Introduction

First published in the 2020 special issue of *Practical Theology*, this article offers critical autobiographical and historical reflections on anti-racism activism in the UK over the four decades since 1981. As such, it places contemporary UK-based Critical White Theology in a longer historical context, and also models a self-critical, reflexive stance which refuses to gloss White anti-racist activism with White 'innocence'. It also serves as a pointer towards the work of some of the significant critical Black and postcolonial voices in the late-twentieth-century UK context, including Ambalavaner Sivanandan, Salman Rushdie and Gus John.

'The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority' Revisited: A Personal, Theological and Political Review

Paul Weller

ABSTRACT

Just over three and a half decades ago, as a young, white, Christian anti-racist activist challenged by Ambalavaner Sivanandan's (1981), 'White Man Listen!' and Salman Rushdie's (1982) 'The New Empire Within Britain' the author of this article wrote a booklet with the deliberately 'inverted' title of 'The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority'. In the light of the summer 2020 'I Can't Breathe' death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter uprisings, I was challenged to return to what I had previously written to interrogate how far since then, as a white Christian individual; the Christian tradition to which I belong; and/or also the UK ethnic majority of which I am a part, have or have not changed. Out of that reflection, this article argues that, despite many important developments, in relation to the stark realities of racism, much that was the case in the mid-1980s remains today. It continues to affirm that the route to liberation for members of the UK white ethnic majority still needs to go through a serious reckoning with the differential impact of the histories and continuing legacies of colonialism and imperialism upon ourselves and those who are of the African and Global Majority.

Introduction[1]

Like most things in life, getting older is pregnant with ambiguity. On the one hand, the passage of the years can bring with it the possibility of perspective on what to younger people might – for good and ill – seem to be an exceptionalist particularity of the present. Equally, on the other hand, if one is not careful, getting older can also engender a certain weariness out of the sense that some things do not seem to progress very much or, at least if they do, they have a tendency also to loop back again onto themselves. In talking about the 2020 Black Lives Matter uprisings with my now twenty-something/plus white (albeit British–German) offspring I was challenged to revisit, review and evaluate for the present the thinking that I had developed and shared in a little booklet that I had, from out of the context of the United Kingdom, written some three and a half

decades ago under the title of *The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority* (Weller 1985) published by Christians Against Racism and Fascism and One for Christian Renewal.[2]

Therefore, this journal article, and the conference paper on which it draws, is the product of the national and international conversations of last summer around Black Lives Matter as combined with an historical retrospective in which I seek to interrogate myself and others about how far I as a white Christian individual; the wider Christian tradition to which I belong; and/or also the ethnic majority of the UK of which I am a part, have or have not changed and, if so in what ways, since that booklet was first published. It is these characteristics of the article which also account for the three dimensions of review reflective in the title – the personal, the theological and the political. Thus, while reflecting on history, the article does not seek to be a purely historical review, but rather also clearly to address the present and in doing so, it aims to locate both in relation to personal experience, Christian tradition and political context. In doing so, the article will directly quote from, but also in some other measure re-use some parts of what was written three and a half decades ago where it does not seem possible to state something better than was previously the case.

Moments of profound challenge

Understandings of time within the Christian tradition include the insight that, in the lives of individuals, groups and societies – and sometimes also of the world as a whole – there are moments in time that bring both profound challenge and opportunity. In this, the course of time is neither one of endless cyclical repetitiveness from which the basic human challenge and opportunity is to escape; but neither is it one of a straight line that is pre-programmed towards uninterrupted historical progress. In the so-called *koine* (or commonly spoken/ written) Greek language of the New Testament scriptures, two words are used for time. These are *chronos* and *kairos*, which is not a matter only of narrow linguistic interest. Rather, as one New Testament scholar explains it:

> The presence of two etymological groups, associated respectively with *chronos* and *kairos* for the concept of time, suggests that the Greeks distinguished individual periods of points of time which can be affected by human decision (*kairos*) from the stream of time, whose progress is independent of any possible human influence (*chronos*). (Brown 1978, 834)

