

Critical Issues in American Religious History

Second Revised Edition

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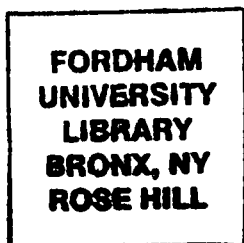
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Chapter 15

RELIGION AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

Issue: How did religion in America contribute to the rise of the civil rights movement?



The previous chapter examines several critical issues that reveal American religion in tension. The period from World War II to Vietnam, often characterized as a time of cultural consensus, in fact was rife with considerable unrest and conflict. No area of American life reflected this more clearly than the civil rights movement, spawned partly by World War II discriminatory treatment of African Americans, and by President Truman's bold move on behalf of civil rights in 1948, when he issued an executive order barring segregation in the armed forces. In 1954 the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision put Americans on alert that change was in the wind. A centuries-old tension over matters of race was ripe for confrontation, and American religion was at its core.

Social change often comes with "glacial slowness," and civil rights change was no different. "The collision between the hopes raised by the 1954 *Brown* decision and the indignities of persistent discrimination and segregation sparked a new phase in the civil-rights movement." In their efforts to do away with the long-enduring hardships of Jim Crowism, African Americans, and particularly black religious leaders, established new organizations and implemented new tactics. No religious black leader did more to spark resistance to American racial duplicity than Martin Luther King, Jr., who as a twenty-seven-year-old minister in 1955 expressed the anger of Montgomery, Alabama, blacks as they initiated their year-long bus boycott. "There comes a time when people get tired, tired of being segregated and humiliated, tired of being kicked about by the brutal feet of oppression," King declared.

In King the bus boycott gave the nation an African American leader who never retreated from the inherent tension and conflict of the new movement for racial justice. His role as an organizer of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957 eventually led to his incarceration in

a Birmingham jail in 1963. The letter he wrote there to a group of antagonistic white clergy combined the spirit of evangelical Christianity with a non-violent resistance strategy. In his letter he emphasized the tension produced by direct action. "Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. . . . I have earnestly worked and preached against violent tension, but there is a type of constructive tension that is necessary for growth."

During the remainder of the decade the struggle for equality produced much tension—tension between blacks and whites, blacks and blacks, and whites and whites—and much of it in the name of religion. A spate of national and civil rights legislation in mid-decade emerged while America's streets hemorrhaged with looting, burnings, and killings. Easy answers were not forthcoming when bewildered citizens of both races asked why such mayhem was happening just when African Americans were starting to achieve some of their goals. For some blacks and whites—and religious persons among them—the pace of change was too rapid; for others it was not rapid enough. This truth is revealed in the documents and essays that follow. What was the role of religion in the civil rights movement? Why were religious Americans of both races on both sides of this tension? Which of the four dimensions of religious tension are revealed in the civil rights movement?

DOCUMENTS

Over a period of a decade and a half from the mid-1950s to the end of the 1960s numerous positions on the civil rights movement were staked out. Pitched battles were fought between blacks and whites and between members of each race. And clergy on both sides were deeply involved in the conflagration. In the first document, Ernest Q. Campbell and Thomas F. Pettigrew of Harvard University report on their study of the role of Little Rock's ministers in the showdown over the forced integration of the city's public schools in 1957, and reflect on the broader role of Southern clergy on matters of race in the South. For a century the African Americans' demand for equal justice had infuriated the Ku Klux Klan. During the decade following the *Brown* decision (1954) the quasi-religious organization increased its activity of intimidation and destruction. In the summer of 1964, soon after the bodies of three slain civil rights workers were found, the Klan in Mississippi issued a statement giving its side of the murders. The second selection is its account of the event. During the civil rights movement African American churches helped spawn a movement culture reflected in freedom songs, many of which were adapted from spirituals and black gospel hymns. The words of "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize" in the third document combine biblical allusions

10. We believe that intermarriage or race mixing should be prohibited.
We want the religion of Islam taught without hindrance or suppression.

These are some of the things that we, the Muslims, want for our people in North America.

§135 White Protestantism and The Negro (1965)

DAVID REIMERS

Source: *White Protestantism and the Negro* by David M. Reimers.
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In the article in the *Christian Century* in 1931, William E. B. DuBois declared, "The church, as a whole, insists on a divine mission and guidance and the indisputable possession of truth. Is there anything in the record of the church in America in regard to the Negro to prove this? There is not. If the treatment of the Negro by the Christian Church is called 'divine,' this is an attack on the conception of God more blasphemous than any which the church has always been so ready and eager to punish." DuBois's stricture had been made before, and it has certainly been made since. Some of the abolitionists had assailed the white churches as bulwarks of slavery, and in the early 1960's numerous church conferences produced speakers who attacked the churches for their race relations practices.

