

# The Role of the Black Church in the American Civil Rights Movement

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*Abstract: This paper seeks to argue that the black church played a pioneering role in the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. To be sure, one cannot think of the CRM without the crucial role played by the black church. The black church not only provided support to various civil rights organizations but also acted as the movement church itself. The church ministers played a vital role in the success of the CRM and the black church mobilized resources and made the CRM practically possible. From the role of the Church in the CRM, one can easily envision the role of religion in social change and identity politics which, in turn, seeks to negate the promise of the project enlightenment. Today, religion has come back as a powerful force and has thus become a reality both in social change and construction of identity not only nationally but also internationally.*

## 1. Introduction

The Civil Rights Movement (hereafter, CRM) which was meant to restore the rights of African American people who lost those rights after the adoption of the Jim Crow Laws from the late 1800s to the mid-1900s is one of the most influential social movements in the twentieth century. The CRM was successful because the white dominated American society finally passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and began treating the children of former slaves as citizens in the United States of America (USA). It is thought that a number of agencies made this movement successful. However, the most profound role in the success of the CRM was said to have been played by the black church which played a pivotal role in the horrendous and tragic history of the black community in the USA. This explains why the black church seemed to have become targets of thugs and terrorists during the CRM. For instance, the historic Emanuel Methodist African Episcopal Church in Birmingham, Alabama was bombed by the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) on September 25, 1963 and, as a result, four young girls were killed at the peak of the CRM. [1] Since the black church is said to have played a seminal role during the CRM, the intolerant section of the white community which could not reconcile themselves with the gains of the black community springing up from the CRM still target Black Church. [1] [2] The latest incident of such an attack on the Black Church took place in Charlestown, South Carolina in which nine black worshipers were killed by a white gunman on June 17, 2015.[3]

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In this backdrop, this research paper argues that the black church played the most important role in the CRM in the USA in the sense that the black church figured most prominently in the CRM in the 1950s and 1960s, changing the course of American history. To be sure, one cannot envision the CRM without the key role of the black church during this turbulent period in US history because the black religious leaders associated with various churches were instrumental in the success of the CRM.

Part A of this paper tries to explore how the black church played a pioneering role in the establishment of the southern CRM in the US. Part B seeks to argue how the black church became central in galvanizing community support in the CRM. Part C attempts to delve how the black church sought to become a “movement church” during the CRM period. Part D argues how the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) sought to ally itself with the black church as a strategic ploy to strengthen the CRM. Last but not the least, part E seeks to deal with how the black minister played a concomitant role in the overall CRM. Part E is followed by a short conclusion which raises questions about the promise of enlightenment while highlighting the role of religion in social change in the overall world order.

## **2. Part A: Pioneering Role Of The Black Churches In The Crm**

The black churches had not only been at the epicenter of African American life [4] [5] [6] [7] [8] but also acted as an important institution that not only nourished the CRM but also led it from behind in a variety of ways. It is true that several organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) played more important and direct role in the 1960s but the black church had always been there not only as the umbrella of organizations but also as the mother organization that always influenced the CRM by giving every kind of support conceivable and essential for the overall success of the CRM in the twentieth century. One can overemphasize the role of the SCLC as the preeminent organization and the charismatic leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as the central figure, leading the CRM in the 1960s but it can plausibly be argued that neither the SCLC nor Dr. King could be thought of without considering the pioneering role of the black church. One can say that the church gave birth to civil rights organizations like the SCLC, molded personalities like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who came to be associated with the CRM at one time or another, nourished and sustained them in the long run. In this sense, the black church can be regarded as the mother organization that not only shaped the organizations involved but also engaged the leaders who came to lead the CRM in different phases.

According to Professor Morris, the black church functioned as the institutional center of the modern civil rights movement. Churches provided the movement with organized mass base; a leadership of clergymen largely economically independent of the larger white society and skilled in the art of managing people

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and resources; an institutionalized financial base through which protest was financed; and meeting places where the masses planned tactics and strategies and collectively committed themselves to the struggle. [5]

The history of black church and the agonizing experiences of the black people in American society put the church in a strategically dominant position to act as the organizer of the organizers, as the abode of faith for the activists, as the exhorter of the activists, as the cultural center of them and the masses, as the place of meetings and discussions for leaders as well as people, as the laboratory for leadership training, as the collector of fund and financier, as the shelter as well as provider of various services needed for the activists and finally as the symbol of identity, autonomy and independence for the overall African masses during the CRM.

