Faith in history: memory, multiculturalism and the legacies of Empire in post war England.¹

This article employs a broad concept of memory in order to examine the reconstruction of the past in various migrant religious and educational settings in the period after 1970. In educational projects designed to promote good community relations, and in attempts to develop non-dogmatic forms of religious belief, British history became the subject of extensive discussion and debate. A small space opened up in which the legacies of British imperial history, so often a matter of visceral feeling, could be publicised, explored and taken seriously. Using case studies from London and Birmingham the article argues that religious groups played a small but important role in enabling new, more inclusive and more critical, historical narratives to enter metropolitan British society.

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Introduction

In Zadie Smith’s award winning novel *White Teeth* there is an affectionate but gently mocking portrayal of Hortense Bowden, a moped riding, octogenarian Jamaican immigrant and Jehovah’s Witness living in London. Hortense’s life is lived in the shadow of British colonialism and its evangelising consequences.

For one thing she is the product of a relationship between a captain in the British military in Jamaica, Charlie Durham, and her mother Ambrosia Bowden. Whilst pregnant with Hortense, Ambrosia receives an English education from Captain Durham before he is called away to help contain the printing strikes in Kingston. Ambrosia’s education is passed into the care of Mrs Brenton, a fiery Scottish Presbyterian spinster who specialised in lost souls and was responsible for introducing the Bowden family to the Witnesses.

Hortense’s attachment to the revelation of God in the Bible is intensified by key moments in her life. She was born during and survives the Kingston earthquake of 1907; her daughter is conceived when she is forty-eight and so qualifies, according to Hortense at least, as a miracle. Her faith is also an important source of consolation and hope to her in the disappointments that accompany her life as an immigrant in England. What might otherwise appear as grim struggle for survival, HortENSE’s life is given shape, meaning, discipline and hope by her devout religious faith. A student of eschatology for fifty years Hortense eagerly awaits the millennial end of the world, her faith apparently intact despite two previous false alarms in 1914 and 1925, and her disappointment at being denied access to positions of authority in the congregation.

An important consequence of Hortense’s faith appears to be a dismissal and denial of the central theme of the novel: the power of the past to shape the present. Responding to her granddaughters’ enquiries about her Jamaican heritage Hortense tells her emphatically: ‘De past is done wid. Nobody
learn nuttin’ from it’. 2 In the character of Hortense religious belief appears as an understandable but obsolete desire for order and control in a chaotic world.

Hortense is a caricature in a comic novel but similar judgement can also be found in writings on the history of religion and Afro-Caribbean migration to Britain. The respected historian Stephen Howe, for example, has argued that

...the influence of the Caribbean on British society has come far more through music, youth culture and (to a lesser degree) imaginative literature than through historical or political work. Indeed history has been the great missing element in the contemporary Caribbean impact on Britain. Rastafarianism, much reggae and rap orature have all espoused a mystical or eschatological rather than a genuinely historical consciousness. 3

The influential sociologist Paul Gilroy has also argued that the attempts of black political activists to imagine and work for a better society have been limited by the eschatology of black Protestantism that defers ‘those utopian questions for another, better world’4.

This article explores these claims. In particular, it seeks to problematise what is presented, implicitly at least, as the binary divide between eschatological and historical consciousness. This distinction is, of course, important. Most practising historians would seek to retain a distinction between a sense of self based on religious or spiritual beliefs, a consciousness ultimately dependent on a transcendental power, and that based on an accurate knowledge and reasoned interpretation of the past. Indeed, that notion of history, as a disinterested scientific practice based on widely shared evidential standards open to rational discussion and debate, lies at the very centre of academic history and the identities of professional historians. Yet, for the purposes of this discussion there are at least two difficulties with it.

The first difficulty is that it is tied to what now appears as a problematic account of modernity. In such accounts historical consciousness, or a full awareness of the historicity of everything in the present, is a specific cultural development located within modernity and so, usually, first and most fully, in European nation states. This, it should be emphasised, is not the explicit claim of either Howe or Gilroy. Yet their arguments do point towards a problematic absence, a lack of proper historical thinking, amongst Black Minority Ethnic groups that echoes Hegel’s assertion that only


Europeans were endowed with historical sense. In fact this accusation, common to all forms of stadal thinking, has been a consistent theme in the representation of the faiths and politics of formerly colonised peoples, especially of the extremist sort, in the post 1945 era in the United Kingdom. Whether the concern has been about Black Power, certain strands of Irish Republicanism and more recently, so-called fanatical Islamism, it is frequently argued that the groups concerned lack a proper understanding of history. From here it has often been a short step to asserting that specific forms of historical education are required to inculcate the correct values in migrant groups.

