The Black Religious Movement: A Historic Mid-Twentieth Century Synthesis of Black Religiosity, Nationalism, and Activism

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Out of the flames of the Watts Rebellion in 1965 rose not only smoke, but the Black Power Movement. The movement did not receive its name until a year later when an incensed Stokely Carmichael, after being released from jail during the Mississippi March Against Fear in June 1966, declared, "The only way we gonna stop them white men from whoopin' us is to take over. What we gonna start saying now is Black Power!" And they did—all over America—as the new slogan spread across the country by the American media. Not all Blacks loved the term however. The largest Black religious body of mostly Southern preachers, the National Baptist Convention (NBC), rejected the slogan because of its "nationalist overtones." NBC President Joseph H. Jackson declared, "the church cannot condone those who teach 'black power.'"[1]

Many Black clergy in the North were not as ideologically threatened by the call for Black Power, having lived through urban rebellions, and already foreseeing the breaking up of the White middle class. One of the ways White society had long controlled the Black community was through its collusion (or more so domination) of the most powerful and independent professionals in the Black community—Black preachers. In exchange for preaching conservatism they were at the least left alone to build their congregations, or at the most they were subsidized, socially and financially, by White society. One of those Northern clergy who foresaw the ebbing of White America's domination of Black preachers was Benjamin A. Payton, the executive director of the Commission on Religion and Race of the National Council of Churches. He convened a group of Black preachers in July 1966 in New York with the goal of organizing them to combat the frantic reaction to the phrase "Black Power" and its distortion in the media. The attendees formed the National Committee of Negro Churchmen (NCNC) and published the first major statement supporting, clarifying, and pointing out the theological connotations of the concept of Black Power in the *New York Times* on July 31, 1966. The NCNC argued that "The fundamental distortion facing us in the controversy about 'black power' is rooted in a gross imbalance of power and conscience between Negroes and white Americans."[2] Forty-eight Black religious activists signed the statement, symbolically launching and putting the NCNC at the forefront of a new social movement among Black believers.[3]

These religious leaders challenged the racism, and ethnocentrism in the predominant religions, particularly Christianity. A massive number of religious Blacks would no longer betray Black people, responding to the critiques of prominent Black activists like author James Baldwin.[4] In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a segment of religious Blacks struggled against White religious

institutions and forced these institutions to support the Black Power Movement. They sought to make their religions breed activism (instead of conservatism), and to become relevant to the Black experience through the creation of Black theologies. Black preachers and religious bodies brought Black Power ideas of Black pride, Black unity, self-determination, and revolutionary activism into their places of worship. And, religious Blacks emerged from these places of worship, joined protests and began building programs to advance their communities.[5] It is this challenge, this activism, this struggle, that I call the Black Religious Movement.

The Black Religious Movement has been marginalized within the literature on the Black Power Movement. Robert Allen, Peniel Joseph, Jeffrey Ogbar, William Van Deburg, and Alphonso Pinkney produced the five best and most important panoramic studies on the Black Power Movement.[6] However, all of those studies either leave out important features or trivialize the importance of the Black Religious Movement.[7] There are several other important manuscripts that inform this historiography, but like the studies on Black Power, they either omit key aspects of the Black Religious Movement, do not focus on this particular time period, or they exclusively spotlight one religion.[8]

There is no study that conceptualizes and describes the Black Religious Movement as its own social movement within the Black Power Movement, nor a study that seeks to lay out the major ideas, theologians, organizations, activities, and protests of that movement. I contend and demonstrate in this essay how the Black Religious Movement, with its historic combination of activism, religiosity, and nationalism, was its own social movement, and one of the many social movements that form the Black Power Movement. The Black Religious Movement, like all social movements, deserves its own historiography. Here, I provide a brief history of the antecedents to this movement and I analyze the major leaders and religious groups, as well as reveal examples of some of the manifestations of Black religious nationalism and activism.

Black Religious Movement and the Black Power Movement

Most Black Power scholars conceptualize the Black Power Movement as being similar to most social movements. However, unlike most social movements in the history of the U.S. that were primarily waged by a fairly unified group of people in one arena of society with generally a common set of strategies and goals, the Black Power Movement was a collection of social movements, or a *social movement of social movements*, and the Black Religious Movement was one of those various movements. The Black Power Movement had a plethora of sites of activity, a myriad of leaders and organizers, and a slew of different approaches and goals. The locations of protests, leaders, organizers, organizations, approaches, and goals differed from social movement to social movement within the Black Power Movement. But what did not differ in all of the social movements was a widespread reverence for Malcolm X, the ideology of

Black nationalism, and a rejection of the Civil Rights Movement. Some of these social movements that together make up the Black Power Movement include the Black Arts Movement, the Black Campus Movement, the Black Prison Movement, the Black Feminist Movement, the Black Cultural Movement, the Black Revolutionary Movement, and the subject of this paper, the Black Religious Movement. It is vital that scholars begin conceiving of the Black Power Movement as a social movement of social movements and more importantly begin examining each of these social movements.