Every social movement needs a guiding philosophy that has to be articulated based on the life experience as well as the felt needs of those who have a stake in the movement. The CRM in America developed the creed as well as philosophy of nonviolent resistance and the black church had an important role in its articulation prior to its grand articulation by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. himself. Professor Morris has rightly pointed out that the church provided the prayers that spoke directly to the needs of an oppressed people. Many black churches preached that oppression is sinful and God sanctions protest aimed at eradicating social evils. The teachings of the church connected the purpose of the movement to the spiritual teachings of Christianity with which most black people were familiar as a way of life and as a symbol of their culture. According to Andrew Young, a civil rights leader, Dr. King echoed the message of the black church in the CRM. [5]

He said that nobody could have ever argued that segregation and integration had nothing to do with the black people. But when Martin Luther King Jr. talked about leaving slaves of Egypt and wandering into the Promised Land; it made sense to folks. It is true that people might have not understood it because it was not a political theory, but it was people's grassroots ideology. It was their faith; it was the thing that they had been nurtured on. And when they heard the language they responded. Andrew Young thought that it was the natural milieu, when people were really united with the real meanings of that cultural heritage and when they saw their faith also as a liberation struggle that they could identify with. They all wanted to be religious. And when they finally helped them see that religion meant involvement in action, they had embarked upon it. [6] Thus the basic message of Dr. King not only as a Christian leader, but also as a political leader resonated with the cultural and religious life of the black people and drew them closer to the movement.

The black church also exhorted black people to accept the concept of redemptive suffering as sacred because this is rooted in Christianity. Some were again influenced by the church to accept nonviolence as a way of life since it is the only way through which early Christians fought injustice in history and it was said that it was still valid as well as a guide for good Christians to fight injustice anywhere in the world. Church leaders always gave references from biblical stories, the

underlying message of which was that serving the oppressed amounted to serving God and submitting to God's will. Thus the church was able to mobilize people for nonviolent action because church membership provided individuals a frame for receiving messages and meaning of non-violence. [7]

The CRM which emerged as the defining social movement in American life in the 1960s needed a history and "the church gave civil rights movement continuity with its antecedents in the long-standing religious tradition of black people." [5] One can thus say that the black church worked as a laboratory as well as a legacy for the CRM in the 1960s for peaceful social change for oppressed black people in American society. From this standpoint, it can be argued that the black church worked as the organization of both organizers as well as organizations because both the civil rights organizers as well as organizations with a few exceptions were the products of the church. The SCLC, which became the preeminent organization spearheading the CRM and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and most of his associates of the SCLC who led this social movement were both the products of the church as well as church people.

Dr. Morris has rightly observed that the SCLC was a church-related protest organization. The overwhelming majority of the SCLC's original leaders were ministers. The original SCLC had thirty-six formal leadership positions; only four of the thirty-six were filled by non-clergymen. Most of the SCLC's decisions, therefore, were made by activist clergymen. Indeed, the important decisions of the early SCLC were made by the Administrative Committee, comprising thirteen individuals, eleven of whom were ministers. Thus the SCLC was anchored in the church and probably could not have been otherwise. [5]

The black people had suffered extreme humiliation in American history but what sustained them in their ordeal was a strong sense of spiritual culture centered on the church. It is in churches where they would often gather for moral and spiritual rejuvenation as well as sustenance and cultural activities amidst both oppression and exclusion. As a result, when the call for participating in the realization of their rights came, they not only listened to church people, but also gathered around the churches for political education, participation and socialization as part of their religious as well as political culture. The church prayers, rituals, music and doctrines gave them both identity and group solidarity anchored in the doctrine of the equality of men before God.

