

“We Walk By Faith”: Religion and Race During the Civil Rights Movement

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Abstract

Proudly Protestant and Evangelical, southerners consider themselves the religious backbone of America. Yet, in historical moments when the nation’s attention was centered on the South, few recognized Christian morality in the actions of many. How could a Citizen Council member burn a cross on Saturday and serve as a deacon on Sunday? This question found resonance in particular with southern blacks, whose churches were instrumental in challenging social injustice. This paper looks at the different understandings, not of the radicals, but of the majority of black and white southerners, about the role of religion in society and how this impacted the way they reacted to the civil rights movement. By looking at these groups from an inter-religious perspective, one is able to see how different they truly are and begin to build bridges and heal old wounds.

On April 16, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote his famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” in which he expressed disappointment with the white church that too often “remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows” while injustices took place outside (Bass 2001, 251). Like many others over the course of southern history, King searched for tangible proof of the white south’s commitment to Christian ideals. From slavery to racial violence following Reconstruction and the entrenchment of segregationists during the Civil Rights era, religious white southerners both ignored and perpetuated racial injustice with clean consciences, often under the sanction of the local church. The stances of black congregations throughout the South during the Civil Rights era have been well researched and documented, but few scholars have examined the stances of white congregations. By looking at the response of the white church in the South, scholars can see how the white interpretation of the church’s social responsibilities differs from that of its black counterpart and begin to examine how practitioners of a common faith can differ significantly in their understanding of what it means to be an adherent .

According to the historian Jason Sokol, “White southerners’ racial attitudes and behavior frequently revealed a confused and conflicted people, at times divided within and against themselves” (Sokol 2006, 14). Gunnar Myrdal, author of *An American*

Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy, similarly stated in 1944, “The conservative southerner is not so certain as he sometimes sounds. He is a split personality. Part of his heart belongs to the American Creed” (Myrdal 1944, 461-2). The conflict many white Christians faced stemmed from their sense of southern identity. Southern ideology mixed American symbols of equality, freedom, and justice with a profound allegiance to the South and its particular history (Manis 1987, 15). Southerners saw themselves as the best kind of Americans; their society shone as a pinnacle of American ideals. Religion played a major part in this concept of the South. A “Lost Cause” theology emerged following the Civil War as southerners tried to reconcile their self-perceived role as God’s chosen people with their defeat at the hands of northern infidels. Southerners interpreted the Confederacy’s loss as part of their divine purpose. They were now “baptized in the blood”; made purer by having survived God’s test and waiting patiently for the day they would be redeemed and guide America back to a truer form of Christianity (Wilson 2005, 469-70). Andrew Manis, who has dedicated his career to studying Southern civil religion, states, “One should view resistance to the integrationist goals of the civil rights movement as more than merely a hypocritical rejection of Christianity’s universal acceptance of all persons or as the captivity of the churches to the traditional Southern social and racial arrangements. This resistance also constituted a virtual pledge of allegiance to a Southern civil religion...that viewed desegregation and the movement that fostered it as a threat to its understanding of America’s sacred meaning as a nation (Manis 1999, 34).” By the 1960s, the South had begun to more closely resemble the rest of the country, but many of its white citizens still clung to the belief that it was set apart in its commitment to upholding the Christian ideal, an ideal that had little trouble ignoring racial injustice.

Just as a portion of Christians wrestled with the issue of slavery in the antebellum south, some found discontinuity between the words they professed and the world in which they lived. Raised in Sandersville in the 1920s, Grace Bryant Holmes struggled to justify the social hierarchy most of her life. In her memoirs, she recounts feeling connected to the black women who worked for her family, ate lunch alongside them in the kitchen, but who were not allowed to enter the house through the front door. She reflects “Every time I accepted a privilege denied to people of color, I knew the shame of hypocrisy. I was a slave to a system I sensed was out of joint, incompatible with the ideals of America and Christianity” (Holmes 2000, 93).

