

Book Review

We Need to Talk About Race:

Understanding the Black Experience in White Majority Churches

Ben Lindsay

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What follows is a joint review of 'We Need to Talk About Race'. Both Steve Muneza and Will Foulger are ordained priests in the Church of England. Steve is black, and Will is white. They review the book together before commenting from their own perspective.

A legitimate first response to Ben Lindsay's book might be to ask the question: Do we? Do we still need to talk about race? Didn't Paul's letters to the Galatians and Corinthians, almost two thousand years ago, convincingly and exhaustively answer the question at least for the Church? This book argues otherwise.

Ben Lindsay is a black British pastor, husband to a white woman and father to mixed-race children. In this book, he speaks from a position of personal experience intermittently, with stories and perspectives from members of both white and non-white communities on questions of 'black experience in white majority churches'. Lindsay tells of his violent awakening to the reality of racism when, at age 14, he was attacked by two young white men who called him 'ni**er' while beating him up.

Above all, *We Need to Talk about Race* is a stark call to white majority churches in the UK to think differently about black people's experience. *How* the Church responds to this call is a different matter. The book itself succeeds in making this call clear, grounded in experience and evidence, and inviting. This last description is

important. Though grounded in the author's experiences, and drawing heavily on the expression of other black thinkers, historians, writers, and artists (both from within and from outside of the Church), the book refuses to separate the Church across lines of race. What is in view, and what is achieved, is a vision of Church as truly multi-racial, not simply in demographics but also representation (a central theme of the book) and true *koinonia*. This vision does not however blunt the book's sharpness; Lindsay begins by referencing Augustine's description of hope as having two daughters — anger and courage — and he does not hold back on either.

The book brings to the Church's attention (and it does bring to attention: it is impossible to read this book and not have one's own perceptions and presumptions put under the spotlight) and offers a good introduction to some themes that have been playing out in secular society for the past decade. In particular: stereotyping; black experience as secondary trauma; micro-aggression; white privilege; colour blindness/(un)consciousness; the difference between diversity and inclusion; and the particular uniqueness of black *women's* experience. A particular strength is the book's handling of the Church's role in the transatlantic slave trade; what is offered is an honest, critical, and yet ultimately repentant way forward.

In his introduction, Lindsay talks about the need to overcome barriers of 'defensiveness' and 'dismissiveness' when talking about race to white people. He also talks of reticence from minority ethnic groups not wanting to be defined as victims or simply 'tired of defending themselves to majority groups'. This sentiment is reflected for instance by Reni Eddo-Lodge, whom Lindsay quotes, in her book *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*. Lindsay argues that the conversation about race needs to step up, especially in the Church if we are to work towards a true unity of the body of Christ. Lindsay argues that historical failures to engage effectively with race issues have significantly damaged the Church's mission with long-lasting detrimental consequences on both majority white and ethnic minority communities.

The challenge in writing such a book it seems is to present a distinctive Christian vision of the renewed humanity under Christ, rather than a rehashed secular version of 'diversity.' As Lindsay's book makes clear, however, this is a problematic task for the Church, since in terms of *awareness* — and her previous

complacency/complicity — she has lagged behind. In this sense the book is a piece of practical theology; it refuses the temptation to ignore the church's actual forms and behaviours (culture) under the auspices of doing 'ecclesiology'. Lindsay is effective in this task to the extent that he manages to hold those two things together (theological vision, and actual goings on) without losing the edge of either. For Lindsay it is precisely the vision of what the Church should be that motivates his delve into the messy realities of UK church culture.

Will Foulger's Reflections

The strength of Lindsay's book is that it does achieve his stated intention of provoking self-evaluation. Reading as a white former church leader I felt exposed and critiqued. In particular, the section on the Church of England's role in the slave trade was especially difficult to read. Although not new information for me, it was significant to read about this in the wider context of the book. This is the institution which has ordained me and to which I belong. Likewise, the accounts of the other obvious and not so obvious ways in which white majority churches have embodied racism. So challenged, yes. However at no point did I feel excluded. As I read, I felt that I wanted to be in on the discussion and in on whatever a way forward might need to look like. Two features helped in this: the first is the reflections at the end of each chapter which pose questions to be considered by a person of colour, white church leader, white church member, and a more general perspective respectively. This helped underline Lindsay's point that each of us come at this issue with differing perspectives but also (perhaps more important to realise) different responsibilities too. The second is the section on the Kings Church, Lewisham — a large black majority church — and the insights of its (white) teaching pastor. To be clear, this section did not stand out because it offered a white perspective, but rather because it allowed me to see what steps I might need to take (from my own position, as it were) in order to contribute. It was clear, practical, and made something possible.

