

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

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| <p><b>Institution:</b> Canterbury Christ Church University</p>   |
| <p><b>Unit of Assessment:</b> Theology and Religious Studies (33)</p>  |
| <p><b>Title of case study:</b> Biblical Exorcism as Political Motivation: Empowering Black Pentecostals to Engage with Politics</p>  |
| <p><b>1. Summary of the impact:</b></p> <p>Dr Robert Beckford's research triangulates black liberation theology, documentary film and racial justice practice. It has constructively influenced the racial justice strategies in different settings and contributed to civil society by challenging social assumptions and cultural values. The case study demonstrates how Dr Beckford's research on Biblical exorcism as a socio-political trope is translated into a political resource by highlighting the empowerment and motivation for a working group, working for equalities in the local community (<i>Birmingham Race Action Partnership, Bringing Hope</i>), a black Pentecostal church ministry and the empowerment of black workers at the Brighton and Sussex University Hospitals NHS Trust.</p>   |
| <p><b>2. Underpinning research:</b></p> <p>Dr Robert Beckford (2011-present) was appointed as Reader in Theology to enhance the strategic expertise in Social Justice and Religion. His research combines theory and practice, identifying theological politics in the Christian scriptures and disseminating these in a variety of media, in order to engage with a wider audience, including black Pentecostals.</p> <p>The underpinning research of this case study is an interdisciplinary postcolonial analysis of black Pentecostalism in Britain. Black Pentecostals represent the fastest growing Christian demographic in Britain and comprises of African and African Caribbean adherents. However, as a migrant Christian tradition originating from former British colonies, black Pentecostalism is blighted by the residual remains of colonial Christianity, namely, an irrational anti-intellectualism and apoliticism. This research seeks to challenge the present malaise by reframing colonial Christianity through the lenses of slave narratives and the philosophy of religion as a nefarious spiritual force that continues to 'bewitch' former colonial subjects and their descendants in Britain. To identify and critique the influence of colonial Christianity, the research appropriates theoretical tools from anthropological African witchcraft studies, including the idioms of the cannibal and zombie. To construct an alternative to colonial Christianity, uniquely, the research identifies 'exorcising' practices in the documentary film canon of Dr Robert Beckford. The research reveals how a critique or 'exorcism' of colonial Christianity was '<b>encoded</b>' in the researcher's television documentary films. The original critique of black Pentecostalism was published as "From maintenance to mission: resisting the bewitchment of colonial Christianity" (2013) and refined in the book, <i>Documentary as Exorcism: Resisting the Bewitchment of Colonial Christianity</i> (2013).</p> <p>The key findings were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <b>A contextual black liberation theology</b> emphasising a bewitchment-exorcism nexus. Black theology while a fledgling discipline in Britain has often relied on themes and concepts from African American or Latin American theologians. This research represents a <b>first truly indigenous black liberation theology</b>. It does so by appropriating theological sources from the Caribbean diaspora in Britain, including language familiar to most black Pentecostals such as 'bewitchment' and 'exorcism' – but used in ways that are unfamiliar to them. Black liberation theology is a political theology, which seeks to resist and overturn oppressive forces in Christian theology and the social world. This research continues this liberation tradition by critiquing the continued influence of colonial theology in black Pentecostalism and contouring a new socio-political practice for these churches.</li> <li>○ <b>A theory of colonial Christianity as malevolent spirituality</b>. The legacy of the British Empire in Christian theology has received little attention in post-war British Christian academic theology. This research breaks the silence. Through diachronic and synchronic analysis of written historical texts, ethnographic and auto/ethnographic methods the</li> </ul> |

