

# What Role did Christian Teachings Play in the American Civil Rights Movement?

Written by Juleus Ghunta

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JULEUS GHUNTA, NOV 1 2018

During the grueling years of civil rights protests, Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. and his allies often turned to their Christian faith for sustenance (Booker 2014). This fact is frequently raised by admirers and critics alike. While Christianity played a crucial role in movement's pro-integration campaigns, contemporary discourses are often uncritical of Christian teachings that led to what King called 'spiritual moribundity' (Ferguson-Smith 2015), as well as pro-segregation activism (Evans 2006:147), anti-black violence and the ostracism of non-theistic partners. This essay puts forward a critical analysis of the role of Christian teachings (CT) in the civil rights movement.

Section I provides an analysis of the essay question. It argues that 'Christian teachings' is a nebulous concept that does not denote a unitary worldview, and therefore, must be analysed within distinct socio-political, cultural and economic contexts. The analysis of the main variable (i.e. CT) in the question is needed because it sets the stage for more nuanced and balanced analyses. Section II provides a general overview of the role of Christian teachings in the civil rights movement (CRM), concluding that such teachings, while important, proved insufficient. Section III examines the role of CT from the perspective of the progressive black church. Section IV does a similar examination from the viewpoint of predominantly white evangelicals (white church) who were described as the movement's "fiercest critics" (Evans 2006). Section V briefly summarises the key points.

### Christian Teachings and the Politics of Christianity

#### *Interrogation of the Essay Question*

Three decades after the Harlem Renaissance (HR) and first Great Migration of blacks to the north (Steward 2003:2010), America was once again engulfed in a debate about blacks' civil rights. Several HR intellectuals became prominent leaders of 1950s civil rights campaigns. These leaders drew largely from what Cornel West (Hedges 2013) calls the 'black prophetic tradition'. Their commitment to faith enabled them to marshal effective resistance to Jim Crow (Ferguson-Smith 2015) and secure advances in key areas where the HR failed. Ironically, this commitment to faith also gave credence to potent anti-civil rights detractors, especially white *and* black evangelicals (Scheller 2018).

In discussing the role of Christian teachings in the CRM, one must examine the teachings that propelled the movement, as well as those teachings that held it back (Booker 2014:215). Christian teachings are sometimes instructive (e.g. love your enemies—Matt. 5:38). Others encapsulate the worldviews (e.g. 'only personal regeneration can end America's race problems') that govern varying factions of Christendom, as well as life outside the church. During the CRM, the black church's (progressives) and white church's (evangelicals) understanding of Christian doctrine was undergirded by their political postures. As such, Christian doctrine in the white church (WC) was used to concretise their socio-political hegemony. Calhoun-Brown (2000:169) describes the civil rights era WC as "the principal institution of oppression and racism in the country." In many ways, the evolution of the black church (BC) was in direct response to the WCs' domination.

I use the phrases black church and white church guardedly. Calhoun-Brown (2000:167) notes that "many (black)

# What Role did Christian Teachings Play in the American Civil Rights Movement?

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ministries refused to become involved (in the CRM)...the translation of black Christianity into a nonviolent political movement was by no means automatic." This assertion is shared by Fairclough (1958:35), who notes that as many as "90% of black ministers shunned the activities of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference" in Birmingham. Equally, arguments in support of Jim Crow Laws did not receive the support of all white churches. Jim Crow was sanctified mainly by southern (white) evangelical theologies (Harvey 2016:4). Early progressive Christians' (black church and white Protestants) interpretations of scripture were not only different from evangelicals', they were also subversive in the ways they challenged status quo.

This shows that American Christianity has never been monolithic (Harrington 2007, Marsh 1997). Booker (2014:218) discusses Marsh's (1997) observations regarding how varying interpretations of "Christian theologies pervade...stances towards civil rights" and led to the perpetuation of "social injustices". Some black activists, including Fannie Lou Hamer, rejected scriptural edicts (e.g. 'the meek will inherit the earth') that suggested that they accept their lowly place in America (Hamer 1964).

