



## Interview with Professor Robert Beckford

**PROFESSOR ROBERT BECKFORD WAS INTERVIEWED BY MISSIONAL FOCUS CO-EDITOR REV. CAROL CLARKE IN JULY 2023.**

**Carol Clarke (CC):** Professor Beckford, thank you for agreeing to take part in this *Missional Focus* issue, focusing on the theme of 'Missional Justice'. Can you start by telling me a little bit about yourself?

**Prof. Robert Beckford (RB):** I am an activist scholar, working interdisciplinarily to address, confront and overturn injustice in African mainland and diaspora communities. My scholarship takes place across a range of media. I have to date written eight monographs exploring the interface of religion, ethnicity, and social justice. My most recent work is an action-research project on decoloniality, music and theology (*Decolonising Gospel Music: A Revolutionary Theopraxis*, Bloomsbury 2022).

I am also a BAFTA Award-winning documentary filmmaker. My films have contributed to increasing public awareness of issues of corporate malfeasance in Africa, the reparations movement and anti-racism in Britain. My most recent media projects are an independent film project funded by the Movement for Justice and Reconciliation (50k), exploring the meaning of reconciliation in response to the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade ('After the Flood: The Church, Slavery and Reconciliation,' 2022).[1] Also, a BBC World Service documentary on the environmental impact of colonialism on Barbados (2022).

In 2021, I completed a three-year collaborative £600,000 ESRC research project on 'Austerity Britain' with the University of Coventry and in Autumn 2022, I hosted the first national symposium for global majority peoples in Britain advocating climate and social justice.

**CC:** What are the key challenges surrounding racial injustice in today's world, particularly in 'multicultural' (as well as more homogenous) settings in the UK?

**RB:** There are two fundamental issues to be resolved. One is the arrogance by white theology. What I mean by that is the unwillingness to address its complicity with racial terror, and then, racial capitalism or slavery. Consequently, there is a cultural ignorance, and a lack of moral courage to do the right thing. I am speaking specifically about the church.

Secondly, another barrier of concern is black people in mixed churches who are frightened of raising issues of racial injustice because they would prefer to be liked rather than being God's instruments of prophetic justice. An example of this is the unwillingness to transform theological education so that antiracism is built into the syllabus and pedagogy.

In summary, I am saying on the white side there is an arrogance and on the black side there is a view of not wanting to upset the status quo. Another way of describing this is the continuity of colonial thinking of Christian theology, church and life. It is about the continuation of colonial thinking of the theological establishment and church life. A good book on this is Willie James Jennings' *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (2020).

**CC:** What is the legacy of Black Lives Matter (BLM), and are there lessons we can learn?

**RB:** We often forget that the primary role of the prophet is to speak truth to power. Most churches have corrupted the practice of the prophet by reducing it to clairvoyancy or just looking into the future. For me, BLM was a prophetic utterance; a call to dismantle structural racism. I would say, it took BLM to hold to account London City Airport for polluting black communities. Equally, underlining the institutional racism in the police force.

**CC:** What can we learn from this?

**RB:** I would say that my sense is, neither theology nor the church have learned a great deal from the movement and are currently irrelevant in the struggle for racial justice. What this means is that our public witness is weakened because we have neither positive example nor meaningful policies to offer as an alternative.

I think there are three things that are required:

- Repentance from the sin of racism.
- There should be a consideration for restorative justice to heal the wounds caused by racism in Christianity.
- Then thirdly, I would say the need to institutionalise new practices of inclusivity and neutrality.

**CC:** How do we conceptualise equality and identity, and how can we formulate a robust theological and missional response to instances of real and imagined discrimination that are all around us?

**RB:** I would say that is a big question, but the way ahead is to decolonise mission and that is a much more complex discussion. We have to acknowledge that what we know as Western Christianity is fundamentally a racist tradition. Black inferiority is inscribed in the discipline from when Immanuel Kant folded whiteness in the being of Christ. Black inferiority was integral to the Christian mission in the West Indies, and only enslaved Africans who became Christian figured out that it was not possible to love God and be racist. Racist Christianity has not been undone in modern British theological thought or church life.

There are very few theological institutions that make a centrepiece of Christianity's collusion with racism – there are almost no courses or modules. Yet somehow, white Christians are supposed to think they are receiving a theological education when the most pressing question about equality in Christ is suppressed. Racism is not about individual prejudice; it is about the structures of theological thought and how they scaffold discrimination in mission and church life. Until we get to the root of this in teaching, preaching and mission, we will continue to ask the same questions repeatedly about racism in Christian missions without addressing the actual root cause.

**CC:** How would you summarise the key points of your argument?

**RB:** I would say that we need to rethink what the Bible says about mission in relation to the history of colonialism. We must develop new concepts of missions that respect and empower diverse communities. And finally, we need to practise decolonial or inclusive and reciprocal missional strategies. Sadly, there are very few examples of this in Britain.

#### **End Note**

[1] <https://www.mjr-uk.com/aftertheflood.html>.

