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Reimagining Race?

Transcript of Chine McDonald's prophetic address

You can watch the [video](#) of Chine's address from 00:30:10 up to 01:01:33.
In this section, Chine explores the church's history with white supremacy.

The Eight Minutes and Forty-Six Seconds of Mr. George Floyd's Last Words on Earth

It's my face, man.
I didn't do nothing serious man.
Please.
Please.
Please. I can't breathe.
Please, man.
I can't breathe.
I can't breathe.
Please.
Man, can't breathe, my face.
Just get up.
I can't breathe.
Please.
I can't breathe shit.
I will. I can't move.
Mama.
Mama.
I can't.
My knee.
My nuts.
I'm through.

I'm through.
I'm claustrophobic.
My stomach hurts.
My neck hurts.
Everything hurts.
Some water or something.
Please. Please.
I can't breathe, officer.
Don't kill me.
They goin' kill me, man.
Come on, man.
I cannot breathe.
I cannot breathe.
They goin' kill me.
They goin' kill me.
I can't breathe.
I can't breathe.
Please, sir.
Please. Please.
Please.
I can't breathe.

I only watched the footage once.

Once was enough.

In those early months of the global pandemic that changed all of our lives, the world seemed to stand still for 8 mins and 46 seconds.

8 mins and 46 seconds as we watched a Black man breathe his final breaths as a white police officer knelt on his neck for what was a significant period of time. It was far too long.

For those of us who are Black, as we watched George Floyd's murder, we saw our own necks on the line. We recognised in that event the symbolism of the long, painful, and violent story of Black people's place in the world.

The story was not new, but echoed through the centuries – the voices of our ancestors crying out in the wilderness.

What will it take for us to retell that story of race that has been so imprinted in our minds?

It will take discomfort, it will take courage, it will take wisdom, humility, and the grace of God.

But it will also take reckoning with our past, confronting the present, and doing this all for the sake of our future.

The past – lament what has come before

In writing my book [*God Is Not a White Man*](#) last year, I came face to face with the sins of the church's past.

One afternoon during my research, I found myself sobbing so loudly that my husband ran downstairs thinking someone had died.

While he took his place beside me as I wept in front of the laptop on which I typed this talk, he tried to decipher my muffled words through my hyperventilation. I sat with my head in my hands, trying to cover my face as the floodgates opened and I could hardly breathe.

I had stumbled upon some words that I had not been prepared for, and though I was in shock reading them, they also confirmed what I had already suspected. *This explains everything*, I kept thinking.

Anyone who speaks or writes about the Black experience in the present day and throughout history must come face to face with trauma – a deep pain that connects us with our present reality, the primal scream that joins hands with the pain of our ancestors.

I knew that what I wanted to show was that the church and Christian theology has not always been what it has claimed to be; it has at times failed to be a place where all people

of all races are welcomed into the family of a God who loves each of us equally. *For God does not show favouritism* (Romans 2:11).

I had suspected that at various points in history our theology had been influenced by beliefs that most right-thinking people today would find abhorrent. Yet I have at the same time had faith in the church's ability to rise above the prevailing narrative of its day and to speak hope and life to a broken world.

I cried that day when I realised that at times it has been our theologies that have broken it. At times our theologies have fed a white-supremacist narrative in ways that make me sick to my stomach.

The cry came from somewhere deep within me as I read of the arguments that had been put forward by Christian men and women about whether or not Black people were in fact made in the image of God like white people were, as I scanned the diagrams of the faces of Black people alongside those of apes.

I was reading about Charles Carroll, who in 1900 argued – he believed – on the basis of Scripture that Black people's destiny was to serve white people. He wrote a delightfully titled pamphlet, *'The Negro a Beast,'* or *'in the Image of God'*.

The Negro, Carroll insists, was formed separately from the white man, is not part of the Adamic family, and is an ape. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ was made necessary precisely because man forgot this fact about the Negro, for the Saviour 'came to destroy man's social, political, and religious equality with the Negro and mixed-bloods and the amalgamation to which these crimes inevitably lead, and to rebuild the barriers which God erected in the Creation between man and the ape'.