The second problem with modernist accounts of historical consciousness is that they are elitist. They want to insist on a clear dividing line between history, as a reasoned account of the past based on linear passages of time, and memory, a more inclusive notion alive to all of the ways in which images of the past are created, distributed and consumed in societies. The insistence on the primacy of specific notions of history and historical consciousness privileges academic views of the past and has the effect of removing from view all of the ways in which the past came to be imagined, constructed and applied.

Some further conceptual elaboration can help overcome these difficulties. The German historian Jörn Rusen has defined critical historical consciousness as ‘people’s ability to say no to traditions, rules, principles which have been handed down to them’. In rejecting established historical narratives these actors are simultaneously involved in a search for, and mobilisation of, ‘a specific kind of experience of the past’. This is helpful because it corrects both the Eurocentrism and the elitism of more traditional definitions. It emphasises that critical historical consciousness results from people’s agency and it also insists that historical thinking and awareness can take many different forms. This sort of definition, that bears more than a passing resemblance to that developed by Raphael Samuel and from the work of the Popular Memory Group at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, recognizes the social character of historical knowledge.

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5 Peter Seixas, ‘Introduction’ in Peter Seixas (ed) Theorizing Historical Consciousness (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004): 9. On Hegel, and the important distinction between history and historicality that is important to all postcolonial history see Ranajit Guha, History at the Limit of World History (New York: Colombia University Press, 2002).

6 For a contemporary and biographical version of this argument see Ed Husain, The Islamist (Penguin, 2007).


8 Good starting points for the considerable literature on memory and heritage include Brian Graham and Peter Howard (eds), The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008) and Susannah Radstone, and Katharine Hodgkin (eds), Regimes of Memory (London: Routledge, 2003).

Representations of the past are the work of many hands, and are produced by many different people working in a range of locations and settings.10

This article argues that the religious practices of Afro-Caribbean migrants in the post-war period made an important contribution to the development of what Rusen calls critical historical consciousness. In practising their faiths, first and second generation Afro-Caribbean migrants did not develop exclusively eschatological identities. Instead, faith stimulated a turn towards the past. The argument is structured around three case studies: Windrush, Uppsala and Africa. In each case religious belief invoked historical memories of suffering, repression and alienation. But these memories had to be made. They were the fruits of education in its broadest sense: listening, watching, reading; discussion and debate; publication and instruction. All of them sought in the past something intangible but important; roots, identity and a sense of self free from the prejudice and discrimination evident in post-war Britain. Faith, and the importance of bearing witness to suffering, carried with it a belief in the power of history; that it could promote understanding and reconciliation and form the basis of a more pluralist citizenship.

Windrush

The SS Windrush docked in Tilbury, Essex in June 1948. On board were 417 passengers, mostly Jamaican, whose arrival has subsequently been used to symbolise the making of multicultural Britain.11 The migrants brought with them distinctive religious beliefs and practices that reflected the turbulent history of Christianity in the Caribbean. After the arrival of Spanish Catholicism in 1492 and the imposition of Church of England doctrine after 1620 there followed, from the mid-18th century onwards, a long and complex process in which various evangelical or non-conformist groups sought to save souls, often in direct competition with independent black Christian groups from the mid-19th century. If the traditional Churches had memberships dominated by the white elite, slave, and then free, blacks practised various forms of Christianity with roots in Africa. But neat dividing lines are not possible here. As Roswith Gerloff has argued, there was a ‘sustained cultural interplay in the West Indies between two cosmologies, two cultures, two theologies, one European and one African’ that produced a ‘process of cross-fertilisation, allowed for a creative synthesis of different traditions and made syncretisation in various degrees inevitable’.12 In addition, and in the early

twentieth century, Pentecostal Christianity arrived in the Caribbean from North America and grew with quite phenomenal success.\textsuperscript{13}

