



Report of the SST Executive Committee Subgroup on Theology and Race

Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1: that the EC invite BAME theological leaders to accompany and advise it in addressing this issue and establishes practices or structures to this end.

Recommendation 2: that the EC explore ways to introduce BAME colleagues into its membership and acts upon them expeditiously.

Recommendation 3: that the EC together with its partners consider the options above (and others) and, as soon as possible, develop a strategy and timescale for introducing changes to help shift the culture of the Society in a more inclusive direction.

Recommendation 4: that the EC consider as a matter of priority ways of facilitating reflexivity on these and related issues (cf. class, gender) as part of the programme in future annual conferences.

Recommendation 5: that the EC begin outreach activities with BAME constituencies, beginning with those willing to accompany it (see Rec. 1) and produce a strategy and timescale for implementation as soon as possible.

Recommendation 6: that the EC pursue conversations with relevant stakeholders to consider and (as appropriate) realise these and similar options for further participation from BAME theology scholars and students.

Recommendation 7: that the EC give thought as to how to sustain the culture of change required to see through an agenda addressing the issues identified here.

Introduction

At its meeting on June 10th 2016, the Society's Executive Committee heard from Prof. Anthony Reddie on steps the Society might take to widen participation in its annual conference to Black, Asian and other non-white theologians. In order to take his suggestions forward, the Committee established a subgroup. This is its report. It sets out a diagnosis of the problem and some recommendations about a process and an agenda for change.

The subgroup met by Skype on 29th June and 11th October 2016. Between and after these meetings we had correspondence and conversations with a number of Black Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) theologians and others, discussing the problem of the lack of diversity among SST members and conference attendees, whether they might be willing to be involved in some way or could help us build bridges into various constituencies with significant BAME membership. This report draws on those conversations and our deliberations as a group in light of them. The impact of the conversations we had deepened our sense of the seriousness of the situation, to which Anthony and other members of the panel on Race at the 2016 Annual Conference (and previously Prof. Robert Beckford at the 2014 Conference in Durham) had drawn the Society's attention. We are extremely grateful to everyone who spoke with us. Some of our dialogue partners did not want their remarks to be attributed specifically to them as individuals. Out of respect for their wishes we have decided not to put names to quotes as a matter of course.

The Society for the Study of Theology exists, according to its Constitution, 'to promote excellence in the study of Christian Theology by facilitating and shaping theological thought, conversation and community.' It aims to 'identify and discuss important themes, questions and dialogues which call for theological engagement.' It seeks to 'explore the nature of and foster theological integrity, responsibility and vocation in academy, church and other areas of public life.' The conversations we had underline the extent to which the Society is falling short in fulfilling its aim when it comes to BAME theologians and the varied constituencies they represent. At present, the Society facilitates and shapes theological thought, conversation and community in such a way that many of these theologians are not included. In part this is because it does not identify or discuss themes, questions and dialogues which call for theological engagement that are of concern to those constituencies. As a result, it must do much more to foster theological integrity, responsibility and vocation in the academy, church and other areas of public life – in respect of BAME theologians, and of the Society's current members.

It is important to begin by noting broader factors that bear upon this situation. SST is an academic society which seeks to cater for, and attracts participants from, UK HE and some UK churches, as well as overseas participants, principally from Europe and North America. In this report we focus on the UK context from which most participants come. In UK HE, BAME students are over-represented (relative to UK population) but under-attaining and have poorer graduate prospects than their White British counterparts (Runnymede Trust, *Aim Higher*, 2015, 4, 10). At the same time, BAME scholars are considerably under-represented in academia, and especially in the professoriat – and this seems especially true