Reflecting upon the church culture of African American people and its effect upon them during the CRM, Professor Allison Calhoun-Brown has rightly observed that as a free space, the church offered an environment in which people were able to learn a new respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills and values of cooperation and civic virtue. This was thoroughly vital in a thoroughly racist society that tried to deny to blacks all of these things. It was church, and not simply black Christianity that helped to shape their attitudes. Although internal religiosity can certainly have independent effects, attitudes and understandings about religious matters are significantly affected by the church to which one belongs. Whether this-worldly or other-worldly, the black church

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communicated the revolutionary message of equality before God. Its songs, prayers, rituals, and doctrines all reinforced this simple truth. [7]

The black church helped raise funds and provided a lot of money to the CRM. This way these churches worked as resource-mobilizers for the social movement like the CRM. Interestingly, people provided the church with resources because they owed allegiance to the churches which funneled those material resources to the social movement organizations like the NAACP and the SCLC. Dr. Fredrick Harris points out that African American churches provided material resources.[6] Professor Morris thought that thousands of dollars could be raised by a number of churches in such a short time to finance a concerted plan. [5] This type of fund raising for any action related to the CRM by the churches not only demonstrated the financial clout of the churches but also their role as the financiers of the movement for equality of the black people.

Sometimes, the churches worked as a venue of shelter for movement activists involved in various types of protest activities because the churches were the only organizations capable of providing shelter in such moments of necessity. In fact, when the Freedom Riders were faced with hostilities and violent counter-actions of the racist elements in white society in the Deep South in the early 1960s, black churches often came to help and gave shelter to the Freedom Riders. For example, when the Freedom Riders were attacked and beaten in Montgomery by the white mob, church leaders like Reverend Abernathy not only rescued them but also gave them shelter in his First Baptist Church. And Reverend Abernathy justified that saying it was fitting for the demonstrators to be penned up in his church. [5] When the Freedom Riders faced similar types of hostility and physical attack in Alabama, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth did the same. Once the churches established the precedent as well as courage in giving shelter to the movement activists, others came forward to give shelter to Freedom Riders as well as those who went to the Deep South from the North and West for voter registration of the disfranchised African American people.

We can thus see that the black church played a pioneering role in the establishment of the CRM. Interestingly, once the churches played a pioneering role in establishing various movement related activities, then other organizations followed suit and subsequently took over those activities as part of the overall CRM. Indigenous resource mobilizations are vital in the early stages of any social movement. [5] And this is what the churches did in the case of the CRM because the churches provided indigenous resources like articulation of the philosophy as well as the ideology that guided a social movement, initial leadership, education, money, volunteer, moral support, etc. Thus the role of the black churches had been so pivotal in the establishment of this social movement that one cannot conceive the idea of the CRM without the pioneering role of the black churches in the South.

### **3. Part B: The Role Black Church as the Central Organization in Galvanizing the Community**

The black churches were uniquely positioned in American society in the sense that they turned out to be the central organization in galvanizing community support because they were organized and developed by the oppressed groups mostly insulated from the institutional life of the larger American society. Since the larger institutional set-up of the mainstream society excluded the black community, the black churches filled the institutional void for black people in American society in the sense that it was the only institution to which the black people looked for the fulfillment of their immediate needs as well as guidance. Hence, the black churches acted as a civil society outside the domain of the state for the African American people. [7] The same happened during the CRM. While other organizations cropped up during the CRM, the black church had been so central as well as ubiquitous in African American life that they played a preponderant role in securing community support for the equal rights for African American people in American society.

The church could also galvanize community support because it is both the product as well as the producer of the black community in the sense that the African American people, being insulated from the mainstream racist white society, developed their stake in the church, socialized around it, fulfilled their spiritual as well as social needs around the church and developed their culture around it. The black churches had wide networks that could easily help mobilize community support in the case of the mass boycott of buses or certain white business institutions that practiced segregation. [5]

A prolonged resistance like the bus boycott in Montgomery needed enough resource mobilization, especially finance and other material resources, but the church could galvanize community support because, as seen above, the overall life of the African people had been influenced by the churches [5] and the black church was the only institution to which they had access without any barrier. Socio-historically speaking, American society had been more community-oriented [8]; however, what is particular about the black people in America is that they have been more communitarian than the white society not only because of their African heritage but also because of the question of their survival because of the legacy of slavery and Jim Crow Laws.