It is obviously difficult, therefore, to adequately summarise the range of religious beliefs that were exported from the Caribbean to Britain in the period after 1945. I leave aside entirely important theological differences between black-led churches. Instead, in the space available, it is only possible to stress some broad themes. One is that the success of evangelicalism in both Africa and the Caribbean resulted in a general emphasis on the inherent sinfulness of human beings but, also, on the primacy of the Bible. Whilst Evangelicalism typically emphasised the importance of direct and personal relationships with God, it also championed a return to the scriptures as the works that revealed the power and majesty of God. It was a Christian duty to read and understand the word of God. But, in an echo of the tension that also plagued 16\textsuperscript{th} century Calvinists, this duty did not dispense with the idea of a correct or proper interpretation of scripture, and its meaningful application to daily life. The emergence of a black theology of liberation in the Caribbean in the late eighteenth century, typically associated with George Liele, Sam Sharpe and Paul Bogle, clearly demonstrates that there was room to interpret the scriptures and the Christian duties that emerged from them in politically radical ways.\textsuperscript{14}

Another theme relates to this radicalism. In various different ways Syncretic Christianity often had a historical component in that it helped to keep alive a memory or image of Africa and, in doing so, sustained an aspiration for freedom. Stephen Howe’s important book, \textit{Afrocentrism}, tells us as much. Identifying the writings of figures like Edward Wilmot Blyden, Alexander Crummell and Marcus Garvey as part of a wider autodidactic, activist and pamphleteering tradition, he notes a ‘strong streak of mystical, occult and eschatological beliefs’ and compares them to the English plebeian radicalism explored so memorably by Christopher Hill.\textsuperscript{15} The observation is suggestive because it underlines how black theology was underpinned by the same tendency to treat the Bible as a historical document subject to interpretation. In reappropriating scripture from its white interpreters, black theologians necessarily began to sketch out a historical narrative that was to become central twentieth century black nationalism.\textsuperscript{16}

Important to this narrative was an idea of Africa. Even if this was often romanticised and wildly inaccurate, the attempt to rehabilitate Africa, to identify it as the prime site of black spirituality and identity, ultimately led to its historical reconstruction. This relationship, between religious belief and historical memory, was exemplified in the thought of Marcus Garvey. Garvey was the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association which, by the early 1920s, had around eight million

\textsuperscript{13} Robert Beckford, \textit{Jesus Dub: Theology, Music and Social Change} (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006): 36
members in the Caribbean and North America. The UNIA was committed to African redemption, sought to arrange an Exodus to the mother-continent under the leadership of Garvey who was sometimes explicitly identified as a modern Moses. History, for Garvey, was a source of inspiration and he preached a return to an imagined past; to a golden age of black civilisation before slavery and colonialism.

Judging by the catalogues for New Beacon Books for the period, it is clear that narratives mixing black history and theology remained important for the growing Afro-Caribbean community in Britain. Take Edmund Blyden’s work, for example. His *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*, first published in 1887, was available in 1970 in hardback, along with two biographies; *Blyden of Liberia* by Edith Holden and Hollis Lynch’s unambiguous attempt to position Blyden, in a suggestive metaphor, as a *Crusader for Black Nationalism: Pan Negro Patriot 1832-1912*. Quite widely how such works were read and interpreted remains open to question, of course, but it is clear that they were available and seen to be relevant for post war Caribbean migrants.

Whatever its particular themes, religious allegiance and participation was, it should be noted, adversely affected by the experience of migration. Church membership in the Caribbean was been estimated to be as high as 90% of the population but only one in five migrants was a regular church goer in Britain. However, amongst those who did attend and join churches, it was syncretised Christianity that proved easily most popular. It has been estimated, for example, that two-thirds of the active church-going population amongst Afro-Caribbean immigrants attended black-led Christian churches. In fact, the period from the 1950s to the 1990s saw a sustained growth in black-led Churches; from an estimated 77 congregations in 1962 to 2,500 congregations with 100,000 members in the mid-1980s. Gerald Parsons is surely right to regard the ‘foundation, growth and development of black-led Churches as one of the most striking developments in the religious life of post-war Britain’.

