A Challenge to Change: British Baptists and Racism in the 1990s

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Abstract
Significant efforts were made in the 1990s to catalyse renewal in the life and witness of the Baptist Union of Great Britain. Several key Baptist thinkers identified racism as a problem impacting British society and Baptist churches but ignored any detailed consideration of the issue. This article seeks to account for this paradoxical phenomenon among contributors to the discourse about Baptist identity, denominational renewal, and engagement with mission within the larger story of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and racism in the 1990s. The writings of Nigel Wright, Rob Warner, and Derek Tidball are considered. All three authors self-identified as evangelical and advocated denominational renewal in the service of mission. The article explores factors that informed and limited discourse about race and racism among British Baptists in the 1990s, and the significance and outcome of these for Baptist life and witness in the ensuing decades of the twenty-first century.

Keywords
Baptists; race; racism; imagination

British Baptists at the End of the Twentieth Century

At the start of the 1990s, the Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB), which accounts for most Baptist Christians in England and Wales, stood at a crossroads. Behind it lay a path, trodden over the preceding twenty years, littered with an eclectic mix of events and developments that posed searching questions to the unity, ministry, and mission of the churches, associations, and colleges in membership with BUGB.[1] These

[1] The Baptist Union of Great Britain in the decade of the 1990s has been examined by Andy Goodliff, lecturer in Baptist History, Regent's Park College, Oxford. See Andy Goodliff, *Renewing a Modern Denomination: A Study of Baptist Institutional Life in the 1990s* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020).

elements included persistent numerical decline,[2] Christological controversy,[3] charismatic renewal,[4] new independent church networks,[5] fractured urban life,[6] growth in ethnic diversity,[7] calls for new initiatives in evangelism and church planting,[8] new patterns of ecumenical and interfaith relations,[9] questions about the nature of Baptist identity,[10] relocation of the national offices of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) from London to Didcot, Oxfordshire,[11] and the appointment of a new national secretariat to serve BUGB.[12] These factors in combination prompted a season of questioning and reflection.

What direction(s) should Baptist Christians pursue into a new millennium? Shortly after assuming office in 1991, the new General Secretary, David Coffey, and Deputy General Secretary Keith Jones, embarked upon a listening process across the BUGB constituency to begin discerning a way forward into the next decade and beyond.[13] This line of inquiry would eventually crystalise into asking, 'What kind of Baptist Union was needed in the twenty-first century?' It would culminate in a Denominational Consultation in 1996 to answer this question.[14] In the five years leading up to the Denominational

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2 Adult attendance at BUGB churches declined from 174 300 people in 1979 to 166 100 people in 1989. See Peter Brierley, *'Christian' England: What the English Church Census Reveals* (London: MARC Europe, 1991), pp. 39–40.

3 Ian M. Randall, *The English Baptists of the 20th Century* (Didcot: The Baptist Historical Society, 2005), pp. 366–375.

4 Douglas McBain, *Fire Over the Waters: Renewal Among Baptists and Others from the 1960s to the 1990s* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997); Randall, *The English Baptists*, pp. 396–402.

5 Andrew Walker, *Restoring the Kingdom: The Radical Christianity of the House Church Movement* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985).

6 Church of England, *Commission on Urban Priority Areas, Faith in the City: A Call for Action by Church and Nation: The Report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas* (London: Church House, 1985).

7 Randall, *The English Baptists*, p. 404 and pp. 508–510.

8 Rob Warner, *21st Century Church: Why Radical Change Cannot Wait* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), pp. 143–160.

9 Randall, *The English Baptists*, pp. 444–451 and pp. 491–496; p. 515.

10 Brian Haymes, *A Question of Identity: Reflections on Baptist Principles and Practice* (Leeds: Yorkshire Baptist Association, 1986).

11 Randall, *The English Baptists*, pp. 427–428.

12 Randall, *The English Baptists*, pp. 472–476.

13 Randall, *The English Baptists*, pp. 472–476.

14 Randall, *The English Baptists*, pp. 487–490.

Consultation, a variety of voices stimulated thinking and discussion across BUGB about the obstacles and opportunities facing the Christian Church in the United Kingdom and how Baptists might respond.

A Modest Proposal

Nigel Wright, a prominent pastor-scholar in the 1980s and 1990s, outlined a personal vision in 1990 of what the Baptist Union of Great Britain might look like in the twenty-first century. These thoughts were succinctly presented in the pages of the newsletter published by Mainstream: Baptists for Life and Growth (hereafter Mainstream).[15] An expanded version of Wright's theological rationale and re-imagining of what it might mean to be Baptist Christians on the threshold of the twenty-first century appeared in book form in 1991 under the title *Challenge to Change: A Radical Agenda for Baptists*.[16] A review of Wright's book and a study guide subsequently appeared in the *Mainstream Newsletter*.[17] His ideas commanded widespread attention among national officers, association officers, college staff, and local ministers.[18] Fellow Baptists actively discussed the signposts Wright erected to guide them into the twenty-first century, pointers he thought had the potential to revitalise Baptist life and witness.

Chapter One of *Challenge to Change* makes an appeal for Baptists to 'undergo a theological renewal, to re-appropriate and re-express the Baptist values which are at the basis of their life'.[19] The purpose of such a retrieval of core Baptist values is to act as a catalyst for 'a renewal of local churches and of wider denominational relationships', enabling Baptists to 'further the mission which they are called by God to fulfil.

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15 Nigel Wright, 'An Agenda for Baptist Christians', *Mainstream Newsletter*, 35 (January 1990), pp. 2–6.

16 Nigel Wright, *Challenge to Change: A Radical Agenda for Baptists* (Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1991).

17 Derek Tidball, 'A Challenge to Change Reviewed', *Mainstream Newsletter*, 40 (April 1991), pp. 2–3; Steven Hembery and Roy Searle, 'Study Guide to "Challenge to Change"', *Mainstream Newsletter*, 43 (January 1992), pp. 8–14.

18 David Coffey, the new BUGB General Secretary wrote the foreword in *Challenge to Change*; Douglas McBain, General Superintendent of the Metropolitan Area of the Baptist Union, commended *Challenge to Change* on its back cover, as did Paul Fiddes, Principal of Regent's Park College, Oxford; I discussed Wright's ideas with local ministers in London.

19 Wright, *Challenge to Change*, p. 22.

The potential is exciting but the cost is the challenge to change.'[20] Wright identifies four beliefs central to his notion of Baptist identity. First, the Bible is 'the supreme authority' in shaping the Christian life.[21] Second, the church is a community of believers and baptism 'a sign of freely chosen faith'.[22] Third, every member exercises a ministry and the local church is autonomous.[23] Fourth, he advocates freedom of conscience and 'the separation of church and state'.[24] Wright is persuaded that these beliefs make Baptists who they are and ought to determine what they do. A key theme throughout *Challenge to Change* is that doctrine matters. Let us really understand what we believe is right, let us be authentically Baptist in the convictions we adhere to, and Baptists can be transformed for the better:[25]

> This book […] is not a challenge to change from our basic principles but to change so that we truly recover them and embody them in the world of today. It is a call for us to be ourselves.[26]

By going back to their roots, re-appropriating core convictions, and expressing them in ways that connect with a new world emerging, Baptists will be better equipped to reform their local, regional, and national structures to be faithful to the gospel.

Challenge to Change is a book about identity written in a context where many Baptists worried that BUGB was on a path of numerical decline and diminishing spiritual vitality.[27] Some believed that intentional efforts were required to re-energise Baptist life and witness. Mainstream, which Nigel Wright joined and became closely identified with, actively sought to reverse the narrative of decline among Baptists.[28]

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[20] Wright, *Challenge to Change*, p. 22.
[21] Wright, *Challenge to Change*, p. 22.
[22] Wright, *Challenge to Change*, p. 27.
[23] Wright, *Challenge to Change*, p. 32.
[24] Wright, *Challenge to Change*, p. 34.
[25] Wright explored key Christian doctrines in a subsequent publication: Nigel G. Wright, *Vital Truth: The Convictions of the Christian Community* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2017).
[26] Wright, *Challenge to Change*, p. 35.
[27] Randall, *The English Baptists*, p. 414; McBain, *Fire Over the Waters*, pp. 82–85.
[28] Goodliff, *Renewing a Modern Denomination*, pp. 24–32. Mainstream: Baptists for Life and Growth was formed in response to perceived fatalism on the part of BUGB national officers in the face of gradual and persistent decline in numbers and spiritual vitality. For information about Mainstream's early history, see <https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_mainstream_01.php>

According to Wright, the recovery of authentic doctrine and living it out faithfully are potential catalysts for a new lease of life among Baptists.[29]