The fight against the Nazis in WWII further put the hypocrisy of segregation into stark relief for many, challenging the white supremacist mindset. People questioned whether or not they could wage war against “a Jew-Baiter in Germany” and support “a Negro-baiter in Georgia” (Tuck 2001, 28). Segregation became a source of moral dilemma for those who found it out of sync with Christian and American ideals. It required them to choose between their belief in both Biblical and Constitutional values

and the “southern way of life.” Giving up segregation meant turning one’s back on home and heritage. As the possibility of integration neared, many began to side with the southern consciousness, just as their ancestors had in the years leading up to the Civil War. Samuel S. Hill notes that many white southerners continued to believe that Southern churches represented the true Christian church and the universal ideal through the first half of the twentieth century. Southerners cast the region as an innocent victim of northern aggression and arrogance. Righteous indignation is evident in much of the language used to describe desegregation. Many perceived forced integration as a “mid-Twentieth Century reconstruction period” in which northern politicians crammed integration down white southern throats (Manis 1987, 79).

Black Georgians’ sense of identity closely mirrored that of their white counterparts. Blacks, too, had a strong belief in America’s promise of equality and freedom and an understanding that they were the agents of God, commissioned to raise America to its divinely appointed place as a Christian nation (Manis 1987, 50-56). Though similar in structure, the black and white sense of divine mission differed radically on the expectation of how a Christian nation would look. Traditionally, southern blacks emphasized that the blood of Christ made all men who accepted Him equal brothers. Black Christians revered America for its potential, but believed the country would not become a Christian nation until all men were treated as equals under the law. By challenging social injustice, the black community would help the country realize the promises set down in the Constitution. Challenges to Jim Crow took on a religious tone; ending segregation meant creating a society on earth that more closely mirrored the heavenly kingdom. For Fred Shuttlesworth, a prominent black activist in Alabama, “America was *not* a Christian nation...it was founded upon Christian principles, Christian pronouncements, Christian platitudes [but] it had really never been a Christian nation...And I think God intended it to be a Christian nation” (Manis 1987, 52).

Southern blacks saw the transformation of America into a Christian nation as part of their divine purpose. As such, blacks in Georgia expected the church to take the lead in changing the political order. As early as 1933, the General Missionary Baptists adopted a resolution stating, “the church has been too much divorced from politics” at their Macon convention (Manis 2004, 111). Black churches felt a responsibility to address social issues and began to look for ways to use their influence in the community to give a voice to the disenfranchised. The first real challenges to Jim Crow in the South occurred under the leadership of various black church leaders. Local ministers served as ambassadors to white politicians and had tremendous influence within the black community. They often headed branches of the NAACP, especially in rural areas.

Ministers were not the only Christians urging blacks to get involved in social protest. During the Macon, Georgia bus boycotts of 1962, black congregations proved

they would not support pastors unwilling to take a stance for freedom by placing clothing buttons in their collection plates. Offerings in some churches dropped by as much as ninety percent as members registered their disapproval of church leaders sitting on the fence (Tuck 2001, 141). Many black Christians agreed with prominent leader Martin Luther King, Jr. that the church “must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority. If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions” (King 1963).

While black Christians took the lead in challenging Georgia’s Jim Crow laws, their white neighbors often refused to acknowledge the changing racial landscape. Despite the decidedly Christian arguments used by black civil rights leaders and cooperation between some interracial groups, the majority of religious southerners continued to justify racial segregation, some using the argument that “God himself segregated the races” (Tuck 2001, 77). In 1955, Eugene Talmadge, whose stint as Georgia governor coincided with more lynchings than any comparable period since Reconstruction, published *You and Segregation* in which he partly defended segregation as a mark of obedience to God. Many believed that God mandated segregation and saw the Jim Crow social order as part of a divine plan (Manis 2004, 151). They also looked for other ways to divest themselves of any wrongdoing or discredit the black leaders who used the Bible against them. Some connected the Civil Rights Movement with communism (Manis 1987, 43-48). No danger was more real to America and its role as God’s chosen nation than the red threat. The atheistic component of communism made it an easy way for Christians to take a strong stance against anything that hinted at a socialist world order.

The vast majority of southern whites, however, simply overlooked racial tensions, not viewing themselves as racists, and so could nod in agreement to sermons about brotherhood on Sunday morning and continue to uphold segregation on Monday. Racists hated blacks, but most white southerners saw themselves as intimately connected to their black neighbors through a complex paternalistic rationalization. According to a South Carolinian,

You’ll see white and colored little kids playing together all the time. We live with ‘em all day...I don’t let ‘em come in and sit down at my table, sit in my living room, but they can come up to my back porch and talk to me anytime they want to. I carry them to the doctor, carry them to the hospital, loan ‘em money if they need it, do everything I can for ‘em” (Sellers 1962, 55).