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a number of different pseudo-scientific and religious thinkers arguing about whether or not Black people were actually humans. There was a debate in the southern states of America about whether enslaved Black people were 'a high type of domesticated animal to serve as the white man's tool like another beast of burden' or instead whether 'the slave was a child in a patriarchal relationship with his master'.

Most of us would find it unpalatable to believe that the Christian faith ever found its way anywhere near such abhorrent beliefs. Reading about the manipulation and distortion of Scripture to prop up the most extreme white-supremacist narratives made me feel sick, but also ashamed. We have, of course, moved far from such views, but there are vestiges that persist in both subtle and unsubtle forms. Sometimes the Christian story becomes so bound up with whiteness and Westernness that it is hard to see the wood for the trees, to disentangle the authentic hope of the gospel from the chaff of racist ideologies.

We have come a long way. But we're not there yet. The present day shows us that there are still vestiges of these views about race – which hold up whiteness as superior and anything other than white as inferior.

Many white Christians refuse to see the way in which the history of the church has been stained by racist attitudes. White supremacy is a sin against God, and the church must be washed clean of it. In order for this to happen, before the healing and hope can come, there must be repentance – an acknowledgment not just of the past sin of the Church as a whole but also of the times when we have looked down on others and seen them as less human than ourselves; of the ways in which our addiction to power has rendered us blind to the plight of the oppressed; of those times when we choose to take offence in our privilege instead of working tirelessly for justice and equity for all.

The present – a time to heal?

This is not just a thing of the past, but racism echoes in our present. And even in our churches. And it is a gospel issue. Because recent years have made me question whether the story of race being communicated in our churches is really what I signed up to. This present political moment – the rise of far-right nationalism – has been shocking to me – and many of us.

It might be easy for us as British Christians to dismiss the alignment of Christianity with Trumpism as completely irrelevant to our own contexts. We are not America. We are British.

Donald Trump knew exactly how to appeal to his base – white Republican nationalists for whom the church, the Bible, and Donald Trump have come to signify their defence against a changing world that is diverse and multicultural. For them, Christianity is a white man's religion and God is a white man who wants to make America great again.

While the support of Trump is abhorrent to people like me, who perhaps have naïve views about what Christianity should be all about, when taken in context, the Christian support of Trump (he also received strong majorities among white Catholics and white mainline Protestants) is a natural outworking of a Christianity that has for centuries been intertwined with white supremacy. At times, the protection of the white race and its elevation over all others has been more overt – Ku Klux Klan members, slave owners, and lynchers have been made up of churchgoing white folk – and at other times white supremacy has been masked by coded language such as law and order and family values. Robert P. Jones argues that in the US, white Christians' support of Trump is not an anomaly, but required to provide 'the moral underpinning for the entire project of protecting the dominant social and political standing of whites'. He explains, 'American Christianity's theological core has been thoroughly structured by an interest in protecting white supremacy.'

Speaking to the New York Times about numbers of people of colour leaving white evangelical churches in the US in the wake of Trump's election, Michael Emerson – author of *Divided by Faith* – said: 'The election itself was the single most harmful event to

the whole movement of reconciliation in at least the past 30 years. It's about to completely break apart.'

There are big and obvious ways, such as the Capitol Hill riots in the US, where white supremacy is obviously aligned with Christianity. But there are much more insidious and subtle ways – ways that we have all become accustomed to.

In thinking about my experience as a Black person within white majority church spaces, my thoughts have been punctuated by doubt. A doubt about whether I really have anything to say on the issue. I've never faced what some might describe as explicit, overt racism. Never been called the N word or heard it preached anywhere that Black people are inferior.

But I *have* been made to feel like I don't belong. Because I'm not white.

I moved from Nigeria with my parents and younger sisters to the UK when I was four years old.

So, for much of my childhood, I had a Nigerian passport and not a British one. And that made going on school trips awful. I remember arriving on the coach heading to Calais. The border police would get on the bus and I'd be hoiked off the bus for my interview. It was humiliating and isolating and made me feel extremely other and very unwelcome.

I remember the first trip I went on once I had my British passport.