The critics of white Protestantism's treatment of the Negro had much evidence to support their strictures. But Protestantism's treatment of the Negro was no better and no worse than that of American society as a whole. Fundamental to an understanding of the race problem in Protestantism is the fact that the churches are social institutions that are shaped by the culture in which they exist. There were experiments in American history that attempted to build a holy society, but often these experiments were sharply modified by the very environment and people they sought to mold. This was especially true after the end of the colonial era.

Church members, whether in the pre-twentieth century days, when they represented only a minority of the community, or in the twentieth century, were also members of a variety of social groups and were pressured and influenced by many social forces. Hence, the attitudes and practices of white Protestant churches regarding the Negro were those of white America generally. . . .

In attacking segregation, Protestantism was in the mainstream of American life. It was no accident that the call for a "non-segregated church and a non-

segregated society" came at about the same time as the threatened Negro march on Washington, Myrdal's *American Dilemma*, and President Truman's Commission on Civil Rights.

With the new goal, pronouncements covering almost every aspect of the race problem came from church conferences and religious leaders. But it is doubtful if many of the laity and even some of the leadership were fully aware of their denomination's position on the race problem. Thus the problem lay in implementation. Protestant churches are voluntary associations, and their social pronouncements are binding upon no individual or congregation. Rather, they serve as guideposts for social behavior.

By the early 1960's the white churches had made some progress in implementing their desire for truly interracial churches. Negroes were occupying leadership positions they had never filled before, church administration and church-related institutions were being desegregated, and even local congregations were becoming racially inclusive. At best, however, practice fell considerably short of preaching. Much of the desegregation within the churches stopped short of full integration. Southern seminaries, for example, admitted Negro students but did not hire Negro deans and faculty. Negroes became bishops, but their work was generally confined to Negro churches. Local white congregations admitted Negroes to membership but did not allow them to serve in the pulpits or in other leadership positions. Full integration, in which all phases of church life were open to all without regard to race and in which Negroes served in nonracial capacities, was far from being achieved by 1965. In 1959 Liston Pope of the Yale Divinity School wrote of Protestantism.

Its record indicated clearly, however, that the church is the most segregated major institution in American society. It has lagged behind the Supreme Court as the conscience of the nation on questions of race, and it has fallen far behind trade unions, factories, schools, department stores, athletic gatherings, and most other areas of human association as far as the achievement of integration in its own life is concerned.

Whether or not Pope's comment was entirely fair, the fact is that Protestantism had not been in the vanguard of integration. . . .

If the white churches on the whole were slow in climbing to the high plateau established by their own social pronouncements, many individual Protestants over the years were ahead of institutionalized religion. Some were in the antislavery movement or active during Reconstruction. Some protested against the churches' own segregationist and discriminatory practices. Some worked in associations such as the women's missionary groups or the National Council of Churches' Department of Race Relations. The distinction between the social institution and the individuals and groups within it is

an important one, for these individuals and groups acted as the moral voice of the churches when the churches themselves practiced segregation and discrimination.

The individuals who fought slavery, segregation, and discrimination were often torn between conflicting loyalties. On the one hand, their Christian consciences drove them to seek justice, which at times meant denouncing the church for its racial practices. On the other hand, their roots and loyalties lay with the church, which for all its imperfections was still the carrier of the word of God. Some of these people were forced out of the church or left it voluntarily, as was the case with Will Alexander. Others remained within the church and formed such groups as the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity to correct the faults of the church and to reconcile Negroes and whites.

Another contribution of the white churches to the development of a truly democratic society was made inadvertently. After the Civil War, they talked of evangelism and Christian education to uplift the American Negro. Although the educational programs of northern missionaries smacked of paternalism and Booker T. Washington's philosophy, they also propagated the Christian gospel. The churches and their schools talked long and loud of Christianity, and many Negro ministers absorbed these teachings. In the 1950's these Negro clergymen made themselves heard. Whether Ralph Abernathy or Martin Luther King, Jr., in the South, or James H. Robinson in the North, these Negro churchmen began to lead their people in demanding the fulfillment of the democratic and Christian ideals that white churches had taught them. It may well be that these Negro churchmen will yet teach the white Protestant churches the full meaning of the gospel of the brotherhood of man they espouse.

§136 Martin Luther King Explains Nonviolent Resistance (1967)

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

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During my freshman days in 1944 at Atlanta's Morehouse College I read Henry David Thoreau's essay *On Civil Disobedience* for the first time. Here, in this courageous New Englander's refusal to pay his taxes and his choice of jail rather than support a war that would spread slavery's territory into Mexico, I made my first contact with the theory of nonviolent resistance.