

Impact case study (REF3)

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| Institution: Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) | | |
| Unit of Assessment: UoA 31 (Theology and Religious Studies) | | |
| Title of case study: ICS31.01_Theology in Action: Impact on religious programming, religious debate, and educational and political engagement. | | |
| Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2013-2016 | | |
| Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit: | | |
| Name(s): | Role(s) (e.g. job title): | Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: |
| Professor Robert Beckford | Professor of Theology and Culture in the African Diaspora | 01/11/2011-30/07/2019 |
| Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014-2019 | | |
| Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N | | |
| <p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Professor Robert Beckford's research on the contemporary influence of 'colonial Christianity' on the Black Pentecostal Church and intersections between theology and popular culture, has:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resulted in impacts on media production, contributing across the spectrum of the BBC's religious programming, including the making of TV and radio documentaries; • Influenced public discourse and debate in relation to contemporary Christianity in the UK and promoted greater educational, political and social engagement; • Changed approaches to diversity within the Society for the Study of Theology (SST) and extended opportunities for advanced theological education within the UK's Black Church. | | |
| <p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>A founding member of Black Theology in Britain, Beckford's research focusses on African and African Caribbean history, religion and culture, alongside the black Christian experience in Britain. Through theory and practice, his interdisciplinary research examines the intersections of faith, culture and social/political justice via writing, filmmaking, media and audio productions.</p> <p>In the chapter 'Maintenance to Mission: Resisting the Bewitchment of Colonial Christianity' (2013) [3.1], Beckford demonstrates the complicity of the Catholic and Protestant churches with British colonialization and identifies the continued impacts of missionary theology. Drawing from religious motifs from Traditional African Religion (TAR), he argues that it created Christian 'zombies', encouraged by a focus on Christianity as a mindless body experience. He asserts that this legacy of Empire and colonial Christianity did not end with the abolition of slavery but continues to impact on the Caribbean diaspora in Britain, and particularly on African Caribbean black Pentecostals. Beckford, again, drawing on tropes from TAR, characterises this as a 'bewitchment' that has resulted in a lack of academic engagement to the detriment of effective involvement by the black British Pentecostal Church in wider society. He argues for meaningful black Pentecostal political and social engagement and an increased commitment to theological education as a challenge to this 'bewitchment'.</p> <p>These arguments are expanded in the monograph <i>Documentary as Exorcism: Resisting the Bewitchment of Colonial Christianity</i> (2014) [3.2], which additionally articulates how Beckford encoded these themes in his documentary film canon. Here he draws on the African diaspora concept of 'conjure' where spiritual meaning is attributed to a cultural product, reintroducing the key role of the author in understanding the meaning of cultural products. Through an analysis of his twenty-three documentary films made primarily for Channel 4, Beckford articulates how religious meaning is encoded in his filmmaking, demonstrating how the films critique continued colonial influence and represent a challenge to resultant apoliticism and anti-intellectualism within the Pentecostal Church. He argues that the encoding constructs an alternative emancipatory framework for contemporary Pentecostalism, an act of 'exorcism' to the 'bewitchment' of 'colonial Christianity'. This exploration of the potential of documentary film to communicate complex theological ideas brings together 'theology as visual practice' and 'documentary as political</p> | | |

engagement', representing a new way of conceiving and making documentaries as theological practice.

The translation of this emancipatory framework into visual practice in the form of a documentary film is 'theology in action', a strand of Beckford's research that explores, inscribes and analyses theological ideas and concepts in the public domain through the arts. Examples of this are Beckford's BBC documentary films *The Seven Wonders of Brazil* (2014) and *The Battle for Christianity* (2016). *The Seven Wonders of Brazil* [3.3] looks at the contemporary identity of Brazil forged from a history of colonialization, slavery and immigration. Here visual culture is used to analyse the syncretism of religious tradition and beliefs that create Brazil's melded form of Christianity. This includes the influence of African beliefs (Candomblé), indigenous Indian rituals, Catholicism and Protestantism and the rapid development of Pentecostalism in the country. *The Battle for Christianity* [3.4] encodes themes of inclusion and social responsibility, utilising documentary film to examine the changing face of Christianity in the UK. A counter-narrative to a picture of declining congregations and increasing secularism, it highlights the diverse and committed forms of Christianity brought by immigration and the increasing popularity of inner-city churches. It additionally examines the tension between charismatic faith's attraction of huge congregations and the position often taken by popular churches on issues like gay marriage, abortion and euthanasia, and the role that Christian society plays in challenging poverty and inequality. This research informed Beckford's participation as Co-Investigator in the ESRC funded *Life on the Breadline: Christianity, Poverty and Politics in the 21st century* (2018-2021), analysing Christian engagement with urban poverty in the UK (led by Coventry University).

