

# Black and White in Church?

## The legacy of slavery and colonialism

*When I relocated to Amsterdam from Ghana in 2016, my family and I were offered a family home in a suburb of Amsterdam West close to Nieuw Sloten. We received the housing offer with joy because we had heard a lot of stories about the struggle to find a house in Amsterdam.*

*As a Christian and having been brought up as a Roman Catholic in Ghana, Christianity defined my sense of identity and belonging. So, the search for a Catholic church in the area began earnestly in our first week of residence. Although we had not finished furnishing our home, the desire to find a Catholic church closer to my home was of utmost importance. We searched online and walked the streets hoping to find one. One Saturday afternoon, on one of our usual walks, we found a Catholic church in the north-eastern part of our neighbourhood. From the notice board and with our little understanding of the Dutch language, we established that it was truly a Catholic church. We noted the time that Mass starts and visited the church the following day.*

*When we walked into the church building, it was partly filled with a group of mainly white people. We were the only black people in the church. After the various prayers and hymns, the priest took to the altar and started to deliver the sermon for the day. As we listened, after a few minutes we were unsure of the language in which he spoke. Was it Dutch or Latin? We asked ourselves. We sat through the service without understanding a word of the priest's sermon. We comforted ourselves that perhaps after church service we might meet some members of the parish and ask if they had a separate meeting time for non-Dutch speaking congregants. Unfortunately, we never had the opportunity to speak with any member of the parish even during the brief opportunity for social after the service. Any attempts to speak with a parishioner proved futile as they mutely referred us to the notice board by pointing their fingers or hand to the notice board or the place the hot coffee and tea with snacks were being served.*

*We went home that day a bit surprised and dismayed. Did it have to do with our blackness? Did we miss something? Were we not welcomed in the space? It was perhaps the most non-friendly welcome we had ever received while visiting a new church in a new country. We discussed this and compared this experience to our previous experiences of visiting churches in the UK, Canada, USA and elsewhere. On those occasions, the people had always been kind and receptive despite the widely reported cases of anti-black racism in those countries. We were tempted to assume that it was due to the language barrier but we could not rationalise how a cosmopolitan city such as Amsterdam could have a church with over fifty people and none of them spoke English or noticed our presence so as to welcome us.*

My and my family's experience is no exception: black people often feel segregated and excluded in the white dominated churches (Beckford 2011). This raises a lot of questions or personal inquiries (Groenewald 2010; Mosterman 2016): is there 'oneness' in the Church or, is there 'Black and White' in the Church? Could such experiences explain the disconnectedness and the huge divide between the 'Dutch' and the so-called black 'migrant' churches? Could this be the main factor for the continuous proliferation of so-called black 'migrant' churches in the Netherlands?

The narratives or experiences of people from the black ethnic communities in the Randstad area of the Netherlands that I have documented over the last six years doing ethnographic research show that not many 'White Dutch' are prepared either to move beyond race or to embrace racial heterogeneity due to the history and legacies of slavery and colonialism (Bakuri 2021). Responses from various global communities to slavery and colonialism appear to have shifted from the traditional civil rights movements to civil disobedience, and the conceptualisation of the interconnection between subjectivity, desire, and power (Steyn et al. 2021). In the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe, racial prejudices are pervasive in nearly all of its administrative and sociopolitical systems as a result of the transatlantic trade of enslaved Africans and colonization (Balkenhol, Mepschen, and Duyvendak 2016; Wekker 2016). This is mainly because the legacies of the Dutch in terms of slavery and the enduring harms inflicted particularly on black people have yet to be fully understood and confronted. The role that religious institutions played in slavery have also been studied more in recent times (Hendrickson 2021; Vink 2007).

Based on personal reflections and interviews from ethnographic research, this article therefore attempts to explore how 'Black Dutch' Christians in the Netherlands express their religious sense of belonging by describing themselves as being 'in relation to' someone or something. I will describe how participants' experiences of racism either facilitates or hinders their sense of belonging both in their churches and in the Netherlands more generally. More specifically, I will show how one's position and experiences within a church and with church members impact participants' 'ambiguous' ways of relating with others and things. In so doing, I examine the Dutch transatlantic slavery legacies and its connectedness with the religious belonging of descendants of enslaved and colonised 'Black Dutch'. I aim to draw attention to matters relevant to conceptualising and wrestling with the specificities of anti-black racism and the role that the churches play in it.