Chapter two proposes 'An Agenda for Baptist Christians' that calls for a change in approach among Baptists in worship, structures, government, evangelism, mood, and lifestyle. Wright perceives a need to shift 'from the conformist to the Christian' in lifestyle among Baptists at the tail-end of the twentieth century:

> Here, we raise the question of whether Baptist Christians are now so conformed to their society that they reflect more the image of the world than of Christ. We underestimate the degree to which we are pressed into the mould and in being conformist, we lose any possibility of presenting to the world an alternative society living by a better code in a higher strength.
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> Take the issues of racism, sexism, materialism, and militarism. These four key issues for our society require a positive witness from the Christian community, and yet the instinctive reaction of many Christians in these areas would probably put them on the side of the reactionary status quo. What is worse, however, is the apparently uncritical way in which many hold their moral, social and political views, without reference to Jesus Christ as the One who determines our whole existence. Different political views in the church of Christ may be understandable and even possible. What is inexcusable is unwillingness to make this area the subject of careful Christian thinking so that we hold our opinions in the light of Christ.[30]

Wright does not explain the terms 'racism, sexism, materialism, and militarism'.[31] The meanings of all four terms are assumed to be self-evident to the reader. Nor is any evidence marshalled to support Wright's impression that in relation to the four 'isms' named, the 'Christian community […] probably' is 'on the side of the reactionary status quo'.[32] No attempt is made to develop substantive thinking on

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and for more recent developments, see <https://freshstreams.net/about-us/our-strory/how-fresh-streams-began>.

29 Rob Warner commended biblical fidelity and cultural relevance as essential ingredients in revitalising Baptist life and witness in the 1990s. See: Warner, *21st Century Church*.

30 Wright, *Challenge to Change*, pp. 68–69.

31 Wright's quartet of 'isms' echo the triumvirate of 'isms' declared problematic by Martin Luther King Jr, namely, racism, capitalism, and militarism. See Martin Luther King Jr, 'A Time to Break Silence', in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. by James Melvin Washington (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), pp. 231–244. There is no evidence that Wright is familiar with King's social analysis and critique in *Challenge to Change*.

32 Presumably Wright's contention is based on anecdotal evidence, which would certainly correspond to my own impression of views present in BUGB life in the 1980s and 1990s. The

'racism' or any of the other three 'isms' identified alongside it. The nature and concrete outworking (for example in social processes and institutions) of these 'isms' in church and society are not described or interpreted. In view of the attention drawn to these realities and their perceived role in conformity among Baptists and other Christians to cultural values and practices alien to the gospel, the absence of any further investigation of the four 'isms' represents a significant lacuna.

Simultaneously Identifying and Ignoring a Problem

Wright illustrates tendencies evident in other British Baptists in the 1990s.[33] First, the fact of racism is acknowledged. Second, the painful impact of racism on UKME (United Kingdom Minority Ethnic) people[34] is signalled implicitly or explicitly. Third, definition and careful analysis of the phenomenon is avoided or explicated in limited fashion. Fourth, attitudes contrary to Christian values are assumed to be present in Christians and the corporate lives of congregations. Fifth, it is assumed that the church should act to counter beliefs and practices

Zebra Project (Methodist), Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice (largely Anglican), and the British Council of Churches Community and Race Relations Unit all pre-dated *Challenge to Change*. An important account of racism in Britain appeared three years before *Challenge to Change*: Kenneth Leech, *Struggle in Babylon: Racism in the Cities and Churches of Britain* (London: Sheldon Press, 1988). Resources existed to marshal evidence in support of claims about racism and to assist with the description and analysis of race and racism. Local Baptist groups emerged in the 1990s to resist and challenge racism such as Progress Within (Birmingham) and Reach In, Reach Out (London). See Randall, *The English Baptists*, p. 478.

[33] This article focuses on prominent Baptist pastor-scholars engaging with issues around Baptist identity in theology and culture in the 1990s in relation to race and racism. The following accounts trace institutional developments on race and racism within BUGB in the same period: Andy Goodliff, 'A Summons To Be Heard: Towards a More Just Baptist Identity', *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, 22, no. 1 (2022), 21–36; Wale Hudson-Roberts, 'British Baptists and Institutional Racism', in *Race for Justice: The Struggle for Equality and Inclusion in British and Irish Churches*, ed. by Richard S. Reddie (London: Monarch Books, 2022), pp. 46–50; *Journeying to Justice: Contributions to the Baptist Tradition across the Black Atlantic*, ed. by Anthony Reddie, with Wale Hudson-Roberts, and Gale Richards (Bletchley, Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2017).

[34] BAME (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic) was a common acronym employed to describe people that are not white in the first two decades of the twenty-first century in the UK. UKME (United Kingdom Minority Ethnic) and GMH (Global Majority Heritage) are now more commonplace. See The Church of England, *From Lament to Action: The Report of the Archbishop's Anti-Racism Taskforce* <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2021-04/FromLamentToAction-report.pdf> [accessed 21 October 2023].

incompatible with Christian discipleship.[35] The writings of two other prominent Baptist authors in the 1990s lend support to the claim that the identification of racism and ignoring or absence of any further exploration of the reality named is a feature of British Baptist commentary in the closing decade of the twentieth century.

Catching the Tide: The Church and The Challenge of Today's Society by Derek Tidball, also a prominent pastor-scholar in Baptist circles in the 1990s, presents a brief sociological account of contemporary society to help Baptists address the question, 'What is the way forward for our churches?'[36] A section on 'Social Problems'[37] alerts the reader to Baptist involvement in the campaign to end slavery in the nineteenth century[38] and points to the existence of 'racial tension' in the present:

> Communities are often divided on racial lines entailing much prejudice and injustice. Christians are called to be peacemakers and to be active in reconciliation.[39]

The category of 'race' is explicit in the acknowledgement that 'communities are often divided on racial lines', and the existence of 'racism' is implied by the reference to 'prejudice and injustice'. Neither 'race' nor 'racism' are explained or explored any further. Tidball is persuaded that Christians are required to 'be peacemakers and to be active in reconciliation'. He concludes the section on 'Social Problems' by illustrating that Jesus demonstrated a concern for the powerless. By implication the followers of Jesus should do the same. Tidball then proceeds to challenge the reader to select one of the social problems discussed, or one they choose to nominate, and engage in action to improve it for the common good.

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35 Wright does not indicate in *Challenge to Change* how to counter beliefs and practices incompatible with the gospel.

36 Derek Tidball, *Catching the Tide: The Church and The Challenge of Today's Society*, rev. edn (Didcot: Baptist Union of Great Britain, 1991), p. 63.

37 Tidball, *Catching the Tide*, pp. 50–53.

38 Tidball, *Catching the Tide*, p. 51. Tidball's stress is on past activity to end slavery rather than examination of the ideas and attitudes that justified and enacted slavery in the first place.

39 Tidball, *Catching the Tide*, p. 52.

Tidball was elected President of the Baptist Union for 1990–1991.[40] He published 'Reflections on the Presidency' in the *Mainstream Newsletter*[41] that includes the following observation:

> Then I was struck by our ethnic diversity. Admittedly we have a long way to go and our brothers and sisters from ethnic minority groups have some painful stories to tell us at the way we are so often blind to them still. Notwithstanding that, was encouraged by the racially mixed nature of a church like Windsor Road, Slough or Yardley, Birmingham.[42]

The experience of these 'brothers and sisters from ethnic minority groups' made an impression. Tidball is sensitive to the stories he encounters but confesses that 'we have a long way to go'. He laments 'we are so often blind to them still'. What do white Baptists (inferred) not see? Are we 'blind' to the experiences of 'brothers and sisters of ethnic minority groups', and the stories of their lives? Tidball takes some encouragement from the fact of ethnically mixed congregations within the Baptist constituency.

Rob Warner, editor of *Mainstream Newsletter* in the early 1990s,[43] reflected on the findings of the English Church Census in 'The Changing Face of the Church in England' in the summer of 1991.[44] The census indicated that 86 percent of Baptists are evangelicals. Warner contends that the evangelical identity of Baptists needed to be reflected in Baptist structures and that Baptists should seek cooperation with like-minded Christians. 'Our nearest neighbours with whom co-operation should be most ready at local and national levels are in fact the independents, Pentecostals and Afro-Caribbeans."[45] This conclusion underestimated significant differences in polity (church structures and governance), doctrine (understanding of the person and work of the

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[40] Derek Tidball also served as BUGB Secretary for Mission and Evangelism and Principal of London Bible College (now London School of Theology). Randall, *The English Baptists*, p. 476.
[41] Derek Tidball, 'Reflections on the Presidency', *Mainstream Newsletter*, 41 (July 1991), pp. 3–5.
[42] Tidball, 'Reflections', p. 4.
[43] Rob Warner held pastorates at Buckhurst Hill, Essex and Herne Hill Baptist Church, SE London. He became a teaching pastor at Queen's Road, Wimbledon, London, where his time and energy were split between the local congregation and a wider trans-local ministry. Randall, *The English Baptists*, p. 497 and p. 503.
[44] Rob Warner, 'The Changing Face of the Church in England', *Mainstream Newsletter*, 41 (July 1991), pp. 1–2.
[45] Warner, 'The Changing Face', p. 2.