### **4. Part C: Role of “Movement Church”**

The black church turned out to be “movement church” because it became an integral part of the CRM in the sense that as a social organization of the subordinate group, i. e., the black community, the black church defined the goal of the movement, educated and mobilized the masses, organized and coordinated the social movement of this community for attaining equality in American society. Practically speaking, the black church defined the goals of the movement, i. e., the equality of black people as a whole in the eye of God as prescribed by

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Christianity as well as the technique of the movement, i. e., disciplined non-violent action. Along with defining the goals, the church also played an important role in educating black masses through various educational programs and mobilized them to attain the goals of the CRM. Finally, the black church also mobilized and coordinated the overall CRM because there were various groups as well as classes involved in it.

The Baton Rouge bus boycott was led by the Mt. Zion Baptist Church, one of the largest in the city. Reverend T. J. Jamison, the pastor of the church, became a leading voice of this bus boycott which motivated the black community in such a way that the church could not accommodate the surging crowd within its own vicinity. Dr. Morris says, "The Reverend T. J. Jamison became the official leader and spokesman of the Baton Rouge movement." [5]. He was an authentic leader in that he proved his worth before the movement started. He was also financially independent and well-educated. His new-comer status helped him because he did not develop any suspicion or enmity of any local group. He was also well-integrated into the local community he was leading. He had a wide network of supports through the church that gave him access to the resources and organized work forces of the community. [5] Reverend T. J. Jamison was also a member of the local NAACP and of the Baton Rouge Community Group, a local civic organization.

In the course of the Baton Rouge bus boycott, the Mt. Baptist Church was joined by other local churches that provided the institutional link to the black masses. Community support became more readily available "when Jamison called other ministers throughout the city and asked their congregations to join the boycott." Even those people who did not belong to any church also became part of the movement. Since the churches were highly respected, any program initiated by the churches had a high chance of gaining mass support. Anyway, black church congregations rallied behind the boycott of 1953 all over Baton Rouge. The various churches also provided the manpower required, necessary finances, and communications networks that brought about the indispensable mass participation. Jamison received all the financial support that he needed from members of various churches. In fact, such a financial base helped the movement to operate the car lift without a taxi license. Though a few white people contributed, the overall financial support came from the black community.

However, decision-making became difficult within the context of the churches because there were so many of these organizations. There were also some organizations that were secular. Hence, they sought to participate outside the orbit of the church. In this context, the United Defense League (UDL) was formed. The formation of the UDL also became necessary because though it was church-related, the movement also needed the support of other organizations within the community. All these organizations gave leadership within the context of the UDL but they still maintained their individual identity. A large number of ministers gave diverse leadership because they were already leaders of their congregations. The UDL deepened the quality of leadership by engaging the entire community while simultaneously promoting creativity, discouraging

jealousies, eliminating needless duplication of effort and maximizing group cohesion.

The overall Baton Rouge Bus Boycott which was led by both the churches and the UDL was finally successful, though it was a partial victory since Jamison accepted compromise. Nevertheless, this movement was a monumental incident because it occurred before the famous school desegregation decision won by the NAACP in 1954 and also predated the much celebrated 1955-56 Montgomery bus boycott. Overall, the Baton Rouge Bus Boycott was a mass, church-based, direct-action movement directed by a new organization of organizations" called the UDL. The Mt. Zion Church of Baton Rouge gave pivotal leadership, though subsequently a new organization had to be created to steer the movement to success. Thus, we find that the Mt. Zion church played the role of a "movement church though it exhibited certain limitations during the course of the movement.

#### **5. Part D: Naacp's Alliance With The Black Churches:**

Once the NAACP spread its organizational branches in the South, it became "closely tied to the black churches." The NAACP needed to ally itself with the church for a variety of reasons. First, the Church was the most important institution of the black community in the South. Hence, the NAACP needed the premise of the church where it could meet for its own business.

Second, the NAACP also needed the church for its financial support in the South. In fact, the NAACP was largely financed through the black church. The financial aspect of the alliance between the church and the NAACP was so important that the NAACP created in 1947 "a Church Department for express purposes of coordinating activities between the churches and the NAACP and acquiring NAACP memberships and financial support from the church." Third, the NAACP needed ministers of various churches to work in the NAACP local branches in the South because the local units were important sources of support for national organization. Fourth, the NAACP had identity of interests with the churches as well in the sense that both organizations had been involved in the struggle for equality of black people in American society.