This paper is organised in four sections; firstly, I will draw on existing literature to point out how the aftermath of slavery and colonialism leads to anti-black racism and impacts on the religious sense of belonging. Secondly, before presenting the findings of this paper, I will describe the role of Dutch merchants and Republic during colonialism, slavery, racism and more recently the Dutch government's attempts in response to the appeals for reparation. Thirdly, I will examine whether the narratives of Dutch slavery really do impact the way in which descendants of enslaved or colonized people perform their religious sense of belonging vis-à-vis their Dutch identity. Finally, I conclude by discussing the role of the Church in combating these realities and perceptions.

## The Dutch legacy of slavery and religion

All world religions proclaim universal brotherly and sisterly love. Yet history is littered with moments in which religion has provided a justification, for, or has given cause to, all kinds of atrocities directed towards people of a different race or culture: the Crusades, slavery, the Holocaust, etc. (Duriez and Hutsebaut 2000, 1)

It is an undeniable fact that the dehumanization act of slavery and colonialism have led to unprecedented levels of enslavement, murder, genocide, incarceration as well as racial hatred (Brandon and Sarkar 2019; Wekker 2016). Most of these atrocities were perpetuated by many of the major European countries that desired to increase their wealth and build 'powerful' nations at the expense of black lives. The result was massive colonialism, which caused many African states to be colonised by different nations, and the people of the colonial countries were taken from their homeland to work as slaves in order to benefit these imperialistic countries (Brandon 2015; Brandon and Sarkar 2019). The exporting of slaves from Africa overseas, which eventually became the transatlantic slave trade and a norm among many thriving nations of Europe, including the Netherlands.

The Dutch have been criticized by several people for white-washing their past to make it look as if it was all about trade and economic gain (Wekker 2016; Brandon 2015). Even if it was for economic gain, at whose expense, and how is this discussed? The dominant Dutch public discourse on its legacy of slavery is typically presented as a 'black page in history' of the Netherlands and choreographed with a taste of denial, innocence, and misplaced entitlement (Wekker 2016; Van

der Veer 2006; Esajas and De Abreu 2019). In the last twenty years, more attention has been paid to the role the Dutch played in slavery.

However, the role of religion and the Church has been mostly ignored. For example, the Reformed Church was in charge of churches in overseas colonies and often dealt with black people (both former enslaved and free people) on Dutch soil (Vink 2007; Hendrickson 2021). There was a link between religious goals and the West Indies Company's (WIC) business goals. The Reformed Church is known to have sent nurses and clergy on company ships, and they decided who could be a part of the Christian community and who could not (De Jong 1971). This shows how deeply and in how many different ways the Church was involved in slavery and the slave trade, both in terms of what they did and what doctrines they held. Until recently, this part of Church history was mostly overlooked.

However, the legacies of the Dutch and the Church's involvement in slavery abound all around in its major cities such as Amsterdam, Utrecht and Rotterdam, and these include graves of unnamed slaves, the depiction of black people in Dutch paintings, as well as the undeniable presence of descendants of enslaved and colonized people from its former colonies (De Witte 2014; Rieger and Savin-Williams 2012; Esajas and De Abreu 2019). With these few demonstrated legacies of slavery in the Netherlands, it is increasingly becoming difficult to deny its existence or the Dutch's involvement. Nevertheless, the denial of the existence of slavery in the Netherlands is often seen as directly or indirectly insulting to affected people who live in the Netherlands (see Wekker 2016).

Thus, how does Christianity's involvement in the historical context of slavery impact the reli-

gious belonging of descendants of enslaved and colonized people?