So it was a distinctive form of Christianity, one which mixed religious belief with an imagined African history, appealed to the first generation of Afro-Caribbean migrants to Britain. This was partly

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because it involved distinctive religious rituals and forms of prayer. It was typically more expressive, musical, oral and communal than traditional church services.\textsuperscript{22}

However, it was not just a preference for expressive worship that stimulated the growth of black-led churches. As the theologian and sociologist Clifford Hill was already arguing in the early 1970s, it was the ‘total race situation’ that explained the preference evident amongst ‘West Indians’ for specifically black churches.\textsuperscript{23} Instead, Afro-Caribbean worshippers were often treated with coldness and insensitivity in traditional Christian churches in Britain. They routinely reported being ignored, patronised or asked not to return. Experiences of outright discrimination were common.\textsuperscript{24} More generally, the hardening of attitudes towards race in the 1960s, and the growth of anti-immigrant and racist movements, and provides an important context for the growth of black-led churches.

A number of early ethnographic studies of black Pentecostal churches reported these experiences but tended to dismiss them. Malcolm Calley’s 1965 study, for example, found no evidence of prejudice in English clergymen and suggested that tales of discrimination at church were ‘excuses’ and ‘folk myths’.\textsuperscript{25} What had really happened, according to The Reverend Jennings of St. Michael’s Church in Handsworth, Birmingham, was that West Indians had ‘succumbed to a materialistic and atheistic environment’.\textsuperscript{26} Such explanations were typical of the way in which the significance of black Led Churches, as sites of spirituality, agency and spaces free from racism, were consistently denied. Calley is again typical for his reductive view. Pentecostal sects were, he argued, ‘a stumbling block to the assimilation of Britain’s West Indian minority, providing as they do a magico-religious refuge from the stresses and strains of settling down in a new country’.\textsuperscript{27} This refuge was presented as a problem precisely because, convinced of the Second Coming, members showed no interest in the past or the present; they lived only for today. Calley repeatedly refers to members who ‘are totally lacking in historical time-sense’, ‘lack appreciation of historical time-depth’ and whose ‘belief in the imminent dissolution of the world is also a specific sanction for lack of interest in the past and the future’.\textsuperscript{28}

As well as underestimating the kind of influences already discussed, post-war studies of Pentecostals like Calley’s had a reductive view of humanity. Humans are complex beings, quite capable of holding inconsistent or apparently illogical positions simultaneously. They are a long way from the caricature

\textsuperscript{22}Roswith Gerloff, \textit{A Plea for Black British Theologies: The Black church movement in Britain in its transatlantic cultural and theological interaction} (New York/Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1992); Parsons, ‘Filling a Void?.


\textsuperscript{26} \textit{The Times}, 17 October 1960.

\textsuperscript{27} Calley, \textit{God’s People}, 144.

\textsuperscript{28} Calley, \textit{God’s People}, 5-6.
of Hortense Bowden. Thus, even in the most fundamental churches, it was possible and routine to combine a belief in the Second Coming with what Robert Beckford calls a subliminal affirmation of black history. The recounting of the congregational story, of the establishing and development of church, was itself an important part of the development of black history in Britain. It located the congregation within a local landscape, explained their arrival and affirmed the agency of black immigrants in Britain. As churches were built and congregations developed it became possible to represent a black history of achievement by both men and women; of monies raised, missions carried out and Sunday schools staffed.

More than this, however, these local histories were always related to a divine purpose; to God’s plan for his people on earth that was set out in the Bible. And whilst we may not wish to identify this kind of ordained agency as historical consciousness, its reading of scripture worked against prevailing historical narratives. Through both prayer and bible study worshippers sought new understandings of Scripture based on Afro-Caribbean history and experience.

A key feature of those experiences was prejudice, intolerance and racism in the streets of metropolitan Britain. Despite their formal status as British subjects and their emotional allegiance to an inclusive British identity, Afro-Caribbean migrants were widely rejected as alien foreigners, as outsiders who threatened an exclusive national culture. This could not fail to prompt questions about identity and belonging. The past and history had particular resonance in the search for answers and it informed every aspect of the Caribbean imagination. This can be seen in the phenomenal growth of cultural and educational activities dedicated in some way to the exploration of black history and culture. Black worshippers were also people who lived through the rising popularity of Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism, the foundation and development of black publishing houses, campaigns for Black Studies, the rise of a successful supplementary school system and a whole host of other initiatives. These wider influences shaped the way black congregations met, worshipped and studied. They meant that church necessarily involved a return to the past in order to recover an identity free from racism.