in theology. Campaigns like ‘why is my curriculum white?’ have highlighted the under-representation of minority histories, concerns, traditions and especially scholars in curricula in the Humanities. BAME ministers are greatly under-represented in at least some of the mainline churches from which SST members and participants hail: the Church of England, for example (*Guardian* 20.9.16, ‘Church of England seeks more black and minority ethnic clergy’). At the same time these churches are actively seeking to further the participation of BAME members and increase their percentage of BAME ministers, and both C of E and Methodists report rising representation. We were also told by some of the black scholars with whom we spoke that, compared with the flourishing tradition of black theology in the US, there is less of a developed tradition of scholarship in black-led churches in the UK (although there are some leaders who are trying to change this). They added that historically leaders of black churches and black congregations in the UK have not greatly valued theological education and scholarship, although this is changing. This situation also needs to be seen against the context of the barriers put in the way of black people in UK HE, the biases of the culture of British theology (see below) and the broader history of the legacies of colonialism. Nor is it unique to UK black churches: a suspicion of academic theology is also found in many predominantly white churches and networks.

These issues form part of the contexts in which the Society functions, which is in itself significant. The Society as such has little or no influence over these wider contexts, though many of its members have some influence in particular academic departments and Universities, and particular churches or denominations in the UK. However, its relationship to those contexts is significant in relation to the considerable barriers to greater participation from BAME theology scholars and graduates, including ministers and church leaders, which our interlocutors reported. The following barriers indicate where the Society can usefully examine itself and act:

- The Society does not, at present, have much to offer lay and ordained minorities ministering in different UK churches seeking ministerial development and the furthering of theological vocations.
- The Society does not represent itself as welcoming minorities – by its governance, the language it uses, its speakers, themes and venues, its expectations of styles and methods of presentation. Even the language of ‘Study’ in the Society’s name implies a particular way of doing theology. Some interlocutors reported that in general black theologians perceive SST to be a ‘white, elitist’ society ‘constructed by white theologians for white theologians’, just as they see British academic theology as ‘backwards and a bastion of white privilege’.
- SST’s conversations are not germane to congregations of colour; its categories are alien to them; it does not discuss ‘issues prevalent in black congregations or ethnic minorities’ but rather ‘the existential concerns of those racialised as “white”’; it marginalises certain theological methods and approaches. Several of those we spoke to have been put off by factors listed in this and the previous point, and attributed the lack of participation of other BAME theologians to them. ‘It was like a different world entirely’, one found.

- Many black clergy and congregations are unaware of SST.
- Recruitment to SST through networks reinforces the problem.
- In addition, there are other avenues already open to BAME folk who wish to pursue theological education and conversation. Students have ‘the opportunity to attend a multitude of diverse theological gatherings across the globe without having to submit themselves to the double alienation of being a minority in an intellectual milieu which has historically ignored them’.

These barriers to participation inhibit the Society from fulfilling its aims. Insofar as the Society is a forum that facilitates networking and the promotion of scholars’ careers and their scholarship, these barriers mean that the Society also contributes to the marginalisation of BAME scholars in academic theology in the UK.

In our report, drawing on the input we received, we set out several areas where the Society might reflect and change, and make recommendations. There is, however, one over-arching recommendation about the process from this point forward, and that is that the Executive Committee of the SST should invite BAME theological leaders to walk alongside it as it seeks to take this agenda forward, possibly in the form of an advisory board (following the example of organisations like the American Academy of Religion). This group of people could offer advice and feedback, whilst initiative and responsibility for reflection and change should remain with the EC. In respect of the whole report and its recommendations, it is worth emphasising the diversity of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Christians and Christian theologians in the UK, and the need therefore, for care in understanding and addressing the varied barriers to their participation and seeking to create more inclusive conditions for their contributions.

The EC might also consider to what extent similar action is needed with regard to other comparable problems of representation/exclusion (class, gender, sexuality).

Recommendation I: that the EC invite BAME theological leaders to accompany and advise it in addressing this issue and establishes practices or structures to this end.

Structural change

Governance is an important aspect of the way the Society represents its constituencies. The membership of the Executive Committee has tended to represent the range of churches, nationalities, universities, and both genders of SST members, but it has also reflected *de facto* the marginalisation of non-white scholars in the Society and the theological academy. Change here is important for two reasons: (1) on the principle ‘nothing about us without us’, BAME theologians should be part of the decision-making process, and not only advisory to it; (2) because the constitution of the EC represents the Society’s intentions regarding inclusivity to potential participants.