## Impact case study (REF3b)

- research identifies **a.** nefarious religious interpretation of British colonialism in the West Indies and **b.** Catholic and Protestant church complicity with the malevolence of Empire.
- **The continued impact of colonial Christianity on black Pentecostalism.** The research makes its point of departure in the black British experience. This is to identify the postcolonial influence of colonial Christianity on contemporary black Pentecostalism. Through archaeology of textual sources and ethnographic study of urban churches, the research identifies the intellectual and political fall-out from colonial Christianity's complicity with colonial Christianity in the English speaking Caribbean. These include a Pentecostal apoliticism (non prophetic ministry) and an anti-intellectualism (academic theology-phobia).
  - **Documentary film as a theological practice.** In the quest to construct a contextual liberation theology, the research makes use of visual texts, that is, the religious and political television documentary. The analysis of these films is grounded in auteur criticism rather than textual or audience analyses. The research identifies how authors create meaning and how the author as a filmmaker in turn creates meaning in documentary film. One outcome is a new mode of documentary, where documentary film represents a visual theological practice. To reformulate this process, the researcher appropriates the African diaspora concept of 'conjure.' Conjure describes the spiritual use of cultural products and encompasses the role of religious icons, clothing, food and in this case, films. Through an analysis of twenty-three documentary films, the research reveals how the author inscribes meaning on documentary texts in the documentary's narrative, so that at a subliminal level of engagement, these films are a critique of continued colonial influence and their overcoming.
  - **Translation of exorcism into a contemporary visual aesthetic.** In order to show that the bewitchment-exorcism motif has practical application to church life, including and beyond black Pentecostalism, the study goes in search of the bewitchment-exorcism theme in contemporary church art. Through a cultural and textual analysis two black Atlantic examples, the work of the visual artist, Keith Piper, and the church art and decor on display at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, USA, the research contours and proffers an exorcism aesthetic in black visual culture(s). The research contends that rather than being exclusive the black Pentecostalism, an exorcism aesthetic is relevant and necessary for all Christian traditions with colonialism in their past.

**These findings are important** because

- It identifies a new contextual liberation theology in and through documentary film.
- It reframes the meaning of British colonialism and colonial Christianity as overwhelming religious force that require a religious investigation and redress.
- It identifies the continued influence of colonial Christianity on contemporary black Pentecostalism.
- Reintroduces the central and potentially defining role of the author in the parsing of religious meaning of cultural products. Traditionally, theologies of culture in Britain have focused on textual and ethnographic study of cultural texts.
- Identifies a new mode of documentary filmmaking that takes seriously the religious cultural and socio-political motivation of documentary filmmakers.

**3. References to the research:**

1. Robert Beckford, "From maintenance to mission: resisting the bewitchment of colonial Christianity" in Phyllis Thompson (ed), *Challenges of Black Pentecostal Leadership in the 21st Century*. London: SPCK, 2013.
2. Robert Beckford, *Documentary as Exorcism: Resisting the Bewitchment of Colonial Christianity* London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

**Evidence for quality of research:****[From review report for publisher]:**

**Documentary as Exorcism:** "This text is an innovative and creative exploration in the field of theology and religious studies. It juxtaposes seemingly discrete and disparate sources in order to

create a new and distinct form of theological discourse – namely utilising documentary film making processes as a means of critically evaluating Pentecostal religiosity. To the best of my knowledge, this work is unique.”

-- Dr Anthony G. Reddie – Visiting Fellow at Aston University

-- Editor of *Black Theology: An International Journal*.

#### 4. Details of the impact:

As an award winning broadcaster, public speaker and activist, Dr Beckford communicates his research in written text, visual media (he has made over 20 documentary films) and audio culture (four radio documentaries, one radio drama) to engage a wider audience with issues of faith and justice. This has raised his public profile and led to close and on-going engagement with non-academic groups, which has enhanced public understanding of black theology and contributed to civil society by challenging social assumptions and cultural values.

##### Enhancing public understanding via media:

Since Beckford's employment at CCCU he has contributed to several radio documentaries and acted as the faith consultant for the BBC African Caribbean radio network. For example, his collaboration with playwright Kwame Kwei-Armah on a radio drama, 'Father, Son and Holy Ghost' examined faith and the impact of a consumerist society in an inner-city Pentecostal church (first broadcast on BBC Radio 3, 10 March 2012) and subtly challenged the anti-intellectualism and apoliticism of British Pentecostalist churches [corrob. 5.1].

##### Contribution to civil society:

Dr Beckford's research has impacted three distinctive constituencies: shaping the discourse of charities that work with black and minority groups, resourcing black workers in the NHS Trust Brighton to extend the range and quality of their empowerment in their workplace and informing the ministry of a black Pentecostal church ministry.