3. References to the research

3.1 Beckford, R. (2013) 'From Maintenance to Mission: resisting the bewitchment of colonial Christianity' in P. Thompson (ed) *Challenges of Black Pentecostal Leadership in the 21st Century*. London: SPCK. pp 32-51. ISBN 9780281070282 [Book Chapter] Available from CCCU on request.

3.2 Beckford, R. (2014) *Documentary as Exorcism: Resisting the Bewitchment of Colonial Christianity*. London: Bloomsbury. ISBN 9781847063922 [Authored Book]. First publicly available 18 December 2013. Available from CCCU on request. *Documentary as Exorcism* is reviewed here: Broyles, Michael (2015) "Documentary as Exorcism: Resisting the Bewitchment of Colonial Christianity," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 19: Iss. 1, Article 42. Available at <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1301&context=jrf>

3.3 Beckford, R. & BBC Religion (2014) *The Seven Wonders of Brazil* [Documentary Film]. First screened BBC 2 on 20 June 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkFbKZyL3Zc&t=154s> and available from CCCU on request.

3.4 Beckford, R. & BBC Religion (2016) *The Battle for Christianity* [Documentary Film]. First screened BBC 1 22 March 2016. Available from CCCU on request.

Associated grants:

Christopher James Shannahan (PI), Coventry University; Peter Manley Scott (Co-I), University of Manchester; Robert Beckford (Co-I); *Life on the Breadline: Christianity, Politics in the 21st Century*. ESRC. September 2018 – August 2021. £480,572. ES/R006555/1.

4. Details of the impact

Impact is underpinned by insights developed through an exploration of theology and culture ('theopraxis'); and 'colonial Christianity' and its relationship to apoliticism and anti-intellectualism. The latter encompasses the promotion of a more critical approach to theological education and greater political and social engagement within the Black Pentecostal Church. These insights have resulted in contributions to the BBC's religious programming; influenced debate and discourse in relation to contemporary Christianity, and approaches to theological education; and promoted increased political and social engagement.

Impact on media production, including co-production of TV and radio documentaries for the BBC's religious programming. Beckford's contributions to documentary films, radio productions and other religious content is to the benefit of programme makers, broadcasters and

audiences. Committed to the exploration of theological ideas in the public domain, he contributed to a wide range of the BBC's religious programming, including two documentary films, three radio documentaries, a 4-part radio play, as well as additional contributions to other BBC religious broadcasting (e.g. *Songs of Praise*, *Thought for the Day*, *Sunday* and *Beyond Belief*) [5.1]. Since 2014, Beckford has co-written and narrated two documentary films for the BBC, working in collaboration with the production team. BBC 2's *The Seven Wonders of Brazil* (2014) [3.3] was screened on the 20 June 2014 against coverage of the FIFA World Cup held in Brazil, attracting 1,500,000 viewers, and repeated on BBC Two on 9 July 2014 and 6 March 2015. It is now available from PBS, an American public broadcaster and television programme distributor, and can be rented on Prime Video, with a version available on YouTube having over 66,000 views [5.2]. It was recommended viewing in *What to Watch on TV Tonight* in *The Independent* (20 June 2014) [5.3]. Viewers' comments include 'If you have any interest in Brazil culture [...] you will love this documentary. I find it very informative and interesting, totally recommend'; 'Visually appealing and informative. It was an interesting way to learn about the culture, history and community of the Brazilian people.'; and 'I'm Brazilian, [...] I thought [it] wonderful. Congrats for explain[ing] our culture to the other countries' [5.4]. *The Battle for Christianity* (2016) [3.4] draws on Beckford's understanding of contemporary Pentecostalism [3.1] [3.2] and analyses the factors changing the nature of Christianity in Britain. Watched by 1,200,000 people, it was part of the BBC's Easter programming, shown on BBC1 on 22 March 2016 and repeated on BBC2 on 8 April 2016. The BBC's press release states 'this revealing film gets to the heart of what's changing within Christianity in the UK. [...] and provide evidence of a more committed, but potentially divided, future.' The programme was reviewed in *The Guardian* (see below) and audience responses include: 'Brilliant programme. Lots to think about'; 'fascinating and respectful documentary'; 'just simply insightful! So glad I stumbled on it tonight! Wow!'; and 'illuminating and encouraging'. [5.4]