The Black Religious Movement has two primary sets of characteristics. The first addresses the members of the movement, and the second speaks to the actions and goals of those members. Black Christians dominated Black religious America with a membership of eleven million in the late 1960s.[9] Although their numbers suggests that therefore they should make up most of the discussion, a study of the literature would be at a loss without including the influence and activities of the Nation of Islam (as the impact of this organization exceeded its membership), as well as Orthodox Muslims, Jews, and Blacks who fused nationalism and activism with other religions which will not be discussed in this paper.

Only a small percentage of religious Blacks participated in the Black Religious Movement. One study of Black clergymen in Buffalo found about 25 percent involved in the struggle.[10] These participants in the Black Religious Movement were *Black religious nationalists* and/or *Black religious activists*. It is important to note that there was a distinction between the nationalist and the activist camps in that not all nationalists were activists. All Black religious activists were religious nationalists, but Black religious nationalists were not religious activists. Black religious nationalists sought to infuse nationalism into their places of worship and among worshipers. For Black religious nationalists, the construction of Black theologies was a means *and* an end. They sought to use nationalism to uplift the religious lives of Black people. In contrast, for Black religious activists, the construction of Black theologies was a means *to* an end—the advancement of Black America. The Black religious activists not only articulated and refashioned their places of worship with Black theologies, but the Black religious activists also left their places of worship and their communities of believers and became a part of the general Black revolt against American society.

The second set of characteristics of the Black Religious Movement can be placed into three categories: (1) To challenge religious Whiteness, (2) promote the growth of religious Blackness, and (3) the active confrontation with American society. First and foremost, Black religious leaders and members of congregations challenged the dominance, pervasiveness, and normalization of European theologies, and the oppressive polices of the White church. In their massive critiques of the prevailing theological concepts, they took the mask of normality and universalism off of those religious concepts and revealed that

these were Eurocentric. Due to their disillusion with White churches, they challenged the pervasive racism and paternalism, the racial inequality in church governance, and forced White churches to contribute to the advancement of the Black community.

Black religious nationalists and activists also fostered the erection of religious Blackness. After challenging and ridiculing White theologies, Black religious activists in particular criticized the passive and conservative elements of Black churches. Moreover, Black religious nationalists and activists introduced, disseminated, and were religiously motivated by Black Muslim and Christian theologies. Black religious activists came together and established Black caucuses in White church institutions and used those caucuses to fight for the rights and the standing of Blacks in those institutions and in the larger community. Black religious Christian activists also banded together and formed cross-denominational groups that served as organizational platforms for Black religious ideas and positions. As a result existing Black church bodies were pushed to the political left, particularly by its younger members who brought conferences and workshops on Black Power into their churches. Finally, Black religious activists confronted the deteriorating and oppressive social policies directed at Black people. They organized and joined protests for their liberation, and were active in demonstrating for a relevant and enriching, as opposed to indoctrinating, seminary experience. Blacks, motivated by Black theologies, moved themselves to the forefront of the Black rebellion in the later part of the 1960s and early 1970s during the Black Religious Movement.

History of the Black Religious Movement

All of the social movements that together make up the Black Power Movement had significant ideological and practical lineages. Likewise, the Black Religious Movement had its historical antecedents. Nat Turner and Gabrielle Prosser were preachers who led slave revolts. Harriet Tubman and Rosa Parks were devout Christians as they were breaking the back of slavery and segregation. Henry McNeal Turner preached that God was Black in the late 19th century while urging Blacks to return to Africa. Turner followed in the path of championing emigration forged by a series of 19th century Black religious activists like Alexander Crummell and James Holly. A decade after Turner passed, Marcus Garvey took up his ideas, declaring, "We, as Negroes, have found a new ideal…We have…now started…to see our God through our own spectacles."[11]

Garvey was not the only Black religious activist of the 1920s. Followers of Noble Drew Ali's Moorish Science Temple believed that "before you can have a God, you must have a nationality." Later, in the 1930s, "Black" and "Ethiopian" became the identifiers of those in Universal Hagar's Spiritual Church, and members of Father Divine's Peace Mission created songs about the Black struggle in America and gathered 250,000 signatures for a petition to demand

federal anti-lynching legislation.[12] In the 1940s, arguably the most influential Black religious activist of the 20th century took his seat in the House of Representatives. Representing Harlem and the pastor of the famed Abyssinian Baptist Church, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., was a ferocious champion of Black rights during his two decades in the House. And of course Black women, "as the most dynamic force within the church," gave keys to preachers like Jim Lawson, Fred Shuttlesworth, and Martin Luther King Jr. and those in his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) who during the Civil Rights Movement turned on the engine of activism in the Black church.[13] Thus, when the Black religious activist came on the scene in the mid-1960s, they did not have to begin from scratch—only steer the Black Religious Movement into the direction of Black power. Of the three leading theologians two were Muslims--Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad, and Rev. Albert Cleage was a Christian.