Many southern whites simply did not view their social system as hypocritical.

As civil rights protests entered the local arena, most white churches did everything in their power to ignore what was happening on their city streets. While national denominations often took an official stance in support of civil rights activists, and certainly of new laws, their formal position rarely translated to the attitudes of individual congregations. As far as the Georgia Southern Baptist Convention was concerned, the opinion of the national convention didn't even extend to the state level. In 1956, the Convention's Social Service Commission recommended that Georgia Baptists accept the *Brown vs. Board* decision and cultivate an atmosphere in which public schools could comply with laws requiring integration. The state convention rejected the suggestions by a vote of three to one (Manis 1987, 70).

Part of the deafening silence from white churches stemmed from a different interpretation of the church's role in the political realm. White church leaders were the guardians of the status quo and the standing social order; while black churches felt called to shape modern history, white churches were content to observe it, choosing to place their emphasis more squarely on the world to come than on the possibilities of what the present world could be. This allowed white Christians to divorce social and political issues from their religious conscience. Following the *Brown vs. Board* decision, for instance, a Georgia Methodist declared that "Being a Christian is accepting the Lord Jesus Christ as my personal savior...just because I don't want my granddaughter going to school with a Negro boy, I don't see what that has to do with my being a Christian or not" (Sokol 2006, 52). This attitude underscores one of the primary differences between the South's black and white churches at the time. While black congregants were practically compelling their ministers to join the Civil Rights Movement, white preachers "did not, must not become involved in politics" (Holmes 2000, 124). It was not the place of the church to meddle in government policy.

White church leaders balanced precariously as they worked to negotiate between the official stances of the denomination and the sentiments of those in the pew (Sokol 2006, 50). Many ministers were more liberal than their church members, but were muzzled by strong feelings of congregational authority and independence found in southern churches. Baptist ministers served solely at the approval of their members. Those who spoke against desegregation often found themselves without a pulpit as angry deacons decided that it was better to exorcize leadership than risk splitting the church into warring factions (Holmes 2000, 126).

Denominations with more ecclesiastical structures also found ways to remove unwanted pastors, usually by creating a toxic atmosphere that forced ministers to resign. Reese Griffin resigned from his Methodist pastorate in 1956, just months after suggesting black and white children attend integrated church schools. The pastor wrote at the time, "It has come to the place where a minister will lose his pulpit if he says anything in favor of integration. It is not a matter of what he says nor how he says it. He

must dare not say anything at all” (Sokol 2006, 52-3). Deacons and church board members often called the shots in local churches, perhaps even quelling congregations willing to support a pastor’s liberal stance. This was evident to Lyndon Johnson who urged church leaders to take control of their congregations at the 1964 Southern Baptist Convention. Before a collection of some of the South’s leading ministers he entreated, “The leaders of states and cities are in *your* congregations, and they sit on *your* boards. Their attitudes are confirmed and changed by the sermons you preach and by the lessons you write and by the examples that you set” (Sokol 2006, 103). Too often, however, the example Johnson hoped for could not be found.

In the early sixties, black activists began taking their fight directly to southern white Christians by staging “kneel-ins” at central, prominent churches in order to place the problem of segregation “squarely on the hearts and the moral consciences of the white Christians in [the] community” (Tuck 2001, 114). Kneel-ins occurred on Sunday mornings at eleven o’clock, widely regarded as the most segregated hour in America. Typically, a group of black students attempted to enter a white sanctuary and join the congregation only to be turned away by deacons standing guard at the doors. While kneel-ins occurred throughout the South, some of the earliest took place in Georgia. On August 7, 1960, black college students simultaneously visited six white Atlanta churches. With the exception of First Presbyterian and St. Phillip Episcopal Church, all refused to allow the students into the sanctuary, though several churches offered to let students listen from the foyer. One church set up a loudspeaker in a downstairs Sunday school room for the students (Beantly 1960).

