colonisation began. In summary, such theories claimed that blacks had different origins and that they were lesser, unregenerate mankind, akin to apes. They were portrayed as subhuman, idle and with unnaturally large appetites of every kind; being inherently inferior mentally, morally, culturally and spiritually when compared to the white European. Africans were considered not to feel the same sort of pain on separation from their families and countries as Europeans would; and it was felt that the slave trade benefited and helped civilise Africa. It was constructive in putting the naturally idle and carefree African to work in a productive way. Slavery was on the whole a 'mild and benevolent institution'.

The attitude of Christians to the slave trade was mixed; some using theology to justify its cruelty by claiming that black people were the descendants of Ham (Gen 9:20-2), and thus destined to be 'hewers of wood, and drawers of water' (Josh 9:21). However, the overwhelming justification of slavery was an economic one. Britain's Industrial Revolution was founded on the slave trade and the exploitation of raw material from its colonies. The trade in slaves created immense wealth and Britain feared that if it withdrew from the trade, its European neighbours, who would then secure an economic and political advantage over it, would fill the gap.

The acceptance of these views allowed people to salve their consciences. They were to undergird the attitude of Britain in its relationship with its colonies for over 200 years. They are deeply embedded in British psyche, culture and tradition.

Psychological Causes

There is also a psychological aspect to racism. This can be identified in the 'loaded' use of the word 'black' in English language to refer to things that are associated with life's evil, fear and spiritual darkness, whereas 'white' is used to represent all things pure and light. Christian culture also follows this tradition. Haslam [1996] quotes St Jerome, 'Born of the devil, we are black.' The projection of blackness is linked to fear, thus feeding the already repressed fears about black people.

□ The Twentieth Century

The next great influx of non-white people would come in the 20th century. During its wars of expansion and in two world wars, Britain expected its colonial subjects to fight in its army. However, after the wars were over the story was always the same; their contributions were quickly forgotten and their efforts went unrecognised. They became targets for racial attacks, and violent riots would break out. In 1919 riots broke out all over Britain and again in the 1950s, notably in London, Cardiff and Nottingham. 'The Blacks' were seen as a threat to employment, jobs, housing and the 'British way of life'. The clarion call went out for them to be sent back. However, when in the 1950s the British Government realised that it did not have a large enough work force to shore up its



floundering industrial base and that it needed to speed up recovery, it launched a major immigration drive. Enoch Powell went to the Caribbean to encourage individuals to come to Britain to help rebuild the country. The British Nationality Act of 1948 had made all subjects of British colonies and those of the newly independent Commonwealth countries, British citizens. Migration was encouraged from the West Indies, Ireland, South Asia, Italy and Cyprus, while displaced Polish refugees were also encouraged to work and settle here. Most black immigrants found the welcome less than friendly and were often barred from access to decent housing, jobs and services. Many black Christians were made so unwelcome in the traditional church denominations that they were forced to worship in each other's homes.

Pressure for immigration controls soon followed and the government responded with a succession of Immigration Acts that denied access to British Nationals from the Commonwealth countries (1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Acts). In their 1964 General Election campaign, the Conservatives fought and won their seat in Smethwick with the slogan, 'If you want a nigger neighbour vote Labour!' Successive Immigration Acts have sought to limit the numbers of non-white migrants to Britain, pandering to the fears of those whose notion of 'Britishness' meant 'whiteness'. Soon the same immigrants, who had been vigorously encouraged to come and help rebuild Britain, were accused of taking jobs from local people. Enoch Powell changed his mind and was a powerful voice against immigration, citing images of 'rivers of blood' if immigration continued. It was believed that they were a burden to the country and such claims have continued to echo down through the decades to the present day. In the late 1980s visa requirements were put on Nigeria, Ghana, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, while they were removed from Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic. In the 1990s all visa restrictions were lifted on EU nationals. The 1981 British Nationality Act meant that British citizenship was no longer an automatic right if one was born in Britain; it became conditional on the citizenship of one's parent. Individuals (the majority from the black Commonwealth) who had lived here for decades, and whose children were born here after 1981, now had to pay to become registered citizens, or lose rights and privileges they had previously enjoyed; whereas white individuals who were never born here could claim citizenship on the grounds that their grandparents were born here, as was the very famous case of the white South African, Zola Budd, in the early 1980s.

'Immigrant' is now used as a byword for people perceived as social security scroungers, undesirables and aliens (normally refugees and black people). The reality is that the majority of primary immigrants to Britain today come from three groups: citizens of the EU; citizens of Ireland; and work permit holders mainly from the USA and Japan. It is the same old belief system born in 'blacks are unintelligent, lazy and generally less capable when compared to whites', that Haslam claims has fuelled such reactions. He is not alone in realising that it is this belief system, running strongly beneath the surface of polite behaviour, which helps maintain the 'blindness, and numbness' of most Europeans today, over the inequalities of the modern world.

Questions

1. How important is it to hear the personal stories of people who have experienced racism and prejudice? What can they teach us that it would be difficult to learn elsewhere?



2. Is it important to agree the terms and definitions used in any discussion about race and prejudice? What might be the difficulties if we don't?

3. What do the causes of racism teach us?

Open Reflection

If you were racist in what areas of your personality and reactions do you think that attitude would be most likely to express itself, and why? Why do you think people develop racist attitudes? Why do you think the church has so often been, and can still be, racist in its behaviour? How does the Christian gospel challenge all ideas of racism? How should this work out in practice?

Reading & Resources

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