It was amazing. I loved the freedom that came with that!

'Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone' (Ephesians 2:19).

The picture presented of the early church is one in which healing takes place – a healing of the fragmentation that has existed between people groups. This is the healing that we need today – a bringing together of people of all races, lamenting about the fragmentation that has gone before and striving on towards a future hope.

But we're not there yet.

Despite having a British passport, I was still BLACK.

When you are a Black family of five turning up at all-white churches in places like Hertfordshire or Kent or Hampshire, people notice. I recall my parents being asked once by a woman on the welcome team why they had chosen that particular church to attend instead of the Black church down the road. I'm sure she thought her question was harmless, but I have never forgotten it. It suggested that not only did she see our race first rather than see us as members of God's big family – her family – but that the norm she had become accustomed to was that white people were here and Black people were *over there*.

We've often heard it said that the church remains one of the most racially segregated spaces in society. We find sometimes that we speak of white churches over here, Black churches over there, Asian churches somewhere else.

White supremacy comes not only in the Klansman's white cape, but the subtle words that seem to betray the idea that white is right. White supremacy can come not in literal chains and shackles, but the narrow definition of what and who is beautiful. White supremacy can come in the form of monochrome leadership, theology and practice, a cookie cutter of chino-wearing whiteness. In my experience of church, despite the knowledge that the God we worship is Lord and Creator of all, one might be forgiven for believing that our God values whiteness – white leaders, white theologians, white readings of Scripture, white Western forms of worship – as supreme.

My experience as a Black person in white majority spaces is that white is right and everything else is colour. But I believe the beauty of the Christian story is in Christ drawing together all people from all places – breaking down the dividing wall of hostility.

At times when I've thought about race issues within the church, I've been met with a retort that says all are equal under God and therefore we should not play into identity politics – in other words, I've been warned not to play the race card.

The majority white church asks us not to play that card, while simultaneously doing a very good job at highlighting our difference in ways that make us uncomfortable. I think back to the 'International Sundays' where we were encouraged to bring our native food, dress in our traditional outfits, and celebrate our culture. These days would provide a certain level of anxiety for me as a young person – because I was already confused enough about my own identity. Was I British or Nigerian? Should my parents bring jollof rice to share or coronation chicken, quiche and cucumber sandwiches?

I realise that what I'm saying is contradictory and can be confusing for well-meaning white people. I've said my culture should be celebrated, but that you shouldn't point out that I'm different.

I want them to recognise where I'm from, but I have spent far too many hours tying myself in knots trying to appear wholly British without any hint of the Nigerian heritage that I used to be ashamed of.

Some of us, however, don't understand that this pervasive white superiority is not just found in British or US churches, but it is so dominant that it has crept its way into churches in other parts of the world too. Places like Nigeria. Colonialism and globalisation mean that many countries in the global south have also been conditioned to believe that white is right.

My grandmother's funeral two years ago was a significant moment and rite of passage for our family. We gathered together from all over the world for three days of mourning – a night vigil in the darkness in the grounds of my father's property, a burial service attended by around a thousand people coming to pay their respects to my grandmother and the

family, and a church service at the village Methodist church. We wanted to end on a hopeful note and so my parents arranged for this service to include thanksgiving – for the life of my grandmother and also the birth of our son Keir. Although he was a toddler at the time, it was the first time we had gathered together to welcome him into the family and dedicate him to God. A thanksgiving service often involves the family giving thanks by offering gifts to God and to the church.

And so it was that my husband and I found ourselves dancing up the aisle, holding our son aloft, with around fifty relatives, plus goats, yams, and wads full of cash. It was an incredibly moving moment for me. I was overwhelmed by the love for us as a couple and for our son; in our culture, when one of us is blessed, the whole community receives the blessing, and we give thanks together. As we reached the altar and handed Keir over to the Methodist minister for the dedication, he said he felt particularly blessed that day because our son was the first child the new ministers had dedicated in the church. And they were even more blessed, he said, because the child was the son of an *oyibo* – a white person – and that that very white man had graced them with his presence. And everyone whooped and cheered. So this is what it's like to be a white man, I thought, holding power wherever it is you go; revered even in the middle of a rural Methodist church in Igbo-land. I'm reminded of novelist and playwright James Baldwin's description of the difference between Blacks as minorities and whites as minorities:

There is a great difference between being the first white man to be seen by Africans and being the first Black man to be seen by whites. The white man takes the astonishment as tribute, for he arrives to conquer and to convert the natives, whose inferiority in relation to himself is not even to be questioned; whereas I, without a thought of conquest, find myself among a people whose culture controls me, has even, in a sense, created me, people who have cost me more in anguish and rage than they will ever know, who yet do not even know of my existence.

