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Social Strat–South

Steadfast Faith in the Transforming South

Since their arrival on the North American continent, religion has played an integral role in the lives of African Americans. During the days of slavery and sharecropping, many aspects of religion gave an escape or outlet for slaves. As the nation moved into the time of the Civil Rights Movement, the church took on a political role, as it was the central meeting place for African Americans in many southern cities. From that time onward the Black Church has focused itself on community organization in a way that the white church cannot conceptualize. It has developed into the central meeting place and home for civic and political participation, as well as for religious affirmation.

Throughout history, the Black Church has been a central unifying force in black communities. While the physical make-up has changed substantially, there has never been any doubt that it is a force here to stay. This paper will explore the changing structure of the Church and the simultaneous changes this has caused within the black community.

During the time period of slavery, blacks were permitted, and sometimes required, to attend church with their masters. Most often, slaves were relegated to the back of the sanctuary (Barr, 369). The placement of blacks in this location shows that masters had them there with purely selfish intentions. Sermons generally consisted of some version of the righteous being meek and humble, waiting for their reward in heaven. This message used religion as an ‘opiate’ and conveniently delivered undertones of forced submission (Harris, 43). White preachers were famous for delivering such messages as a

means of assistance to their white, slaveholding congregations (Barr, 368). In this way, the white members of the congregation brought their slaves in order that they would hear messages of oppression, not that they would hear something that to help them grow spiritually. Slave owners, knowing the importance of religion in the lives of their slaves, thought its use would decrease the likelihood of rebellion or any similar outpouring of animosity.

Even though preachers fed blacks messages of meekness, whites were concerned about the possibility of insurrection. Therefore, they felt the need to do everything in their power to prolong their reign over the lives of blacks. With the end of slavery, former slave owners wanted blacks to remain part of white churches, with the continued poor intentions of how this would facilitate non-action on the part of blacks. If whites remained in control of the messages delivered to blacks, the chances that blacks would rise up was dramatically reduced, at least from the perspective of these whites. While some blacks did remain in white congregations, new black-led congregations began cropping up left and right. Those slave congregations that existed before emancipation grew significantly during this time (Barr, 369).

As things evolved, entire new denominations formed for preachers to garner total control over the workings of the church. The majority of churches developed from preexisting slave congregations belonging to the Baptist or Methodist Episcopal denominations (Barr, 379). For many years these congregations remained small, because of financial limitations. In order to find somewhere to conduct services, church communities could not grow into large gatherings (Barr, 371). Instead, many small churches formed. This construction allowed congregations to become like tight-knit

families, making it easier to fulfill goals of unification within the black community. Since this was a time when blacks were not permitted to take part in many aspects of conventional society, congregations became their own societies. Unlike in mainstream white churches, black churches contained many different aspects of civil society, including, “politics, arts, music, education, economic development, social services, civic associations, leadership opportunities, and business enterprises” (Calhoun-Brown, 169). Such all-encompassing involvement allowed blacks to create their own societies under the larger umbrella of the church, an institution that was already so important in their lives and hearts. While the most crucial goal of the Church was to bring all the people they could into the fold of religious life, certain side missions of the church were accomplished simultaneously.

Most blacks who joined these churches had few resources of their own to use in creating lives for themselves, the least of these being education (Barr, 376). One of the first goals of the black church was to provide education for church members and their children, in order that they would have an increased chance of positive community involvement (Barr, 377). Churches became the central meeting place in the community, holding bake sales, picnics, and all sorts of community activities. This constructive presence gave church members a greater range of ways to engage in community activity, and in a way that allowed the black community to grow together. All this unification came to be essential in the movement of the years to follow.

The development of these churches also saw the inclusion of a different kind of religious interpretation. Instead of focusing on passages that served to limit the action of people, the black church developed a rich liberation theology. This message is the one

slave owners spent so much time trying to prevent their slaves from hearing. The idea of liberation denotes a freedom from bondage and the constraints of someone else's hand. It was this message that gave many the drive to continue onward during the harsh conditions of slavery (Harris, 45). Indeed, this same idea continued to be a motivator throughout the African American struggle for rights, as was displayed through the teachings of many of this time, including Martin Luther King, Jr.

Religion, being an essential component to how blacks, especially in this time period, identified themselves as group, provided a perfect home for unification and movement building: 'Exposure to the liberation message often preached in black churches is thought to foster black pride and politicized group consciousness' (Wilcox, 272). Since they had not been permitted to engage actively in white churches, at the time that predominantly black denominations were forming, members were searching for freedom. Sick and tired of being told that their reward would come in heaven, seeds were planted in the minds of African Americans that something about their current life situation was not right. Now coming upon the mid-1900s, many had come to realize that this spirit of cultural survival needed to be put to work. The formation of black churches back in the 1800s had been the first 'freedom movement'. Now it was time for something more substantial (Calhoun-Brown, 169).

According to Wilcox's study on religiosity of African Americans, religion is essential to the way that they define themselves (Wilcox, 283). Inherent in this line of thought would be the following idea that this means African Americans are increasingly likely to be members of churches. This idea, coupled with the historical perspective that saw the Black Church become essential to the community from the start, meant that the

church would provide the most likely and most logical home for the Civil Rights Movement.

Any account or study of the Civil Rights Movement is compelled to show the essential role that the church played in its development and success. However, a common misconception is that the movement developed directly out of the church. While the church did fulfill a central role, it was not the place where the movement was born. Because of the distinctly political motives behind the actions of activists, many church leaders were wary of immediate involvement (Calhoun-Brown, 172). However, it became readily apparent that participation would be necessary for the movement's success. This decision came mainly as a result of the prominence of the black church within the minority community. Since the church was the building block of society and the place where people gathered both to worship and to connect as a community, the church had too many resources not to get involved. Even though many ministers had to be actively recruited to the cause, their ultimate decision to join gave the movement its ability to permeate communities and strive onward toward achieving its goals (Calhoun-Brown, 172).