Malcolm X was *the* ideological father of the Black Power Movement. His ideas guided Black Power activists in every social movement, including the Black Religious Movement. In the last year of his life, this pioneering Black religious activist articulated the need for Black nationalism, revolutionary activism, and a Black God and tenets in religions. In his "Ballot of the Bullet" speech in April 1964, he instructed that "anywhere there's a church that is also preaching and practicing the gospel of black nationalism, join that church."[14] At Alabama's Tuskegee Institute in February 1965, Malcolm declared that he was "not willing to sit and wait on God to come…I believe in religion, but a religion that includes political, economic, and social action designed to eliminate some of these things, and make a paradise here on earth while we're waiting for the other."[15]

Malcolm X had tried to pull Elijah Muhammad up from the level of Black religious nationalism to the peak of Black religious activism, but he was unsuccessful. Nevertheless, Muhammad's Black religious nationalism certainly set the stage for the Black religious nationalism that rushed into places of worship and filled up pews during the Black Religious Movement. As the undisputed leader of the Nation of Islam since 1946, he taught that Blacks were the original humans, and Whites were created a mere six thousand years ago by an evil scientist known as Yakub. Whites were inherently inferior to Blacks and essentially devils are sought to destroy Blacks, and therefore Blacks in America should be permanently separated from Whites. Muhammad preached that Blacks had been deceived by Christianity, the White man's religion, and they therefore needed a mental theological resurrection to their true religion, Islam.[16] Through their resurrection, Blacks are to identify as the "beloved ones," give up their slave names, and realize that only Allah can save them from their oppressors.[17]

Albert Cleage, a self-described Black Christian nationalist, was the Christian equivalent of Malcolm X in the first half of the 1960s. As the pastor of the one thousand-member Central United Church of Christ in Detroit, each Sunday he had an alter call asking attendees to accept the "Black Messiah," join

a new Black nation, and pledge their allegiance to the following Black Christian nationalist creed: "I believe that the revolutionary spirit of God embodied in the Black Messiah, is born anew in each generation and that Black Christian Nationalists constitute the living remnant of God's Chosen People in this day, and are charged by Him with responsibility for the Liberation of Black People."[18] Through Malcolm and Cleage who both shared stages together in the early 1960s, both Christians and Muslims received lessons on Black religious activism, and after they grasped those lessons, they launched the Black Religious Movement.

Leaders of the Black Religious Movement

Malcolm X was killed a year before the Black Religious Movement commenced. He therefore stayed in the role of theological predecessor for the new movement. Yet Cleage transitioned from being one of the chief predecessors to one of the foremost participants. He produced two influential texts that theologically guided the struggle: *The Black Messiah* in 1968, and *Black Christian Nationalism: New Directions for the Black Church* in 1972.[19] In 1967, he renamed his church The Shrine of the Black Madonna and installed a fascinating mural of a Black Mary and Jesus. In 1970, he again changed his church's name to the Pan-African Orthodox Christian Church (PAOCC) and his own name to Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman. He also became involved in a series of protests, and leapfrogged the country, sometimes preaching, other times lecturing—but all times enunciating Black Christian nationalism.

Cleage was the leader of a strike committee that organized a one-day nationwide job strike by Blacks in February 1967 after Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., was deposed from the House of Representatives. After an urban rebellion ravaged Detroit in 1967, Cleage led the New Black Establishment Committee and later the Federation for Self Determination that sought to control the rebuilding of Black Detroit and counteract committees formed by Detroit's White power structure. In March 1968, he discussed Black Power and White racism at the Church and Society Conference in Detroit, and became co-chair of "Operation Connection," a coalition of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish leaders who pledged $10 million to aid five urban centers. In 1970, Cleage led a workshop at the first Congress of African Peoples, and was the keynote speaker at the fourth annual convention of the National Committee of Negro Churchmen (NCNC).[20]

While Cleage was touring the country, an unknown theorist was conceiving of his own, more conventional theology for Black Christians. In the mid-1960s, the challenges of Black students in Arkansas and his experiencing the urban rebellion in Detroit caused James Cone to realize that the theology he had learned in his graduate studies was bankrupt.[21] By 1968, he was serving as a fellow at Colgate Rochester Divinity School lecturing about a new theology for Black people. He decided to publish his thoughts, and "even before its

publication date advance notices made it a sensation among Black religionists," according to one of those religionists.[22] In 1969, Jones published his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, becoming "the first to suggest the broad outlines of a Black theology based upon an essentially classical interpretation of the Christian faith."[23] It was the first of a trilogy, including *Liberation: A Black Theology of Liberation* and *God of the Oppressed*, published in 1970 and 1975, respectively, that positioned Cone as the preeminent Black theologian during the Black Religious Movement. Similar to Cleage, Cone gave lecturers around the nation sharing his innovative Black Theology, which became the standard theological line of the NCNC.[24]

The "sole purpose" of Cone's Black theology was "to apply the freeing power of the gospel to black people under white oppression."[25] It was derived from a social basis—the African American experience in America.[26] He contended that Black Power and Christianity both had the "liberation of man" in common, as Christianity was a religion of liberation.[27] He declared that "in twentieth-century America, Christ meant Black Power!"[28] God must be envisioned as Black because "there is no place in Black Theology for a colorless God in a society when people suffer precisely because of their color."[29] The church as an institution "must share in [God's] revolutionary activity for the liberation of man," Cone explained.[30] Since White theology does not share in this revolutionary activity and instead places "God's approval on white oppression of black existence," it is a theology of the Antichrist.[31] A groundswell of theologians critiqued Cone, calling Blackness "an illegitimate basis for a Christian theology."[32] But not before his theology inspired a swarm of Black theologians to saturate the rhetorical air of Black religious America.[33]