Holy Spirit), and the experience of racism familiar to many black Christians from a Caribbean background. In January 1992, Warner penned an editorial under the title 'The Cross and Racism'[46] that challenged Baptists to proactively expose and resist racism. The article describes the intentional efforts of the leadership of Herne Hill Baptist Church, to address the issue of racism. These initiatives arose from an awareness that, historically, black people had not always been treated with understanding and dignity within the congregation,[47] and a recognition that the contemporary demographic composition[48] of the church necessitated an intentional and positive response to bear faithful witness to the Gospel in a city, London, with an increasingly diverse population. Warner incorporated this material in his subsequent book *21st Century Church: Why Radical Change Cannot Wait*.[49] The existence of racism is acknowledged but nowhere defined in either the newsletter editorial or the book, nor is consideration given to the causes of racism and the factors that perpetuate it within church and society in either publication.[50]

These authors reflect a tendency in evangelical thinkers in this decade to admit the existence of racism as an uncomfortable reality. But they do not dwell on it. No attempt is made to understand the nature of racism and its impact on church and society. The remainder of this article seeks to render some explanation for this paradoxical phenomenon, outline why it matters, and suggest some implications for British Baptists today.

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46 Rob Warner, 'The Cross and Racism', *Mainstream Newsletter*, 43 (January 1992), pp. 1–2.

47 Warner, 'The Cross and Racism', p. 1.

48 Warner, 'The Cross and Racism', p. 1. Thirty nationalities were represented in Herne Hill Baptist Church's morning congregation in 1991.

49 Rob Warner, *21st Century Church*, pp. 113–115. Warner's book is a call to action that, in a similar vein to Nigel Wright, advocates the merits of adhering to authentic Christian beliefs (in Warner's terms 'biblical' beliefs) and adapting attitudes, practices, and structures in the church to connect intelligibly with contemporary culture for the sake of mission.

50 One Baptist scholar that engaged more extensively with the reality of race in the 1990s is the church historian Brian Stanley. He examined race in Protestant missions during British imperialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but, like the authors considered in this article, does not explain the category of 'race' and assumes the meaning of the term is self-evident to the reader. See Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions and British Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Leicester: Apollos, 1990), pp. 36, 97, 102, 119, 162–163, 167, 172, 182–183; and 'Culture and Christian Mission: A Perspective from History', *Baptist Ministers' Journal*, 242 (April 1993), 3–6.

Accounting for an Acknowledgement and an Absence

Theology, or talk about God, always occurs in a cultural context. Stephen Bevans made this claim in 1992 in a landmark publication *Models of Contextual Theology*.[51] He voiced an awareness that 'cultural contexts shape theology',[52] an awareness that had been growing since the 1970s, especially in liberation theology and mission studies.[53] Christian doctrine and systematic theology also now increasingly acknowledge the role of context in theologising.[54] Andrew Walls, a church historian active in mission studies, points out that the gospel is a 'prisoner and liberator of culture'.[55] What is it that imprisons and liberates the theological imagination — that is, the description and interpretation of God, society, church, and Christian discipleship — in Wright, Warner, and Tidball? All three authors, in varying degrees, recognise that the church is frequently 'conformed to culture' in ways that are at variance with the gospel. What elements constrain and free their theological imagination in relation to race and racism? Three factors stand out: blueprint ecclesiology, diseased social imagination, and evangelical identity.

Blueprint Ecclesiology

Wright, Warner, and Tidball exemplify the Baptist instinct to seek a vision of the church grounded in the New Testament, the church as close to God's intentions as possible, the church that Christian disciples at their best aspire to live out. They articulate or imply what Nicholas M. Healy calls 'blueprint ecclesiologies',[56] ideal theological models of the Christian community. A focus on the ideal church with negligible or no reference to the messy reality of its concrete existence has consequences:

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[51] Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, rev. and expanded edn (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), pp. 3–15.
[52] Bevans, *Models*, pp. ix–xi.
[53] Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976); Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).
[54] Uche Anizor, *How to Read Theology: Engaging Doctrine Critically and Charitably* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), pp. 25–56.
[55] Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), pp. 16–24.
[56] Nicholas M. Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 25–51.

> The church's witness and its pastoral care are compromised when it fails adequately to acknowledge and respond to its sinfulness.[57]

Healy thinks that fixating on an ideal theological model of the church and simultaneously minimising attention to the empirical reality of the church, inclines theologians to accentuate notions of the Christian community at variance with the lived experience of the church. Healy proposes that 'ecclesiology [the study of the church] can aid the church's efforts by reflecting theologically upon its concrete identity'.[58] The Baptist authors featured in this article partially recognise aspects of 'concrete identity' in church and society. Wright acknowledges the existence of 'racism, sexism, materialism, and militarism'. Warner acknowledges the reality of racism and a culturally changed society. In Tidball, the problem of race and racism is tacitly acknowledged, but he moves immediately to advocate for Baptists to seek peace and reconciliation. There is no attempt to understand the causes of the present situation and what may be obstacles in the way to overcoming it. None of these authors describe or seek to make sense of race and racism in any depth. They skip over the 'ugly truth'.

The concrete or empirical church is not completely lost to view in Wright, Warner, and Tidball. It may be more accurate to say that their perspective on the concrete church is blurred and attention is directed to a limited set of features. There is a tendency to see churches conditioned by buildings, organisational structures, and formal ways of doing things devised in an earlier age. These features and reasons to change them for the sake of mission are attended to in some detail. Race and racism are acknowledged but not examined with any rigour. What might be 'colouring' their approach? Willie Jennings, an American black Baptist theologian offers a stark proposal for white theologians of all denominations in Western Christianity to reckon with.

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[57] Healy, *The Church*, p. 25.
[58] Healy, *The Church*, p. 25.

Diseased Social Imagination

Willie Jennings argues in *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*[59] that 'Christianity in the Western world lives and moves within a diseased social imagination',[60] a distorted mode of describing and interpreting human identity and organising social relations. 'Whiteness' is a critical element within this 'diseased social imagination'. By 'whiteness', Jennings means that white people in the West understand their identities and relations to others who are not white through the lens of colour. People that do not possess this arbitrary attribute cannot claim a white racial identity.[61] Those deemed white benefit from social advantages, assume their way of doing things is universally true, and do not realise that their racial identity has unrecognised outcomes for their lives. Whiteness is a social construct, a distorted but powerful perspective,[62] inimical to the gospel, which has developed and mutated over centuries:

> Slowly […] whiteness emerges, not simply as a marker of the European but as the rarely spoken but always understood organizing conceptual frame. And blackness appears as the fundamental tool of that organizing conceptuality. Black bodies are the ever-visible counterweight of a usually *invisible* white identity.[63]

This 'diseased social imagination' of the West is the context within which the 'Christian imagination' or way of describing and making sense of reality has developed. To understand the practice and operation of

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[59] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010). I am persuaded that the substance of the argument Jennings makes is correct.

[60] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, p. 6.

[61] The story of 'whiteness' in America is complex; it established boundaries between people groups but exhibited flexibility in response to immigration from Europe. See Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). Also, Susan K. Brown and Frank D. Bean, 'Assimilation Models, Old and New: Explaining a Long Term Process', Migration Policy Institute (October, 2006) <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/assimilation-models-old-and-new-explaining-long-term-process> [accessed 21 January 2024]. Horsman shows how notions of an Anglo-Saxon race shaped American thinking. Brown and Bean explore how white people born in America, initially viewed Irish and Italian immigrants as inferior nationalities, depicting them in racial categories, but eventually came to see them as 'white'.

[62] We shall see that 'whiteness' and concepts such as 'race' and 'racism' are not simply cognitive or abstract accounts of reality.

[63] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, p. 25.

theology or talk about God in Western Christianity, we must comprehend the context in which it has arisen:

> One must look at […] the soil in which the modern theological imagination grew and where it continues to find its deepest social nutrients.[64]

For Jennings, the 'diseased social imagination' he identifies must be acknowledged, because it skews description and interpretation of God, human beings, and relationships. Western Christians can no longer ignore it if they are to be true to the gospel and to bear faithful witness to Jesus Christ.[65] The theologising done by the Baptist thinkers showcased in this article predates these shifts in perspective in academic theology in the United Kingdom. There is no awareness of whiteness in their theologising, which helps to explain, in part, their priorities and limited recognition and engagement with race and racism. The distorted Christian imagination Jennings alludes to is multi-faceted. It inherits and promulgates the categories of race and racism. Race differentiates between people based on skin colour;[66] it simultaneously attaches an arbitrary value to a person according to their skin colour. Race structures relations between human beings from different people groups into a hierarchy of importance. Hence, race is not simply a descriptive term. It

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[64] Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, p. 7.