Sociologists have developed many different theories about why the Civil Rights Movement progressed as it did, trying to explain the church's involvement. One of the most convincing was advanced primarily by Aldon Morris and Doug McAdam. Morris criticized collective behavior theorists for their dependence on spontaneity as a means for accomplishing group goals. Instead, he helped develop the Resource Mobilization Theory. This theory takes collective action and roots it in existing organizations (Killian, 770). In collective action, a group has more available resources than an individual, and in

resource mobilization, an organization has more resources than the group. Moreover, the organization provides a means to efficiently use those resources. Organizations have networks and connections that others do not, and such networks are important for the success of grassroots movements (Killian, 771). Those individuals involved in such movements often do so to gain rights, and therefore do not have a full host of available wherewithal at their disposal.

Much of Morris' analysis comes from the Sit-ins of the 1960s. His examination led him to the conclusion that those sit-ins would have been impossible, were it not for the intense planning behind them. Communication was essential to them happening at all, no less to their eventual triumph (Killian, 771). While they gave off the impression that they were spontaneous, happening all over the south within a period of a few weeks of each other, "the pre-existing internal organizations perfected strategy and directed action" (Killian, 771). For the entire Civil Rights Movement, this internal organization was the Black Church.

McAdams added to Morris' ideas about resource mobilization through his concept of cognitive liberation. He attached a Marxist sort of perspective in contending that participants in any movement chose to be such because they have become aware of their deprived or constrained status and are called to action to invoke change (Killian, 771). Both authors manage to come to similar final conclusions: "they are rational actors working intentionally to achieve their ends, and their collective action is rooted in the pre-existing organizational structure of the minority community" (Killian, 771). As previously established, the central organization of the black community is the church, reinforcing its importance in the development of this movement.

Resources are inconsequential if there is not a means by which to organize their efficient use. The church, with its access to networking and higher levels of power, gave an organizational head to motivated actors. However the church was important, even before there were droves of people ready to take part in the movement. From the beginning of the black churches, many preachers regularly gave sermons about the need for civil rights, education, and the ability to exercise rights of equality (Barr, 377). With the ministers able to disseminate such messages, the church found itself in a position of power within the call for action. Many churches struggled to find the balance between championing freedom and equality and become political actors. Once they navigated this territory, they became the “dominant institution in the black community” (Calhoun-Brown, 172). As such, they worked with larger institutions like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to give necessary information to entire communities (Calhoun-Brown, 170).

Activists attained comfort in the religious-political arena of the Civil Rights debate through a rooting of the arguments in religious undertones. This goal came primarily through one mechanism: nonviolence. Nonviolence became the only means by which goals could be accomplished simply because the black community lacked the ability to achieve the ends they desired if they were to act by force (Calhoun-Brown, 172). The eventual success of the nonviolence agenda was due, in large part, to how it was framed within the church. Even though nonviolence may not have been the most natural reaction for people who have spent hundreds of years being exploited, beaten, and looked down upon, the church itself had served as a means for African Americans to give meaning to their lives beyond their historical oppression (Calhoun-Brown, 172). This

new found meaning allowed black Christians to embrace nonviolence as the most logical and effective means to achieve their end.

In order for the movement to develop the rhetoric of nonviolence, they needed many well-spoken preachers who actively believed in the cause. One such man was Martin Luther King. While he did not initially support the cause because of its political nature, he eventually became one of its loudest advocates (Calhoun-Brown, 172). He is widely known and respected for his call for change and his drive to settle for nothing but complete equality: "We the disinherited of this land, we who have been oppressed so long, are tired of going through the long night of captivity, and now we are reaching out for the daybreak of freedom and justice and equality" (Lawson, 462). In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," he talks at length about the importance of nonviolence and its religious disposition. In order to withstand the harsh atrocities that were likely to befall them, every person had to go through a period of self-purification that would prepare one to remain steadfast in peace, despite the temptation to be engaged by the violence perpetrated against them (King, 2).

The nonviolent campaign was successful because of its ability to create a visible force without breaking very many laws. Nonviolence "create[s] such a crisis and foster[s] such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue" (King, 3). Nonviolence equipped African Americans for more than just standing up to police officers. Because of its nature of active resistance without criminality, it taught them to stand up for their rights and fight for the things that they deserved, yet gave them a "positive orientation toward the civic order" (Calhoun-Brown, 173). The coupling of these two things was essential in that it left African Americans

with a respect for the laws that were fair, yet reminded them of how to campaign for change in the ones that were not.

Because of men like Dr. King who were willing to take an unpopular stand, the church became inextricably intertwined with this movement toward equality and justice. And thus, the black church found itself an essential component of the black community then, which is something that has not changed substantially now. While the percentage of the community in attendance may have shifted, for those who attend, church is likely to be the center of their lives and their point of association with various aspects of the entire community (Wilcox, 283). Those who attend church are more active in various components of civic society, from voting to giving back to the institution that gave so much to them (Harris, 46). The black church today, while not as actively involved in politics as during this time, still finds itself carrying considerable weight within the black community.

From the moment of their arrival, religion has been an essential component to the lives of slaves. During slavery it gave them encouragement to struggle through. During the emancipation period, it provided way to unify and develop community. During the civil rights movement, it promoted action and organized change. Now, it provides an escape from the realities of life within some communities and serves as a reminder of the importance of civil engagement. Over all these years, the black church has taken on dynamic forms, yet has, and continues to, serve and give to its people in abundance.

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