

NEWS & OPINIONS

Creating Christian Cultures of Transformation and Empowerment

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A Transformative Movement

Black Lives Matter (BLM) and the larger Movement for Black Lives (M.BL) of which it is a part, seek Black liberation by transforming traditional cultures and deconstructing frameworks that perpetuate oppression. Emphasizing the diverse social locations within the Black community, they struggle on many fronts, organizing intersectionally, from the bottom up, and connecting local, national, and international issues, to produce holistic and broadly inclusive strategies and solutions (Black Lives Matter 2021a). Using this transformative approach, they challenge any structures of power and privilege that perpetuate conditions of injustice by targeting existing beliefs, structures, and policies for critique and change (Shields 2010). Although it has played important roles in the struggle for Black liberation in the past, the Black Church is not excluded from the M.BL critique.

At the heart of this issue of *On Knowing Humanity*, in articles by Vongvirath, Scott and Burroughs, is an essential and enduring dilemma confronting not only White and multiethnic churches, but also and especially the Black Church. According to C. Eric Lincoln, Black Christians and their churches have always considered “whether to struggle at all with the powers and principalities of this world,” particularly regarding race, in the context of Christian faith (Lincoln 1974). In their research and discourses about how Christians should respond to the Black Lives Matter Movement, one thread that runs through Burroughs’, Scott’s, and Vongvirath’s articles connects racism, church, and power. Black radical Christians and the Black Prophetic Church have historically engaged earthly and spiritual power on behalf of the least, those suffering and often invisible. They and contemporary Christians who continue to engage the M.BL as well as other just causes adapt a culture of

sustained transformation based on a commitment to seek freedom as their calling.

However, as Gayraud Wilmore explained in *Black Religion and Black Radicals* (1983), Black Christian responses to oppression typically fit within a continuum from survivalism to radicalism. Survivalist Black Christians focused on providing leadership and strategies for the Black masses to survive the violence and trauma of racism in the U.S. by securing the skills and acumen established as standards acceptable to White society. This approach was intended to facilitate assimilation and ward off violent attacks by White mobs and the state. Radical Black Christians, in contrast, sought holistic change. They endeavored to establish means of independent thinking and livelihoods to thrive within the full range of blackness, whether in the U.S. or beyond, often in conflict with White society. Neither of these was definitively distinct, as all were prone to practice both, yet among most, at least one tendency was dominant.

Wilmore also notes that since the 1970’s, Black radicals and Black Christians have increasingly disengaged. Black radicals have become progressively more secular, while Black Christians have become increasingly more conservative. In contrast, when Black radicals and Black Christians were organically engaged, Christianity and radicalism reinforced one another. On one hand, during emancipation, civil rights, and Black power struggles, the Black church was a foundational organization for planning, mobilizing, and sustaining political action, and Black faith was an intentional inspiration for radical change. On the other hand, radicalism challenged Black Christians to plumb the depths of biblical understanding, from their own experiences and understanding, to answer critical questions about our condition, identity, and ethics. Ultimately, radicalism challenged the Black Church to a continually relevant theology.

The MBL and Black Church Survivalism

Today, Black churches and their leaders continue to contend with whether to engage the MBL. Some argue as Dr. Harold A. Carter Jr., Pastor of New Shiloh Baptist Church of Baltimore stated,

There are some significant things that have impacted the Black Church. The movements that made the church great in the culture of who I am and who African Americans are had a God . . . [as in] the Civil Rights Movement [for instance]. The Black Lives Matter Movement has no God. That's a major deficit. (Soul of a Nation 2020)

Most criticisms from MBL focus on these kinds of Christian views, highlighting the classism, sexism, and gender discrimination prevalent in past Black liberation movements.

