

**“THIS IS WHAT CHURCH IS SUPPOSED TO LOOK LIKE”:  
THE MULTI-ETHNIC CHURCH, MEMORY,  
AND THE POST-BLACK<sup>2</sup>**

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***Abstract:** The paper examines Efrem Smith’s proposition of a post-Black church from a cultural perspective. His vision of a post-racial Christ-centered spiritual-cultural space is based on a concept of culture of thirding that seeks to overcome the culture war in America, raising the question of whether his post-Black argument is a post-racial balm or a reasserted pro-Black stand.*

***Keywords:** African American religion, post-Black theology, racialized society, reconciliation*

## **1. Introduction**

The movement that Efrem Smith, founding pastor of The Sanctuary Covenant Church, identifies in his *The Post-Black and Post-White Church* (2012), embarks on breaking the racial divide that characterizes American churches. Its aim is to establish congregations whose membership is multiethnic, multiracial, and multigenerational by reintroducing the Christian concept of reconciliation as a method and the concept of community as an intercultural and intergenerational entity.

Rooted in triumphalist anticipations stemming from the idea of a post-racial society under the Obama presidency, the post-Black and post-white church movement envisions congregations in this new era, in which the colour divide is completely overridden in a post-racial utopia. The terminology of the “posts”, however, suggests that the movement is not the result of a dream come true, but an attempt to recognize a post-racial community that consciously strives to position itself against the race discourse. Given the fact that Smith’s congregation described in the book has an African American lead pastor and its liturgy is heavily indebted to African American culture, the question arises whether the movement is strategically deployed to valorize African American culture and weaves a multiracial texture with an African American overtone, and the concerted polyphony reiterates post-Black as “new Black”.

The paper will primarily investigate how Smith’s cultural philosophy connects to African American religious memory in this context as well as try to map the layers of the meaning of post-Black in his work.

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## 2. Efrem Smith and the beloved community

Reconciliation theology within the Black Church is postulated by Smith (2011) as Post-Black Theology, which aims at the “redemption, liberation, and reconciliation of both the oppressed and the oppressor”. Much as his coinage of the parties involved indicates that grievances of the past are neither forgotten nor forgiven, making direct connections to Cone’s liberation theology palpable, he seeks to establish a “beloved community” (Smith 2012: 1), much in Martin Luther King Jr.’s footsteps. King (1997a: 459) talks about the advent of a “new age” in a 1956 speech, in which the “struggle for justice” must continue, as “social systems have a great last minute breathing power. And the guardians of a status-quo are always on hand with their oxygen tents to keep the old order alive” (idem: 460). The post-Black phenomenon that Smith detects in the civil rights movement is a stand against segregation, thus a fight for social equality, i.e., “ending legal racial segregation, hate, and inequality” (Smith 2012: 101), and less the manifesto of a multiethnic movement, as Smith contends. King’s concern is primarily social, and his view of society in the new age is defined by social equity and racial equality (see Edwards 2008: 140), but not by cultural juxtaposition, which allows little speculation about King’s stand on the cultural heterogeneity of churches Smith proposes. Nevertheless, King envisions a society without races in another speech, in the same year:

[. . .] We must prepare to go into this new age without bitterness. [. . .] We must conquer the hate of the old age and the love of the new age and go into the new age with the love that is understanding for all men, to have with it a forgiving attitude, it has with it something that will cause you to look deep down within every man and see within him something of Godliness. That something that will cause you to stand up before him and love him.

As we move in this transition from the old age into the new, we will have to rise up in protest. [. . .] It is merely a means to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor, but the end is reconciliation. The end is the creation of a beloved community.

The end is the creation of a society where men will live together as brothers. An end is not retaliation but redemption. That is the end we are trying to reach. That we would bring these creative forces together we would be able to live in this new age which is destined to come. The old order is dying and the new order is being born. (King 1997b: 344)

Reflecting the philosophy of an integrated society, in which “personal growth cannot take place apart from meaningful relationships with other persons, that the ‘I’ cannot attain fulfillment without the ‘Thou’” (Smith and Zepp 1974: 121), King conceptualizes the beloved community as one, where reconciliation leads to a new order of, primarily, social justice. “Agape” for King (1991: 19), however, also entails the vision of a community through inevitable reconciliation, since “it springs from the need of the other person” as a result of which “Agape is love seeking to preserve and create community, [as] agape means a recognition of the fact that all life is interrelated” (idem: 20). For Smith and Zepp (1974: 120), the transition to a beloved community entails that “Everyone will have to become color-blind”. Whether by “a sense of shame”, i.e., repentance, and forgiveness, King referred to a colour-blind society is not clear, just as it cannot be vouched for that “the liberation of Black people will also lead to the emancipation of White

people” (idem: 122), especially as the coinage suggests the entrenchment of the race binary. As Humphrey Jr. (2022) asserts, King’s beloved community “is not grounded in a color-blind ideology that deemphasizes difference and chooses comfort over tension, preferring rather to live in homogeneity than living and finding comfort and rhythm in diversity, uniqueness, and distinctiveness, and as a result, authenticity”. Ultimately, reconciliation represents “an openness to the uniqueness of the Other” (ibid.).