Uppsala

A key feature of post 1945 British Christianity was a deepening commitment to denominational and interfaith dialogues, especially around social issues like racism. Racism had been an explicit concern of the World Council of Churches (WWC) since at least 1954, when it declared any form of ‘segregation based on race, colour or ethnic origin contrary to the Gospel’. The Council, which represented Anglican and other denominations, was highly active particularly in developing countries coming to terms with colonial histories.

However, prior to the 1968 Assembly in the small Swedish town of Uppsala, action had rarely followed rhetoric. 1968 was quite different. The cumulative effects of very different kinds of social and political struggles around the world, from the slogans and protests of the Paris students’ May days, to anti-colonial wars in Africa, from the birth of the civil rights movements in the United States to the championing of a liberation theology in South America, created an atmosphere ripe for action. This was only enhanced when the invited keynote speaker, Martin Luther King, was assassinated weeks in advance. His replacement, the American novelist, commentator, activist and preacher’s son, James Baldwin, delivered a provocative address that recalled the close association between Christian faith and the practice of slavery and argued that ‘the destruction of the Christian Church as it is presently constituted may not only be desirable but necessary’ if racism was to be eradicated.

Thus, the Assembly moved beyond simply deploring the problem of racism to an active anti-racist position. New approaches in education and the mass media were demanded to correct the ‘fallacious generalizations and distortions’ that sustained the existence of racism. It was a programme fleshed out to further radicalism when the controversial Notting Hill consultation identified the existence of institutional racism and called for, in a deliberately martial analogy, a Programme to Combat Racism. Though this programme had limited financial resources, just 150,000 dollars per annum over five years, it did commit the Assembly of Churches to ‘work towards the redistribution of social, economic, political and cultural power from the powerful and to the powerless’. The majority of money was committed to projects in sub-Saharan Africa and, most

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35 The educational significance of the speech is confirmed by its publication in the journal Religious Education. See James Baldwin, ‘White Racism or World Community?’, Religious Education, 64, 5 (1969); 342. Slack, Uppsala Report, 31-33.

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controversially, to funding groups associated with armed liberation struggles. Yet, and no doubt swayed by the growing backlash against immigrants ominously articulated in Enoch Powell’s now infamous ‘rivers of blood speech’, the WCC also saw identified Britain as place where the struggle against racism was most intensive and the monies awarded to the West Indian Standing Conference aimed to ‘promote solidarity among the black community and to develop a black power base which could effectively protect them and combat this racism’.37

The decision to fund the WISC, described as a ‘non-partisan umbrella organisation’ but whose activities were concerned only with black people in Britain, at least partly reflects the growing influence of African and Third World Christianities on the WCC. Such groups tended to take seriously arguments about the racist nature of British imperialism and it was logical for them to organise a defence fund for those in the metropolitan home. The decision was predictably unpopular with politicians and the press in Britain.38 It was significant precisely because it indicated a willingness to think about the historical identity of British imperialism and openness to its continued legacies.39

A similar willingness was evident in the British Council of Churches who, in 1974, established a Working Party on Britain as a Multi-Racial Society. The group was given a broad brief (examining and assessing impact of immigration on society; discovering the forces at work; articulating the principles revealed; describing the objective for a new multiracial society) and the freedom to explore particular issues and themes. The final working party comprised eleven men (Ann Dummett resigned after two meetings) and was chaired by Gus John, the latter certainly responsible for the insistence on using history as a tool for analysis and one of the first analysts in Britain to discuss the term institutional racism.40 In the Working Party report, published in 1976, John wrote:

A pronounced and almost cynical lack of attention to history on the part of white society has accounted for a situation where black people in Britain today are being regarded as if they are aliens from another planet suddenly transported to a society which has had no

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38 See, for example, correspondence in The Times, 13-20 September 1970.

