

YOU HAVE CREATED ME BLACK

By EVE PITTS, HANSA SHAH, ELAINE FOSTER,
VICTORIA MERRIMAN-JOHNSON AND
GWEN CAESAR

DISCRIMINATION HAS many faces. Racism is one. In many black Christians it evokes a vibrant and explicit spirituality. Other black people, not finding an image of God to affirm them, either lose faith altogether or find God outside white 'European' Churches.

For this article five black women connected with the Black and White Christian Partnership in Birmingham, U.K., agreed to give time to have their thoughts and experiences recorded on tape. Four share their stories of the pain and sorrow that racism has caused as well as sharing the spiritual realities which sustain them. One has happier memories.

Each was asked similar questions: when did you first become aware of discrimination? What part did faith and prayer play in helping you to cope? How has racism affected your life as a Christian? Have you been helped by your faith community, your Church? Have you ever felt inhibited or frustrated by a British or European spirituality which is not your own?

Limitations of space make it impossible to transcribe in full the five fascinating and humbling sessions. What follows are selections offered without further comment as being relevant to 'Spirituality and social issues'.

Margot Hutchison

Eve Pitts

I think full consciousness came when I must have been about eight years old and I went to what was then a very popular Baptist church with my mother. At the end of the service my mother and I came to the door to say goodbye to the minister. I remember his saying, 'Well, it was nice to have you Mrs Stewart; it was very nice to have you, but would you not come back next week because parishoners, my parishoners, don't like it'. I think this

read more at www.theway.org.uk

was when the full consciousness finally arrived. I had now put my finger on the difference. I actually remember going down the road and my mother holding my hand very tightly, very firmly, and I can only think that must have been anger and bitterness because she didn't talk to me about the incident. She didn't communicate her feelings to me. Until this day she's never said anything, but I'll always remember the way she gripped my hand very tightly as we walked away from church . . . I knew there was something very, very wrong that I couldn't explain and a total state of confusion set in by then, and this has never left me; this feeling, this deep sense of hurt and rejection has always been in the forefront of my mind and I think this new consciousness started right then, and I thought, well, I was told in the church that Sunday that I was one of God's children—as a child I think that makes a very deep impression—and I think that's the first impression I had of not being accepted in British society.

From a personal point of view, and it's a personal one, I grew up with a love-hate relationship for my God, because like many black people I grew up in a home where God was at the centre, however vague that may be at times. He was very much at the centre of our existence—our whole being. It was almost second nature for my mother to come out and say, 'Well, God will provide' or 'God knows our hearts, dear', or 'You know God will recompense us one day—he'll give us our just rewards'. Subconsciously the whole ethos was about a God who cares and a God who will deliver. But I think that that was one level. As I grew older I began to dislike this God more and more: what kind of God is this? Who is this God that my parents talk about? I became very scornful towards this God who they projected, and I wanted to discover a new God, a God who meant something to me in the playground, in the workplace, in the church—a God with whom I could identify; that he or she was on my side and that in order for this God to be God he had unequivocally to be against the forces which diminished my humanity. This is not recent language I've developed—I've been talking like this since I was knee-high to a grasshopper, saying to my parents, 'Who is this God you are talking about? If this God cares so much for us, why are black people being humiliated day in and day out?' My mother would throw up her hands in horror and say, 'Oh dear, we brought this child up to believe in God and listen to what she's saying'. I mean they didn't know how to cope with me.

The Church, the Pentecostal Church which I was part of at that time couldn't cope with me. They said I was blaspheming, and I was anti-Church and therefore I had to leave the Church and I was quite happy by then to leave the Church because the God they presented to me just didn't add up. He didn't make sense in the world in which I found myself, where people were hostile to my culture and to my colour. And so I thought, if that's the God you're going to offer to me, who offers piecemeal that I should turn the other cheek, then I'm not interested. So I left the Church and I went into political organizations—the black people's freedom movement and so on. I was on a journey; I was wanting to find out who this God was; the nature of the God that makes demands on me that I should worship him. I wasn't prepared to worship a half-baked idea. I think it was about ten years ago when I suddenly grew up—my faith grew up. It wasn't my mother's faith any more; it wasn't my father's way or my grandfather's who was a Methodist minister; it wasn't my grandmother's who was a strong woman, a beautiful African woman; it was now *my* faith.