Other Black Religious Activists and Nationalists

Gayraud Wilmore and C. Eric Lincoln were two of the more preeminent scholars of the Black Religious Movement. Wilmore was the executive director of the United Presbyterian Church's Council on Church and Race (COCAR) in the late 1960s and helped form the National Committee of Negro Churchmen in 1966, drafting its theological report in the fall of 1968.[34] He made the "case for a new Black church style" in one of the decisive essays of 1968, and provided a thorough history of radicalism in the Black church in 1973.[35] Lincoln, one of the leading faculty at Union Theological Seminary, inaugurated the C. Eric Lincoln Series in Black religion that produced Cone's second book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Henry H. Mitchell's manuscript on Black preaching, and William R. Jones' well read text answering the question: "Is God a White Racist?"[36] He also published a series of studies in periodicals like *The Christian Century* re-reflecting on the role of theology and the Black church in the movement for Black advancement.[37]

Vincent Harding, as chair of Spellman College history department, was another important scholarly voice. Like Lincoln, he defended Black power from a

theological perspective in *The Christian Century* with articles like his 1967 "Black Power and the American Christ."[38] He later wrote a famous essay, "The Religion of Black Power," which "caused a flurry of excitement in both Black and white theological circles."[39] Joseph R. Washington, Jr. was also a notable intellectual during the movement. He had already received some attention with his 1964 study of Black religion. By the late 1960s, he was part of the chorus urging Black clergy in his popular text, *The Politics of God*, to become a potent force in the struggle of Black Americans for their freedom.[40]

That chorus also included Jesse Jackson and Nathan Wright, Jr. Jackson, a Baptist minister who became one of the first aides to King to develop a "philosophical" belief in Black power, and he attended the first national Black power conference in Newark in 1967. He also was the national leader of Operation Breadbasket, which successfully secured thousands of jobs for inner city Blacks throughout the nation by boycotting local businesses.[41] Wright was a high-level official in the Episcopal church who presided over the first two National Black Power conferences in 1967 and 1968 and demanded that the church activate itself in his popular 1967 book, *Black Power and Urban Unrest*.[42]

These aforementioned male Black religious activists and nationalists rejected racist White churches and theological concepts. Yet, they were "conspicuously silent on feminist theology generally and Black women in particular," Cone remembered.[43] They did not reject the patriarchy and sexism that pervaded the Black and White churches, and theological concepts. Cone recalled, "The distinctive contribution of Black women was not a part of my theological consciousness … until I was challenged by Black and other Third World women."[44] One of the first women theologians to challenge the race-centeredness of the Black theologies during the movement was Theressa Hoover. As the associate general secretary of the United Methodist Church's women's division, Hoover, in her 1974 seminal essay, "Black Women and the Churches: Triple Jeopardy," lamented over the absence of the struggle of women in the struggle-oriented elements of Black theology. Hoover instructed that, "the black churchwoman must come to the point of challenging both her sisters in other denominations and the clerical-male hierarchy in her own … In many ways she has been the most oppressed and the least vocal."[45]

Women had been vocal during the Black Religious Movement. As early as 1966, Pauli Murray was not only co-founding the National Organization of Women (NOW), but was also challenging patriarchy within the Episcopal Church. Like so many Black women during the movement, manifestations of sexism were a "stumbling block" to her faith. To remove the block, Murray, who later became the first Black Episcopalian woman priest, dispatched a letter to the vestry asking why women were invisible, concluding, "There is no difference between discrimination because of race and discrimination because of sex."[46] Four years later, Murray took issue with Black religious activists in her paper on "The Liberation of Black Women." She slammed the National Committee of Black

Churchmen's famed 1970 Declaration of Independence because it "ignored the person hood and contributions of black women to the cause of human rights."[47] This challenge of Black women during the Black Religious Movement to the patriarchal Black church and male-centered theologies and tenets generated a new wave of Black women theologians and preachers, most notably Jacquelyn Grant, who published *Black Theology and the Black Woman* and later *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*.[48]

Organizations of the Black Religious Movement

Black religious nationalists and activists formed the National Black Christian Students Conference and the National Black Evangelical Association. Actually, the latter emerged in 1963, and its members "interest in Black Theology grew naturally out of the Black awareness movement of the sixties."[49] The concept of Black Power also grew on Martin Luther King and his group, SCLC. Initially, King and SCLC watched from the sidelines, but by 1967, King and his organization had joined the Black Religious Movement.[50] Sounding similar to Albert Cleage in 1967, King declared: "Power is not the white man's birthright; it will not be legislated for us and delivered in neat government packages. It is a social force any group can utilize by accumulating its elements in a planned, deliberate campaign to organize it under its own control.[51] Also, some of his closest SCLC associates became NCNC members, and at the SCLC convention, there were placards that read "Black is beautiful and it's so beautiful to be black."[52]