[65] For additional thinking on whiteness in America see Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2020); James W. Perkinson, *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004). Anthony Reddie has explored similar themes in the UK. See Anthony G. Reddie, *Theologising Brexit: A Liberationist and Postcolonial Critique* (London: Routledge, 2019); *Deconstructing Whiteness, Empire and Mission*, ed. by Anthony G. Reddie and Carol Troupe (London: SCM Press, 2023).

[66] Skin colour is central to discourse about race in America. See Ibrahim X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (London: The Bodley Head, 2017). Antisemitism is not part of Kendi's account of racism in America. Kenan Malik, writing in contemporary Britain argues, 'The concept of a "racial type" as it developed through the nineteenth century was of a group of people linked by a set of fundamental characteristics and differing from other types by virtue of those attributes.' See Kenan Malik, *Not So Black and White: A History of Race from White Supremacy to Identity Politics* (London: Hurst, 2023), p. 3. His construal of race means that skin colour is not necessarily determinative to experience racism. Malik is not alone in a British context in theorising about race beyond the category of skin colour. Mike Cole, Emeritus Professor of Racism Studies at the University of East London, distinguishes between 'Colour-coded racism' (e.g., directed towards enslaved black Africans) and 'Non-colour coded racism' (e.g., anti-Irish racism and antisemitism.). See Mike Cole, *Racism and the Tory Party: From Disraeli to Johnson* (New York: Routledge, 2023), pp. 7–14. This difference of approach cannot be resolved here.

does political and ideological work.[67] Racism is the oppression of one group of people by another group of people based on skin colour.[68]

Race is not merely an abstract theory or ideology, a set of ideas that serves the interests of a particular group of people, arrived at through a process of logical discourse. Race is inculcated and absorbed through complex processes of socialisation. It operates implicitly and explicitly, consciously and unconsciously. Race shapes decisions, informs actions, and fuels emotions. James McClendon's concept of a conviction, outlined in *Ethics* the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, helps account for the potency of race and its influence in shaping a 'diseased social imagination' in the West. McClendon distinguishes between opinions and convictions:

> Opinions are the stuff of debate and discussion […] Convictions on the other hand, are less readily expressed but more tenaciously held. It may take me a long time to discover my own convictions, but when I do, I have discovered […] myself. My convictions are the gutsy beliefs I live out — or in failing to live them out I betray myself.[69]

> A conviction is a persistent belief such that if X (a person or community) has a conviction, it will not be easily relinquished without making X a significantly different person (or community) than before.[70]

In *Doctrine*, volume two of McClendon's *Systematic Theology*, he expounds three inter-related aspects of a conviction.[71] First, a conviction is cognitive in nature; it describes and interprets how we see reality. It is a mental map of how we make sense of the world. Second, a conviction is volitional in nature; it informs our decision-making, our action and inaction. Third, it is affective in nature. The beliefs we hold to be most true, our persistent beliefs, are not held dispassionately. Our most persistent beliefs are 'self-involving'.[72] They exercise a powerful emotional appeal within us. A persistent belief may be exposed as

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67 Drew G. I. Hart, *Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2016), p. 49.
68 In Cole's terms, this article deals specifically with 'Colour-coded racism'.
69 James Wm McClendon Jr, *Ethics: Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, 2nd edn (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), p. 22.
70 McClendon, *Ethics*, pp. 22–23.
71 James Wm McClendon Jr, *Doctrine: Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 29.
72 McClendon, *Doctrine*, p. 29.

lacking coherence in relation to reality, but its affective dimension will mean that it is not easy or straightforward to abandon. Modifying or relinquishing a persistent belief can be costly and difficult for a person or a community.[73] Identifying our convictions, theological and non-theological, is vital to discern how and to what extent they correspond with the gospel and the way we live out Christian discipleship. If we cannot 'see' what is informing and limiting our theological imagination, we will not be able to modify or correct it in the light of the gospel. We are more likely to prioritise and favour some themes rather than others. It is probable we will skim over some aspects of our lived reality and invest time, energy, and resources on others, which is precisely the phenomenon being explored in this article.

British Evangelical Identity

The three authors in the spotlight of this article all identified as evangelicals and characterised Baptists as inherently evangelical.[74] Their acknowledgement of the fact of racism and the simultaneous absence of any in-depth engagement with race and racism illustrates a widespread trend in British evangelical thought in the period from 1970 to 1999. The mainstream of white British evangelicalism was slow, reluctant even, to engage with the idea of race and the reality of racism as matters of pressing concern.[75] These attitudes were indicative of a deeply engrained resistance among evangelicals across denominations to

[73] A change in convictions or persistent beliefs can be difficult, costly, and transformative. See Megan Phelps-Roper, *Unfollow: A Journey from Hatred to Hope, Leaving the Westboro Baptist Church* (London: riverrun, 2019); J. Michael Feazell, *The Liberation of the Worldwide Church of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001); Joseph Tkach, *Transformed by Truth* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1997).

[74] David Bebbington argues that, historically, four characteristics mark evangelical identity: conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism. David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 3. This account broadly applies to the evangelical thinkers featured in this paper.

[75] Racism in the history of American evangelicalism is troubling and problematic. See Randall Balmer, *Bad Faith: Race and the Rice of the Religious Right* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2021); Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021). It is tempting in a British context to assume that the issue is more serious in America than here and so avoid addressing race and racism in our own backyard.

interact with social issues and the challenges they posed to church and society.[76]

A few evangelicals wrestled with race and racism in the 1970s and 1980s. The Evangelical Race Relations Group (ERRG) was founded by evangelical Christians working in multi-cultural areas in London and the Midlands. It organised conferences and published a quarterly journal. In the 1980s it was renamed Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice. ECRJ employed a series of workers to engage in training and enabling churches and organisations to address issues of racism.[77] In spite of these efforts, the mainstream of evangelicals continued to remain largely unengaged with race and racism. White evangelicals had little contact with independent black congregations, denominations, and leaders.[78] Yet, this fact is not the whole story. There were congregations in historic denominations, which included evangelicals, that experienced an influx of black Christians from the Caribbean, the Windrush generation, from 1948 onwards. Multi-ethnic Baptist congregations emerged in several cities.[79] Much of the impetus to recognise and face up to racism came from the grass roots of Baptist life, not from colleges, associations, or BUGB national structures.[80]

The tide began to turn in the mainstream of evangelical thought with the publication in 1984 of John Stott's *Issues Facing Christians*

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[76] A point made by John Stott, a prominent voice in British and world evangelicalism. Nigel Wright reflects some of these tensions in Nigel Wright and David Slater, *A Theology of Mission: AIM 2* (Didcot: BUGB, 1990).

[77] Greg Smith, 'How Can We Create a Multicultural Church?', Psephizo <https://www.psephizo.com/life-ministry/how-can-we-create-multicultural-church/> [accessed 22 November 2023].

[78] The West Indian Evangelical Alliance (WIEA), later African Caribbean Evangelical Alliance (ACEA), which served a black church constituency, affiliated to the mainly white Evangelical Alliance. The founder of the WIEA, Philip Mohabir, intentionally sought fellowship with white evangelicals and worked for mutual understanding, fellowship, and reconciliation. Mohabir first met Clive Calver, the then General Secretary of the Evangelical Alliance, at a conference in Amsterdam sponsored by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Organisation. See Philip Mohabir, *Building Bridges* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), pp. 192–208.

[79] Becoming a multi-ethnic congregation that faces up to race and racism is challenging but rewarding. See D. J. Wise, 'Developing a Genuinely Multi-Ethnic Local Church Congregation: An Autoethnographic Investigation into Greenford Baptist Church 1987–2014' (doctoral thesis, University of Roehampton, London, 2021).

[80] Randall, *The English Baptists*, p. 478.