The point I need to make before I go on is that when I left the Church, however hard I tried, I couldn't get God out of my system. I may not have liked the idea of the God I had, but I couldn't get it out of my system; it was almost second nature. But I remember, it was ten years ago; I got up one morning—no, the night before I'd said, 'Okay God, because I can't get you off my back, I'll go back to church, but I'll only go back to church if I can have some evidence that you care for my people; that you care for me as I am and I don't have to come and ask you to forgive me for my blackness; if I don't have to describe myself in mucky terms; that I can actually, positively embrace what you have made me. If you deny me that humanity then I want no part of you'. I remember actually saying that at my bedside. I wrote down a list of questions that I wanted to ask God and it was largely about Africa; about the denial of black humanity; about white people's inability to see me as totally human—which made me take strides every day to match up to their idea of what it means to be human or to gain equality, which presupposes that white people are the ones who have the monopoly of being human. Those were the questions that I asked God that night.

The following morning, maybe it's just coincidence, but I'm not that type of person, I remember being woken very powerfully—and I always say it was in the most powerful and yet gentle way—

somebody touched me, and I jumped out of my sleep. I woke up, switched the radio on quite automatically and on the radio was a very good friend of mine. He was saying: 'Are you disillusioned? Are you asking questions of God that he doesn't seem to be answering? Are you angry with this God?' And I was saying, 'Yes, yes, yes, I'm angry with this God!' I went downstairs and rang this friend at that time in the morning and said 'You've just been on the radio!' He said, 'Yes, very good!' Anyway we talked and we prayed. But it didn't stop there. I call it a truce—a truce that happened between me and my God. I became a Christian that week. I was always a Christian, but now I was the one who called the tune. And from that day for about a year I lived on cloud nine. The questions hadn't gone but I had the zeal of the converted . . . and that lasted for about a year.

Then I went zoom. I just went downhill; nobody understood what was happening. Some people didn't care at church; some people cared very much. By now I'd washed my hands of the Pentecostal Church and I'd gone to an Anglican church. Nobody understood in my congregation what was happening to me; all the questions flooded back: Who is this God? Does he care for the oppressed? What has he got to say to the people I meet every day? It was hell; there's no other word that I can use to describe that experience than to say I went to hell and back. My husband Anthony said, 'I'm unable to help you, but I'm here when you come out'. I couldn't even take part in the Eucharist any more. The Eucharist, whilst with my head it was meaningful, with my heart there was something fundamentally wrong with the way it was presented to me. It was presented by white people who failed to recognize my humanity. So how can it be meaningful? In fact one of our wardens, who once said in a meeting that he could never consider black people to be one of themselves, was actually one of the people who administered the chalice on Sunday—so the whole thing of the Eucharist just became empty for me. How can I share in the Eucharist when people I share with felt that way? And that went on for quite a long time—about nine months again. And when I came out of it, I remember the night when I knelt at the bedside; and I hadn't been able to pray properly because every time I prayed the words just bounced on the ceiling and bounded back. I remember the night and my husband remembers it because he was at my side, and I said, 'Here I am again. You take me as I am, God, totally; you take me in all my blackness—in a positive

way'. This wasn't 'O God, wash my soul so I can be white as snow'. I was saying, 'O God, take me as I am because I am one of your creatures; you have created me black and I won't apologize for it and if I have to apologize for it, God, I don't want to be part of you'. And I prayed that prayer: I said, 'I love my black nose; I love my broad nose; I love my thick lips, and I love my hair just as it is, and if I have to do something else to change myself to make you accept me, then please let me go'. And it was one of the most liberating prayers I've ever prayed.

In all that the institutional system cripples you. My quarrel at the moment, and I think my fear, when I see many white vicars with black congregations; my fear is that unless that minister affirms that black person's humanity, says that this too is one of God's creatures, made in God's image, unless that vicar can say it unequivocally; then my fear is that from my experience certainly (as far as my vicar was concerned I was just a nice Christian woman) that my blackness is denied all the way. He's a very nice man, but he had to struggle intellectually and emotionally and I've no doubt spiritually to actually make the hurdle and say, 'Yes, Eve is one of God's creatures'.

It's not an easy question for me to answer: why have I stuck with the institution? I was brought up in a Pentecostal Church and I'd be the first to recognize the good things it did for me. It gave me a strong sense of striving for holiness. It gave me a strong awareness of what our responsibilities in our relationship with God should be. I think there are lots of good things about the Pentecostal Churches. It encourages you to use your talents whatever they are, however small. If you're not a good speaker or if you're a good one, you get equal chance to go up there and preach and teach. For me, though, it became a prison. It became a prison in which I wasn't able to articulate the issues and the questions which I wanted to ask: what must be the Churches' responsibility towards the suffering of their people? At that early age when I was told I was heretical and I had no right to ask God such questions, all that did to me was to kill me spiritually so I knew I had to get out.