A sister group of the SCLC, the Southern Conference Education Fund (SCEF), which was led by Fred L. Shuttleworth, who was also the secretary of the SCLC, wasted no time in supporting Black Power. In a policy statement in November 1966, SCEF said it "is sympathetic to this essential and original meaning of the phrase black power."[53] On the other hand, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion church, the second largest Black Methodist denomination at the time with about one millions members, condemned the concept at its conference in 1967.[54] The largest Black Methodist denomination, the AME church, was on the fence. But by 1968, at least its first Episcopal district of New York had come down on the side of the Black Religious Movement.[55]

The leading organization of the movement was the National Committee of Negro Churchmen. After the group famously became the first major defender of the Black Power Movement, in November 1966, the NCNC gathered at the Statue of Liberty and issued a statement of "determination of black men in America to exact from this nation not one right less than our full manhood rights."[56] In 1967, the organization became known as the National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC). That summer, NCBC members dominated the religion workshop at the Black Power Conference in Newark, and in November held its first national convocation.[57]

The NCBC organized a series of regional caucuses of Black churchmen. One of its major caucuses, the Philadelphia Council of Black Clergy, put together a position paper in 1968 on the past, present, and future of Black religion. The position paper stated that "Black churchmen, in increasing numbers and on their own initiative…are opting for Black nationalism as the only viable alternative for developing an authentic religious experience for Afro-Americans."[58] On the eve of King's assassination in April of 1968, the NCBC proclaimed that no longer can White churches bypass Black churches and make direct contact with the Black community.[59] In the fall of 1968, the NCBC reported that "there is…great interest in opening up new material for theological study and reconstruction among black churchmen."[60] Later in the fall, the NCBC met in St. Louis, Missouri for its second annual meeting.[61] In June 1969, the NCBC gathered in Atlanta and produced a statement on Black theology. Those at the assembly declared that "[Black Theology] comes out of the past. It is strong in the present. And we believe it is redemptive for the future."[62] And at the NCBC's third annual convocation in November of 1969, the four hundred attendees sent a "Message to the Churches from Oakland" urging them "radically to change, by whatever means are necessary, the racist structures which dominate our lives."[63] On Independence Day in 1970, the NCBC issued a "Black Declaration of Independence." The declaration, ratified later in the year by six thousand Blacks, ended: "All Black People…Solemnly Publish and Declare, that we shall be…FREE AND INDEPENDENT FROM THE INJUSTICE, EXPLOITATIVE CONTROL, INSTITUTIONALIZED VIOLENCE AND RACISM OF WHITE AMERICA."[64] This national committee of hundreds of Black religious activists did not just issue well publicized and circulated statements. They also formed working coalitions with other groups like the Black Economic Development Conference and the National Welfare Rights Organizations, and supported revolutionary movements in Africa.[65]

While the NCBC was organizing itself, the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO), founded in 1966 with an integrated Board of Directors, was focused toward advancing the struggle of oppressed people. The Black directors quickly formed a strong Black caucus on the board and controlled most of its policies. The IFCO organized and sponsored a Black Economic Development Conference in Detroit on April 25-27, 1969. More than six hundred people from all segments of the Black community attended this conference where attendees rejected Black capitalism and championed cooperative economics.[66] One of the attendees, James Forman, the international affairs director of SNCC, presented on April 26 when he addressed the conference a "Black Manifesto," a massive indictment of U.S. capitalism and racism. This manifesto, approved by the majority of delegates, famously erected the contemporary reparations movement. The manifesto read in its most celebrated section, "We are demanding $500,000,000 from the Christian white churches and Jewish synagogues, … [This] is only a beginning of the reparations due us as a

people who have been exploited and degraded, brutalized, killed and persecuted."[67]

White religious America was not aware of the manifesto until Blacks began bringing it to their doorsteps. The most publicized invasion came from Forman himself who appeared at the famed Riverside Church in New York City on May 4, 1969. During a service, he walked down the aisle and began reading the manifesto to a shocked congregation. In the ensuing months, hundreds of Blacks, even some abroad, became Black religious activists, and stormed into churches and synagogues, reading the demands of the manifesto.[68] Although some Black preachers were against the manifesto, others in the Black Religious Movement, such as the members of the NCBC, came out in support of the manifesto.[69] Most of the White Christian and Jewish organizations either did not respond to the manifesto, rejected it, or made some token gesture in considering the demands of the Black Manifesto.[70]

In the aftermath of the Black Manifesto controversy in 1969, Black women in the Methodist church, including Hoover, met to discuss (along with White women) their position in the church. "Women must be accepted as persons," said one of the Black women that weekend. "The black man wants to assert today his so-called masculinity, but it is really *personhood*—for both sexes."[71] In 1970, three women activists—Patricia Haden, Donna Middleton, and Patricia Robinson—came together and wrote that "we have no Gods in our own image."[72] Even though God was being seen more and more as Black by Blacks, God was still conceived of as a male.