Today.[81] Stott challenged hesitant evangelicals to get involved in social issues and offered thought on a range of topics, including a chapter on race, racism, and race relations under a title infused with hope, 'The Multi-Racial Dream'.[82] *Issues Facing Christians Today* was one of the first attempts by a prominent evangelical thinker and leader in Britain to interact with race and racism.[83] Stott opens the chapter by quoting the 'I have a dream' section of Martin Luther King Jr's speech at the March on Washington in August 1963. He asserts that, 'It is right for Christians to dream this dream.'[84] Stott omits reference to King's strong condemnation of the social conditions black Americans contend with in the first part of the speech.[85] He chooses to begin with King's vision of reconciliation between different peoples.[86] Stott then proceeds to survey three chapters in the annals of race: slavery in America, antisemitism[87] in Germany, and the 'British Record'. Stott's account of the latter is silent about British involvement in the transatlantic slave trade and practice of slavery in the British Empire. He acknowledges the reality of 'racial pride'[88] and condescension exhibited in colonial rule. Stott traces the story of migration from Commonwealth countries to the United Kingdom following World War Two and the experience of migrants in a hostile society. He refutes various myths and flawed theories about race. The chapter concludes with a section on 'Biblical foundations for multi-racialism', which echoes King's dream. For Stott, the teaching of the Bible is unambiguous: 'The church must therefore exhibit its multi-racial, multi-national, and multi-cultural nature.'[89]

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[81] John Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today* (London: Marshalls, 1984).
[82] Stott, *Issues*, pp. 194–211.
[83] For a more recent consideration of evangelicals and race see Jessamin Birdsall, 'Racial Diversity in British Evangelicalism: Frames, Barriers, and Practices' (doctoral dissertation, Yale University, 2021).
[84] Stott, *Issues*, p. 194.
[85] Washington, *A Testament*, pp. 217–220.
[86] This concluding part of the speech is the place where evangelicals and most white Christians like to begin. Starting at this point in the speech entails avoiding the harsh reality of racial injustice and moving swiftly to the aspirational vision of reconciliation. King held reality and hope together.
[87] Stott includes antisemitism in his discussion of race. No rationale is offered for his decision.
[88] Stott, *Issues*, p. 201.
[89] Stott, *Issues*, p. 209.

Stott is aspirational in what he writes. He reflects on history, ideas, and the Bible. The chapter is a distillation of thinking by someone who has read widely but does not reckon with the lived experience of black Christians in church and society. Attention moves quickly to biblical principles to guide the church. Stott advocates a blueprint ecclesiology. He envisages correct doctrine is the key to being the church: 'Only a true theology, the biblical revelation of God, can deliver us from racial pride and prejudice.'[90] The origins of race and racism are not probed. Stott's approach anticipates Wright, Warner, and Tidball's later works, as self-identified evangelicals. He is unaware of key factors shaping the way he does theology: the 'diseased social imagination' explicated by Willie Jennings, the 'blueprint ecclesiology' mode critiqued by Nicholas Healy, and an evangelical identity still unsure of how to engage with the lived experience of social issues and operating with 'selective historical amnesia'[91] about Britain's distant and more recent past in matters to do with race and racism. There is an absence of reflexivity, the scrutiny of how personal and social identity, lived experience, and assumptions shape one's outlook, with significant consequences for theology and action.

Baptists and Racism Beyond Mainstream in the 1990s

Local Initiatives

The theological musings of pastor-scholars closely associated with Mainstream is not the whole story of Baptists and racism in the 1990s. However, the limited scope and hesitancy to explore race and racism reflected in their output is indicative of the BUGB[92] landscape in the early 1990s. It was grass-roots initiatives in local churches and

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[90] Stott, *Issues*, p. 209.

[91] Robert Beckford used this term in a presentation on Sam Sharpe at the UK Baptist Assembly in Plymouth, Devon in 2000. For more on historical amnesia in the context of whiteness see Katharine Tyler, *Whiteness, Class and the Legacies of Empire: On Home Ground* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 214–219.

[92] BUGB serves as a shorthand term with a dual reference to (1) the national offices, staff based in Didcot, Oxfordshire, and Baptist Union Council, and (2) to the churches, associations, and colleges that together constitute the membership of the denomination. The context will normally make clear which sense is intended.

associations that sparked serious exploration and conversation about race and racism in Baptist Union circles rather than leading theologians or the national offices in Didcot. Progress Within (PW), which drew black and white members from three churches in Birmingham, met for the first time in 1991 at Cannon Street Memorial Baptist Church.[93] Progress Within critiqued the dynamics of racial injustice within local churches, the West Midland Baptist Association, BUGB national structures, and British society. Key members of Progress Within included Pete Cutts, Deleyan Smith, and Joanne Gillings. James Ashdown,[94] a deacon at Battersea Chapel, South London,[95] became aware of the existence of Progress Within. His conversations with the Birmingham group resulted in a meeting at Battersea Chapel in March 1993 between Progress Within and interested Baptists from South-West London.

This gathering inspired the formation of Reach In, Reach Out (RIRO) in May 1993, which, in its early days, counted James Ashdown, Pat White, Julian Gotobed, Rosemarie Davidson-Gotobed, Gillian Small, Debbie Linton, Sue Marley, Janice Zvimba, and Devon Marston as members. Meetings alternated between Battersea Chapel, Brixton Baptist Church (Kenyon), and Raleigh Park Christian Centre, Brixton Hill (then under the care of Bonneville Baptist Church, Clapham).[96] RIRO produced a publication, *Reaching Out: Thoughts, Views, and Stories About Racism*,[97] with financial support from the London Baptist Association (LBA) and BUGB Social Action Office.[98] This booklet

[93] Joanne Gillings, 'Making Progress in Birmingham', *Baptist Times*, 4 September 1997, p. 8.

[94] James Ashdown worked for the Zebra Project, a Methodist racial justice initiative, and the Evangelical Coalition for Urban Mission in the late 1980s and early 1990s. See James Ashdown, The Storyman Website <https://www.storyman.org.uk/home.html>. He was a member at Clapham Baptist Church in the 1980s and Battersea Chapel in the 1990s. Among (white) Baptists in the 1980s and 1990s he possessed a unique range of experience and knowledge in relation to Black Majority Churches and racial justice issues.

[95] I was the minister at Battersea Chapel from 1991 to 2001.

[96] James Ashdown, Pat White, Rosemarie Davidson-Gotobed, and I advocated for racial justice more widely in the LBA and BUGB.

[97] James Ashdown, Pat White, Janice Zvimba, Julian Gotobed, Debbie Linton, Devon Marston, and Rosemarie Davidson-Gotobed, *Reaching Out: Thoughts, Views and Stories About Racism* (London: Reach In, Reach Out, 1995).

[98] The LBA took advice from Desmond Gordon and Frederick George as part of its decision-making process to approve funding to produce *Reaching Out*.

offered personal stories, interviews, poetry, analysis of race, ideas about combatting racism, and signposted resources. Local groups also emerged in Bristol, Derby, Nottingham, and Yorkshire.[99] As the decade wore on, national gatherings were convened with the help of the Social Action Office to enable local groups to share experiences and learn from one another.[100] A further important development in the 1990s was the formation of the Black and Asian Ministers' Forum at the instigation of Desmond Gordon, minister at Finchley Baptist Church, London, as a safe space for Black and Asian ministers to find fellowship and reflect upon their experiences. Several members would go on to exercise leadership in the LBA and BUGB, such as Desmond Gordon, Frederick George, Rupert Lazar, and Wale Hudson-Roberts.[101]

National Initiatives

BUGB published *Belonging: A Resource for the Christian Family* in 1994 as 'A Resource for the UN International Year of the Family', including a chapter on 'Multi-Cultural Community'.[102] The chapter presents historical and current perspectives on 'changing patterns in society' with reference to cultural diversity and race. This booklet acknowledges the existence of race and racism but does not explain these categories or examine the realities they refer to in any depth, much like the theological outputs of Wright, Tidball, and Warner. The chapter on 'Multi-Cultural Community' signals the availability of 'organisations that help churches and other bodies become more aware of their attitudes and discriminatory structures'.[103] The reader is informed that Baptist Union staff at Didcot have been on racism awareness courses provided by

[99] The mission minister of the Yorkshire Baptist Association, Revd Stan Woods, produced a report in the early 1990s based on a sabbatical research project. He made a series of recommendations, including 'that the Baptist Union set up a working group to look at the whole aspect of racial justice in the denomination'. Stan Woods, *Let Justice Flow* (unpublished sabbatical report, Yorkshire Baptist Association, 1994), p. 25.

[100] Revd Andy Bruce played a key role in facilitating these gatherings.

[101] Desmond Gordon was active in LBA and BUGB Councils. Frederick George became President of the LBA in 1993 (see *Capital Vision*, Autumn 1993, p. 1) and then went on to become President of BUGB for 1997–1998. Rupert Lazar became President of BUGB for 2016–2017. Hudson-Roberts would become the first BUGB Racial Justice Co-ordinator in 2002.

[102] BUGB, *Belonging: A Resource for the Christian Family* (Didcot: BUGB, 1994); the chapter can be found on pp. 99–108.

[103] BUGB, *Belonging*, p. 103.