The overall relationships between the NAACP and the churches were, however, not one-sided because the local church ministers had developed their interests in the NAACP membership. The ministers needed to be familiar with the organizational culture as well as the functioning of a national organization. This type of alignment of the ministers with the NAACP not only sharpened their leadership quality but also made them locally visible. It also increased their social standing in the eyes of their congregations all over the South, though their affiliation with the NAACP also incurred the wrath of the white community as well, sometimes endangering them.



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### **6. Part E: Role of A Minister In The Crm**

A minister in a black church occupies an important position because he is an important official who not only manages the churches in day to day affairs but also represents his churches in all official transactions. A minister is highly educated and he is a charismatic personality. The church members display considerable commitment and loyalty to the minister. The black minister presides over the church hierarchy. He is an individual who is ultimately responsible for the overall functioning of the diverse committees and groups. The source of black minister's power is his charisma.

During the CRM, the charismatic ministers played important roles and churches thrived on the relationships that a charismatic minister produced between the churches and the congregations. [9] The churches wanted the ministers who could command the respect, support, and allegiance of congregations through their strong, magnetic personalities. Furthermore, the majority of the black ministers claimed to have been "called" to the ministry directly by God or at least by God's son through such agencies as dreams, personal revelation, or divine inspirations. Once such a call was accepted, a minister continued- in his perception and, usually, that of his congregation- to have a personal relationship with God. Clearly, to congregation's belief that such individuals enjoyed a direct pipeline to the Divine to set them off from the rest of the population.

These ministers became an integral part of CRM and they shaped the contours of the movement. They led the churches in the struggle for the rights of the black people since they felt it was their higher call to give leadership for their congregations. Ministers of different churches developed personal relationships among themselves and they had also developed city ministerial or an interdenominational alliance, through which they were able to debate and confer on issues important to the black community.

### **7. Conclusion:**

We are thus led to conclude that the role of the black church is synonymous with the overall CRM. We found that the black church played a vital role in establishing the Southern CRM. [9] They were equally effective in galvanizing community support which was crucial for the success of the movement. The church also played a significant role as a "movement churches." The church was such a pivotal organization that the NAACP had sought to ally itself with the church in the South. The ministers of the black churches had played a seminal role in the success of the overall CRM. One can thus say that there could be no CRM in the South without the contribution of black churches. In fact, the black church elevated the CRM to the stratus of a religiously driven social movement for the salvation of the black people in America. It is in this context that historian Albert Robateau remarked, "The Civil Rights Movement became a religious crusade" (quoted in Mellows in 10). And in that crusade, the black church waged a successful battle against those elements in American society who sought to deny them their basic rights and dignity as human beings.

What is the implication of the pivotal role of the black church in the CRM in the context of the politics of social change and history? Influenced by the project enlightenment, philosophers, sociologists and thinkers such as Max Weber, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Samuel Freud, Emile Durkheim and Anthony Giddens have postulated that informed by reason and rationality and science, societies would increasingly be modern and secular and the role of religion would disappear from social life. However, the exact opposite has happened in the social praxis because contrary to their expectations, religion has not disappeared; rather, it has become pervasive. [11] Barring Western Europe, religion has turned out to be a potent factor in social change since more and more people have turned to religion both for salvation and identity. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran which was mostly inspired by political Islam and championed by the supreme Iranian leader Ayatullah Ruhullah Khomeini proved that religion was still a potent factor both in social change and identity construction. The idioms of religion became more pervasive in the 1980s following the Islamic Revolution in Iran [12] and people slowly turned to the construction of identity based on religion. The Polish Catholic Church, egged by both the Papacy under the Polish Pope John Paul II and opportunistic politics of the Western bloc during the dying days of the East-West Cold War world politics, fuelled the Solidarity Movement and finally brought down communism in 1991. [13] Religious resurgence took place in almost all countries in the post-ideological world following the end of the Cold War and the present day world order has been witnessing pervasiveness of religion across national boundaries. Thus resurgence of religion has proved the promise of progress and modernity of the project enlightenment questionable and the vengeance of religion a reality in our life. [14]

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