In this respect, Smith’s openness to difference does not represent colour-blind thirring, but one that denies race, while acknowledging ethnic differences as natural. As he (2010: 101) contends, “The racial construct of black and white is unbiblical. This categorizing and placing value on someone based on skin color is ungodly. The race structure cannot be justified as we move through and wrestle with Scripture. Culture, ethnicity, and nationality are biblical, but not race.” Colour for him represents diversity and multiplicity that is the reiteration of the biblical intention and the image of the whole missiological field demanding a holistic approach. It is not just the wider framework of racialised society that he criticizes, but the church, including the Black Church, which he sees stuck in the race binary: “The whole world outside of the church seemed to be in full color, but the church looked like the black-and-white television of the old days” (idem: 84). The haunting past culminates in a “walled-in experience” (idem: 80) and does not allow opening to a shared Christian experience, which in return reproduces entrenched prejudices - however depleted they may be.

In his *Jump: Into a Life of Further and Higher*, Smith (2010: 71) echoes King’s criticism of the American “race-based society”, refusing it through enlarging on his doctrine of the triad of beloved life, beloved church, and beloved world (idem: 27), but he goes further to emphasize that the struggle to establish the beloved community means more than a social movement. It represents a theological discourse of reconciliation that acknowledges the world “in full color”. Directly connecting to King’s vision, Smith insists on fighting against social ills - an attitude that emanates from the beloved identity. He conceptualizes the latter as a mature Christian identity (idem: 100): “As liberated, beloved beings, we become vehicles of compassion, mercy, justice, truth, and transformation in the world. This work leads to people coming to Christ, which is of utmost importance, but it also leads to Kingdom acts of justice, dealing head-on with poverty, racism, sexism, hunger, and the need for health care” (idem: 46). Smith places emphasis on the identity aspect, whose result is social engagement. The beloved identity, one that is rooted in a Christian identity, leads to colour blindness: “The beloved self is about identity. My entire self should be rooted in my identity in Christ. This was an important jump for me. My identity is not shaped by the majority culture; it’s shaped by God” (idem: 68). “Majority culture” must mean here the white American culture, perceived in the black experience as oppressive and segregationist, against which he seeks to deploy his colour-blind Christian discourse. Colour blindness evolves through Christian transformation, which entails the natural refusal of the idea of race and consequent Kingdom acts. Importantly, Smith does not consider this kind of transformation as an African American religious tradition, but puts it in a theological context, which he supports with the historical fact of the participation of “others with the white church and other faith communities” (idem: 69) in the civil rights movement, thereby verifying and foreseeing the necessity and the advent of multi-ethnic churches.

### 3. Culture war in the post-black era

Efrem Smith's post-Black, post-White church paradigm is imagined along very similar lines to the conceptualization of reconciliation by reconciliation theology. Based on the complementary binary of repentance and forgiveness, he imagines the beloved community based on the reconciliation between races in a third culture. He bases his argument on Soong-Chan Rah's (2009: 186) idea of the "triple consciousness" of "Third Culture Kids", i.e., second- and third-generation immigrants, and Dave Gibbons's (2009: 40) rather vague idea of a third culture of "adaptation, the both/and, not the either/or, mindset" with the ability "to look beyond categories and see relationships" (idem: 51). Apparently, adaptation does not mean the eradication of cultural differences; much rather, it denotes skills to use cultural particularities to foster a shared Christian understanding: "Third culture affirms one's ethnic identity. One's ethnicity is not ignored but celebrated! Third culture doesn't dull the color of one's culture. Third culture actually enhances a culture's uniqueness while at the same time celebrating the synergy of its fusion with other cultures. Third culture artfully flows in and out of multiple cultures like water" (idem: 39). Gibbons's pragmatic deployment of thirding as an intercultural communication skill leaves it blurred whether the term means a cultural adaptation through subsequent phases of cultural development, a relativizing cultural framework of juxtaposition of cultures, the creolization of cultures, or even the creation of a hybrid Christian, Christ-focused culture, in which ethnic identities are tokens of diversity, but less identity-salient.