Expressed in such a way this distinction might still seem rather abstract. But expressed more generally, many people recognise that, from time to time, as part of our individual, social and historical experience, 'special' times occur when the options that can lead to various destinies are heightened. In recent times, globally, such a moment was 9/11. And more recently, those of us who are committed to building societies globally that continue seriously to try to overcome the inheritance of racism and of slavery may hope that the summer of 2020 – of George Floyd and of Black Lives Matter – might yet still prove to have been a positive turning point. It is in such turning point times that the meaning of *kairos*, as further explained by Colin Brown, can be pertinent in terms of it being a kind of time that 'characterises a critical situation, one which demands a decision … ', and within this Brown notes that of such a time of decision it can be said that 'Positively it implies opportunity … or advantage; negatively, danger' (Brown 1978, 833).

In my own past, just as during the summer of 2020 many white people were brought up sharp by the challenges around the 'I can't breathe!' killing of George Floyd and its embodiment of many aspects of the concerns of the Black Lives Matter movement, as a young white Baptist minister with very little direct personal experience of the multi-racial and multi-cultural society that the UK had become while I was growing up as a teenager in Margate in Kent, I was brought up sharp by the impact of the 1981 New Cross Massacre fire (Andrews 2021) in which thirteen young black people died, and which many believe to have been the work of fascists. In the wake of that there was a dramatic march of thousands of black people in London in protest about what had happened and police indifference to those young black lives.[3]

In connection with that march I encountered – or, perhaps better to say, I was encountered by – a searing piece of writing by Ambalavaner Sivanandan called 'White Man, Listen'.[4] In its title, it echoes forward the American novelist Richard Wright's (1957) passionate book of the same title (with an exclamation mark added) which published a compilation of the text of lectures he gave in Europe around three decades previously, between 1950 and 1956, yet again underlining the historical continuity of the issues of racism that were being addressed in *The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority* and, again, are being reprised in this article.

'White Man, Listen'

In some ways, as a white person, it might be appropriate for me to finish my own writing at this point, using it only as an introduction to reproducing Sivanandan's challenge in its entirety. This is because the things of which he spoke then can – all too depressingly – still equally forcefully and relevantly speak into the UK of today without need of further commentary. But to do this would, I suspect, be to let me and other white people off the hook of our own responsibilities to make at least some attempt to reflect on, address and tackle 'The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority'.

However, I am nevertheless going to quote quite extensively both from Sivanandan's piece and also from another powerful piece of writing from the 1980s (see further below), and which also had a profound effect on me. This is because learning to *listen* – while not sufficient if it *ends* there – is an absolutely necessary *starting point* in attempting the task of 'Dismantling Whiteness' as a power construct and therefore in opening up even the possibility of being able to move into an attempt to construct a 'Critical White Theology'. So, as Sivanandan put it now some four decades ago, and in a way in which I think the reader will acknowledge to have strong contemporary resonances:

> Listen, white man – listen to what black people are saying to you – listen now before it's too late – listen for the sake of your own decency, the salvation of your own society. That march that Monday – the march of the black 10,000. To the best of you it spoke of black frustration, white insensitivity to 'black problems', the breakdown in police/black relations; to the rest of you it spoke of mob violence, blacks on the rampage, the invasion of your privacy, the damage to your property. But it is not to these or to the yellow press that I address myself. You mistake the mood. The mood is not of the moment – of momentary outrage at the burning of our children in a fire in Deptford. (Sivanandan 1981)

Sivanandan's challenge of 'White Man, Listen' went on from this opening challenge – which, it should be noted was couched in terms of it being for the sake of the 'salvation' of white society – into a painful litany of why the UK more generally, and especially white

people within it such as myself and many readers of this article should not need what happened to George Floyd in the USA in order to face up and come to terms with the profoundly and deeply rooted history of racism and injustice towards black people in the UK and the seeming all too readiness of many of us who are white to live with it.

White memory and black memory

In honesty, however, apart from perhaps some among us who are white and of my generation, I doubt whether many of the following names invoked in Sivanandan's litany – as of those who died in the New Cross fire – are known by many white people today. Rather, they have likely shared the fate of those many black people who, in contrast to the many memorials to slave owners, colonialists and imperialists mostly have no public memorials raised to them. But, in stark reality, it is not that in between they have become forgotten and invisible to most white people. Rather, their names were usually never known and were nearly always invisible to most white people. But of these, at least, Sivanandan says:

> Do you remember the murder of Gurdip Singh Chaggar, of Kenneth Singh, Michael Ferreira, Altab Ali and so many more – all on the high streets of your cities? Black people do. For that is all their memory, their history in this country. They remember Oluwale, the tramp hounded to death by your friendly bobbies, George Lindo railroaded to prison, Steve Thompson committed to Rampton for daring to be Rasta and different. Errol Madden arrested for being in possession of his own property. They remember virginity tests and the deportations, the stop and search and the sudden arrest, the blanket raids of the Illegal Immigration Intelligence Unit into their homes and workplaces, the thuggery of the SPG[5] and the unexplained deaths in custody.

This tendency to white forgetfulness is why, over three and half decades ago, I began *The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority* the words of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, and as cited in the Gospel According to Matthew, in a way reprised by Jesus as:

> You will listen and listen again but not understand
>
> See and see again, but not perceive.
>
> For the heart of this nation has grown coarse
>
> Their ears are dull of hearing
>
> And they have shut their eyes.
>
> For fear that they would see with their eyes,
>
> Hear with their ears,
>
> Understand with their hearts,
>
> And be converted and healed by me. (Matt 13, 14-15)

Coming full circle

At the end of his piece on 'White Man Listen', Sivanandan went on forensically to pick apart the nature of many white responses to the New Cross Massacre and the march of

the Black 10,000 against it. After having done so, he eventually arrived at a sobering conclusion, in relation to which I think that, even if those of us who are white only half listen now, we will very soon recognise how sadly it has been reprised in the political and media commentariat discussions around Black Lives Matter. Thus, Sivanandan again:

> And you fell back on old ploys, old themes – the two sides of the question approach; the numbers game, the fertility count, and the 'legitimate' fears of the British public; the threat to the British way of life. You have come full circle. This is where you first began - pandering to prejudice, sanctioning fears, legitimating racism, and, in creating the moral morass that fascism breeds in, creating the monsters of your own destruction. Listen, white man, for it is of your destruction, and ours, I speak.

So why is it that, especially to those of us who are getting older, but also for those who take the time and trouble to look into it, the history of these things so often seems to be on a loop? As an aid to understanding this, I am going to refer to another powerful short piece written in the 1980s out of another part of the black experience in the UK. Before he became most famously known for other controversies around his 1988 novel, *The Satanic Verses*, the author Salman Rushdie wrote a powerful and insightful piece called 'The New Empire Within Britain' – within the title of which is, I think, a clue to the answer to the question with which this paragraph began, and in which Rushdie issued the challenge to white people that:

> You talk about the Race Problem, the Immigration Problem, all sorts of problems. If you are a liberal, you say that black people have problems. If you are not, you say they are the problem. But the members of the new colony have only one real problem. That problem is white people. Racism, of course, is not our problem. It is yours. We simply suffer the effects of your problem. And until you, the whites, see that the issue isn't integration, or harmony, or multi-culturalism, or immigration - but simply the business of facing up to and eradicating the prejudices within almost all of you - the citizens of your new, and last, empire, will be obliged to struggle against you. (Rushdie 1982, 138)

In many ways, if this taken completely seriously, what Rushdie said here represents a very stark analysis – especially in its concluding sentence about what will be the case if those of us who are white do not engage seriously in 'the business of facing up to and eradicating the prejudices' within almost all of us – namely, that (and with italics added by the present author) 'the citizens of your new, and last, empire, will be obliged to struggle *against* you'. Yet despite, or perhaps rather precisely because of the starkness of this challenge, in *The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority*, I wrote:

> Salman Rushdie is exactly, if uncomfortably right … The business of those of us who are white, then, is not so much to try to solve the problems of black people as to tackle our own problems as they affect black people. This is not to claim a priority for our problems, but it is to recognise that in a society where the majority are white, the liberation of both black and white people does demand that white people as well as black people work towards the liberation of all. (Weller 1985, 5)

White anti-racism and self-criticism

Part of the reason for why, by the time I wrote *The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority* I had come to believe that 'Salman Rushdie is exactly, if uncomfortably right' emerged out of my experience as a young, white, Christian leader. In relation to this, I would emphasise

that this was not as a white person sitting on the side-lines.[6] Rather, and perhaps more challengingly, it was precisely as one engaged who was engaged in the attempt to take racism seriously and to engage with it. Therefore, the Preface to *The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority* began with sharing the following self-critical learning that was only to be had by the active engagement of a white Christian person, trying to do something to combat racism:

> As a white Community Relations Officer working for and mainly within the Christian churches, I often find myself put in the highly invidious position of being called upon to interpret black experience to white Christians. I know that this is really an impossible task for me to do properly since my white experience is different from the black experience of Britain, and I suspect that sometimes I am only being used as a buffer to avoid the challenges of the black communities themselves. Because of this, I have increasingly come to believe that it is crucial for me and for other white people to reflect specifically and carefully on the problems of the white ethnic majority, instead of accepting the role of interpreter of black experience. This pamphlet is written out of the concern that white Christian reflection on our multiracial society all too easily slips into the trap of a distorted 'Good Samaritan syndrome' of focusing on what white Christians in the churches can do to help with the problems of the black ethnic minorities, when we ought to be wrestling with some of our own problems as members of the white ethnic majority. (Weller 1985, 3)

Today the fact that, around three and a half decades on, there are clear signs of the development of a broad and deep concern among significant numbers of white Christians in relation to the challenge of 'Dismantling Whiteness' in the sense of an attempt self-critically to overcome the power structures associated with whiteness in our societies as a pathway towards the possible construction of a 'Critical White Theology' is one that brings hope to a person of an increasingly older generation such as this author. The presence of black people in British society has challenged the complacency of its white ethnic majority – about our all too often assumed decency, fairness and democracy. This has been especially true when black people have shown that they are not ready to accept white putdowns but are determined to stand up for their human rights and to resist the dehumanisation of racism.

When black people fight against racism the truth is that many of us who are white – even, or perhaps precisely when we are trying ourselves to do something to address racism – begin to feel threatened. But here we come back to the, in many ways bleak words of the prophet Isaiah and of Jesus quoted earlier in this article. This is because although, both in Jesus' time and also when applied to the understanding of racism among those of us who are part of the white ethnic majority such words are a *very big part of the story* and *around which it is not possible to go if one is to take their challenge seriously*, they are also *not the whole of the story*. In the time of Jesus, among those who were confronted with the sharpness of the challenge that: 'You will listen and listen again but not understand. See and see again, but not perceive' (Matthew 13. v. 14) there were also some who recognised in-breaking challenge of the realm of the design of the divine into the disordered structures of the world through the person, teaching and practice of Jesus as having – as Brown (1978, 833) was also previously quoted as saying – created 'a critical situation' of a kind 'which demands a decision'. And that, alongside the 'danger' that a *kairos* time brought that, 'positively' it also implies 'opportunity'.

That was so in my own personal experience of three decades ago, and I believe can also be so again today both for me and for others in white ethnic majority, in the context of the *kairos* challenge and opportunity that has been opened up through the Black Lives Matter movement. In this, if those of us who are members of the white ethnic majority can truly listen to the voice of God's judgement speaking to us through black people, then that voice of judgement is also a voice of grace, in and through which it is possible for 'The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority' in which we share, truly to become transformed into liberative opportunities. But for such a transformation to be able to happen, as well as being confronted with our lack of real understanding of black history, those of us who are White really do have to engage with white history and to understand, in the words also of Sivanandan which cut both ways that, 'Our History is Not Your History'.

'Taking On' racism

A key factor in this matter of black and white histories is that, in general, black people are far more conscious of their history and its significance than white people are of ours. It is this white unconsciousness of history which makes those of us who are white think that we can relate together with black people in society or in the Church as if we lived in a social and historical vacuum. As powerfully expressed by Tuku Mukherjee in a filmstrip and accompanying booklet produced by the Community and Race Relations Unit of the former British Council of Churches called *The Enemy Within*, 'So there is no escaping this fact, that by and large, if you are white, you are brought up in a racist cultural atmosphere. You take it on' (Taylor 1981, 7). In other words, none of us who are white in Britain today has escaped the scars of that cultural and historical inheritance.

The truly visceral level at which this can operate is something to which I can testify from my own experience as a child, from a time before I was really capable of making my own judgements and decisions and commitments. In recounting this, I feel very uncomfortable, but I share it because it does, I think, reflect part of the truth of what is the case for many of us who are white people and so is a part of 'The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority'.

In the mid-1960s my paternal grandparents lived in Brixton, south London, which was one of the early main areas of settlement of people from the Caribbean. As a family, we used to go and visit my grandparents there. At that time, myself and my parents lived in Southampton which, as a port city also had a large Caribbean origin community within which my father (who was a Baptist Minister) became known, in the language of the time, as 'the West Indian's pastor', a go-to person especially for weddings and funerals. What I was not conscious of at the time was the kind of 'welcome' that black people more generally were encountering in predominantly white churches – an example of which my colleague Anthony Reddie of the Oxford Centre for Religion and Culture often recounts, in a story all too common, of what happened following his mother's first visit to a Baptist Church in Bradford and where, at the end of the service, it was made clear to her that she would not be welcome in that congregation if she came back on the following Sunday.

My grandparents lived in a block of flats where they shared the landing with another family. That family was black. And, as I recall it, my grandparents and that black family shared the toilet on the landing. To this day, I can remember being afraid to use that

toilet – Why? It was not, I think, directly from my parents whose at least conscious attitudes were certainly not of that kind. But perhaps from the television I was watching, or from the books that I was beginning to read, or from my school friends, the association of black people with uncleanness and disease had somehow got into my mind. At the age that I was this could not have been the result of a conscious decision that I had made about black people. Rather, it was the result of, as Tuku Mukherjee put it 'the racist atmosphere' (Taylor 1981, 7) of the society in which I was growing up.

Personal, theological and political

Recounting the above story should most definitely not be misunderstood as an argument that 'The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority' operate only, or primarily, at the level of personal prejudices. But it is also the case it is likely to be impossible properly to engage with or tackle 'The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority', unless we are also prepared to engage with white history at this kind of level too. And it is precisely from such and countless other experiences of micro-personal prejudices that the question should be posed concerning how such attitudes connect into the structural history and inheritance of the wider society.

For those of us who are members of the white ethnic majority, our history is one that has been deeply rooted in imperialism and colonialism and all that is signified by these words which, it is important to recognise, are not tired and now empty slogans of a passé form of Communism. Rather they represent very substantive realities that have shaped, and continue to shape, the world in which we live and the differential experience of diverse groups within it. Indeed, it is because of this that these things are very deeply ingrained in those of us who are among 'The White Ethnic Majority' to the extent that they may even run counter to our present personal, theological and political choices and commitments.

However, if we are to hope for liberation, the hold that this history has over us needs to be recognised. In relation to such history, what helped me, as a relatively comfortable white, middle-class Christian get to grips with this in the late 1970s was a prophetic action of the global Christian *oikumene* that all too often today is forgotten – namely that of the World Council of Churches' Programme to Combat Racism (Adler 1974) and more specifically, its so-called Special Fund which gave funds directly to liberation movements in Africa, such as SWAPO (South-West African People's Organization), in order to express ecumenical Christian solidarity in the struggle against colonialism in what was South-West Africa and is now Namibia; and to the Patriotic Front in what was then Rhodesia and is now Zimbabwe.

With the benefit of historical perspective around especially a lot of what subsequently happened in Zimbabwe, there are obvious criticism that can be made in view of the abuses of power that followed the original liberation. But even at the time such grants were also highly controversial in that while they were clearly intended especially for humanitarian-related use, in entrusting the liberation movements with their use, they were also an expression of an anti-colonial and anti-imperialist solidarity. For such as myself, the fact that an official global ecumenical body had decided to make such grants was an action that brought into sharp focus the question of what had led to the decision to do this and why it was so important, and through that, as a white person

to become more alert to the global realities of racism, colonialism and imperialism, not only as historical phenomena, but as continuing inheritances.

Within the UK, the Community and Race Relations Unit of the British Council of Churches in which during that period I eventually became involved (including for a temporary period in 1984, on a secondment, as its Field Officer) had its own version of these funds which, for example, included the making of grants to such bodies as the Liverpool 8 Defence Committee in the wake of the Toxteth uprisings of 1981 (Writing on the Wall 2021). In relation to these prophetic actions, one has to ask whether one can imagine such actions being undertaken by the 'ecumenical instruments' of today? Or have our Church and ecumenical bodies lost both the sharpness and consciousness of global socio-political analysis as well as the courage to be criticised and potentially to be ready to risk making mistakes when acting within the imperative to express solidarity of the kind that the Programme to Combat Racism and the Community and Race Relations Unit were prepared to risk for the sake of seriously pursuing the goal of 'racial' justice.

Here it is, perhaps, important to pause to note how terminologies and their significance change over time and in different contexts. In the USA, the phrase 'people of colour' emerged as an attempt at a politically inclusive reference to a 'rainbow coalition' distinct from the majority WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) experience. In the UK of the early 2000s the acronym 'BAME' (Black and Minority Ethnic) became increasingly common. When *The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority* was written what had up to then been a relatively common differentiation between 'black' (understood as African and Caribbean) and 'Asian' (understood in terms of people of 'South Asian' heritage) was increasingly being challenged by groups like the Asian Youth Movement who argued for recognising a 'political Blackness' rooted in an overwhelmingly shared – even if also differentiated – experience within a system shaped by racism, colonialism and imperialism. Today, there are those such as the longstanding anti-racist activist, Gus John (2021), who increasingly argue for the use of a descriptor 'Global Majority' or 'AGM' (African and Global Majority) people as being more properly reflective of reality in a way that in itself challenges the understandings of racism couched in terms of issues relating to racialised 'minorities'. Such a descriptor also challenges the insularity and false to global reality consciousness of those who, in terms of the UK, look at our white ethnic majority position in terms of the UK only.

Still today, if those of us who are white can allow ourselves to be challenged sufficiently for it to be the case, I would argue that the very recognition of our inheritance being so deeply shaped by colonialism and imperialism can, it itself, be at least the beginning of an opportunity for overcoming it. The recognition does not make the problem go away, but it does get a lever on it and as the great anti-racist Methodist minister of the period Tony Holden put it in his Zebra Project publication, *Black Consciousness and White Liberation*:

> There is a sense in which we are inevitably racist in Britain because we are an ex-colonial power, and whilst this knowledge doesn't take away our responsibility, maybe it can free us from our guilt - so that we can face up to, rather than play down, what has been going on in our society during these past thirty years or so. (Holden 1980, 1)

In the above, notice Tony Holden's reference to 'what has been going on in our society during these past thirty years or so' and realise that it was Tony Holden writing in 1980! So,

we are talking in total now of seventy years! – of at least two generations, and in truth it is of centuries and so it will not be overcome in a lifetime. As Holden pointed out, though, personal guilt-feelings (which are a common problem lying in wait for members of the white ethnic majority who are beginning to become aware of our problems), can be singularly unproductive and even counterproductive. At the same time, their tendency to have a paralysing effect can be overcome when we realise the role played by structures and forces which operate beyond our immediate personal control.

This is not a license for personal irresponsibility or for being let off the hook of challenging such, but it is a realistic appraisal of situation in which many of those of us who are White find ourselves. For this reason, while I would question the Christianity of the 'Christian' who refuses to be challenged about his or her racism, and certainly of the 'Christian' who holds on to such racism as a theory of life, in relation to the presence of racial prejudice – where is the white British Christian who can claim it is not there (even if differentially, when taking seriously the class, gender and other differences within the white ethnic majority)? It is almost inevitable that it is there. It has been taught and caught in the society – and what is more, in the Church, too.

But, if and when we recognise the racial prejudice and wider racism that it is there, the issue becomes what do we do about it? Do we pretend and continue to sin? Or do we repent and struggle against it, seeking to root it out as contrary to the basics of our faith and of our humanity, and in the understanding that only through the attempt to do so might we find that our own liberation and healing is also possible? But will we ever really leave our white ethnic majority problems behind us? Can we contribute anything at all to the struggle for a just and harmonious society?

When we have recognised black history as black people tell it; when we have taken our problems as white people seriously; when we have recognised that in doing this we are going to experience conflict and pain, do things then become clearer? Those who have travelled at least some of this road have found that it is precisely at this point that our problems in many ways begin to sharpen and intensify, and that more than ever we need the grace of God and of our black friends to see us through. At this point, though, a danger can emerge of simply – as I wrote in my original booklet on *The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority*:

> … echoing every word which black people utter, blindly following their lead with out bringing to bear our experience, understanding or critical faculties upon what they have to say. This is a perversion of solidarity, but although it is very easy for concerned white people to slip into it really is just being patronising in a different way. An Anglican vicar in Manchester tells of how the black members of his congregation say to him, a white vicar, that they are glad he knows how to talk to them 'black to black'. In other words, he can disagree and debate with them. He relates normally – as brother to brother, sister to sister, human to human. But it is only possible to do this having discovered a form of white identity which doesn't need to denigrate either itself or others. (Weller 1985, 14)

When we do develop an honesty with ourselves and a commitment to solidarity with black people, Sivanandan's dictum is underlined for us – black history is not white history. That basic gap is still there even in the affirmation of common and equal humanity. When I first wrote *The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority* as a white Christian increasingly becoming conscious of these problems, I wrote something through which I have since come to address myself, in all honesty and seriousness, than I perhaps did at the time, and this is that:

> We know that, however much we are committed to solidarity with black people, we are not black. We can do nothing about this, since it is a fact of social position, but we do need to recognise that it means we can always walk away from the experience of solidarity. We may get involved with the risks of solidarity, and even pay some of the costs, but in the final analysis we can walk away. (Weller 1985, 15)

In truth, I will have to acknowledge that am not today personally engaged in the degree of anti-racist activism that I was thirty or forty years ago. I hope that, in both the academic and practical work concerned with relations between people of varied religion and belief that I have since become more engaged with that I have still also continued to try to confront in myself and in others the kind discrimination and 'othering' that dehumanises both those who suffer from it and those who perpetrate it and within which there are also often dimensions of racism (Weller et al. 2013). But I do have to ask questions of myself of what it means for 'The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority' in relation to racism that 'we may get involved with the risks of solidarity, and even pay some of the costs' but that 'in the final analysis' the truth is that 'we can walk away' which is not something that is possible for those who are black.

And here is the rub for someone like me, if I am brutally honest. Perhaps a clue about how to face and to handle such uncomfortable truth can be found in a very powerful 1976 report from a working party of the British Council of Churches called *The New Black Presence in Britain* which, when it was first published, had an electrifying impact arising from its sharp honesty. In its Preface, the then General Secretary of the British Council of Churches, Henry Morton, wrote: 'The reader, who is accustomed to reports in the British Churches will be surprised by the style of this pamphlet. It is not a judicious report on a controversial subject, but an invitation to Whites to engage with angry and alienated Blacks – to see ourselves as others see us' (British Council of Churches 1976, 1). In the report as it was published, Gus John is quoted as having written something in a supplementary essay that he authored and which fed into the considerations of the working party that produced the report. This challenge of Gus John's, in its appeal to self-interest, might seem counter-intuitive to many of the at first sight apparently more pious themes of Christian theology. However, in its perhaps stark unexpectedness, I think it bears reflecting upon carefully for those of us who in one way or another hope, with help from our friends, to be able to continue in some measure to try both to tackle 'The Problems of the White Ethnic Majority' of the UK within ourselves and to challenge them in others:

> A pre-occupation with community relations and racial harmony is unjustified and misplaced unless it is seen as a natural outcome of the struggle for equality, liberation, human dignity, and racial justice. The church must choose to identify with and wage that struggle not in order that blacks might be given a better deal, but on its own terms and out of active self-interest. If the church is happy about the society which black people experience in the manner described, then it has nothing to say to black people – or to whites for that matter – and it deserves to be condemned with the oppressive system. If it is not, then it is imperative that it engages the values of society and works towards a re-ordering of society in accordance with the vision of social justice and the deliverance of the oppressed, which, as Church, it must have in Christ. (in British Council of Churches 1976, 31)