### Why 'Black and White churches' in the Netherlands?

Racism within the Church could influence black people into establishing and maintaining their own black churches. This is not to take away the agency of black people who truly want(ed) to establish their churches for various reasons and not necessarily because of racism (Noort 2011; Adedibu 2013). This is also to show that structural racism has also contributed to the need to establish what is often known as black or 'migrant' churches in the Netherlands. This designation is problematic. Being 'migrantized' plays a pivotal role in current discussions in Europe and the Netherlands (Andrikopoulos 2017; Bakuri 2021).

Migrantization is the process of presenting people with a non-European migration history as eternal newcomers in public discourse, no matter how many generations have passed. This also happens to these 'migrant' churches, many of which were established in the Netherlands years ago. By calling them 'migrant', 'mainstream' Christian churches relegate their black members to second-class status within the Church. Even in those instances in which blacks remained in the white church, they often had their own fellowships, which served for the most part as places they could talk, complain and find comfort. The 'migrant' church became one of the most important institution in black communities (Van Dijk 2002; Bakuri 2014). It became the vanguard in the fight for social justice from the beginning of its existence.

I share a few examples from my research data I collected from 2016 to 2018 during my doctoral studies and have revisited as part of my PhD and

current postdoctoral research below. In an interview with Pastor Kwame, (a 63-year-old Ghanaian-Dutch) in early 2017, he told me how racism had affected him in many ways and he shared one of such encounters with me. This story had to do with his son, who had been born and raised solely in the Netherlands. Because of a new job as a teacher, his son had moved to another city in the Netherlands – along with his wife and two children.

*As a God-fearing man and desirous to worship with any Christian church he could find, he went out in search for a church where his family could worship on Sundays in his predominantly white neighbourhood. After a long search he found a church building and approached to find information about its worship meeting schedule. Suddenly, an elderly white man opened the church door halfway. He walked up to the elderly man, whose first question was: are you looking for shelter?*

Pastor Kwame described to me how his son felt with such a strange welcome and was overtly surprised why this elderly Dutch man thought he needed shelter. According to him, the man did not even say a greeting or ask how he could help him. What may have accounted for this stereotype? Was it because he was a black person?

As shown in this brief note on Pastor Kwame, the attitudes toward black people within churches in the Netherlands have been unsettling in terms of experiences of racism: overt, subtle and everyday racism (Siebers and Dennissen 2015). The acceptance of black people by the majority of white Dutch churches seems questionable. More importantly, however, the note reveals how hard it generally is for black people to be accepted into these predominantly white churches due

to anti-black racism. Anti-black racism is generally not seen as a problem in the Netherlands and when acknowledged, it is viewed as a problem outside the Church but not within the Church. It even becomes extremely problematic when people deny people's experiences and how people feel in those circumstances.

I do not conclude that that race and racial differences is the only factor of such segregation of 'White and Black in the Church'. Nevertheless, the racial card appears to be the central problem for many research participants.

*In a conversation with a 27-year-old Surinamese Dutch woman, Fabiola, she told me about her experiences of being racialised in the church while growing up. She remembered looking at pictures in her church and everyone in those pictures was white, making her realise that she was one of the three black children in their church from two different families. She recounted being part of the children's drama ministry at her church. She was part of the Christmas celebration and one child whispered to another that she looked like 'Zwarte Piet' ('Black Pete'), but it was whispered more loudly than the girl had intended. Fabiola's mother, who was with her at the time, had overheard what the girl said and walked up to the child and her parents, who found her mum too confronting. The confrontation quickly escalated but the focus was no longer on the racial slur or name calling but rather on how uncultured and how loud Fabiola's mum was. As she reflected on this incident, she quickly concluded that this experience was a typical case of racialisation and being othered in the church. It made her feel that all the touching of her hair as compliments by church members had actually been racist as she often wore Afro-styled hair. Perhaps she was seen as a slave ('Zwarte Piet') to some of the whites.*

Similar stories of childhood experiences that participants shared with me showed that this impacted how they interacted in their church spaces. Some people questioned their space there while others left to other churches. Others remarked they fought it the best they could, by confronting parents whose children were racist to their child, as Fabiola's mum did, or by embracing their blackness better by wearing Afro-styled hair, or just by going to church taking up space within the church, thereby communicating to others that they were there to stay.