Denominations choose to accentuate some teachings and de-emphasise others. Divergences in exegeses lead to varied commitments. Christian teachings, therefore, should not be viewed as a unitary concept but rather as a complex mix of conflicting injunctions and expectations, which should not be divorced from the culture in which they evolved. This culture, as well as being religious, is also economic and socio-political. To accurately examine the role Christian teachings played in the CRM, one must, therefore, *also* examine the 'politics of Christianity' at that time.

In examining the politics of Christianity in America, I'll be able to more accurately highlight how similarities and differences in radical and mainstream Christian teachings led to the promotion and repudiation of civil rights (Harrington 2007:4). Some of these teachings around issues such as homosexuality and atheism resulted in the ostracism of some of the era's most compelling voices (Thrasher 2013). Given the diversity and elasticity of the Christian Faith, the notion of Christian teachings becomes nebulous against the backdrop of hermeneutical differences that characterise the wide spectrum of American Christianity (Ross et al 2012:3616).

## Historical Background: Civil Rights Movement—Much More than a Religious Crusade

The civil rights movement took place in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. It was a movement for "political reform" which led to significant changes in the "working of basic institutions in American public life" (Harvey 2016:3). Harvey (2016) and Booker (2014: 220) argue that the movement would not have succeeded without the "spiritual empowerment" of the black church. Fred Shuttlesworth, one of the movement's 'big three', referred to the CRM as a "religious crusade" (Chappell 2004). According to Chappell (2004), BC civil rights activists felt that evangelism was "crucial for all revivals", that spreading the movement's social gospel was no different from proselytising for the Kingdom of God (King 1963). And all new converts, regardless of their race or religious propensities, were considered 'brothers', because they had joined 'God's struggle'. These activists saw God as the author of "the social change" that would free them from the clutches of white supremacy (Harvey 2016:4). This religious imagery created a powerful 'new religion' which inspired political long-suffering and a strong sense of destiny. Harvey (2016:5) notes that no other force "could have kept the masses going through years of state sponsored terrorism."

However, Christian teachings proved insufficient. Leaders of the new religion sought counsel from others in instances where there was a marginal grasp of political organising and the workings of America's legislature (Harvey 2016:4). In addition to "black church traditions" and "soul force", (Harvey 2016:1, Jelks 2004:828) the movement's leaders also sought inspiration from Thoreauvianism, Gandhian notions of civil disobedience, and black Protestantism in South Africa (Mwambazambi 2010). Several southern clergymen, who would later become crucial figures in the movement, went to India in the 1930s to study Gandhi's Satyagraha (Harvey 2016:1). These clergymen included Howard Thurman, James Lawson, and Glenn Smiley, a white Texas veteran of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. They appropriated Gandhi's teachings and reshaped them to fit into the new religion in the same way mainstream Christian tenets were reshaped in the interest of BC activism. Like mainstream American Christianity, Gandhi pro-race advocacy in South Africa was decidedly anti-black (Harvey 2016:5, Biswas 2015). Nonetheless, as MLK Jr. noted, "while Christ gave the civil rights movement its goals, Gandhi taught it what tactics to use" (Harvey 2016:5).

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It is true that Lawson and Thurman's interest in nonviolent resistance was not new. According to Harvey (2016:8), what was different this time was that "the ideas of nonviolent civil disobedience...had to make their way from the confines of radical and pacifists thought into African American (religious) culture." The hybrid pacifism that emerged also "drew heavily from the (nonviolence) philosophy of Quaker pacifist, Richard Gregg", whose seminal work, *The Power of Nonviolence* (Kosek 2005:1318), provided scriptural guidance for the new religion. It was Lawson who persuaded an initially reluctant MLK Jr. to join the movement (Harvey 2016:6).

Lawson and Thurman's advocacy for nonviolent spiritual resistance awakened the latent CR struggle. After WWII ended, groups such as the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) began to adopt this new coherent narrative. But, as Harvey (2016:1) notes, "only a minority of churches and clergymen were involved in the movement." Some remained reticent out of fear while others actively denounced campaigners.