For me, being able to get up spontaneously, to sing a song from the heart, a typical black song about freedom and oppression and what's happening; that's essential. So I think over the next five years at the most I would like to see some kind of liturgy which takes on board the black expression of faith; that the black person

can use the structures, the Anglican structure and the Eucharist and prayer and intercession and actually use it in a black context. I think what has been happening, and it's worrying, is that black Anglicans have become as cold as their white brothers and sisters, and to me that's worrying. Black Christians have to maintain that thing, that indefinable thing within us which means that when we get up we sing from the depths of our being and we say 'The Lord delivered Daniel' and we sing 'Steal away' because it's part of our culture. Or we get up and we can talk about our Christian journey with conviction, and I'm not talking about triumphant testimonies; I'm talking about that experience that only belongs to the black congregation. I don't want to be in a church full of black people where if I close my eyes I can pretend it's white.

Hansa Shah, probation officer

I was born in India near Bombay and only came here twelve years ago. Being of Asian origin I do want to be called black. When I came here I didn't have a black identity, I didn't have a very strong black consciousness really. And for the first two years I worked in a hospital and started becoming aware of the issues. It was then I decided that black was a much more political term than just about the colour of skin, and I was going to put myself alongside black rather than fragmenting and saying that I'm Asian. But I didn't come like everybody else who applied to come to Britain. I came here at the invitation of certain churches to work with Asian people, and in that sense I was called. In the first three years I really believed that I was here to help Asian people and that's what God wanted me to do and I was happy; I sailed along. Painful things were happening but they didn't cut deep into me. I was helping people and I was doing good social work and that felt fairly nice. Then, little by little, small things started happening—being discriminated against on buses; with the police; in small things; in conversations; little boys coming and holding their noses and saying 'you smelly Pakky'. It seemed everywhere and I felt bad.

Only a few months ago I attended a short retreat where a black bishop talked about identifying with the oppressed; what it feels like to be oppressed and then being able to appreciate what Christ went through in his whole experience. I said to him, 'Listening to you, you have put it into words for me—maybe my coming here wasn't just to do wonderful social work. My coming here has

opened my eyes; I really understand what it is not to have power, not to be in a position of power, not to be able to do very much. And when discrimination or injustice happens you don't have very much recourse. I have begun identifying with that, and because of identifying with that my spirituality has deepened—when I read the bible and whatever happened to people there, I think that is one step further on.

A month later, the recent incident happened. It was a painful stand. And all the time I felt God telling me not to be afraid; that he would see me through and if this was happening to me who hadn't done anything wrong, I had to stand. It would have been very easy to ignore it like everybody told me: 'You are being too sensitive, just ignore it; you know what that judge is like.' It would have been easy to do it, but that would have been covering up injustice to all the black people, to me, to black clients, to everybody. I had to take the stand no matter how painful it was, to expose injustice that was happening at every level.

Elaine Foster—deputy head of a comprehensive school

I see Christ as the central focus and person in my life. I don't think Christ would take easily to being discriminated against. If I think about it, the way Christ dealt with it was to point out to people that they were oppressing the poor. I intend to politicize what Christ teaches and my experiences and to say, 'Okay, there are people and systems that work against me, but not just me as an individual. There are so many other people discriminated against and oppressed and who are not as articulate as myself, probably haven't the tools or the strength, the inner strength, yes, not only to think through what is happening but also to be assured that there is something better; that beyond this there is a humanness that could be re-lived and could blossom.'

Having analyzed the situation I realize that there is a lot of hope, because I do believe very much that Christ and his teaching is against oppression and against exploitation, and I think that's quite strengthening and liberating for me. Yes, I do pray for people who are oppressive and governments and systems and individuals who do oppress, but I don't think it's enough to just pray. I think you have got to take action. You've got to take political action. Life is politics and if you have Christ as the central person in your life and you have a lived understanding, a lived experience of him, and you can make the links between what

Christ teaches, and you are committed, I think you can actually overcome or help to build a new society. It's time-consuming; it's very slow in many cases, because, well, it is.

I've been helped by my Church in a negative way, because my own Church which is the New Testament Church of God, a Pentecostal Church, I have a lot of battles with. Over the years it has given me a lot of security; a lot of strength, a lot of support. I mean that people are wonderful, real, loving caring people. I've taken a position that you need to take certain forms of social and political action in your community in order to live out the Christ experience. They don't share my idea of that, no. To be a Christian in my Church, to be a member of the Church, means that you live and work within it, and I feel that that is only part of its existence and that there are many things to be done outside of your congregation. You must get involved in politics; you must get involved in the socio-economic life of the community.