39 Of course, this was not new as the incisive and insightful article of Dorothy Howell-Thomas entitled ‘Immigration’ and published in Focus, the newsletter of the Clapham Parish Church in mid-December 1961. It warned that no nation can escape its own history, pleaded with parishioners to think about the ‘roots of our prejudice’ and invoked the actions of the Clapham sect in freeing slaves. ‘As members of the Commonwealth we must redeem the bad parts of our history’. LMA ACC 1888/117.

40 Derek Humphrey and Gus John, Because They’re Black (1971)
experience of a black presence and bears no responsibility for their troublesome presence now.41

Britain, John argued, was ‘refusing to come to terms with its own history’.42 However, all this remains at the level of working parties and declarations. Even a provisional assessment of this attempt to get white Britons to face the past has to make some attempt to examine the resulting educational practices.

Reverend Tony Holden’s account of the Zebra Project suggests some important developments. Established in the Methodist Bow Street Mission in London in 1975, the project aimed at a positive multiculturalism achieved through partnership and understanding across the racial divide.43 It was fairly typical of a series of local ecumenical projects that sought to develop closer denominational ties with action on social issues.44

In the Zebra project history, or perhaps popular renditions of the past in white societies, was identified as a source of confusion, misunderstanding and, ultimately, racism. It, too, claimed that the course of British history was badly misrepresented and its legacies completely ignored; quoting from a book of aboriginal short stories, Holden argued that what used to be called ‘the Expansion of Europe’ was the saddest and most terrible theme in history. But it was important precisely because it continued to shape attitudes and behaviour in the present and was a direct obstacle to the development of new, pluralist societies.

‘There is a sense in which’, Holden argued, ‘we are inevitably racist in Britain because we are an ex-colonial power’. Whilst that sense was never clearly spelt out, it was loosely associated with black experiences of racism and discrimination and a refusal to understand or embrace the coming of multiculturalism:

They want us to pretend it is not happening. They want, often, to turn the clock back to some imaginary time before our social bereavement as a nation, to a time when they falsely imagine there was only one way of being English.45

It was a Christian duty to challenge the silences on race and to bear witness to Britain as a pluralist society. As well as having a responsibility to speak out against discrimination and racism, white

45 Tony Holden, Black Consciousness and White Liberation, 6.
Christians were also urged to confront the fears of those who denied the advent of multiculturalism because they were certain it was doomed to fail. In bearing witness, in becoming part of a process of learning, awareness and action Christians were asked to commit to something more than words, and something other than formal and sterile programmes of education.

Holden’s analysis, clearly influenced by race awareness training in the USA, was strongly dialogic. This meant that rather than simply affirming the importance of developing a positive black identity and consciousness, he also insisted that whites had most to learn from these efforts. Revisiting the past held out the promise of unravelling a history of economic exploitation, colonisation and trade in human beings. White liberation meant freedom from untruth and required changes in the educational system. The purpose of eliminating racism from textbooks, of reviewing school curricula for a multi-cultural society, of introducing Black Studies, was not to accommodate Black children. It had a far more fundamental aim; seeing the world with fresh eyes.

The Zebra project itself developed a short course called Face to Face in which small groups of black and white Christians met together on five successive weekday evenings to agree a programme of events to promote understanding. Typically, a black speaker began by sharing something of the black experience. A second event consisted of a filmstrip or film about the black experience. A third week could involve a visit to a Pentecostal church. A fourth week was devoted to assessing what has happened and what has been learnt.

All this amounted to an ambitious project. It sought to gather Christians together and it sought to promote knowledge of the impact of European colonialism on black people worldwide. Versions of it were practised in many of the big cities with significant Afro-Caribbean communities; in London, Birmingham and Liverpool for example. But it also sat uncomfortably with the established idioms of British life; the public profession of racial discrimination, as either victim or unwitting perpetrator, was difficult in a country where personal privacy and a national reputation for tolerance were still highly prized. So there were practical difficulties. But there were also more conceptual ones.

The Zebra Project was typical of the influence of psychological theories of identity and race in the 1970s. These theories travelled from the USA and tended to interpret racism and prejudice as a cognitive error, arguing that the need to order a highly complex social world resulted in classifications and categorisations that reflected historical processes and events. The influential American psychologist Judith Katz thought racism a psychological disorder that was deeply embedded in White people from a very early age on both a conscious and unconscious level and that

‘being White...implies being racist’.49 The proposed solution was education. Race Awareness Training (RAT) programmes asked individuals to examine the origins of their attitudes and feelings. In this respect it did serve to promote historical thinking and awareness. British imperialism and its consequences were discussed.