Black Lives and the Acceptability Politics Critique

As Burroughs identifies complicity with established power as an important reason for White Evangelical/Southern churches' support of racially divisive politics and opposition to the Black Lives Matter Movement, the MBL also offers scathing critiques of Black leaders, including church leaders, who are neither relevant nor responsive to the Black community. MBL critiques of "acceptability politics" confront the survivalist tendency among Black Christians. They view the Black Church as so committed to self-preservation, it becomes neglectful and lacks courage to defend and care for its own. A clergy member participating in protests in Ferguson, MI reflected upon this:

What young people are feeling is we're out here and we have to fight all of these adults and the church ought to be the people who are fighting the adults with us or for us, and they're not. Instead, we're getting harassed and mistreated and shot and killed by the police and the church turns to us and says, 'Well, you need to pull up your pants,' or, 'You need to be more respectable and that will change things,' rather than go to the police and say, 'Hey, stop messing with our kids.' And so, I'm just waiting for somebody to come out and say to the police, 'Stop messing with our kids.' (Francis 2015, 97)

Moreover, MBL activists criticize Black leaders, secular and Christian, whose first response to Black anger is to pacify, and even condemn, protesters rather than to represent their concerns. This critique is grounded in the realization of the stark class division emerging among Blacks in the U.S. Noting that this era has produced numerous Black elected officials, Black millionaires, and desegregated police forces, yet persistent "impoverishment, suffering and vilification" (Ransby 2018) of a large Black underclass, MBL activists consider it their role to hold Black leaders accountable.

Black Lives and the Hetero-Patriarchy Critique

In multiethnic churches, Scott connects unresolved racism rooted in White Christians' sense of entitlement to power, to their resistance to share in support of Black leadership and lukewarm response to the Black Lives Matter Movement. Similarly, the MBL distinguishes this movement from past movements that typically centered heterosexual men, omitting women, queer, and transgender people from leadership, and ignoring their concerns without consideration and sustained redress. Instead, BLM highlights ways in which Black women, and especially Black trans women, are violated, and the differently abled are made invisible (Black Lives Matter 2021a). To ensure a movement that brings all Black people to the forefront, BLM centers those who have been marginalized within Black liberation movements in the past. The BLM challenges any efforts to systematically target Black lives for demise, affirms Black humanity, and highlights Black contributions to society, encouraging Black resilience in the face of deadly oppression (Black Lives Matter 2021b).

For example, Pastors and activists from BLM delivered a critique of Black Christian leadership, during "Black Lives and the Fullness Thereof? A Town Hall Conversation on Spirituality, Sexual Politics and Social Justice," on Monday, September 28, 2015, at Mother Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, PA. The Reverend Dr. Leslie Callahan (2015) described how during one BLM Sunday, citywide gathering, those leading the service were all men and invited only men to come forward for prayer. This very intervention, to raise consciousness of how Black life is devalued in larger society, showed just how much the same kind of intervention is needed in the Black Church where the lives of Black women and the LGBTQAI are

continuously devalued. Black churches were characterized as cities of refuge for only some, but for others, centers of bigotry, homophobia, and dogma. Participants shared their own stories of discrimination based upon gender and one speaker told of their queer parents being asked to leave a congregation. Dr. Imani Perry declared that she is “Opposed to everything church stands for on gender and sexuality” (2015) and others challenged Black churches to consistently advance theologies of freedom and liberation in Jesus among all who are oppressed and marginalized, including those persecuted because of queerness in the Black Church (Pitts 2015).

The MBL and Black Churches in the Prophetic Tradition

Other Black church leaders find themselves called to support BLM like Rev. Dr. Leah Gunning Francis, author of *Ferguson & Faith: Sparking Leadership & Awakening Community*, who wrote the following:

So, I marched, prayed, organized, held vigil, lectured, protested, and passed out supplies—all in an attempt to bear witness to this tragedy and work toward social change. And I was not alone . . . As a woman of faith, I did not separate my actions in pursuit of justice for Michael Brown from my faith. Instead, I understood them as an expression of my faith. My faith, or my belief and trust in God, motivated me to join the efforts to seek justice and provide care. My faith was integral to my works, and, together, enabled me to embody my ideas of faithfulness in this time of communal distress (2015).