MELRAW.[104] A spirit of hopeful realism characterises the text: 'In many respects race relations in Britain have improved over the years but racially motivated discrimination and violence remain major social problems.'[105]

Stephen Lawrence was murdered at a bus stop on a street in Eltham, South-East London, in April 1993. His experience of racially motivated violence was not unique. Black and Asian Baptists knew what it was like to meet 'racially motivated discrimination and violence' in the 1990s. Greenford Baptist Church, West London, reckoned with such an episode in 1997, when a racially motivated attack was directed at an Asian family in membership with the church.[106] In my own context in South-West London, a Nigerian woman who worshipped regularly at Battersea Chapel was assaulted in her own home, no more than a two-minute walk from the chapel building, by neighbours that took exception to a complaint about an uncontrolled dog intimidating her children. Her husband had to obtain a restraining order to protect the family. White Baptists living outside major cities rarely encountered such incidents. Ministers and churches in cities with multi-ethnic populations were far more likely to be confronted by racism and racially motivated violence. Activism for BUGB to recognise and act in the face of racial injustice came predominantly from Baptists in urban conurbations. Moreover, action for change reflected dissatisfaction with conditions in church and society among a generation of young adults aged 20–40.[107]

The limited attention afforded to racial justice matters in BUGB in the early 1990s can, in part, be explained by the absence (unlike other denominations) of a national officer with a racial justice brief and by limited interaction with ecumenical initiatives on racism and racial justice. Gradually, however, the Baptist landscape began to change. David Coffey and Keith Jones, the new denominational secretariate,

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104 BUGB, *Belonging*, p. 103. MELRAW is the acronym for the Methodist and Ecumenical Leadership Racism Awareness Workshops.

105 BUGB, *Belonging*, p. 99.

106 David Wise documents this episode, the difficult aftermath, the campaign to secure justice, and impact upon Greenford Baptist Church in Wise, *Developing a Genuinely Multi-Ethnic Local Church*, pp. 31–38. He gave evidence at the Stephen Lawrence Enquiry in 1998.

107 Most participants in Progress Within and Reach in, Reach Out were in the 20–40 age range.

convened a 'listening day' for the LBA in 1991 as part of a BUGB wide listening process. Frederick George spoke about racism and the need for BUGB to be proactive in working for racial justice. I also attended the LBA listening day and reiterated the importance of facing up to the challenge of racial justice.[108] The listening day process resulted in *A Ten Year Plan Towards 2000*.[109] The plan did not refer to racial justice, but the National Mission Strategy which accompanied it acknowledges that

> less attention has been paid by Baptists to the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of British society than it deserves. A number of mission initiatives […] have been taken and a number of healthily integrated churches exist, whose insights should be shared with others. Steps must be taken to listen and understand the grass roots, especially the young. The leadership that ethnic minorities are already giving calls us to reform ourselves, so that such leadership can take its place in our structures and benefit the wider union […] A strategy for the furthering of racial justice in our denomination needs to be devised.[110]

Ecumenical Encouragement

Some of these aspirations began to materialise as the decade progressed. In 1993, the Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland (CCBI) asked BUGB to appoint a Baptist representative to the Churches Commission for Racial Justice (CCRJ).[111] This role was filled by Pat White,[112] a member of Brixton Baptist Church and Reach In, Reach Out. Pat White served as a deputy moderator of the CCRJ[113] and convener of the Baptist Union Racial Justice Task Group (RJTG),[114] which was formed in 1995.

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[108] I encountered racism and its impact upon lives during my three years as youth worker and assistant to the minister at Brixton Baptist Church (Kenyon) while training for the Baptist ministry (1988–1991). Battersea Chapel, a multi-ethnic congregation, called me to be its minister in 1991.

[109] BUGB, *A Ten Year Plan Towards 2000 Incorporating the National Mission Strategy* (Didcot: BUGB, 1993).

[110] BUGB, *A Ten Year Plan*, p. 19–20.

[111] The Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland (CCBI), successor to the British Council of Churches (BCC), created the CCRJ to continue the work of the BCC's Community and Race Relations Unit (CRRU).

[112] Mark Rudall, 'When the River of Justice Fails', *Baptist Times*, 15 July 1993, p. 6. I made Douglas McBain, General Superintendent of the Metropolitan Area of BUGB (i.e., the area covered by the LBA), aware of Pat White at a regional LBA meeting at Balham Baptist Church in the early 1990s.

[113] David Haslam, 'Miscarriage of Justice', letter, *Baptist Times*, 5 August 1993, p. 6.

[114] The RJTG subsequently became the Racial Justice Working Group (RJWG).

She was a key figure in Baptist and ecumenical circles working for racial justice through the 1990s and into the 2000s. A range of internal and external voices added an impetus to push racial justice up BUGB's agenda. Keith Jones, BUGB Deputy General Secretary, proposed the idea of developing a national initiative on racial justice. Anne Wilkinson-Hayes, BUGB Social Action Adviser,[115] was assigned to support the new racial justice brief.

The second half of the 1990s witnessed increased activity in the pursuit of racial justice across BUGB. The council committed to a programme of action in 1996–1997.[116] The Social Action Committee produced *How Do We Work for Racial Justice?,*[117] and with the RJTG promoted Racial Justice Sunday (launched as an annual event by CCRJ in 1995), supported a resolution on racial justice at the Baptist Union Council in 1996, helped with Frederick George's presidential theme 'Take the Risk' at the Baptist Assembly in 1997, and organised national gatherings for local groups to learn from one another and engage in training to empower them to work with local churches and organisations to progress racial justice.[118]

Baptist Union Council

The Baptist Union Council in the 1990s included a handful of minority ethnic members such as Rosemarie Davidson-Gotobed, Desmond Gordon, and Frederick George. George, from Sri Lanka, trained for Baptist Ministry at Spurgeon's College and entered a pastorate in London. He advocated racial justice in local association and national structures in the 1990s. George proposed a resolution committing BUGB to make racial justice a priority at the Baptist Union Council meeting in March 1996. The *Baptist Times* records that a decision was

115 Anne Wilkinson-Hayes was Social Justice Adviser for the Baptist Union between 1992 and 1997.

116 The programme prioritised four elements: awareness raising; training; organisational change; and monitoring.

117 This four-page information guide outlines seven steps to engage with racial justice and provides a list of resources.

118 This included such events as, for example, an exploratory workshop convened at Cannon Street Memorial Baptist Church, Birmingham, in March 1996.

reached following 'a lengthy presentation and debate on racial justice'.[119] Progress Within and Reach In, Reach Out contributed to the presentation.[120] The Council adopted a composite resolution:

- to encourage and affirm in our churches the contribution of different races and cultures;
- to recognise that racism is sinful and a denial of God's view of humanity;
- to acknowledge that there is racism in individuals and in our churches;
- to make a commitment to challenge this evil wherever it exists;
- to actively support the ongoing work of the Racial Justice Task Group through the Union's Social Action Committee;
- to endorse the creation of a programme of activities aimed at furthering these issues in 1996–1997.[121]

The *Baptist Times* reports, 'There was no shortage of speakers anxious to support the resolution, though some sounded a note of caution about the danger of using high-sounding phrases as a substitute for genuine self-examination and reform.'[122] I recall David Coffey, then BUGB General Secretary, coming over to those of us from Reach In, Reach Out after the close of the debate and the vote for the resolution, to declare, 'I think something significant happened today.' The *Baptist Times* summarised a more cautious assessment on the part of Frederick George in his contribution to the debate:

> He reminded members of the Council of the Manifesto of Evangelical Christians for Racial Justice adopted by the 1988 Baptist Assembly, which called for repentance over racial attitudes, an end to discrimination, and better racial understanding.
>
> Eight years on, he said, the situation was, if anything, worse. Clearly it was no use simply passing a resolution if there was no subsequent action. We must be seen to be doing something.[123]

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[119] 'Council Agrees To Make the Pursuit of Racial Justice a Priority', *Baptist Times,* 28 March 1996, p. 3.
[120] I attended as a member of Reach In, Reach Out and was part of the group's presentation to Council.
[121] Council Agrees To Make the Pursuit of Racial Justice a Priority', p.3.
[122] Council Agrees To Make the Pursuit of Racial Justice a Priority', p.3.
[123] Council Agrees To Make the Pursuit of Racial Justice a Priority', p.3.

The London Baptist Association

1996 also proved to be a significant year for racial justice in the LBA. The demographic profile of many churches in the LBA had changed, becoming multi-ethnic following the arrival of the Windrush Generation from the Caribbean in the 1950s and 1960s,[124] and Asians and Africans from the 1970s to the 1990s. Black and Asian ministers in London began to press the LBA to come to terms with the demographic changes in the capital and appoint a Racial Justice Co-ordinator (RJC) as a resource for London Baptists to create genuine multi-ethnic/multi-cultural community in congregations and to challenge racism in church and society. The LBA Council agreed to create a RJC post in 1995. The General Purposes and Finance Committee (GP&F), a small committee that acted on behalf of the Council in between the quarterly council meetings, was tasked with implementing the decision. Frederick George and Desmond Gordon were central to advocating and developing the job specification for this role.[125] However, despite advertising and interviewing for the post, no suitable person had been identified by spring 1996. Failure to make a 'suitable' appointment was cited by the GP&F at the LBA Council meeting in March 1996 as a reason to pause the search and reconsider the post.[126] Frederick George and Desmond Gordon interpreted this recommendation as an attempt to discontinue efforts to create a Racial Justice Co-ordinator. It compounded a perceived resistance to the creation of the post within the GP&F from the outset. George openly challenged the proposal issuing from the GP&F at the Council meeting. He urged the Council to reaffirm its commitment to the original decision and persevere with appointment of a Racial Justice Co-ordinator.