Nearly half a century on from this, for our society as a whole; for the Churches within it; and especially for those of us who are members of the UK's white ethnic majority, the

current period of *kairos* once again brings into sharp focus the challenging and troubling question of whether it will prove possible to develop the spiritual and intellectual clarity, the political incisiveness and the practical wisdom to rise to the challenge of engaging with 'roots' of this *kairos* without prematurely being seduced into calls for 'peace, peace, where there is no peace' (Jeremiah 8 v. 11). Especially as the historic and continuing significance and effects of the phenomena of colonialism and imperialism have finally boomeranged home to roost in the fragmented, embattled and embittered fabric of what is left of the now post-Brexit deeply (dis) 'United' Kingdom (see Reddie 2019; Weller 2019),[7] without abdicating our own responsibility to work on 'critical whiteness', those of us among the UK's white ethnic majority who have been given the grace in some measure to have 'eyes to see and ears to hear' will likely need to call in aid against our temptation to despair the analytical, spiritual and practical resources that sisters and brothers among us with heritages from the Two Thirds world have developed over several centuries in terms of understanding the 'roots' of these destructive phenomena and identifying the possible 'routes' out of them.

Notes

1. This article is based on a paper commissioned specifically as an historically and personally self-reflective piece by the organisers of the 17 April 2021 conference on 'Dismantling Whiteness: Critical White Theology' who are also guest editors of this edition of Practical Theology.
2. The booklet in printed form is technically undated, as it did not contain within it a year of publication. However, from both its contents and other related materials, the author is reasonably confident that it can appropriately be attributed to 1985. The original text can be accessed via a scanned copy at: https://www.academia.edu/51117192/Problems_of_the_White_Ethnic_Majority
3. The names of those who died were: Rosaline Henry; Patricia Johnson; Humphrey Brown; Gerry Paul Francis; Owen Wesley Thompson; Andrew Gooding; Peter Campbell; Lloyd Hall; Patrick Cummings; Steve Collins; Yvonne Ruddock; Glenton Powell; Paul Ruddock; while Anthony Berbeck took his own life two and a half years later, becoming the fourteenth victim of the fire.
4. From a current gender inclusive perspective, one might note that Sivanandan's challenge was framed as 'White *Man*, Listen.' (italics mine). At the least this raises a question of whether it was consciously expressed in the slang tradition of the USA as a way of referring to a person (usually white) – 'The Man' – who is in a position of power; or whether it was being used unconsciously in a way that rendered women's experience invisible. Whichever was the case, just as Sivanandan and others argued at that time that it is impossible to address 'race' without also addressing class, then in ways that I have not been able fully to explore in this article, but which it is important to note, it is arguably no longer possible to address either 'race' and/or class without also addressing their gendered dimensions.
5. The Special Patrol Group was a unit of the Metropolitan Police, active between 1961 and 1987, which became associated with Stop and Search activities targeted towards black people as well as in the 1979 killing of white anti-racist protestor Blair Peach during an Anti-Nazi League demonstration in Southall.
6. In particular, I was involved in campaigns for family reunification and against deportation, including the early development of the sanctuary movement in the UK – see Weller (1987, 1989).
7. As a member of a British-German family, and one who has also been involved over several decades in wider work for peace in Europe as well as justice, from the times of the Cold War's 'Iron Curtain' across Europe down to the fall across Europe of what I call the new 'Brexit Curtain', it is my conviction that there is much here that could with benefit be

further explored in terms of the trauma that has already befallen and, in future, is likely to further befall, the millions of EU citizens who had made their homes in the UK and UK citizens who had made their homes in the EU. As explored in a journal article I have written on Brexit (see Weller 2019) this is, I believe, both different from but also linked to what was experienced by the Windrush Generation. For those who may be interested I presented some of my personal and familial experience, wider observation and analysis, to an online seminar organised by the New Europeans on the topic of 'One Year and One Day on: What Price are Citizens Paying for Brexit' (3.2.2021), accessible at c. 32 minutes into its (unfortunately rather poor visual internet connection quality) You Tube recording at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UTcmBAx1u1Q&t=2096s

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ORCID

Paul Weller http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1690-5261

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