But the whole process was individualised and, in important aspects, ahistorical. It was designed to correct individual attitudes that were the product of inherent cognitive processes. White racism might be textured by historical circumstances but it was universal and inevitable. It was, as one commentator aptly put it, a kind of original sin.50 Those identified as ‘whites’ took the role of oppressors and were encouraged to develop a relationship to the past that was defined by the need to expiate the collective guilt of their forbears.51 In other words, these were psychological renditions of the past that lacked both historical accuracy and sensitivity. Racism became a property of whites who always benefitted from it. History was reduced to a simple prelude of the present. Long-term historical and structural analysis, with the possibility of change, was marginalised.

Africa

The distinctively Afro-Caribbean Christianity of the Windrush generation, and liberal attempts at inter-faith understanding, had limited appeal to a new generation of black Britons. Faced with discrimination and racist hostility, at school, on the streets and in the labour market, young black Britons were not well disposed to a theology that stressed heavenly rewards for patience and forbearing in this world or whose focus was on piecemeal and patient communication with white society. The growth of the Rastafarian movement in Britain demonstrated not a withdrawal from society but, in the words of historian and educationalist Len Garrison, ‘an attempt at self discovery that constituted an important step in the rise of historical consciousness’.52

All Faiths for One Race, an interfaith organisation founded in 1970 in Birmingham to promote social justice, helped to capture these developments. The organisation, with the Reverend David Jennings serving as its Director, published Talking Blues in 1978. Based on thirty-four in-depth interviews with black young people in Birmingham, the pamphlet documented harassment suffered at the hands of the police and showed, in response, the growing appeal of Rastafarianism in the city. The editors, the photographers and social activists Derek Bishton and Brian Homer, framed the interviews firmly around a concept of identity deficit.53 The claim that Afro-Caribbean children were particularly

53 D. Bishton and B. Homer, Talking Blues: The Black Community Speaks About its Relationship with the Police (AFFOR, 1978)

vulnerable to psychological damage, and to pathologies of self-hate, was increasingly attributed to long-term historical processes. In particular, slavery and colonialism meant that Caribbean societies lacked a distinct, cohesive, cultural identity to which migrant youths might attach themselves. Young black Britons were further disadvantaged because, born and brought up in liberal Britain, they rejected their parents’ strict religious and moral codes but had nothing to replace it with. If, in some educational and sociological studies, this produced an image of young Afro-Caribbean’s as wronged and passive victims inescapably damaged by history, other expressions of the argument left room for active resistance or responses to the past.54

Rastafarianism was one such expression. Its growing attraction was best illustrated in the long interview with Brian that is infused by a sense of history. Brian was fiercely critical of his schooling and his historical education in particular because its litany of great figures consisted of those who had enslaved and oppressed black people. His disillusionment meant a slow disengagement with formal schooling and a compensatory search for roots and culture. No formal educational organisations seemed to have been important in this search. Initially at least it resembled an auto-didactic search for self-understanding. Music, and particularly the growing popularity of reggae, was an important part of an informal education that protested against racism, sketched a history of forced migration and slavery and helped their listeners to both see (in the form of album artwork) and to hear pan-African ideas.55 Biographical texts, on Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, could be important and inspirational milestones, whilst a series of books published by Heinemann helped to set out and make accessible in more structured form the culture and religion of Rastafarians.56 Saturday schools, training projects and advisory services were available in London.57 In Birmingham, and for Brian, scripture readings and long discussions, the groundings made famous by Walter Rodney, led to his associating with a local Rastafarian group.58 Bishton and Homer noted how such groups championed a radical reading of black history, and it was common for Rastas to give long recitations of the historical atrocities of ‘Babylon’ and especially that of the Middle Passage, but quoted local clergy and youth workers to the effect that this history needed wider distribution and a sympathetic hearing if the position of black youth in society was to be properly understood.