And it has made things possible. It has encouraged us as a staff team to think hard about almost everything we are doing: from interviewing technique through to the images we use in lectures. In my own area of missiology I have an opportunity to

draw on a far wider breadth of scholarship and missional experience from across the world.

There remains work to be done in terms of providing an account of the contribution of black men and women to the Church in history, as well as in positing the contribution black thinkers are making, and could make in the immediate future. Lindsay is right to explore both of these, however he at times slightly overstates his case. For example, after some research, we concluded that only a few scholars from the list of black academics that Lindsay provides offer the academic depth and breadth that would enable them to sit in the position on the syllabus he would like them to. This in itself however simply serves to highlight the challenge Lindsay has presented us with.

There is also work to be done in imagining the implications of Lindsay's thesis for churches that exist outside of the major cities; for example, those in large (often 'traditional') white majority contexts. The book is relevant here because Lindsay refuses to make the issue about necessity ('we live in a more diverse society, therefore the Church should reflect this') but rather stresses that the Church should be *leading*: 'diverse' is who she is called to be, wherever she may find herself. Yet the particular task facing churches in these contexts is a different one and we need to think hard about how they might take Lindsay's vision forward.

Reading this book as a staff team and then again with Steve has proved a particularly fruitful experience. My encouragement would be to read this book with others; possibly a small group, or a staff team. Be ready to create a safe environment for the discussions that will follow, and be willing to be honest about what is going on internally as you read. I found I had to pay close attention to my internal responses as I read, and it was incredibly helpful to talk these through with Steve and others.

Steve Muneza's Reflections

At the end of each section, Lindsay gives a set of key questions to help the reader, based on their own circumstances (person of colour, white church leader, or white church member), to reflect on their attitude and how they can positively contribute to changing the status quo. Lindsay also enables different voices to be heard through

this book. He also gives practical suggestions for members of both white and non-white communities on how to equip themselves to better engage with this difficult and tiresome conversation. For instance, he encourages black members to find what Kate Coleman calls 'an immersive space where you don't have to explain yourself'.

This book also points to deeper and enduring questions beyond racial discrimination. As Lindsay points out, Christianity provides helpful models of communities freed from racial prejudices and divisions. The first-century Church in its early steps had to seriously engage with this question of racial, ethnic, national, or cultural discrimination. Early Church leaders such as Peter grappled with this problem on a personal and community level (Acts 10). Peter's sacrificial obedience, even in the midst of questions from his own and his community's prejudices, is a helpful example of the kind of Christian attitude that will help today's Church to respond effectively to the challenge of racism or racial discrimination within and outside of the Church in our local and global communities. Furthermore, as Christians, we are empowered by the Holy Spirit and its fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in our quest to become more and more like Jesus.

To help this conversation, Lindsay preempts potential barriers such as the myth of 'meritocracy' and conscious/unconscious blindness to historical events, such as slavery with its enduring effects in contemporary society. He also offers a short summary of theories and beliefs that led to contemporary forms of racism such as mistaken historical interpretations of Scripture that placed the white race above others, leading to the belief in white supremacy. Although this section is helpful, its discussion is limited by its shortness. Understandably, the size of the book does not allow space to discuss the origins and evolution of these colour or culturally-based racist theories and practices within their socio-political contexts and their connections to corrupt and exploitative practices in local and international trade and political relationships. Nevertheless, signposting to these discussions would have helped.

As an African minister and theological educator in the UK, I found this book helpful and relatable. Some of the theological and sociological discussions could

have been helped by a deeper analysis. However, Lindsay does convincingly state the case for a continued and urgent conversation about race. Moreover, Lyndsay does provide tools to help initiate and sustain this conversation at personal and community levels. I would unreservedly recommend this book for all interested in beginning or continuing this journey towards a more united Church, living and serving as the body of Christ for this generation.

I think that Will is right to highlight the issue of the Church of England and the slave trade. This is not a shaming exercise but rather a difficult, but necessary, self-examination for the Church, comparable to a painful but honest family conversation held within a safe and loving space. We had a really good discussion as a staff team, and we talked through the issues of guilt and shame that result from this. I recognise the different emotional responses Lindsay's book may generate depending on one's perceived self-identity. However, Lindsay invites the Church to move beyond the sense of guilt, shame, apathy, or resentment into constructive conversations and action.

One of the benefits of Lindsay's book is that his approach is a springboard to look at other issues. By addressing the deeper, underlying issues at play, he opens the door for us to reflect on issues of class, gender, and any other areas in which we might hold systemic and ingrained prejudices. Lindsay thus opens a far broader conversation which we must all have, whatever the colour of our skin.