Recommendation 2: that the EC explore ways to introduce BAME colleagues into its membership and acts upon them expeditiously.

Diversifying culture

One purpose of the structural changes outlined above would be to encourage the diversification of the culture of SST, consistent with the Society's core purpose. People from BAME communities are currently under-represented within the Society, and this under-representation reflects not only issues across the TRS sector, but also reflects the homogeneity of the culture within SST itself. Diversifying the Society's culture might include increasing sensitivity to a range of confessional traditions within the church, yet ecumenism may be something of a red herring given that members of ethnic minorities are also strongly represented in such historically 'mainstream' denominations as Methodism and the Baptist church. More specifically for SST, the issue is one of diversity in terms of theological methodologies, particularly the inclusion of contextual methodologies and the social sciences. Full inclusion of people from BAME communities means full inclusivity towards contextual, liberation, black, postcolonial etc. methodologies. Part of the transition would be to see these methodologies no longer as representative of 'minorities' but of global Christianity, particularly given the contraction of TRS in UK universities at present. At the same time, liberationist theology is not prevalent among black British Pentecostals and there is little theological scholarship being done from this tradition. Cultural diversification also needs to include greater receptivity to Pentecostal and charismatic modes of theological reflection.

Furthermore, the topics and issues the Society considers likewise reflect its majority demographic. Cultural diversification would also mean listening to what is of concern at ground-level and addressing those issues and themes, including issues of practice.

Next, cultural diversification also includes questions of modes of theological inquiry and engagement – and being open to alternative modes, such as culture and the arts. The Society has a seminar on this theme, and has occasionally experimented with involving artists (Janet Soskice's presidential plenary paper, Manchester, 2010). It might need to take it more seriously both as a subject for academic inquiry and as media for theological exploration.

Finally, the venues the Society chooses to hold its conference also communicate its values. Whilst bearing in mind the chronic practical difficulties involved in finding locations for its annual conference, given its size and timing, it needs to consider to what extent these are perceived as elitist or exclusive of some of those it would wish to include, and how it might mitigate that problem.

Having said that denominational identity is a subsidiary issue, the achievement of ecumenical diversity is a key part of the history and self-understanding of some longstanding members of SST, as was highlighted during the Wednesday afternoon plenary in 2016. This movement towards diversification could therefore be seen as a continuation and expansion of the same process. It needs to be recognised that this will be a long process and will require sustained commitment across the society.

Some further possibilities to consider:

- The addition of a ‘world theologies’ or ‘contextual theologies’ seminar strand. This could be a temporary measure with the intention of raising the profile of papers from alternative methodologies in the short term, with the purpose of integrating a greater number of these into the other seminar streams in the long term.
- The representation of BAME theologians at SST has been furthered in recent years by the EC paying particular attention to the diversity of plenary speakers. This is an important step, and one which might be worth codifying in some way.
- Using the posters session slot to provide a space for alternative methodologies. Posters may be particularly suited to praxis-based and contextual methodologies, as well as culture and the arts which would be an important bridge to the Caribbean community.
- Sessions or one-off events devoted to the sharing of best practice and the development of resources to incorporate contextual methodologies and world Christianity into teaching of core theological subjects.
- A one-day forum for Black Pentecostal theological studies and scholars as part of the conference, but more devoted to topics relevant to church practice, such as music, hymnody, preaching, youth work, media.
- Holding an entire conference on a theme relevant to minority ethnic concerns or contextual theologies. This would be an expression not just of inclusion or hospitality, but a commitment to changing direction as a society (suggestions: race, whiteness, slavery, empire, world Christianities). This would need to be done in partnership with another organisation (see below).

Two of our interlocutors put well the challenge we face here:

- ‘The question for SST is “are we going to diversify the club and hear alternative voices and create alternative narratives?”’
- “If SST widens the space around the table for others, how is ‘belonging’ around that common table re-negotiated? What needs to change if a ‘mutually enriching’ experience is to flourish? Or is it ‘business as usual?’”