54 See, for example, Ivor Morrish, *The Background of Immigrant Children* (London: Unwin, 1971) and the very important work by David Milner, *Children and Race* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975), especially chapters 4, 5 and 6.
55 Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Culture* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1993);
Around the time Talking Blues was published West Mercia Police generally, and Inspector M.V. Boast in particular, became extremely concerned about the development of Rastafarianism. That concern was evident in the police response to clashes with local Afro-Caribbeans in 1977 in which Rastafarianism was portrayed as a ‘criminalised Dreadlock subculture’. The concern was further articulated in a sixteen page typescript paper that displayed all of the spectacular misunderstanding and insensitivity that accompanied police dealings with minority ethnic communities in the region in the 1970s, Inspector Boast set himself the title ‘Rastafarianism is an excuse, not a religion’ and concluded that it was, indeed, used to ‘justify racial hatred and violence, idleness and delinquency’. Then, as now, this kind of condemnatory comment served to confirm existing prejudices against ethnic minorities’ religious and cultural practices and proved an obstacle for understanding the appeal of Rastafarianism as either religious conviction, or as the basis for political protest and identity.

Conclusion

Re-reading Zadie Smith’s White Teeth in the context of this history it becomes clear that Hortense Bowden’s faith was not a retreat from the world nor was it a denial of history. She was painfully aware both of her own roots and the terrible course of the twentieth century with all its troubles and vexations. Religious belief did not deny these realities but offered the possibility of empowerment and was underpinned by a vision of black women as active historical agents:

Lemme tell you something. I’m not like dem Witnesses jus’ scared of dyin’. Jus’ scared. Dem wan’ everybody to die excep’ dem. Dat’s not a reason to dedicate your life to Jesus Christ. I gat very different aims. I still hope to be one of de Anointed evan if I am a woman. I want it all my life. I want to be dere wid the Lord making de laws and de decisions.

This desire to make laws and decisions speaks powerfully to a past history of slavery and all its consequences because, as Bill Schwarz has argued, ‘consciousness of this unappeased past runs through every dimension of the Caribbean imagination’. Far from being divorced from historical issues and debates, Christian faiths in Britain necessarily revisited history. They did so in different ways. Afro-Caribbean migrants established their own churches and infused scripture readings and routine ceremonies with historical significance. The British Council of Churches declared itself against racism and launched projects for multicultural

60 Birmingham Heritage and Archive Services, All Faiths for One Race archive, Box 2: ‘Rastafarianism is an excuse, not a religion. Discuss’ (n.p., n.d., 1978?)
61 Garrison, Black Youth, 29-30 distinguished three kinds of Rastafarian adherent; the religious, the secular and the sympathetic follower.
62 Smith, White Teeth, 409
63 B. Schwarz (ed), West Indian Intellectuals in Britain (MUP, 2003): 256.
understanding that depended on a new understanding of the past. Rastafarians dreamed of a return to Africa but pragmatically also promoted a culture in which the study of black history and philosophy was a means of developing a secure identity. Different institutions of faith but all attempted, in one way or another, to excavate the past and to understand how it produced British subjects of Empire.

Whether these case studies prove the existence of a critical historical consciousness amongst the Afro-Caribbean faith groups discussed remains open to question. They certainly did reject the traditional historical narratives available in post war British society and the temporalities on which they were based. Slavery was no longer safely in the distant past. Instead, and partly because of the different forms of historical education examined here, slavery seemed immediate and pressing. Moreover, its immediacy raised questions about the nature of British identity and its imperial legacies.  

Perhaps what is striking is how profoundly difficult those questions were. Even within a shared framework of Christian belief, meaningful dialogue about the past proved elusive. This had nothing to do with first or second generation migrants’ faith or its alleged fundamentalism. Instead, it points towards the limits of post-1945 historical culture, its veneration for a particular version of the national story and its silencing of race. The recent political debates in England on the content and delivery of the history curriculum demonstrate the vitality of that historical culture and the resilience and the beguiling simplicity of the idea that a national history can somehow deliver an identity for all students and all citizens.

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64 Mark Salber Phillips, ‘History, Memory and Historical Distance’ in Peter Seixas (ed) Theorizing Historical Consciousness, 95-97.
65 I leave aside debates about whether Rastafarianism should be categorised as a form of Christianity.
67 See discussion and comment by Barbara Taylor, Peter Mandler and Ed Webb, ‘History, Nation and the Schools’ at www.historyworkshop.org.uk (last accessed 6 July 2011)