Black Caucuses

Another conference proved just as significant as the one organized by the IFCO where the original Black Manifesto was approved. In September 1967, Black and White church leaders, including several members of the NCNC, gathered for a conference on the urban crisis sponsored by the National Council of Churches (NCC). During the opening session, the Black attendees proposed the conference be separated into two caucuses, one Black and one White, the first such proposal in American religious history. The Black caucus went ahead and prepared a statement calling "upon Black Churchmen everywhere to embrace the Black Power Movement," and establish Black caucuses in White churches. Black participants took this advice, and soon after began organizing pressure groups, or Black caucuses, in almost every denomination.[73]

Blacks in the United Church of Christ formed the United Black Churchmen (later changed to United Black Christians), and thereby moved Blacks into policy and decision making capacities, with the goal of developing "communication and interrelationships among Black members" and to "represent an agenda developed by the total Black constituency."[74] A Black caucus emerged in the United Methodist Church, the Black Methodists for Church Renewal, which successfully pressured the church to set up a $29 million fund

for social programs.[75] It adopted "The Black Paper" at its meeting in Cincinnati in 1968 that explained that Black power is a "call for us to respond to God's action in history which is to make and keep human life human."[76] The National Caucus of Black Unitarian-Universalists of the Unitarian Universalist Association, demanded more Blacks in top positions, the establishment of a Black Affairs Council, and that the denomination lend a hand to the Black rebellion. The one-thousand-member group forced its denomination to give it control of a $1 million budget for social action.[77]

Black Presbyterians formed the group Black Presbyterian United in 1968, replacing the Presbyterian Interracial Council. But even before that formation, Black Presbyterians were participating in the Black Religious Movement. In August 1966, five Black Presbyterians circulated to their peers a three-thousand-word document interpreting Black power. "What our nation is experiencing these days is nothing less than a black revolution against white injustice," the preamble stated.[78] In the Episcopal Church, the interracial Episcopal Society for Racial and Cultural Unity was replaced by the Episcopal Union of Black Clergy and Laity. At its convention in June 1969, the group pledged their "time, talent and resources to the eradication of racism in the Episcopal Church," and affirmed their "solidarity with the absolute goal of self-determination of the black community both inside and outside the church."[79] Black members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) established the National Convocation of the Christian Church in 1969 as a training organization for Black disciples and a pressure group for Black concerns. More than 250 members attended the group's convention in 1970 where the keynote speaker thanked God "for black power."[80]

In the Catholic Church, Blacks organized the National Office of Black Catholics, the National Black Sisters' Conference, the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, and the National Black Catholic Lay Caucus.[81] The National Black Clergy Caucus condemned its church in April 1968 as a "white racist institution," recognized "the reality of militant protest," and demanded more Black priests, particularly "in decision-making positions," and that "a black-directed department be set up to deal with the Church's role in the struggle of black people for freedom."[82] In August 1968, the National Black Sisters' Conference was organized, according to Sister M. Martin De Porres Grey, "to challenge these nuns to be reborn into involvement in the liberation of black people as celibate, black and committed women."[83] At the third annual National Black Sisters' Conference in 1970, about 160 Black nuns sported Afros and wore dashikis. The sisters were demonstrably frustrated with the verity that "entering an order meant ceasing to be black and looking on what you grew up with as uncouth," as stated by one sister.[84] Also, in 1970, the National Black Lay Caucus held its first conference in Washington D.C. "in order to break the wall of racism and dilute the ingrained poisons that threaten to further divide and alienate Americans from one another."[85]

In total, there were at least ten Black caucuses formed within White denominations. In addition to the aforementioned groups, there was the Coordinating Committee of Black Lutheran Clergymen, the Black Caucus of the University Christian Movement, and the Black Churchmen of the American Baptist Convention.[86] Some Black women even formed their own caucuses within some of the newly emerged Black caucuses in White denominations. A women's caucus emerged in the Black Methodist for Church Renewal, which successfully pushed for the establishment of a Commission on the Status and Role of Women. Black churchwomen also concluded at the National Black Women's Conference in February 1972 that they "must get on policy making boards (both secular and sacred) in the community and serve in executive positions."[87] Even though these Black caucuses and Black Christian organizations in general dominated the movement, other religions and groups were involved, most notably the Nation of Islam and Black Jews.

Nation of Islam

In 1969 the Yearbook of American Churches and in 1970 *Ebony* magazine estimated membership of the Nation of Islam was at 250,000 and 100,000 respectively. Apparently, there were forty temples in 1970 and sixty-four temples in 1973. But the "influence is far greater than the membership implies," noted one scholar, particularly since the newspaper *Muhammad Speaks* had the largest weekly circulation—about 600,000—of any Black-owned newspaper in the country.[88] The Nation was governed by men as a result of their overwhelming numerical majority and the sexist theology of the organization. With their strict moral code and ability to convert America's so-called underclass, the Black Muslims were able to remove vice from several inner cities communities. As one Harlem resident in 1972 said, "They are for black people and prove it."[89]

Members of the Nation were Black religious nationalists who generally did not try to combat America's religious or secular society. It did however make one demand, for the American government to furnish Black people with a separate territory.[90] In the meantime, the Nation built its own separate nation within the larger American nation through practicing Black economic and educational nationalism. "We must begin to take up our own responsibilities," said Minister Louis Farrakhan, who became the Nation's national spokesman in 1967 and one of the more notable Black religious nationalists. Farrakhan declared that "the thrust of the Nation of Islam is spiritual, economic and educational and we're moving in all three areas with the pace quickening in each."[91]