I have often gone to an Anglican service or a Methodist or whatever and it's very interesting because, on the one hand, the services are so staid and restricted and non-participatory in the sense that I understand it, and yet, on the other hand, because I do love certain forms of church music and certain forms of repetitious things, I actually find it quite different and interesting; but I don't think I could live easily in an Anglican setting which is alienating I think.

Victoria Merriman-Johnson—psychiatric nurse

Coming from Nigeria and not knowing the system here, I didn't know that there were two levels of training and when I went for my interview I wasn't told there were two tiers. My qualifications, my 'O' level¹ equivalent from Nigeria, were converted and I was then told that I could come in and do a two year training and within the next few months after that I could get on and do a conversion course and get my registered training done. Well, five years on and nothing has happened. But, incredibly enough, two or three years ago three enrolled nurses who were all working together applied to a nurse training school. We then went to have a look around—two black and a white, all with very English-sounding names; on paper, over the phone, you couldn't tell. The two of us who were blacks didn't get admission and the white girl did. I find it hard not to associate it with my colour, because we

all had the same qualifications; we were all working in the same unit.

Oh, there's no doubt that my faith is what's sustaining me. More and more as I go to work, as I carry out my duties, I have it at the back of my mind that I'm not getting on as I would like in my chosen profession, and I have to stop every so often and give a prayer of thanks, and my faith is one that sustains me. I have to thank God because he says in whatever situation you are you must give thanks and praise and there is no point in going over it—in mulling over something and getting really down and depressed about it. I just have to keep going and think to myself that hopefully there will come a time, sooner rather than later, that things will improve. There's no doubt about it, all that prayer life is what's keeping me going. I get angry; I get frustrated; I get depressed; I get down and I have a feeling that most people don't care, don't want to know. It really upsets me. Oh yes, there are times when I feel like banging my head against the wall—like banging into that office and saying, look at what you are doing—Is this fair? Why don't you give opportunities to people?

Unfortunately I can't say that I have been helped as a Christian by my church because I have not said anything in my church because I go to a very white community. Myself and my son are the only black members on the roll in my church, and there again I have a feeling that people just tolerate me. Sometimes I think back to what it was like when I was at home: the way services are held, you felt part of it. It was alive. It was really wonderful; you looked forward to going to church. There are days here when the Englishness of it just makes it dead. I can't remember when we last laughed in my church and I miss that kind of thing. It just makes you dead and several times I've thought gosh, why do I keep going back to this situation?

Gwen Caesar—young business woman

I was born in this country; I've been here all my life. I can't remember ever being discriminated against. I've mixed with all different types of people and always seemed to fit in. I suppose it depends on how one reacts to other people. I'm the sort of person—I can go places and I can mix with people with no problems whatsoever whether they're black, white, Chinese, Indians. It doesn't make any difference to me. I think I am fortunate because I've got many friends who have told me of incidents that they've

gone through, maybe at work or just walking down the road, but I find it myself I've never seemed to come into the same situations that they have done. I've found that most of the children who were born overseas were brought up differently to us, differently to the ones born over here and they've got different ways of seeing things.

I'm very religious now. There was a day when my dad used to make me go to church. He used to wake us all up and say, 'Come on now, let's go to church', but now I play more of a part. A priest came one Sunday and gave a sermon about how he was going to start up a church for West Indians who don't go to church over here because they felt left out, which I can understand why, 'cause many times I've walked into other churches and you feel—you get this kind of a feeling that comes over you—I don't know, but when I started in my church choir I overcame that. Then he spoke to me after church and asked me if I would like to come along and help them out to get this centre going. I was a bit reluctant at first, then I decided to go along. That was at the West Indian chaplaincy, so I've been doing that and the part I play now, where I run the choir and the steel band, it's made me more aware of being a Christian and what it means to me. And I think just doing that alone has given me more faith and helps me with my problems, I suppose; yes, it does in a way. One has to turn to prayer and prayer helps and it's helped me through all my troubles. I call it troubles, that's the way I put it—it's a bit different but if somebody does say, like, or sometimes you get abused or whatever, you just say to yourself, 'Thanks God'. I can sort of take it, because he's sort of controlling me in a way. That's what I say. It does work. It does help.

NOTES

¹ For those readers not familiar with the British system of secondary education we should explain that 'O' level was a set of examinations in various subjects that some secondary school students took at the age of 16+, with the option afterwards of either leaving school or continuing at school for further studies. This option often depended largely on the 'O' level results. 'O' levels have now been replaced by a new system of examination, the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE).