

Article: “Upon This Rock: The Black Church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement”

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Upon This Rock: The Black Church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement

Churches have traditionally been viewed as places of stability and strength in the African-American community. From slavery through the long racially segregated history of the United States, when African Americans were prevented from building institutions of their own and precluded from participating in the institutions of mainstream America, churches developed and contained civil society for them. In church, one could find politics, arts, music, education, economic development, social services, civic associations, leadership opportunities, and business enterprises. One could also find a rich spiritual tradition of survival and liberation. Whether their leaders repudiated the “curse of Ham,” embraced the revolutionary religious vision of Nat Turner, or preached the more reserved doctrine that “Jesus will fix it after a while,” black churches have always accepted securing and guaranteeing the

freedom of black people as one of their central missions.

During the 1800s, when blacks were struggling to

establish their own denominations and their own places in which to worship, they were rebelling against subordinating themselves to the principal institutions of oppression and racism in the country—white churches. Indeed, as Wilmore contended, the movement to establish independent black churches was, in every sense, the first black freedom movement (1983, 78). Thus, though black religion shares elements of evangelical faith and practice, “the black church itself is a precipitate of its own culture, developed from and in response to its own experience” (Lincoln 1999, xxi). Because, to some extent, all black churches share a common history, the term “black church” is often used by historians to discuss all predominantly black Christian congrega-

tions. The fact that thousands of disparate groupings can be referenced with meaning as a single unit is a testament to the important role churches play in the African-American community and the degree to which black churches and their congregations have been separate and distinct from both mainstream religious organizations and white society.

Black churches have been aggregated into the singular institution called “the black church” to the extent that they are united by their cultural, historic, social, and spiritual missions of fighting the ravages of racism by “buoy[ing] up the hopes of its members in the face of adversity and giv[ing] them a sense of community”—regardless of denominational distinction, geographic location, or class composition (Myrdal [1944] 1962, 946). Although some denominational and congregational distinctions can be drawn, most black churches share a very similar religious culture. Similar scriptural analogies, messages, songs, prayers, symbols, rituals, oratorical styles, and themes of equality and freedom—even the “sanctuary red” carpeting of many of the facilities—are familiar from church context to church context. Although black churches operate with a high degree of independence, people going from service location to service location would feel little cultural disconnect. The many different congregations of the black church collectively have had the feel of the same organization.

Given the connection between the black church and the civil rights strivings of African-American people, the role the church played during the Civil Rights Movement and its relationship to nonviolent social change has been a subject of particular interest. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s was a social revolution. It culminated in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which substantially ended the codification of racism in the United States.

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March on Washington. Over 250,000 gather in Washington in August, 1963 urging support for pending civil rights legislation. Reprinted by permission of D.C. Public Library.

Although some have cautioned that the role the black church played in the movement has been exaggerated (Frazier 1964; Marx 1967, 105), most authoritative accounts emphasize the centrality and importance of African-American churches and African-American religious culture to the movement's success (McAdam 1985; Morris 1984). Indeed, there is a rich literature

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that documents the organizational support that many black churches provided to the Civil Rights Movement.

Still, while much of the research has highlighted the importance of the organizational resources that black churches contributed to the Civil Rights Movement, less attention has been given to how the message of nonviolence was constructed by black church leaders to support collective action or why that message resonated so strongly among followers. What was it about the nature and practice of black Christianity, institutionalized in churches, that facilitated nonviolent politics at both the institutional and individual levels? In this article I address these questions by reviewing the ways that churches were involved in the Civil Rights Movement and looking at how the culture of the black church helped leaders to frame the meaning of the nonviolent message and encouraged churchgoers to respond to it positively. Although most studies of the political effects of religion do not focus on the influence of religious culture, culture is important to political mobilization (Harris 1999; Legee, Lieske, and Wald 1991). Although the study of the relevance of culture to politics has been advanced by the meaningful work of scholars like Almond and Verba (1963, 1989), the manner in which culture—particularly the subcultures of minority groups—affects political action is not well understood. In the case of the Civil Rights Movement, the receptivity of African-American religious culture to the message of nonviolence is what really linked the black church to the movement. Reexamining these relationships may help to identify the contemporary opportunities for and constraints to political mobilization through black churches as well as lead to a more general appreciation of the importance and relevance of religious culture in social and political movements.