The key findings of his research have played a role in **influencing and informing those shaping public discourses on diversity and inclusion**. Beckford is working as a consultant and advisor with several leading charities, including *Birmingham Race Action Partnership* (BRAP), a registered charity and 'think fair tank, inspiring and leading change to make public, private and voluntary sector organisations fit for the needs of a more diverse society'. One of its key aims is to tackle racial discrimination, disadvantage and social exclusion in the city of Birmingham. In 2013, Beckford was a founding member of 'Birmingham at the Tipping Point' events, which was the first ever meeting of equality bodies across the city to collectively work together for change. Dr Beckford has devised workshops which have helped BRAP to review equality theories as a means to support the charity to develop more progressive practice. He facilitated a session which was attended by 200 young people and which explored the link between Hip Hop as a signifier of popular youth culture and crime. The results of this session fed into the comprehensive report 'Urban Myths - Street Realities' with focused recommendations for education, youth work, parents and the criminal justice system (August 2012) [corrob. 5.2]. In August 2012, Dr Beckford chaired the evaluation of the report, 'STUCK: What works in tackling gang crime', which was funded by the Barrow Cadbury Trust [corrob. 5.3]. These examples demonstrate impact on shaping the decision making and influencing the discourse on equality, fairness and race-relations. Specifically, they show how Beckford's concept of Biblical exorcism translates into a political praxis, that is, anti-racism in Britain [corrob. 5.4]. Beckford's work with the charity *Bringing Hope* that works with families, communities and individuals impacted by serious violence and crime, has inspired the documentary *Rite of Passage* (2013), written, produced and directed by Daniel Anderson, that explores 'the journey of dis-empowerment, hope and success within the African-Caribbean community in Birmingham' [corrob. 5.5].

The McPherson Inquiry into the murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence identified institutional racism as a problem for all public authorities [corrob. 5.6], including the NHS. Dr Beckford has been working with the NHS BME [Black and Minority Ethnic] network which adopted the tripartite principles – **the importance of hope in bringing about change and the need for change**

**process from bottom up**. [corrob.5.7]. Beckford's key research finding, **the role of religion in organising for social justice**, has enabled the NHS BME network to develop a strategy for mobilising black workers in the NHS based on grassroot politics aimed at challenging current practices around the ineffectiveness of inequality practices in the NHS. Additional keynote addresses on Whiteness outlined the workings of critical whiteness theory and a history of white people and the implications in regards to the aggression experienced by many black NHS workers (2011, 2012). His research has made people aware that 'faith can be a driving force for political change rather than being confined to the personal sphere' [corrob.5.8].

Dr Robert Beckford has worked closely with black Pentecostal churches to translate his academic work into actual practice and social change by presenting seminars and preaching at churches. His work has affected the **thinking and preaching of ministers of the church** and **contributed to rethinking of Pentecostal thought and practice** by identifying how colonial Christianity impacted Pentecostal preaching and teaching. His work has had an impact on the church's leadership team to engage in both local and national politics leading, for example, the Birmingham-based New Testament Church of God to cooperate with Operation Black to mobilise black voters in Birmingham for the next general elections. He has also argued that a proper theological education means resisting the theological ignorance of colonial Christianity which has led to church leaders studying for advanced degrees in Theology. The impact of Dr Beckford's research is on the education of clergy of British black Pentecostal churches and the public discourse that enhances the understanding of the church's history and empowers members to work towards political and social changes [corrob. 5.9].

#### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact (All links correct at time of submission to REF2014)

- 5.1. Review of radio drama 'Father, Son and Holy Ghost' by Jane Anderson, *Radio Times*, March 2012 <http://www.radiotimes.com/episode/pskkx/the-wire--father-son-and-holy-ghost>
- 5.2. Brap Report, *Urban Myths - Street Realities*, August 2012
- 5.3. Brap Report '*STUCK: What works in tackling gang crime: a conference report*, August 2012.
- 5.4. Statement provided by CEO at BRAP, August 2013, corroborating impact on a national charity tackling racial discrimination and inequality. **(contact I.D. 1)**
- 5.5. Blog entry, *Bringing Hope*, 'Rite of Passage': <http://www.bringinghope.co.uk/wordpress/?p=303>, corroborating the impact of Dr Beckford's work on the documentary 'Rite of Passage (2013).
- 5.6. Homa Khaleeli, 'Twenty years after Stephen Lawrence's murder, what's changed?', *The Guardian*, 21 April 2013, Interview with Dr Robert Beckford on impact of the Lawrence murder on public institutions (with 258 comments by readers). See <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/apr/21/twenty-years-stephen-lawrence-murder-whats-changed>
- 5.7. <http://www.nhsbmenetwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/BMENetworkUpdateMarch2011.pdf> **point 5**, corroborating the adoption of Dr Beckford's methodology.
- 5.8. Statement provided by Chair of NHS BME Network at Brighton & Sussex University Hospitals NHS Trust, August 2013, corroborating impact on the strategies and policies within the NHS BME Network. **(contact I.D. 2)**
- 5.9. Statement provided by the Pastor at New Testament Church of God, Birmingham, August 2013, corroborating impact on Pentecostal church leadership. **(contact I.D. 3)**