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124 For example, major influxes of migrants from the Caribbean in the 1950s and 1960s transformed the demographic profile of many London Baptist churches: Balham, Battersea Chapel, Brixton (Kenyon), Clapham, Vernon (King's Cross), and Willesden Green to name a few.

125 Frederick George tabled a 'Draft Proposal for a Joint-Funded Racial Justice Co-ordinator' at the GP&F on 5 April 1995. I hold an original copy of this document.

126 One factor that contributed, in the minds of some on the GP&F, to reconsidering the viability of the RJC post was the difficulty encountered in fully funding it. The financial obstacles to funding the role of the RJC were ultimately overcome.

I was attending my first LBA Council meeting by virtue of my new role as a Regional Minister for the South-West Region of the LBA.[127] The atmosphere within the meeting was highly charged. To my surprise, I made the second major contribution to the debate by supporting George in his call to Council to reaffirm its commitment to proceed with the decision to appoint a Racial Justice Co-ordinator. The Council had to be persuaded to reassert its will over the GP&F. Our arguments prevailed, and the Council voted decisively to instruct the GP&F to persevere with the project.[128] The post was advertised on two further occasions and one round of interviews was held, but no appointment made. A Futures Group was formed to consider staffing requirements for the LBA, including the role of Racial Justice Co-ordinator, in anticipation of Douglas McBain's impending retirement as General Superintendent and the planned relocation of the LBA offices from Mile End to Bloomsbury Central Baptist Church in 1998. The Futures Group recommended to the GP&F that relevant individuals be asked to meet with representatives from GP&F on 4 June 1997 to discuss possible ways forward. I was among those invited to attend this meeting, which laid the foundation for the eventual appointment of a Racial Justice Co-ordinator. The post would eventually be filled in 1998 by Rosemarie Davidson-Gotobed.[129]

External Encouragement from Baptists Overseas

An external encouragement placed on BUGB to take racism seriously, although unknown to those working for racial justice from the grass roots up, came from the Jamaica Baptist Union (JBU). The JBU executive sent a resolution in June 1997 to BUGB and BMS addressing racial and economic injustices in the UK. The resolution also spoke of the historic legacy of slavery and colonialism that still blighted the lives of migrants to the UK in the present. It appealed to Baptists in the UK to

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127 The terms 'regional/region' would be replaced by the term 'district' when 'Regional Minister' was preferred to 'General-Superintendent' with the creation of the new Regional Associations. I was a Regional Minister from 1996 to 2000.

128 The outcome was not purely the consequence of cognitive assent to compelling arguments. Anger and passion played prominent roles in the public debate with far-reaching consequences for the subsequent implementation and operation of the RJC post.

129 I did not participate in the candidate selection, interview, or appointment process.

> call upon the rest of the church community in the United Kingdom to provide leadership to the rest of the country by making a public declaration of repentance of the atrocities of chattel slavery, repentance of the acts committed by her foreparents in the name of development and progress; repentance of the acts of exploitation, economic and racial injustice.[130]

British Baptist leaders sought clarification about the reasons behind the presentation of the resolution.[131] The JBU executive took time to consider its response. Revd Trevor Edwards, JBU General Secretary, replied on behalf of the executive in May 1998:

> 1. The fact that racism is still a real issue in the world no less the United Kingdom. Concerns have been expressed by persons of colour including Caribbean migrants residing in the United Kingdom, who have testified of their experience of racial discrimination which is an ongoing reality.
>
> 2. The growing number of displaced marginalised blacks and other minorities in the United Kingdom is still a concern to us and we believe ought to challenge the mission of the church.
>
> 3. The fact that it is four times as hard for a black university graduate as opposed to a white university graduate to receive a job interview is cause for concern.
>
> 4. Disproportionate number of blacks in prison and mental institutions in the United Kingdom cannot be ignored.[132]

Trevor Edwards intimated that he was asked by 'a leader in the BU […] to withdraw the resolution'.[133] The conversation between the JBU and BUGB on racial justice would resume in the 2000s. A further external encouragement to BUGB to take racism seriously occurred on the cusp of the new millennium.

The Baptist World Alliance convened an International Summit on Baptists Against Racism and Ethnic Conflict at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, USA, in January 1999.[134] A group from Britain

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130 Cited in Glenroy Lalor, 'Concretizing an Apology: Signposts on the Journey — A Perspective from JBU Sources' (unpublished lecture delivered at Baptist House, Didcot, Tuesday 8 May 2012), pp. 8–9.

131 There was a backstory of correspondence in the 1970s between JBU and BUGB about the experience of Caribbean migrants to the UK and subsequent lull in conversation during the 1980s. See Lalor, 'Concretizing an Apology', pp. 3–8.

132 Cited in Lalor, 'Concretizing an Apology', pp. 9–10.

133 Lalor, 'Concretizing an Apology', p. 10.

134 Lalor, 'Concretizing an Apology', p. 10.

attended this international gathering of Baptists: Chris Andre-Watson, Pat White, David Ellis, Anne Wilkinson-Hayes, Rosemarie Davidson-Gotobed, and Frederick George. The summit called Baptists to commit to a decade for the promotion of racial justice and adopted the 'Atlanta Covenant: a call to Baptist Churches to oppose racism and ethnic conflict and to actively work to establish a united witness for Christ and His Kingdom'.[135] Denton Lotz, General Secretary of the BWA, in the second paragraph of the introduction of *Baptists Against Racism*, the official record of the summit, recalls, 'British participants and Americans of African descent shared the pain of continued prejudice in their own countries.'[136] The *Baptist Times* feature on the Atlanta Summit concludes,

> He [Frederick George] described the summit as 'long on talk and somewhat short on action', noting: 'One African-American pastor was heard to remark, "The floor of hell is covered with Baptist resolutions against racism!"' He added: 'I came away with the sad and sobering recognition that racism and segregation are alive and well today.
>
> 'As a member of the British Baptist delegation, it was difficult to avoid the truth that we have a huge task ahead of us. I hope that all Baptist Christians will covenant to work in the first decade of the new millennium to eradicate racism. We must work to keep the dream alive.'[137]

Perspectives and Power

The 1990s was a decade when white people in local associations and BUGB national structures were required to rethink their assumptions and perspectives about Black and Asian people, and the distribution of power in Baptist structures. The struggle to establish the RJC post in the LBA vividly illustrates how a concentration of power needed to be challenged and overcome to effect change. The LBA Council had to be persuaded to impose its will on the GP&F. The outcome and the manner of its achievement did not result in the excision or diminishing of resistance, but rather in resistance retreating further into the shadows and subterranean currents of the workings of

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[135] *Baptists Against Racism: Proceedings of the International Summit on Baptists Against Racism and Ethnic Conflict*, ed. by Denton Lotz (McLean, VA: The Baptist World Alliance, 1999), pp. 170–177.
[136] Lotz, *Baptists Against Racism*, p. 7.
[137] '"Decade Against Racism" Call', *Baptist Times*, 21 January 1999, pp. 1 and 4 (p. 4).

the LBA.[138] A resolution passed in an Association Council meeting (or Baptist Union Council or Assembly) does not inevitably translate into widespread understanding and joyful implementation. Some, on occasion a majority, of those that gather in deliberation to pass a resolution may experience a 'lightbulb moment',[139] an epiphany, a breakthrough in understanding, a moment of insight and conviction, a sense of solidarity with others, and a coalescence of moral purpose. But 'lightbulb moments' are rare. They are transient and prone to fade. 'Lightbulb moments' extend no further than the walls of the room in which people gather to deliberate and decide. It is impossible to convey to persons that are not present exactly what the moment felt like, or the compelling and self-evident nature of the argument presented to justify change. 'Lightbulb moments' can be profound, but they are inherently limited in scope and effect. Rosemarie Davidson-Gotobed, the first LBA Racial Justice Co-ordinator, reflected on the difficulties ranged against progressing racial justice within the LBA constituency in her first annual report:

> One of the main stumbling blocks to encouraging folk to tackle the issues of racial justice and reconciliation is the entrenched stereotype of what or who a racist is. We cannot relate to the members of the BNP or the murderers of Stephen Lawrence but are comfortable with the idea of racism as 'unwitting'. This can't be acceptable. It does not reveal the whole picture or the reality of the situation. It is saddening because racism is more subtle and more institutionalised than the popular stereotype and it has hindered spiritual growth, understanding and progression on all sides.[140]

The pursuit of racial justice in BUGB in both denominational structures and across the constituency in the 1990s illustrates how disconnects exist between those that campaign for action on racial justice (individuals and groups), deliberative forums (councils or assemblies) where resolutions are passed to state theological positions,

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138 For example, according to the Method of Operation of the RJC post, the GP&F was supposed to provide a budget for the RJC to work within. This did not occur initially and, effectively, hindered the operation of the role. The matter was subsequently resolved, but only by the RJC raising it directly with the GP&F. See Rosemarie Davidson-Gotobed, *Racial Justice Co-ordinator's Report 2000* (London: LBA, 2000), p. 3.