Churches as Organizational Resources

That black churches helped bring organization to the Civil Rights Movement has been well documented thanks to the embracing of resource mobilization theory by students of social movements. Before the explication of resource mobilization theory, much of the social movement literature asserted that movements resulted

from psychological tension caused by disruptive structural or systemic strains. Until at least the mid-1970s, social movements were generally understood to be efforts to relieve these tensions, not to realize explicitly political goals (see Geschwender 1971; Lang and Lang 1961; Smelser 1962; Turner and Killian 1957).

Resource mobilization theory asserts that discontent is basically constant. What really matters to organizers of a movement is “the amount of social resources available to unorganized but aggrieved groups, making it possible to launch an organized demand for change” (Jenkins and Perrow 1977, 250). Armed with this understanding, later analysts of the Civil Rights Movement focused first on the resources that groups external to the black community brought to the struggle and then on the resources that internal organizations could mobilize (McAdam 1985; Morris 1984; Oberschall 1973). Approached from this perspective, mobilization can be understood as the “process by which a group secures collective control over the resources needed for action. The major issues therefore are the resources controlled by the group prior to mobilization efforts, and the processes by which the group pools resources and direct these toward social change” (Jenkins 1983, 532-33). “In the absence of resources,” McAdam explained, “the aggrieved population is likely to lack the capacity to act even when granted the opportunity to do so” (1985, 43). As the most resource-rich institution in the African-American community and the one most closely associated with civil society, the church had much to contribute. The resource mobilization literature notes that the black church could offer social communication networks, facilities, audience, leadership, and money to the movement.

Black churches did support the movement with these things. An examination of the national movement or of any city-specific desegregation effort provides ample evidence of this. At the national level, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference served as the “decentralized political arm of the black church” (Morris 1984, 91). The SCLC’s mandate was to coordinate nonviolent direct action activities through churches in various locations and its initial leadership was made up of ministers who led many of the largest nonviolent actions in Montgomery, Tallahassee, New Orleans, Atlanta, Baton Rouge, Birmingham, and Nashville. Emphasizing the minimal differentiation between black churches and civil rights organizations, Wilmore recalled that it used to be a truism in many communities that “the NAACP is the black church on its knees” (1983, 142).

Black churches also worked with student-dominated groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) to organize demonstrations like the 1960 Nashville sit-ins which produced very accomplished mass-movement organizers who would go on to become leaders of those organizations. The Nashville sit-ins

drew heavily on the resources of black churches. As John Lewis recalls, "The First Baptist Church . . . became a rallying point, it became the meeting place, it became the place where students, young people, community leaders, could come and discuss, debate and argue about what the city should become" (quoted in Morris 1984, 175).

The First Baptist Church, its pastor, Kelly Miller Smith, and the Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC), of which Smith was president, were all integrally involved in the 1960 sit-in movement. Morris (1981) explained that more than a year before the sit-ins, NCLC Project Committee Chair Rev. James Lawson began holding workshops on nonviolent direct action at churches throughout the city. Through the churches and ministers affiliated with the NCLC, students were equipped and trained for nonviolent action, and the black community was organized to support the students once the sit-ins began. In fact, the NCLC leaders organized mass meetings at the churches during which they raised money for bail, enlisted lawyers to represent the students, and promoted the economic boycott that was designed to reinforce the students' demands that lunch counters be desegregated. In Nashville, as they did throughout the South (and as resource mobilization theory might predict) churches provided the organizational resources needed by participants in the movement.

The Message of Nonviolence

Mobilization, however, requires more than resources. The presence of social movement organizations with resources and the existence of grievances are necessary but insufficient conditions for giving rise to social movements. The major critique of the resource mobilization explanation for the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement has been that its proponents ". . . ignore or gloss over mobilizing beliefs and ideas, in large part because of their presumed ubiquity and constancy, which makes them, in turn, relatively nonproblematic and uninteresting factors in the movement equation" (Snow and Benford 1992, 135). Critics of the resource mobilization model have stressed that the significance attached to grievances as well as the actions proposed to address them are socially constructed. Therefore, much of the work done by a social movement organization involves, literally, making meanings and communicating the appropriate mobilizing messages to its constituents.