The future – a hope for what is to come

What can we learn from this and take into the future building of God's church? How do we reimagine our understanding and conception of race so that it truly represents the God we serve? Where can hope be found for the future?

I believe the kingdom of God should be like a mosaic – a tapestry of colour, each part equal and in relationship with each other.

That means that we do not hold whiteness and Western versions of church as superior. To do so limits the power of the gospel and it denies the *imago Dei* that is found in every single one of God's people, no matter their background.

A Christianity that is more focused on maintaining the status quo of white superiority, as if whiteness is something that God sees as worthy of protecting, is not the Christianity of

Jesus Christ. It bears no resemblance to the New Testament's critique of empire and religious leaders who see themselves as pious yet ignore the plight of the outcasts, the wounded, or the subjugated.

I want to end with a story that I think helps us re-imagine race. It's a poem that I've written for my little boy:

You were two years old when you started to understand that the world was made up of difference, and that people came in a variety of shades and colours.

You knew far earlier than I thought you would that I am Black and your father is white. I wondered if you were confused about that – whether it meant anything to you. I wondered whether any children had pulled your hair or excluded you or made you feel like you did not belong.

I wanted to wrap you up in love and shut out a world that ever made you question your worth.

When we asked you what colour you were, you looked puzzled and answered: grey.

Grey; like an overcast day.

And we knew right then that we would have to work hard to protect you from a world that might make you feel disappointed in yourself, one that might make you long for summer when your smile was already a sunbeam.

You will always be our summer.

So your dad told you that you were not grey, but golden brown.

And your eyes lit up.

You saw in golden brown your own radiance and worth. In golden brown we saw the image of God in you.

And God said that grey, Black, white, or golden brown – it was always there.

In the wake of George Floyd's murder last year, I dared to hope that the future we want for our children might finally become a reality. We realised in those revelatory days that we had not moved as far as we would have liked since Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his 'I Have a Dream' speech more than half a century prior. Black people were still being killed in the street for being Black; they were still dying disproportionately from a deadly virus that highlighted the inequalities that keep them from flourishing; they were still underrepresented in spaces that might meaningfully be able to enact change. Politics and business and the church were still being run by white men.

There is no neat conclusion here; the jury is out on whether the reign of whiteness will continue for decades or even centuries more. It is yet to be seen whether the awakening sparked by George Floyd's murder will fizzle out or bring about the systemic change that is needed to change the lives of Black people around the world.

Nevertheless, I refuse to give up hope. I cling to it just as those who look like me have done throughout the centuries, even in the face of torture, enslavement, and persecution. They placed their trust in the God of the impossible.

I take heart in seeing that white men have joined the conversation, some of them ready to dismantle the patriarchy and white supremacy that has handed them power even in God's house. For this change to come, it will take all of us being vulnerable – sharing the warts-and-all stories of the effects of white superiority on our daily lives. It will take all of us searching to unveil the little-known truths that might help us to see the world – and each other – in a different light. It will take all of us listening. It will take all of us to remove whiteness from the pedestal upon which it has been placed, and to create a world where we are all seen as equal in the sight of God.

My prayer is that we the church will be jolted out of ignorance and apathy, so that – armed with knowledge and conviction – we might change the world for my golden-brown boy.



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Chine is a regular contributor to BBC Religion & Ethics programmes, including Thought for the Day. Before her current role as Director of the religion and society think tank Theos, Chine was Head of Community Fundraising and Public Engagement with Christian Aid. Her second book is [*God Is Not a White Man and Other Revelations*](#).