## Role of the Black Church (Progressives) in the CRM

In his 'letter from Birmingham jail', King wrote of his Christian duty "to carry the gospel of freedom" across America (King 1963:78). He compared civil rights protestors' acts of civil disobedience to the resistance of biblical dissidents, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. His faith was "a daily source of courage and strength", not only for him but also for others who worked towards the "fulfillment of the beloved community" (King 2003). This faith was protestors' main source of hope during the grueling years of struggle. What sustained them though was not orthodox faith. Long before African Americans were allowed to participate in mainstream American culture, black churches "contained civil society for them", as well as a "rich spiritual tradition of survival and liberation" (Calhoun-Brown 2000:169).

During the CRM, southern black church activists such as Birmingham's Fred Shuttlesworth and Mississippi's Fannie Lou Hamer "mixed the language of evangelism with the tenets of American (black) civil religion" (Harvey 2016:8). The Bible, they argued, "is full of freedom struggles". A critical element of these freedom struggles was the black church "ritual of mass meetings (and) sacred singing" (Harvey (2016:9, Schnable 2012). This singing was grounded in the tradition of 19<sup>th</sup> century negro spiritualism, a tradition that "inspired new visions of freedom" (2016:9). Throughout the CR era, this custom engendered in local people a spirit of sacrificial resistance which was only possible within the context of black prophetic revivalism. Christian lyrics were "converted...into versions of civil rights manifestos...which were (propelled) with enthusiastic...bodily movement...and foot stomping" (Harvey 2016:9). While in the south, activists from the north who went "with considerable scepticism toward organised religion", learned that the movement barely existed outside of the context "of black southern Christianity" (2016:9). Such activists struggled to mobilise the masses with nonreligious rhetoric. Black churches' certainty of God's 'position' in the struggle was indispensable. Christian ministers understood the importance of creating what Mansbridge and Morris (2001) refer to as oppositional consciousness. They reshaped and retold biblical allegories in ways that were relevant to the counter-hegemonic goals of CR campaigns. The religious orientations of their oppositional consciousness enabled protesters to simultaneously uphold and challenge American values (Calhoun-Brown 2000:173).

The context of black southern Christianity had to be widened to incorporate the 'new' politics of protest. For instance, at the Nashville sit-ins in 1960—which were dominated by student activists from SNCC and CORE—the First Baptist Church (FBC) was transformed into a multifunctional meeting hall (Calhoun-Brown 2000:171). Leader of FBC, Kelly M. Smith, was also leader of the Christian Leadership Council (CLC), which raised funds for legal aid and bail for victims of sit-ins, "and promoted the economic boycott that was designated to reinforce the students' demand that lunch counters be desegregated" (Calhoun-Brown 2000:171).

Despite the inevitable engagement with secular political values and worldly goals, organisations like CLC remained rooted in Christian philosophy. Their "founding statements", for instance, were often influenced by common Christian ideals of love over hate, faith over doubt and the oppressed love for the oppressor (Harvey (2016:10). The manifestation of these ideals led to the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Bill. The bill "substantially ended the codification of racism in America" (Calhoun-Brown 2000:167). This success resulted largely from the work of the National Council of Churches, whose leaders "engineered effective grassroots activism (and) produced an impressive volume of letters to members of congress" (Harvey 2016: 11).

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In contemporary discourses, there is usually little mention of how the black church's commitment to Christian activism influenced other minorities who were fighting for civil rights (Simón 2016). The Catholic labour organiser, Cesar E. Chavez, for instance, credited black Christian activists for inspiring much "of the philosophy and strategy of (his) farm workers' movement" (Chavez 1978). Chavez employed Christian-centric nonviolent tactics (e.g. fasting, prayer vigils, masses') in his struggle for better working conditions for "Mexican migrant labourers" (Harvey 2016:13), claiming that they could only win through "fasting and prayer". Like King, Chavez "religion casera" (homespun religion) was challenged by the Catholic establishment who ignored persistent calls for "the appointment of Latino Catholic priest" and the need to "identify with the poor" (Harvey 2016:13).