In particular, these questions raise issues of disciplinary boundaries and formation, and of non/confessional ethos. How do we demonstrate openness to those without the same disciplinary grounding of many at SST and who may distrust ‘academic’ theology? Would we need to demonstrate a commitment both to practice and to scripture as a foundation for theology for these groups, and might this alter the character of the society as a whole?

Recommendation 3: that the EC, together with its partners, consider the options above (and others) and, as soon as possible, develop a strategy and timescale for introducing changes to help shift the culture of the Society in a more inclusive direction.

This will only work with investment and commitment from SST members – how will we encourage this?

Reflecting on Whiteness and reconciliation

An essential part of changing the culture in SST, therefore, must be making space to promote greater reflexivity, conscientisation and repentance on the part of its existing members and participants about the problems identified above. British academic theologians need to engage critically with the role of race in the formation of the discipline in the context of race in the UK and the British Empire. There is, after all, much on which to reflect. From our conversations, it seems that SST's lack of diversity is driven in part by four factors: 1. historical legacy, 2. cultural hegemony, 3. pedagogy and 4. hiring practices.

Historically, the influence of slavery on theology in Britain is either avoided, ignored, considered irrelevant, or under-investigated. One of our respondents comments that only two books in the last 70 years from the [white] theological guild have touched on race and Christianity in Britain: John Wilkinson's *Church in Black and White* (St. Andrew Press, 1993) and Ken Leech's *Struggle in Babylon* (Sheldon, 1988). James Perkins' analysis of the American theological scene in his *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity* (Palgrave, 2004) might provide one model of coming to terms with the formation of British academic theology.

Culturally, the theological academy in Britain is dominated by what Willie Jennings describes (2011) as a 'diseased' cultural imagination that polices diversity of expression and excludes the kinds of topics and issues germane to BAME congregations and scholars, and marginalises the kinds of theological methods BAME theologians employ. Similarly, 'white theology' is dominant and prevalent throughout British theology insofar as it 'engages with the existential concerns of people racialized as "white"'.

Pedagogically, there is a need to model the critical examination of theological curricula and modes of teaching and learning amongst HE practitioners, and perhaps also critical scrutiny of BAME recruitment, retention, attainment and graduate outcomes in TRS departments.

Finally, the Society has the opportunity to influence influential members of TRS departments and theological colleges by promoting reflexivity about practices of supporting BAME progression to PGT and PGR degrees and addressing hiring practices which exclude BAME candidates from employment, research funding or promotion (and so make TRS departments less diverse and less attractive to BAME applicants and higher degrees less attractive to BAME graduates in TRS).

For some of our interlocutors, such reflexivity is likely to be a condition of dialogue with BAME scholars. Before any meaningful dialogue can occur, 'repentance and restitution' are needed. Really, as one black theologian puts it, 'if you ignore people for 60 years, can a bit of tinkering and outreach really endear black theologians to become more involved?'

Practically speaking, one option would be to use the Wednesday afternoon panel session slot to further conversations to improve understanding and further work of reconciliation and healing. Suggestions might include inviting scholars working on race and theology, or BAME theologians to discuss one of their recent books.

Recommendation 4: that the EC consider as a matter of priority ways of facilitating reflexivity on these and related issues (e.g. class, gender) as part of the programme in future annual conferences.

Outreach and conversation

Broadly speaking, Black clergy and congregations are unaware of SST. Diversification can only be achieved through a significant effort towards outreach and ongoing conversation. If SST wishes to engage these communities, we must discover how we can ‘best serve them and address their concerns’.

One suggestion we received for SST’s strategy is for the Society to approach this difficulty along the lines of an ecumenical conversation. We could begin with the hope of lessening the distance between SST and non-white churches, putting right some misunderstandings and ameliorating problems on the ground. This task will require considerable, sustained commitment – spanning years if not decades – but it is arguably part of SST being connected to the UK Church.

Practically speaking there are a number of options for the Society to increase its visibility in BAME Christian constituencies and undertake this sort of ‘ecumenical’ dialogue.