The Nation built a massive financial enterprise. In 1970, the Nation had assets in the range of $70 million, owning a host of restaurants, apartment houses, publishing houses, retail stores, supermarkets, canning or clothing factories, large orchards, and several farms totaling twenty thousand acres where the Nation grew crops and raised livestock.[92] The Nation's educational

nationalism manifested in the establishment of elementary schools in major cities, two universities, and by being one of the first major community groups to systematically teach Black history. Children who attended the schools of the Nation were also taught Arabic and the contributions of people of African descent around the world: "First, my people must be taught the knowledge of self," Elijah Muhammad once wrote, "Then, and only then, will they be able to understand others and that which surrounds them."[93]

Another Black Muslim group was the Hanafi Muslims, a group of orthodox Black Muslims who openly opposed American racism. Its most prominent member was Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, a future National Basketball Association (NBA) Hall of Famer, who became interested in Islam through his admiration of Malcolm X. Abdul-Jabbar would later boycott the 1968 Olympics to protest against the United States, which he called a "racist nation."[94]

Black Jews

Similar to the Nation of Islam, Black Jews, or African Americans who practice Judaism, tended to also be Black religious nationalists. In 1968, there were about 400,000 Black Jews in America. In 1964, on the eve of the movement, Black Jews founded Hatzaad Harishon (Hebrew for "The First Step") to unite and further the religious and cultural education of Black Jews. By 1970, the group was organizing a variety of shows with Black Jewish artists, and offering scholarships to Black Jewish children to attend Hebrew schools. Also that year, probably due to the prodding of Black Jewish groups, the first Black Jew was appointed to serve as an executive in the Synagogue Council of America, a coordinating organization for the three braches of Judaism in America.[95]

Chicago was the capital of Black Jewish America and one of the most storied centers of Black Judaic nationalism during the movement. There were more than a dozen separate Black Jewish congregations. Some of the groups developed Black nationalists customs and celebrations that were scarcely informed by Judaism. One of the more controversial groups, the Black Israelites, demanded that Israel surrender its land to Blacks who are the "only true Israelites." One Chicago student of the Black Jews at the time viewed their actions as "a religious expression of black nationalism."[96] And, one assemblage of Black Jews fused their nationalism with activism when it made one dramatic move to protest discrimination in the U.S. A group of 162 Black Jews, mostly from Chicago, publicly moved to Liberia in 1968, stating, "We'd rather live in the jungles of Africa than in a house in Cicero."[97]

Expressions of Black Religious Nationalism

Black religious nationalism manifested itself in a series of different manners during the Black Religious Movement. Not only did hundreds of thousands of Blacks begin conceiving of their religious icons as Black, but their

church art reflected that new Black religious consciousness. At a Catholic church in New York, there were more than thirty murals of figures depicted as Black with wavy or woolly hair, wide eyes and full lips, including a twelve-foot-high painting of the Black Madonna and Child. When worshippers at the majestic dome of Detroit's St. Cecilia Roman Catholic Church gazed up at heaven, they saw a twenty-four-foot-tall Black Christ dressed in a purple robe. Over at a Baptist church in Illinois, there were magnificent images of a radiant Black Christ and his disciple Peter. At a Boston church center, in front of a provocative portrait of Black heroes, there was a crutch and a noose symbolizing "the evil that blacks have endured."[98] By 1968, work abounded for artists who could paint a dark-skinned, wooly-haired Jesus as depicted in Revelation 1:14-15, and Black churches were also bringing Jazz and other Black musical genres into their services.[99]

Black church doors and minds were opened to discuss the prevailing issues of the Black Religious Movement. A New York City pastor in 1967 said to Black youth "Every group that has come to this country has exercised power," and an Atlanta pastor at a Baptist church gave a sermon titled "Black Jesus" in 1970. At an Interdenominational Youth Convocation in Pittsburg in 1971, youth were encouraged to "Express Your Thing" in a series of discussions, including one on "Black Power and Christianity." In 1972, religious leaders on the West Coast gathered in San Francisco to thrash out how churches can relate to the Black power, women's liberation, and Third World movements. Black seminarians were particularly active and in 1971, they held a three-day program at Garrett Theological Seminary in Illinois to find ways to make their theological education more relevant to Black communities.[100]

There were also expressions of Black religious nationalism in the prisons as the Black Religious Movement converged with the Black Prison Movement. One of the Nation of Islam's most dynamic recruiting arenas was America's prisons. New York's Sing Sing prison during the early 1970s held a Muslim service for one hundred inmates every Friday afternoon. My goal is "to try to give all my energies to support the teachings of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, and to raising the Black man in America," said the mosque's imprisoned minister.[101] At the same time Black Christian prisoners gathered to receive a new Black theology. At a penitentiary in Pittsburgh, Black Catholic inmates were permitted to have their first Afro-American Liturgy in 1969. Throughout the mass, selections were played by an African band as people chanted in African languages. Before each spiritual reading, Black power salutes and greetings were given.[102]

Expression of Black Religious Activism

A large portion of the participants of the Black Religious Movement not only expressed Black religious nationalism, but were driven by that nationalism to join the crusade to advance the standing of Black America. One of the most

storied demonstrations of Black religious activism was the support Black churches gave to the Black Panther Party. By 1969, the Panthers were feeding an estimated ten thousand children each morning in Black churches. Father Earl Neil of Oakland compared the Panthers to Jesus explaining that "the only difference between Jesus and the Black Panther Party is that Jesus fed 5,000 and the Black Panther Party feeds 10,000."[103]