## Role of the White Church (white and black conservatives/evangelicals) in the CRM

In 1955, L. Nelson Bell, editor of *Southern Presbyterian*, laid out evangelicals' and 'God's position' on civil rights in an unflinching denunciation of integration. "It is un-Christian, unrealistic and utterly foolish", Bell writes, "to force those barriers of race which have been established by God and which when destroyed by man are to his own loss" (quoted in Blackwelder 1997). In 1957, the journal "adopted voluntary segregation as its official policy" (1997:335), it subsequently became a major critic of pro-integration evangelical leaders and enjoyed widespread backing from congregants. Following the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling, *Christian Life*, another leading evangelical journal, vowed to become "a (stronger) forum for resistance to desegregation". It urged principled believers to fight for "reversal". In the 1960s, *Christian Life* propagated the view that civil disobedience was "in conflict with God's Law" (Blackwelder 1997:336). These views were shared by Carl Henry, editor (1956-'68) of *Christian Today*. Henry urged readers to desist from giving assistance to anyone who was not evangelical or was not in the process of converting. He reserved his harshest criticisms for those who "agitated on behalf of black rights" (Evans 2009:256). Unlike renowned evangelical and CIA director J. Edgar Hoover—who was ubiquitous in *Christian Today's* pages—MLK, Jr. was not mentioned before 1964.

Hall (cited in Taylor 2016) notes that "white evangelicals were...invested in their efforts to either uphold Jim Crow or try to slow its dismantling", a position that was buttressed by their theology. This theology purported "that the unsaved often exhibited a more robust concern for justice than the saved" (Evans 2009:247), that true faith is evinced in one's complete commitment to the otherworldly Kingdom of God. As a political force, evangelicals opposed all civil rights legislation which advanced the black cause. Such activism fell within "their conceptions of sin" which were based on the view that Christians should focus on "personal regeneration...instead of the social and systemic change advocated by" King and others (Evans 2009:249). They believed that the preaching of *social gospel* undermined Christians' duty to proselytise (Evans 2009:247). They did not see any contradiction with holding this view and the manner in which they pushed for political influence. Evangelicals' interest in political autonomy superseded their commitment in evangelism. In this way, anti-black racism and discrimination, which were difficult to justify biblically, were easily justified legislatively. When they felt that "their conceptions of the proper social order" was under threat, "they invoked a spiritual solution or personal conversion to social problems" (Evans 2009:250).

Prominent evangelical, Billy Graham, was a leading proponent of personal conversion or regeneration. Graham, who advised several presidents on race, viewed the push for civil rights as a "threat to (evangelicals') understanding of religion" (Evans 2009:250). His Christian worldview included the belief that "religion was the panacea for America's social ills" (Evans 2009:253). He held this position against the backdrop of glaring divisions within the pews of his own church. Graham's church was deeply segregated; a profound contradiction to his teaching that after conversion the Holy Spirit would transform racists' hearts. The states in which Graham's Christian teachings flourished were the most segregated states in America (Chappell 2004).

Despite Graham's conservatism, he was ahead of many of his white evangelical contemporaries in his support of desegregation. Many evangelical sects, including the Church of God and Assemblies of God, remained unmoved by activists' pleas for change (Chappell 2004:6). In 1957, Graham invited King to pray at a crusade in New York. His decision was met with derision from congregants who accused him of contravening scripture. Graham sought to assuage their rage. In 1958, despite King's objection, Graham invited Price Daniel, Governor of Texas and eminent segregationist, to a major crusade in San Antonio. Graham later declared that King's dream would "never be realised until the return of Christ" (New York Times 1963, Stephens 2016:561). He urged moderation and branded

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integrationists as extremists.

Despite the controversy caused by his liaison with King, Graham was seen as indispensable. This was not the case for less powerful evangelical leaders, many of whom were sacked for “embracing aspects of the struggle” (Dupont cited in Taylor 2016). This is one of the reasons why many ministers within the ‘national black church’ movement held deeply conservative views. Some felt “repressed by economic coercion and threats of violence” (Harvey 2016:7). One such minister, Joseph Jackson, then leader of the National Black Convention (NBC), charged that “direct action” was “anti-American”. He “did not attend the August 1963 *March on Washington* and encouraged others to do the same.” Booker (2014:216) argues that Jackson’s stance propped up government institutions.