139 Rosemarie Davidson-Gotobed uses the phrase 'lightbulb moment/s' to describe a moment of insight or a breakthrough in understanding of self, others, or God.

140 Rosemarie Davidson-Gotobed, *Racial Justice Co-ordinator's Report 1998–1999* (London: LBA, 1999), p. 3.

agree policy, and commit to action, and the members of the denomination whom campaigners and deliberative forums seek to influence. A plurality of positions on race, racism, and racial justice existed within the Baptist Union in the 1990s. Consequently, change in the pursuit of racial justice was persistently contested. Conflict occurred. Robin Gill, describing Britain in 1988, recognises the existence of racism, but insists, 'the prevailing ethos is anti-racist, there are laws which attempt to suppress racism, and overtly racist political parties gain little electoral support'.[141] The backdrop of a growing anti-racist ethos in British society exercised some constraints upon behaviour in public contexts. Ecumenical endeavours challenged racism in the churches and society.[142] Proclaiming overtly racist words and performing overtly racist actions became harder, but such things never completely disappeared. External constraints upon human behaviour do not automatically mean a corresponding change in internal beliefs and attitudes. Prejudice, bigotry, apprehension, and suspicion towards others due to skin colour persist in varying degrees in subtle and not so subtle ways. People that publicly confess a belief in racial equality in principle can deny it in practice intentionally and unintentionally. The evidence marshalled in this account about Baptists in the 1990s suggests that Gill underestimated how racist mindsets and dispositions continued to saturate society and church into the 1990s and beyond. He did not allow for the 'diseased social imagination' that Willie Jennings named in 2010.[143]

Baptists in the 1990s struggled to live into the fullness of the new humanity in Jesus Christ that they professed to believe in. At best the new humanity in Jesus Christ was realised only partially. Gill wryly points out that 'churches […] have a tendency to romanticize features of their life [like resolutions on racial justice] and to ignore the realities of the finite and sometimes sinful communities which really constitute them'.[144] Baptists required, but did not develop, more realistic and

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141 Robin Gill, *Beyond Decline: A Challenge for the Churches* (London: SCM Press, 1988), p. 53.
142 David Haslam tells the story of the ecumenical response to racism in the last decades of the twentieth century up until 1992. Baptists do not figure in his account. See David Haslam, *Race for the Millennium: A Challenge to Church and Society* (London: Church House, 1996).
143 Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, p. 6.
144 Gill, *Beyond Decline*, p. 8.

nuanced accounts of the sociological complexity of their life together. Namely, that a plurality of perspectives on racial justice existed within BUGB with consequences for the operation of power dynamics in local churches, associations, and the denomination.[145] Furthermore, Baptists lacked a satisfactory account of sin, personal and corporate. There was very limited exploration of the nature and operation of sin in Baptist structures. Jenny Leith, in her analysis of how Christians are formed as disciples of Christ, is surely correct that 'it is impossible to account for the nature of the church without an account of the pervasive presence of sin in its life'.[146] Ultimately, failure to engage in sociological analysis of the plurality of perspectives on racial justice and theological analysis of sin limited Baptist self-understanding and action in the 1990s.

What is All the Fuss About? Why Does any of the Foregoing Matter?

This article has attempted to show in relation to racism that entanglement among Baptists in ways of thinking and doing contrary to the gospel is deeper and subtler than, perhaps, even Wright appreciated. White Western Christians, including British Baptists, are too often conformed to the world more than we are committed to Christ in terms of how we conceive our identities and relations to others. The danger of remaining unaware and unbothered by the deep realities of race and racism is that we produce flawed readings of Christian doctrine and deficient social analysis and social engagement. Consequently, Christian discipleship and the witness of the church are impaired. Wright is surely correct that doctrine and cultural engagement matter. The question is how true and adequate our theological imagination and social analyses are. A refusal to face up to the empirical reality of the church and the diseased social imagination of the Western world will serve only to reinforce blindness to the humanity of those who are different to us (especially if we are white). It will foster complacency in relation to

[145] Gill explicates the consequences of plurality within churches in *Beyond Decline*.
[146] Jenny Leith, *Political Formation: Being Formed by the Spirit in Church and World* (London: SCM Press, 2023), p. 87.

attitudes and social structures that oppress the vulnerable and strip people of their humanity.

The substance of this article was first presented in 2018, a year that marked the twenty-fifth anniversary of the murder of Stephen Lawrence, fifty years since Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated, and seventy years since the ship The Empire Windrush docked in London. The recent debacle surrounding the unjust treatment and deportation of black British citizens of the Windrush Generation[147] illustrates only too vividly that social regression is possible when people are blind, complacent, and complicit. Race and racism constantly assume new forms and hide in plain sight to oppress and dehumanise. Nigel Wright challenged Baptists to change in 1991, to be true to ourselves for the sake of renewal in Baptist life and witness. Baptists pursued structural reforms at the turn of the millennium in the name of mission.[148] The challenge to generate a 'positive Christian response' to racism remains a work in progress.

The landscape of race and racism among Baptists has changed in some respects since Wright published *Challenge to Change*.[149] Prominent developments include the BUGB Apology for Slavery in 2007,[150] the Journey Process of research, recommendations, and implementation that followed in the wake of the Apology,[151] the Sam Sharpe Lecture (now ten years old),[152] and the Visions of Colour Anti-Racism Course for Ministerial Formation.[153] Towards the end of 2023, The Centre for Baptist Studies, Regent's Park College, Oxford, published *Voicing New Questions for Baptist Identity*, a collection of essays that explores Baptist life

147 Amelia Gentleman, *The Windrush Betrayal: Exposing the Hostile Environment* (London: Guardian Faber, 2019).
148 Goodliff, *Renewing a Modern Denomination*.
149 See *Journeying to Justice*, ed. by Reddie et al.; and Hudson-Roberts in *Race for Justice*, pp. 46–60.
150 See BUGB, 'Faith and Society Files: The Apology for Slavery', Baptists Together <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Articles/366545/The_Apology.aspx> [accessed 30 November 2023].
151 See Reddie et al, *Journeying to Justice*, pp. 94–109.
152 See 'Events: The Sam Sharpe Project', Baptists Together <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/379661/Events.aspx> [accessed 30 November 2023]; and *The Sam Sharpe Lectures: History, Rebellion and Reform*, ed. by E. P. Louis and Rosemarie Davidson (London: SCM Press, 2023).
153 'Visions of Colour', Baptists Together <https://www.baptist.org.uk/Groups/379637/Visions_of_Colour.aspx> [accessed 30 November 2023].

and witness in relation to race, class, gender, and sexuality.[154] In 2024, Tim Judson will deliver the Whitley Lecture 'Dark Weeping and Light Sleeping: Whiteness as a Christian Doctrine of Deformation'. 'Whiteness' is beginning to be taken seriously, in some quarters, as a factor that has significantly shaped the Baptist theological imagination historically and is still at work today.

The theologising of the 1990s is indicative of a moment in time, a cultural milieu informed by blueprint ecclesiology, diseased social imagination, and evangelical identity. Three decades separate *A Challenge to Change* and 'Dark Weeping and Light Sleeping'. The journey to face up to whiteness, race, and racism has been slow and frequently interrupted. Reluctance to look at the empirical, messy reality of the church persists. Far reaching transformation in persistent beliefs, the ones that matter most, which we act upon and feel passionately about, is unsettling and difficult. The spectre of race and racism in church and society has not disappeared. How much have British Baptists changed in matters of race and racism? It is difficult to say with certainty. A question still lingers in the wake of the slow progress from the 1990s to the 2020s. Are we afraid to bear the cost of change because of what we may find and what we might need to lose?

[154] *Voicing New Questions for Baptist Identity*, ed. by Eleasah P. Louis and Andy Goodliff, Centre for Baptist Studies in Oxford Congregational Resources, 2 (Oxford: Regent's Park College, 2023).