The ideas underlying nonviolent action, particularly the notion of the "Beloved Community," have often been given little attention. This is probably because most researchers have taken the relationships among nonviolent direct action, black Christianity, and the black church as a given. To be sure, organizations like the SCLC worked hard in churches to make political



Exercising a constitutional right. Calhoun-Brown notes that "the March on Washington was not an act of civil disobedience but an exercise of constitutional rights." Reprinted by permission of D.C. Public Library.

activism an expression of practical Christianity, but the fact that many ministries refused to become involved in supporting nonviolent protests for the cause of civil rights demonstrates that the translation of black Christianity through black churches into a nonviolent political movement was by no means automatic. Even Martin Luther King Jr. was critical of the involvement of his fellow clergy members in movement politics. He charged them with being both apathetic and otherworldly (1958, 35). In assessing the Birmingham civil rights campaign, Wyatt Walker estimated that as many as 90% of black ministers shunned the activity of the SCLC there (cited in Fairclough 1981, 183).

Today, nonviolent resistance is frequently characterized as an obvious and rational political strategy for the powerless. According to this logic, blacks advocated nonviolently for social change because they lacked the power to win

concessions by force. The church became instrumental in this change primarily because it was the dominant institution in the black community. Of course, blacks, like most people, were not naturally inclined toward nonviolent action. Civil rights activist Hosea Williams poignantly expressed this sentiment by stating, "Nonviolence as a way of life was just as foreign to blacks as flying a space capsule would be to a roach" (quoted in Morris 1984, 158). As E. Franklin Frazier commented concerning the Civil Rights Movement, the ideas of Gandhi had "nothing in common with the social heritage of the Negro" (quoted in Kapur 1992, 156).

Moreover, the church was not uniformly supportive of nonviolent activism. Joseph Jackson, the head of the largest black denomination, the National Baptist Convention, rejected the social gospel. In 1961, Martin Luther King Jr. and a group of ministers from the National Baptist Convention formed the Progressive Baptist Convention in response to the lack of support for social action among the National Baptists (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, 36). The fact that Jackson continued as the leader of the National Baptist Convention for another 22 years after this incident is, in part, a testament to the diversity of opinion that existed among the ministers of the black church regarding the appropriate role for the church in securing social change. This, of course, does not diminish the important functions that many black churches, even National Baptist churches, performed during the Civil Rights Movement. However, it does serve as a reminder that the movement did not rise from the church and that, in many instances,

the resources and ministers of the church had to be actively recruited into the movement.

Mobilizing For Nonviolence

When considering issues of political mobilization for the cause of civil rights, particular attention must be paid to how the message and meaning of nonviolence were constructed by the black church to support individual and collective action. The black church was able to mobilize people for nonviolent action because church membership provided individuals a frame for receiving the message and meaning of nonviolence. A "frame" is an interpretive schemata or way of understanding the world (Snow et al. 1986). Tarrow (1992) has explained that collective action frames work best when they are connected to the cultural meaning and symbols of a movement's audience. Religious culture is one of the most powerful systems of ritual and symbolic meaning in the black community and actively engaging in the activities of the church was very important to the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement.

Black religious culture provided such a strong collective action frame because the black church had been a "free space" in the black community for centuries. As a free space, the church offered an "environment in which people [were] able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills and values of cooperation and civic virtue" (Evans and Boyte 1986, 17). This was particularly vital in a thoroughly racist society that tried to deny to blacks all of these things. It was the church, and not simply black Christianity, that helped to shape these attitudes. Although internal religiosity can certainly have independent effects, attitudes and understandings about religious matters are significantly affected by the church to which one belongs. Whether otherworldly or this-worldly, the black church communicated the revolutionary message of equality before God. Its songs, prayers, rituals, and doctrines all reinforced this simple truth.

Morris (1992) explained that the development of this kind of "oppositional consciousness" is an important component in political mobilization. Many of the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement attempted to draw upon this religiously based oppositional consciousness by referencing biblical stories that reflected God's willingness to work for the benefit of the oppressed. Citing a quote from Andrew Young, Frederick Harris demonstrates how Martin Luther King Jr. was adept at raising this type consciousness among listeners.