Inscribing theological ideas through popular culture as 'Theology in Action', Beckford has contributed across the spectrum of the BBC's religious programming. Between 2015-2019 he made 20 contributions, including: Radio 4's *Thought for the Day* (approximately 7,000,000 listeners weekly - 2018); *Sunday*, Radio 4's weekly examination of current religious and ethical issues; and *Sunday Worship*. He presented Radio 4's *Beyond Belief* on 6 occasions, (900,000 listeners weekly – Dec 2017), on topics relating to religion and popular culture. [5.1]. In 2016 he twice presented *Songs of Praise*, including an episode exploring the impact of the first black churches on Christianity in the UK, and reflected on the Magi as a symbol of social inclusion for the BBC Radio 3's *The Essay*. In 2017 *Jesus Piece* (2017), a four-part drama for BBC Regions, was broadcast. This was developed from an original idea by Beckford [5.5] and examined social engagement and the Pentecostal Church. Documentaries written and presented for BBC World Service include *Jamaican Bible Remixed* (2017), *Doping, Diving and God* (2016), and *The Divinity of Haile Selassie* (2014). During the times of these broadcasts, BBC World Service had a weekly reach of between 1,300,000 and 1,500,000 in the UK and in 2016 its English service had a global weekly reach of 66,000,000.

Impact on discourse and debate in relation to contemporary Christianity in the UK. Beckford is one of the 'leading Black Theologians in Britain' (*Baptist Times*, 2015) and is influential in the Christian community. *The Battle for Christianity* [3.4] acted as a catalyst for debate around the changing nature of religion in the UK, against a backdrop of an increasingly secular society. In particular, it challenged the notion that Christianity is in decline in the UK and highlighted the tensions created by popular churches' often hard-line views on issues such as gay rights and abortion. A review in *The Guardian* (23 Mar 2016) reflected on these tensions: 'It was clear, however, that the real battle lies within, not without, the church; namely, how to navigate the tensions arising from the influx of Anglicans and Catholics from other countries over the past 10 years'. The documentary was the subject of a BBC blog (19 Mar 2016) and a comment piece in *The Independent* (18 Mar 2016) by the then Head of BBC Religion and Ethics, Aaqil Ahmed, who argued that rather than being in decline, Christianity in Britain was diversifying and growing, representing 'a changing in the guard rather than a revolution.' A further article by Media Editor Ian Burrell, *The Independent* (18 Mar 2016), highlighted the diversification of Christianity in the UK and outlined the inherent tensions. The documentary was also reviewed in *Christian Today* (21 Mar 2016) and *Evangelical Times* (May 2016). Beckford was interviewed on *Premier Christian*

Radio about the film and debated the implications of the changing face of Christianity in the UK (22 Mar 2016). In a piece for the Theos website about the future of the UK Church (24 Mar 2016), Elizabeth Oldfield, Director of Christian think tank Theos welcomed the programme's inclusion of 'positive stories, rarely heard' but concluded that 'it can't be said that we are (yet) seeing the UK church gloriously resurrected. [...] But, as many of our lived experience, and this programme hinted, the church might have an exciting future.' [5.6]