- Reach out to ‘bridge people’. Ask for support from people who are able to communicate across the cultural divide.
- Working with theological colleges is key.
- Joint conference/colloquium with key organisations such as the Society for Pentecostal Studies, the Black Theology Forum or the Society for Caribbean Studies (interdisciplinary conference engaging with the social sciences). NB. It is important not to be seen as elitist or attempting to ‘colonize’ other movements or organisations. Any partnership would need to be equal and genuine.
- Committee members and senior members of the Society might promote SST through visiting institutions and Black churches’ spring or summer schools and/or delivering lectures.
- Host a forum for Black Pentecostal theological studies and scholars at SST, or a day conference – i.e. an event that is accessible to those who do not have the kind of disciplinary grounding that is taken for granted at SST, and would attract a more diverse crowd through its choice of topics and speakers.
- Consider hosting ‘open lectures’, given by the main plenary speakers, with specific outreach to black congregations and communities in mind, to be advertised through local church and training networks.
- Consider where SST meets: are the sites close to communities where black congregations are prominent? Might we work with black congregations to host local engagement activities?
- Publish conference papers so that they can be accessed by a wider audience
- Website, social media: would a statement on the website be appropriate? How else might we communicate diversity through the website? Facebook, Twitter etc. are the primary way most people might encounter SST for the first time. How are we communicating diversity through these portals? Might we be more intentional in using them to advertise the society?

- We believe that schools work is outside the scope of SST, which is focussed on postgraduate-level interest in theology, but this might be an area in which SST and TRS UK might develop a joined-up strategy.

Coordinating these efforts would require some investment of time and energy from SST committee members. To meet these challenges, we suggest that SST might create a new committee role of Outreach Secretary, which one committee member might assume on an annual or biennial basis.

Recommendation 5: that the EC begin outreach activities with BAME constituencies, beginning with those willing to accompany it (see Rec. 1) and produce a strategy and timescale for implementation as soon as possible.

Facilitating participation

Where BAME graduates and scholars become aware of SST and see opportunities there for their own professional or ministerial development and the furthering of their vocations, careers, scholarship and theological formation, there may still be further, practical barriers to participation. In addition to its Bursary scheme, the Society should consider other ways of alleviating these practical barriers. For example:

- In partnership with key institutions – e.g. matched funding for conference places:
 - The Methodist Church in respect of its ministers.
 - The Ministry Division of the Church of England is embarking on a drive to improve representation from ethnic minorities as part of Renewal and Reform.
 - Roehampton University is conducting research into ‘the needs of ministerial theology students from diverse cultural and church backgrounds.’
 - Theological colleges.
- Mentoring and bursaries: for those not yet in a position to give a short/seminar paper, we might encourage attendance through e.g. mentoring scheme for students from minority backgrounds and/or free/subsidised conference places for BAME students in return for helping with the running of the conference.
- Work with Tutors in colleges and Training Officers in colleges and churches to ‘spot’ students and ministers who have ‘written excellent essays and done exceptional sabbatical reports and encourage them to present (co-presenting may be a good confidence booster)’.

Recommendation 6: that the EC pursue conversations with relevant stakeholders to consider and (as appropriate) realise these and similar options for further participation from BAME theology scholars and students.

Conclusion

The depth and scope of the problem outlined here is daunting, and the range of recommendations indicates the scale of the task, should the Society be willing to embrace it. We consider that making progress on this issue will require not only structural change and strategic planning, but also commitment from the EC over a lengthy period of time. There is thus, finally, a need to consider how to maintain this issue as a matter of concern for successive generations of Committee members, and how to sustain the activity by which this agenda will be addressed.

Recommendation 7: that the EC give thought as to how to sustain the culture of change required to see through an agenda addressing the issues identified here.

Imogen Adkins (SST Secretary), Beth Dodds, Ben Fulford (subgroup chair), Stephen Garrett, April 2017.

Introduction revised in light of feedback at the 2018 AGM, April 2018.