The clergy also left the church and participated in a series of protests. Black nuns, and clergy from around the nation were part of a large group of marchers who demonstrated for open housing in Milwaukee in September 1967. The next year, a New York City pastor organized a boycott of seven junior high schools. Black Catholics in 1969 staged a demonstration in front of Pittsburgh's St. Mary of Mercy Church to protest a recently released church bulletin that disparaged the raised clenched fist as destructive. Two years later, a group of Black community developers in the United Methodist Church demanded that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) change its discriminatory policies against Blacks.[104]

Black students at seminaries joined in the religious activism as the Black Religious Movement converged with the Black Campus Movement. Black student groups were set up at all the major seminaries. At Colgate-Rochester Divinity School in New York, Black seminarians took over the main building and chapel on March 2, 1969 demanding a more relevant education and more Black trustees. Black students at the Union Theological Seminary in New York staged a sit-in in the administration building in May 1969 supporting James Forman's demands for reparations. At the University of Chicago's Divinity School, Black students organized a caucus and in 1971 issued a series of demands in a letter that stated: "We confront you today as representatives of the black community of the University of Chicago…and the black community of this hell called America—land of the free whites and home of the brave blacks."[105]

When Black religious activists were not combating racism and discrimination through protests, they were building self-help programs in cities across America. A pastor in Brooklyn in 1969 led a series of groups to open savings accounts at a local Black-owned bank. In Baltimore, fourteen Black ministers opened two supermarkets that served Blacks. Black clergy in Philadelphia staged a widely publicized and effective "selective patronage campaign" to boycott those businesses who did not employ Blacks. In that city, Rev. Leon Sullivan and his congregation also organized training classes for workers (school dropouts, skilled workers, and hopeful executives) and built a shopping plaza, housing projects, and numerous business enterprises for the Black community.[106]

Conclusion

Although collective victories abounded well into the early 1970s individuals supportive of the Black Power Movement and part of the Black

Religious Movement were often targeted. Similar to protesters in other Black power social movements, Black religious activists were systematically harassed, immobilized, and jailed by police and/or conservative churches. In 1967, Adam Clayton Powell was removed from Congress, and a Black religious activist chose to leave the movement after his bishop disallowed his "association with black power groups." A Washington D.C. minister's power to invite speakers was taken away shortly after he brought in Stokely Carmichael to speak in 1967, Martin Luther King was killed in 1968, and a Black religious activist in Illinois was illegally imprisoned in 1971.[107] Most scholars point to 1975 as the year the Black Power Movement ended. By the mid-1970s, most of the participants of this social movement were seeking to keep the Black nationalist gains they had successfully won during their movements. In other words, by 1975, Black nationalist activism to maintain had replaced the Black nationalist activism to gain that had guided the Black Power Movement. In terms of the Black Religious Movement, those elements of Black religious nationalism they had gained stayed on the scene. The Black caucuses continued to operate in a number of White congregations and varied denominations. Blacks continued to conceive of Jesus as Black and see Black religious figures in their sanctuaries. But the Black religious activism had leveled off by 1975 as victories lessened, and there was no larger environment nurturing activism.[108]

This study conceives of the Black Religious Movement as its own social movement and historiography within the Black Power Movement, and as such has laid out its major theologies, theologians, groups, and manifestations. This movement forged a historic combination of activism, religiosity, and nationalism, creating legions of Black religious nationalists and activists among religious Blacks. The Black Religious Movement destroyed the ideology of Whiteness in religions, and crafted theologies of Blackness that gave believers the theological impetus to change American society. These Black religious nationalists and activists were following the example of Fannie Lou Hamer—the mother of the Black Power Movement who said, "Christ was a revolutionary person, out there where it was happening … That's what God is all about, and that's where I get my strength."

End Notes

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2. Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972.), p. 266-267; "Display Ad 629 – No Title," *New York Times*, July 31, 1966.
3. See Gayraud S. Wilmore, "Recollections: The Black Revolt and the United Presbyterian Church, 1963-1973," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 85 (Spring/Summer 2007), p. 57-69
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7. Allen and Joseph primarily examine the program and ideology of the Nation of Islam, and Joseph also discusses Detroit Rev. Albert Cleage. Ogbar has an expansive study of the Nation of Islam as well, and a tiny three-page section, "Black Power and the Church," that primarily examines the NCNC and a few secondary theologians. On the other hand, Van Deburg has a large section on "Soul Theology." Yet, he does not discuss the influence of James Cone, the founder of Black theology, nor does he detail the protests and programs of Black religious activists. Out of these major Black Power texts, Pinkney has probably the best examination on the movement. However, he does not address any of the secondary leaders of the movement, like a Gayraud Wilmore, the many new visual manifestations of the movement, or the activities of those who were not Christians or in the Nation of Islam.
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10. Rosemary Reuther, "Black Theology and Black Church," *Religious Education* 64 (September/October 1969), p. 89.
11. Randall K. Burkett, *Garveyism as a Religious Movement: The Institutionalization of Black Civil Religion* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1978), p. 47.
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