Nobody could have ever argued segregation and integration and gotten people to do anything about that. But when Martin would talk about leaving the slavery of Egypt and wandering into the promised land; somehow that made sense to folks. And they may not have understood it; it was

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nobody else's political theory, but it was their grassroots ideology. It was their faith; it was the thing that they had been nurtured on. And when they heard the language they responded . . . I think it was the cultural milieu, when people were really united with the real meaning of that cultural heritage, and when they saw in their faith also a liberation struggle that they could identify with, then you kind of had 'em boxed. They all wanted to be religious. And when you finally helped them see that religion meant involvement in action, you kinda had 'em hooked then. (1999, 139-40)

Nonetheless, the fact that the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement could tap into an oppositional consciousness when framing their message of nonviolence does not explain why the message resonated so strongly. Though the black church historically operated as an affirming free space, it had not always embraced sociopolitical movements—even those most ostensibly tied to the church's liberational mission. Indeed, scholars have often characterized the black church in the first half of the twentieth century as “deradicalized” and withdrawn from political and social involvement in their communities (see, e.g., Wilmore 1983, chap. 6).

Harris' model of how religious culture acts as a resource for political mobilization helps to describe why the church served so well as a conduit for the ideas of nonviolent social activism. According to Harris, African-American churches “provide African Americans with material resources and oppositional dispositions to challenge their marginality,” and at the same time help members “to develop positive orientations toward the civic order” (1999, 40). Harris called this dualistic orientation an oppositional civic culture. “An oppositional civic culture develops attitudes and behaviors that simultaneously support civil society and oppose a system of domination within that society” (67). Viewed from this perspective, the black church can be seen to have engendered in members an oppositional consciousness that predisposed them to challenging society, and concurrently, served to reinforce their attachment and loyalty to the societal regime. Paris observed that black churches have always stressed to their members a healthy respect for the rule of law. He contended that “the loyalty of the black churches to the nation's laws and customs has often limited [blacks] in the kinds of action that they could advocate” (1985, 30) and has prevented them from engaging in forms of sociopolitical action that might in any way compromise a respect for the law or for the political values of American society.

Most nonviolent protests during the Civil Rights Movement were entirely within the bounds of the law. Boycotts, meetings, parades, and mass demonstrations

are all perfectly legal. For example, the March on Washington, even though it involved hundreds of thousands of people, was not an act of civil disobedience but an exercise of constitutional rights. These types of nonviolent protests allowed a person to advocate for social change without violating the norms of the dualistic oppositional civic culture they had absorbed through the church. The act of protest was consistent with an oppositional consciousness, but, because the protest was carried out within the bounds of the law, it did not require disloyalty to the regime. Even in cases where acts of civil disobedience did occur, they did not compromise respect for the law. Civil disobedience was usually undertaken to show that local laws were unjust and opposed to the Constitution. As Martin Luther King Jr. explained

One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for the law. (Quoted in Colaiaco 1988, 86)

Thus, one of the primary reasons that calls for nonviolent social action resonated so strongly in African-American churches was because it related consistently to the oppositional civic culture that the church cultivated. Through nonviolent protest and demonstration, people could simultaneously challenge systematic injustice

and racism and still embrace the principles of the liberal society. Both of these aspirations were valued objectives of the church. The Civil Rights Movement allowed individuals to accomplish both at the same time.

Understanding that black churches fostered development of an oppositional civic culture is also useful for understanding different levels of engagement by individual churches during the movement. If the church is viewed as only inculcating oppositional consciousness then it would be reasonable to expect all black congregations to

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have been heavily involved in movement politics. If the church is viewed only as a conservative institution that promotes loyalty to the social order, then it would be reasonable to expect all churches to have been alienated from movements directed at social change. In

reality, individual black churches occupied every position on the continuum of involvement with the Civil Rights Movement. Though virtually all black churches shared elements of an oppositional culture and a civic culture, the exact balance of these that any individual congregation reflected varied from church to church. Congregational-specific characteristics such as socioeconomic background, educational achievement, age composition, ministerial disposition, and theological orientation were undoubtedly important determinants of the balance.

Culture can significantly influence not only mobilization and the types of activities for which groups are likely to mobilize. In the case of African Americans, the dualistic nature of oppositional civic culture helped to effectively frame what nonviolent social action meant and facilitated participation in it. In studies of the

relationship between religion and politics, attention is most often paid to the resources that churches contribute to political action or how religion influences voting behavior, political attitudes, and political motivations. Only rarely has culture been considered an important independent component. Religious culture, however, and particularly the religious culture of minorities in society, may reveal much about the nature and practice of the politics of these groups. Considering culture also emphasizes that the relationship between religion and politics is multifaceted and more complex than is often appreciated. The black church contributed resources to the Civil Rights Movement and also provided a context in which the movement could be embraced and understood. Much of this was contingent on the nature of black religious culture, and it was this culture that affected the operation of nonviolent social actions.

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