Beckford frequently contributes to events and debates in the Church and beyond, often speaking on 'colonial Christianity' and **promoting greater educational, political and social engagement**. Examples include: the Pentecostal Leaders' Forum of Churches Together, National Theological Conference (2018), where his contribution was described as 'controversial, insightful and extremely thought provoking'; the global Christian movement Justice Conference (2018); Youthscape's National Youth Ministry Weekend (2018); and the Quakers National Gathering on Diversity and Inclusion (2019). In 2015 the National Church Leaders Forum (which brings together leaders of the African and Caribbean church in the UK) launched *Black Church Political Mobilisation: A Manifesto for Action*. The stimulus for the manifesto came from a seminar organised by Churches Together in England in July 2012, at which Beckford was a key speaker [5.7]. As articulated in *Documentary as Exorcism* [3.2], here Beckford challenged Black-led churches to demand greater social justice and increased political engagement, citing 'colonial Christianity' as being a major barrier to political theology. The resulting manifesto was published to coincide with the 2015 General Election and those endorsing it included, then Secretary for State for Justice, Chris Grayling, and MPs Stephen Timms (Labour's Faith Envoy) and David Lammy [5.7].

Influencing the approach to diversity within the Society for the Study of Theology (SST) and creation of greater opportunities for advanced theological study within the Black Church. In 2014, Beckford led the establishment of a new BA in Theology at CCCU. With an emphasis on social justice, critical biblical studies and popular culture, the programme was based on the vision to engage African and African Caribbean students with academic Theology [3.1] [3.2]. Running until 2019 and based at Christ College Woolwich and then LSEC/Greenwich, it was completed by a total of 35 students from a range of backgrounds. In 2017 it won the CCCU University Teaching Excellence Award in recognition of 'the innovative and transformative nature of the programme and how it clearly links with widening participation.' [5.8] Beckford also acted as a research consultant to the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education (where he is now Professor of Black Theology) during their establishment of The Centre for Black Theology [5.8]. Launched in 2018, it was the first of its kind in the UK attracting 'a critical mass of black students primarily, but not exclusively, from black Pentecostal churches.' [5.8]

In 2014, Beckford presented a plenary paper to the primarily white membership of the Society for the Study of Theology (SST) Annual Conference, the leading British learned society for theologians. Beckford lamented the absence of a theological language to deal with the experience of 'colonial Christianity' [3.1] [3.2] within the Church in the UK and challenged the lack of diversity in SST's membership. After this challenge 'from Professor Robert Beckford in his plenary paper in April 2014, and Professor Anthony Reddie and other members of plenary panel on Race in April 2016' [5.9], the SST established a group on Theology and Race. This group reported in 2017, setting out recommendations to address the lack of diversity within the SST and address the 'marginalisation of BAME theologians in UK academia'. To date, actions taken based on these recommendations include: the establishment of a group of BAME theological leaders to advise SST's Executive Committee; the co-option of two BAME members to the Executive Committee; changes to the Society's annual conference programme, including the inclusion of a Theology and Popular culture stream (2018 and 2019), featuring a plenary panel on Beckford's *Documentary as Exorcism* in 2018 and a Black Theology stream in 2019; actions to make the annual conference more accessible and diverse; amendments to the way the SST describes its aims and purpose to be more explicit about who the society is for; a BAME bursary scheme; and efforts to learn about the theological concerns of black and minority ethnic Christians and spread awareness of the SST by attending events [5.9].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 Contributions to BBC TV and Radio Broadcasting.

5.2 *The Seven Wonders of Brazil* on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkFbKZyL3Zc>

5.3 *The Seven Wonders of Brazil* recommended in The Independent.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/what-watch-tv-tonight-doctor-who-seven-wonders-brazil-9552191.html>

5.4 Collated viewers' comments *The Seven Wonders of Brazil* and the *Battle for Christianity*.

5.5 Beckford's contribution to *Jesus Piece* credited here

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p056fncj> and PDF of BBC Press release for *Jesus Piece*.

5.6 Collated reviews and media for *The Battle for Christianity*.

5.7 Collated evidence related to the *Black Church Political Mobilization: A Manifesto for Action* (2015) and Beckford's contribution to 2012 seminar.

5.8 BA Theology at CCCU here <https://www.canterbury.ac.uk/arts-and-humanities/school-of-humanities/religion-philosophy-and-ethics/rpe-team-win-two-teaching-awards.aspx> and PDF of website evidencing Beckford's support for The Centre for Black Theology, Queen's Foundation and Queen's Foundation Press release.

5.9 Link to SST and Race referencing Beckford's influence and report of the SST Executive Committee Subgroup on Theology and Race and subsequent updates on progress.

<https://www.theologysociety.org.uk/initiatives/theology-and-race/>