



R Drew Smith, William Ackah, Anthony G Reddie, and Rothney S Tshaka (Eds)
Contesting post-racialism: Conflicted churches in the United States and South Africa

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From 2011 to 2012 the University of South Africa's Department of Philosophy, Practical and Systematic Theology and the University of London, Birkbeck College's Department of Geography, Environment, and Development studies partnered in co-hosting a project called the *Transatlantic Roundtable on Religion and Race* (TRRR). Two conferences were held: the first at Unisa, Pretoria in 2011, followed by one in 2012 at Birkbeck College, London. The essays presented during these roundtable events are now published as *Contesting post-racialism*, a collection bearing the subtitle, *Conflicted churches in the United States and South-Africa*.

According to the William Ackah, co-editor and author of one of two concluding essays, "three landmark struggles for freedom can be said to define the main contours of black identity in the twentieth century: the struggle to end apartheid in South-Africa, the battle for civil rights in the United States, and the fight to end European colonialism in Africa" (p 229). *Contesting post-racialism* takes the first two of these landmark struggles as its primary points of reference, but directs its gaze to the more recent past, to "post-movement contexts within the two countries" i.e. after 1994 in South Africa; and after 1968 in the United States (p 8). The contributors are in agreement about the "persistence of racially-conditioned social landscapes within their respective American and South African contexts" and share a particular concern for how Christian institutions have responded – or failed to respond adequately – to this lamentable reality (p 8).

As Drew Smith's introduction suggests, a featured question of the volume is "whether acknowledgments of race in the situations under examination

are sufficiently far-reaching, well-aimed, and critically examined to overcome the more distorted, injurious and manipulative ways race has often functioned” (p 8). The individual contributions display the freedom of movement one would expect from conference proceedings and yet an unmistakable thrust resides in all of the essays: an emphatic contestation of any attempt to foreclose the discussion on race while “the legacy of hundreds of years of race-based social policies and structures” continue to shape and colour present-day black realities (p 4).

The ways in which ideologies of post-racialism are contested vary even as the scope of some contributions overlap. While some contributors offer alternative historical accounts to challenge and problematize “official” post-racial narratives (Allan Boesak, Walter Fluker) others analyse case-studies to illustrate how race remains an indispensable category for understanding supposedly post-racial realities (Luci Vaden, Reggie Nel, Chabo Pilusa, AnneMarie Mingo, Ebony and Leah Fitchue). Many contributions augment historical and contextual arguments by demonstrating how race-consciousness remains a necessary tool for social, theological and rhetorical analysis (Cobus van Wyngaard, Rothney Tshaka, Anthony Reddie) while others draw on black (liberation) theology as a resource for inspiring social solidarity, activism and renewed ecclesial identity (Forrest Harris Sr, Boitumelo Senokoane, Vuyani Vellem, Nico Koopman, William Ackah).

While not all the essays deliver on the promise of such a volume, the book certainly succeeds in contesting the notion that a post-racial society has arrived in either of the two countries. Recent developments in South Africa and the United States have not only confirmed the contested nature of post-racialism, but even thrust the issue of race into the public arena in ways that the authors themselves could not have foreseen in 2012. The review-copy of *Contesting post-racialism* arrived on my desk at the same time as the Institute for Reconciliation and Justice’s 2015 edition of the *SA Reconciliation Barometer* (RB, available at www.ijr.org.za). Placing their findings (which confirm that South Africa “remains afflicted by its historical divisions”) within context, the compilers of the document recognise an important shift in the body politic as ...

“... the localised struggles of marginalised South Africans finally spilled over from impoverished townships onto the campuses of tertiary education institutions ... In addition to their concerns related directly to tertiary education, another parallel metanarrative emerged ... which challenged the fundamentals upon which the entire post-1994 political transition were premised. ‘We were sold out by Mandela’ has become a common refrain within these movements. These events brought about a marked shift in both the tone and content of our national discourse. It has become more urgent and uncompromising and, importantly, less patient with anything or anyone appearing to stand in the way of more radical forms of social transformation” (RB, p 2).

What responses to this emerging discourse may we expect from churches in South Africa? Churches that – as the authors of *Contesting post-racialism* point out – are themselves already implicated and conflicted in ways that often remain unrecognized and unacknowledged. To anyone willing to grapple honestly and seriously with these issues, *Contesting Post-Racialism* will be a useful resource.