Jackson’s rejection of the *social gospel* led to MLK, Jr.’s secession from the NBC in 1961 (Calhoun–Brown 2000:172). MLK, Jr. and his supporters formed the Progressive National Baptist Convention later that year—“a denomination more avowedly tied to civil rights” (Harvey 2016:7). Calhoun–Brown notes that “the fact that Jackson (remained leader of the NBC) for another 22 years (reflects) the diversity of opinion that existed...regarding the appropriate role for the church in securing social change.” According to Calhoun–Brown (2000:172), this should serve as a reminder that the movement did not rise from the church”, only a small fraction of Christians joined.

MLK, Jr. was among the critics of (black) fundamentalist Christian teachings that admonished believers to focus on the New Kingdom. King derided Christians who concocted “a self-fabricated space in which freedom (was) absolute”, branding such believers as “spiritually moribund”, “apathetic and otherworldly” (Ferguson–Smith 2015)—even though they had strong exegetical grounds for their indifference. Their belief that the ‘poor will inherit the earth’ (Bible Gateway 2018) resulted in their deference to the status quo. Many student activists who migrated to the south to lead marches and sit-ins felt that Christian teachings “often...hindered rather than motivated a southern revolution” (Harvey 2016:7, Harrington 2007:4). For many of the movement’s foot soldiers, the belief that God was the author of their resistance prevented them from applying the kind of pressure which was needed to effectively challenge the “structurally built-in inequalities in American society” (Harvey 2016:7).

Additionally, the dominance of the movement’s conservative Christian teachings overshadowed and marginalised the “secular...political black left” (Harvey 2016:7), including homosexuals and humanist allies. Some of the movement’s most compelling voices (including Bayard Rustin, A. Phillip Randolph, and Richard Wright) were too progressive, even for the progressive black church. Baldwin (1962) was one such victim. Perhaps the era’s most eloquent voice, Baldwin was barred from speaking at the *March on Washington* because the church did not condone his homosexuality (Pfeffer 1998, Winston 2012). According to Thrasher (2013), Rustin, who was gay and chief organiser of the *March*, was frequently threatened by members of the black church, leading to his resignation from the SCLC and the fracturing of his relationship with King.

In the mid-1960s, a group of evangelical intellectuals began to challenge the white church’s opposition to integration. These “young evangelicals” (including Jim Wallis, Robert Linder, and Frank Baker) were “prolific writers and frequent speakers” (Evans 2009:250) who argued that the “gospel should produce a racially inclusive church” (Lucas in Taylor 2016). In 1973, they formed the Presbyterian Church of America which worked towards integration, but, according to Lucas (2016), their “own theological beliefs... (were) trumped far too often by other deeper-seated commitments to race, class and region.”

## Conclusion

The precise role of Christian teachings in the American civil rights movement has been a matter of great contention. For some scholars (Chappell 2004, Harvey 2016), the claim that the movement was a Christian crusade is an irrefutable fact. Some proponents of this position see Christian teachings as a definable, unitary concept. Critics contend that this view does not take into account the disparities in Christians’ worldviews or the politics of Christianity (Morris 1984). This ‘politics’ refers to the ways in which certain socio-political and economic traditions and interests informed varying theologies, which inspired support for *and* denunciation of blacks’ civil rights. Critics make a distinction between progressives (black church) and conservatives/evangelicals (white church) whose diametrical beliefs and positions were undergirded by scripture (Blackwelder 1997, Evans 2009). In some instances, the

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Christian teachings that were used to justify pro-integration activism were *also* used to rationalise segregation and ostracise nontheistic allies. In terms of the application of these teachings, it is important to note that only a small number of Christians participated in the civil rights movement (Calhoun-Brown 2000). For those who did, while Christian teachings largely informed their struggle, such teachings proved insufficient as tactics for political organising and advocacy (Harvey 2016).

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## What Role did Christian Teachings Play in the American Civil Rights Movement?

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