Similarly, the way Smith employs the term "culture" does not render a clear concept of it. While he seems to embrace the idea of cultural thirding, he treats "culture" as a means of oppression and segregation. As he (2010: 80) claims, "There are walls that divide us by class, race, and culture", which has led to a "warped view" (idem: 121) of oneself and others. Connecting culture to identity in this way becomes a disturbing plight, as he regards true values as Christ-centered, indicating his self-positioning, but also revealing his unawareness of his own cultural embeddedness:

To see culture as the enemy is not the right approach, but neither is a full embracing of the culture. Some parts of the church have embraced the culture around them to the point that they have lost touch with enduring values, which are essential to advancing the beloved world. We must be careful about an embracing of the culture that causes us to question or totally move away from the authority and centrality of Scripture. The biblical approach to culture is not about painting it as the enemy or fully embracing it. The biblical approach is to engage culture for Kingdom purposes. (Smith 2010: 123)

Smith positions himself in the in-between - critiquing the traditional approach of the Black Church as one professing to identity conservatism and, in this way, as one cause of the segregation of the church, and, at the same time, establishing himself within it. He seeks to evade any possible attack by confessing that "Now please hear me, I have much respect for the black church" (idem: 78), subsequently listing the many accomplishments of the Black Church as a kind of homage to it. While, simultaneously and consequently, he identifies culture as the cause of alienation from scriptural truths and demands, his approach to culture is pragmatically tuned, as he sees culture as a toolkit to advance his Christ-centered

goals and to facilitate reconciliation, “seeking oneness across ethnicity and race” (idem: 124). His understanding reaffirms Gibbons’s in that he seeks to deconstruct the self-face and promote the mutual-face, prioritizing the common and intersecting, while diminishing the diverging and antagonizing cultural elements. As Gibbons (2009: 40) insists, “[third culture] doesn’t eradicate color or lines but embraces and affirms who we are, regardless of differences in ethnicity, culture, or mindset”. Maintaining the basic categories, oneness emphasizes akinness in diversity and not its dissolution. Smith addresses multiethnicity in the church primarily as the cultural encounter of different groups and gives little attention to bi-/multi-racial individuals, despite the fact that he considers himself as one: “not only am I ethnically African American but I’m also Irish and Cherokee Indian. I am a multiethnic human being!” (Smith 2010: 87). While the emphasis on group differences may even verify the entrenched divergence in America, the approach misses the opportunity to exploit his embodied experience to strengthen the idea of oneness/akinness in diversity (see, for example, Melendez 2020).

It is this point that reveals his pro-Black cultural embeddedness and orientation. It seems that in Smith’s texts, the celebration of ethnic identities is overdetermined into the direction of black culture, with reconciliation exclusively imagined in the race binary. “Black” is understood in radical negation of “white”, i.e., a monolith of universal (American) whiteness. With “a picture of an upper-middle-class White male” (Smith 2012: 31) as the sole representative of white in mind, Smith relies on the same tactics of auto-stereotypical mechanism that he criticizes when kept waiting once, along with black friends of his, by white police: “Both are college educated, work in the corporate world, own their own homes, and are married with children” (idem: 73). Echoing Rah’s (2009) understanding of American culture, the enunciation of supposedly white values which are amended by claims equating “Western”, “White”, and individualist unreflectively, even when discussing “the materialistic and consumeristic worldview of American culture” (Smith 2012: 34) shows his continued preoccupation with race, while revealing a similarly uncritical stance toward “Black”, which is conceptualized mainly in terms of opposition to “white”, with little reference to inner stratification of the black community along the lines of gender, class, or geography (much as he is critical of the traditional, class-infused features of the Black Church).

Smith’s objective is not to provide an intersectional analysis of cross-cultural relationships, yet his argument, based on a simple binary, presents limits for his otherwise much-needed project and is tossed into the danger of “essentialist anti-essentialism”. While for Nikolas Kompridis (2006: 320) the term serves to critique the unreflective normativization of the hybridization of cultures, for Smith it reflects an approach that apparently essentializes the black experience while rejecting the perceived white essentialism. As in the case of essentialist anti-essentialism, which is “incapable of understanding and explaining cultural continuity” (ibid.), Smith’s (2012: 2) “kingdom culture”, as a hybrid culture of thirding, threatens to erase cultural differences through pro-black cultural normativity - equivalent with the “homogeneous church” (idem: 17) as he labels white churches. Hybridizing into diversity becomes instead cultural homogeneity falling back on a simple binary: homogeneity of culture is deployed in contrast to its anti-thesis and thus works against diversity, the initial goal of Smith’s theorizing.