These experiences, whether during childhood or adulthood, can be painful, and depending on the individual, can leave wounds for a long time to deal with. The personal experiences of black people and the ways that blacks are treated generally and specifically in the church can be damaging to people's pursuits. This may make people search for collectives with people of African descent with whom to share their experiences of racialisation and racism. Others may engage with their own particular African origins and the search for churches that are predominantly black or even leaving the church of which they wanted to be part but were pushed out. And some may end up not going to church again (Bakuri 2021).

This also raises a lot of issues regarding reparations, as with the recent apology by Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte in December 2022, which raised issues about who should apologise, when, how and where (NYT 2022). For the Christians with whom I spoke, some believe that God is a 'God of justice' and will punish all those who mistreat his people. He is also a just and forgiving God. However, to ensure prospering relationships within the church and as a way to commune together, the idea of decolonial love in a form of

reparation could go a long way to eradicate anti-black racism in the church.

### Reparations

What a country owes to the descendants of those enslaved and whether past racist attitudes and mentalities still exist and affect modern society is a much-debated topic even today. However, many countries across the globe that were implicated in slavery and colonialism have come under strict political and moral pressures to institute some form of reparations for those who suffered inhumane treatment. Characteristically, the term 'reparation' is raised in relation to a responsible act to 'restore' or 'repair', or in the context of restitution. However, reparations historically had complex usages and meanings such as 'a healing, especially of an injury', and 'the action of making amends for a wrong or harm done by providing payment or other assistance to the wronged party' (Brown 2019). While the term 'reparation' encompasses other and oppositional understandings and usages of the word, we can use these as points of departure to better understand forms of reparation that people seek.

It is evident that some people seek reparations as part of future transformations. Showing that the idea of reparations is not solely for monetary gains, a formal apology, an official policy, or a solemn promise. Reparations are re-imagined as actions based on relations. Thus, reparations also include interpersonal relations that move away from violence, discrimination towards love (Vásquez 2008), what has been described by Vásquez (2008) as decolonial love. The argument is that reparations in the form of decolonial love traverse the positivistic calculation of debts or apologies owed, and instead engage in inter-generational and collective acts of love and

demand an understanding of (and an accounting for) the *longue durée* of slavery and colonialism and contemporary forms of coloniality and the afterlife of slavery.

This demand for reparations is part of a long history of oppressed peoples wrestling with the aftermath of imperial violence, slavery, colonialism and degradation. It is the reason for the advocacy of love, which necessitates acts of faithful witnessing and ethical actions in the face of visible and invisible domination. Recognizing the violence of dehumanization is necessary for forging ethical relationships based on love and affinity. Though colonization and slavery appears to have ended, their structures remain deeply embedded in the spaces they once occupied and in the psyches and lives of the people they dominated (Lee 2022). The legacy of slavery and colonialism creates the broad strokes of pain, brokenness and discrimination beyond the socio-political structures to include how the modern-day churches function in the Netherlands.

### Conclusion

Racism within the churches in the Netherlands today has its roots in slavery, where stereotypes and ideas of black people were perpetuated, thus forcing some black people to find their own 'migrant' churches. In spite of all the good efforts within churches, racism continues to perpetuate separation, division, oppression and domination of black people. This divide continues to extend itself to how people feel as Christians and their interactions with other people and the situation in the Church. Manifestations of anti-black persist in the failure of creating a loving Christian community and fostering unity in the Church. The Church, because of the very nature of the Gospel of Christ, is called to bring unity, reconciliation,



healing and peace and to show love to others. The Church played a role in slavery and in creating stereotypes about black people; it must now help to create love in interpersonal relations. Churches need to ask themselves questions, such as: How do we treat people of different racial backgrounds here? How included do people feel? Do those who do not look like the majority feel they truly belong? Are their voices heard and their concerns addressed? This will help in various ways to deal with the evils of racism, and the social and economic injustices that come with it. The Church has to work towards the fullness of life for all people. The voice of the Christian Church for tolerance and social justice is needed now more than ever.

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