The first kneel-ins did not receive a wide press, but they did lead many Georgia churches to create contingency plans in case they were faced with a similar problem. The board of elders at First Presbyterian Church in Athens agreed to welcome any visitors who came to the church, regardless of race. But the receptive attitude quickly dissipated. In the fall of 1962, Harold Black entered the University of Georgia as a freshman; he was the first black male to live on campus. Many of Black’s friends attended First Presbyterian and routinely invited him to join them on Sunday morning. At his initial visit, the congregation exhibited no animosity, but within several weeks hostility mounted, forcing the minister, Reverend William Adams, to rescind his initial support of Black. Adams explained to Black that his presence offended many parishioners and, if continued, might lead to violence within the church and damage its reputation. Black “chose” not to return the following Sunday (Pratt 2002, 123-5). The experience of the students in Atlanta and Harold Black in Athens were typical of most kneel-ins. Though white deacons seldom responded with violence, blacks were firmly turned away from the church, overlooking the evangelical emphasis on fulfilling Christ’s command to preach the gospel to all the world.

On September 2, 1966 Ralph McGill ran an article in his nationally syndicated series about the controversy swirling around a small church in Macon, Georgia. At the time, Tattnall Square Baptist Church was a 75-year-old congregation located on the edge of Mercer's campus. Originally erected to serve the religious needs of students, faculty, and the surrounding neighborhood, the Church had just voted 286 to 109 to exclude black students – including those studying for the ministry at Mercer – from attending services. McGill calls the Christianity of Tattnall Square into question, underscoring the contradictions between their actions and the character of Christianity. He concludes:

The essence of Christianity was that Christ was incarnate – was made man and lived in man's world in order to fulfill the prophesy of atoning for man. Yet, Christianity today is burdened down by churches that are afraid of the world and of Christ in it – of God in it...Whatever the future of the Christian church is to be, one of its footnotes will be that of a church calling itself Christian, located on the campus of a church-related university, refusing to allow colored students to worship. If this were not so ineffably sad, it would be hysterically funny (McGill 1966).

McGill's summary of the situation brought national attention to the small church and criticism of white southern Christianity. Embarrassed, many southern Christians saw Tattnall Square's stance as a crime and were outraged by its willingness to condemn a lost world to darkness. Following the church's decision, Holmes received more than 200 responses from all over the world, many from SBC missionaries who believed that what happened at Tattnall Square was detrimental to the global Christian cause. Local Christians also criticized the message Tattnall Square sent to non-Christians by supporting segregation. Though Tattnall Square refused to admit blacks into their services, another Macon church, Vineville Baptist, after debate, decided to offer membership to Mercer's black students. In doing so it became the first church in the Georgia Baptist Convention to do so since the Civil War.

Conclusion

Because southern blacks conducted the civil rights movement as a moral and religious campaign, whites had a chance at reconciliation, and many later admitted their Christian stance supporting segregation was both unfounded and a moral burden upon their lives (Sokol 2006, 324). *The Christian Index*, a publication of the Georgia Baptist Convention, ran an article in 1966 condemning churches that turned away blacks, explaining,

We recognize that we have not been successful in dealing with some of the most difficult social problems of our time...may we pray for increased wisdom, for a fuller measure of compassion, and for the guidance of the Holy Spirit in dealing with problems which defy solution until resolved in the spirit of Lord Jesus.

Mercer University declared that Tattnell Square's decision was a "denial of the relevancy of Jesus Christ as Savior in the 20th Century life" ("Macon Church Needs Our Prayers," 6; "Mercer Comments on Church's Decision," A8). The challenge to white Christians in the South was whether their social actions conformed to their theological beliefs. In time, it seems that they came to.

Any study of southern history and culture must be approached with a willingness to negotiate the complex and often conflicting beliefs that influenced the actions of so many in the South. Religion played a vital role in shaping how southern blacks and whites viewed themselves and their divine purpose, but it was intricately tied to the South's unique history and shared memory. Southern black Christianity is distinctive from its white counterpart, just as southern Christianity is distinctive. The differences between these two groups are best seen in areas in which the two clash: the role of the church in society, America's status as a Christian nation, and the conceptualization of Christian brotherhood and equality. Though the South has come along way since the fifties and sixties, these themes continue to have relevance to its religious communities.

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