One example that shows how Smith imagines using culture as a toolkit in an essentialist anti-essentialist way is his advocacy for a hip-hop theology. In his *The*

*Hip-Hop Church* (2005) coauthored with Phil Jackson, he connects post-Black theology to the postmodern in that he emphasizes the lived experiences of oppressed and marginalized people, relativizing socially accepted truths. What the authors propose is that urban (youth) communities can be described in opposition to the “socially privileged” groups of whites (2005: 105), as well as that they are detached from their own cultural groups, as they fail to respond to their needs due to classism and identity conservatism. As they (idem: 110) suggest, “Today we could very well be in a postblack church culture, as many in the African American urban community look to other places besides the black church for a sense of spiritual truth”. While chastising the African American church for change in this way, they, at the same time, represent urban youth communities as culturally homogenous groups as a result of the unifying effect of hip-hop cutting through ethnic and racial barriers: “African-American urban music has a universal sound that has brought people of many cultures and ethnicities together in America” (Smith 2012: xvi). In other words, the postmodern, post-Black paradigm is conceived in opposition to what it defines itself against and not in terms of inclusion or interrelation, so ultimately, he reproduces the foci of black liberation theology, quite contrary to the concept of thirding or third culture, as reconciliation. Much in line with the foci of liberation and restoration in black liberation theology, “post-Black” means here the reinstatement of resistance, in the way bell hooks (1989: 26) proposes “new strategies of resistance”, which, as Cornel West (2007: 2016) remarks regarding black culture, represents “radical contingency and even solicits challenge and danger”. Smith thus appears to reiterate Daniel White Hodge’s (2017: 2) argument that hip-hop has proved a narrative of a “postmodern and post-soul resistance for decades to come. Hip Hop was, and still is, a way to construct thought, question authority, and express anger, frustration, hate, revolutionary” - hardly the way to reconciliation on a large scale and outside certain communities.

Smith’s anti-essentialism promotes a cultural understanding that does not break away from its own black embeddedness. Always already conceived from within the African American culture, the framework of his third culture understanding proves a reification of black cultural values, reflecting an inherent pro-Black stand. Much as the envisioned cultural thirding seeks to implement a multicultural/multiethnic space, it is based on Black cultural normativity. Despite the inclusivity of his cultural philosophy, it is still defined by reproducing oppositionality, on the one hand, against (white) mainstream America and, on the other, previously valid conceptualizations of Blackness - both constituents of his identificatory mechanism. Oppositionality can be seen as reinstating the idea of resistance - a postmodern trait itself but, in African American cultural terms, the reconceptualization of black cultural energies, with expanded scope in a new age.

#### **4. Conclusion**

If the cultural and spiritual creolization that thirding refers to in Smith’s post-Black post-white movement represents a new coherent cultural framework, then it is yet to be demarcated as a conglomerate, even if “both identical and non-identical with itself” (Kompridis 2006: 390), despite its postmodern refusal of cultural fixities through resistance. As Jane Anna Gordon (2014: 169) defines, the process is the “combination of closure and openness, of sedimentation and fluidity, and of particular forms of identification gaining coherence through their

recontextualization”. The sedimentation delineates a cultural space, which, in Smith’s case, is recontextualized as a post-racial Christ-centered spiritual-cultural space. Seeking to override the ossified social categories of racialized America and the rigidity of the Black Church, his cultural philosophy is overdetermined by “today’s urban-influenced youth culture” (Smith 2004: 89) deployed against “male, suburban and white” ministries (ibid.), which ultimately equals white, class-informed, and racist, and keeps him entrapped in the racial binary. Smith’s ideological position is revealed through his universal definition of white churches as upper-middle class and male in orientation, oblivious of other, though white, but not middle-class or non-urban churches that do not fit his scheme.

The drawbacks do not undercut the important and fruitful mission work Smith has been doing, especially as he has continued his work in a self-reflexive way, regarding the heterogeneity of experiences of individuals in different social groups (see Smith 2017: 12), the acknowledgment of “a need for ethnic-specific or homogeneous congregations” (idem: 106), or the particular needs stemming from local experience and localized knowledge. As he confesses in *Killing Us Softly* (2017: 107), “We need churches to build bridges of reconciliation, ensuring that although we function as individual, local congregations, we do not lose sight of our participation in the larger church of God in the world - and that our individual congregations receive the blessing and empowerment that come from being the beloved children of God”.

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