Historically, researchers characterized Black Christians and churches that acted in this vein as “Black political churches,” those actively attempting to influence government to address the problems of the Black community. They were powerful and capable in mobilizing the Black community to political activism (Harris 1999; Tate 1991). The effectiveness of “Black political churches,” scholars conclude, was based upon their shared experiences in Black traditions: church leaders were trained in Black denominations, by Black organizations that emphasized the priorities of Blacks (Morris 1984; Paris 1991); ecumenically and organizationally, worship and religious activities preserved a distinct Black culture (Dawson 1994; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Reese and Brown 1995); and, large,

civil rights churches, located in Black communities of major urban centers, played a leading political role, employing their considerable economic and political resources to effectively solve social problems in the surrounding community (Billingsley 1999; McDaniel 2001; Morris 1984).

During the 20th century, it would further become apparent that not only were some Black churches political, but also Black politics were Christian. The politics of equal treatment in education, workplaces, and social institutions, reflected a Black Church theology that imbricated Black theology and Black ideology borne of the black experience. Black Prophetic Christians challenged Black Christians to uncover in scriptures means of physical survival, psychic stability, and ultimately political liberation.

Black Prophetic theology presented God as the God of justice who put down the mighty and exalted the low, liberated Hebrews from Egypt and gathered them back after they were scattered and oppressed to rebuild lives of safe refuge because they were committed to God’s work. Jesus, in performing miracles, casting out demons, continuously struggling against Satan, and ultimately sacrificing himself, modeled and empowered his followers to do the same. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, the biblical and Black masses were afforded means of personal freedom and self-determination, but moreover, the Holy Spirit represented the coming judgment and vengeance of God for the mortal sins of white oppressors, by concealed and illusory methods, already breaking into this world (Wilmore 1983).

Reading the Bible “from below” (Hendricks Jr. 2011), in this manner, coupled organically with new Black political ideologies and independent Black political parties, opposing capitalism, colonialism and apartheid (Cone 1970; Gramby-Sobukwe 2005; Hopkins 1989). From this perspective, Christianity throughout biblical history was borne of and established by a radical social movement. Drawing from the lived experiences of people of African descent, from independent societies and cultures, through enslavement, colonialism and imperialism, Bible history is viewed as the story of the masses breaking from the status quo of their oppressive feudal domination. The biblical movement comprises the masses, developing in faith and emerging in power; visionary leaders guide the masses collectively, prophets sacrifice themselves to politically educate and organize the masses; and the Messiah, Jesus, through his life, death and resurrection collapses emerging

western epistemological conceptions of materialism and idealism. From this vantage point, the Bible is a radical manifesto, producing progressive politics and economics.

Transforming Church Cultures: Learning from the Black Prophetic Tradition

As Vongvirath considers whether and how Christians do and should engage in the Black Lives Matter Movement, ultimately challenging Christians to responsibly contest earthly power with their spiritual power by supporting movements for justice, prophetic churches address political concerns of their community-at-large as a matter of principle. As a model, the Black Prophetic Church is politically activist. As Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) note, first, Black Prophetic churches prioritize “involvement in political concerns and activities in the wider community” (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, 12). These prophetic functions, second, are targeted to serve not only the body of Christian believers, but society at large. The Black Prophetic church considers it a Christian responsibility to transform society both by uplifting the weak and by “pronouncing a radical word of God’s judgment” (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990, 12) for those active and complicit in oppression (Paris 1985). Therefore, third, Black Prophetic churches are typically politically progressive. Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) describe them as “networks of liberation” (12). Michael and Julia Corbett, Corbett and Wilson (2014) as well as Robert Wuthnow (1988) associate the “prophetic function” with a version of U.S. civil religion that prioritizes religion’s responsibility to question and challenge the status quo to spur progress in addressing complex political issues. Essentially, Black Prophetic churches promote political change, ranging from legal reform to radically dismantling oppressing systems and reimagining and recreating new structures and processes (Wilmore 1983).

From this perspective, God *is* in Black Lives Matter. As the Movement for Black Life is wholistically committed to the liberation and transformation of Black and oppressed people, so too are prophetic Christians and churches living out their faith in ways that transform church cultures to continually exorcise internal and external exploitation. These combined efforts promote radically reimagining what it means to be church, by establishing, as a priority, a commitment to hear from, speak to, and affirm the oppressed; to resist domination and promote

flourishing; and, to perpetuate traditions of justice, such as providing sanctuary, hope, and response to suffering and impoverishment. To reconceive of church in this manner is an act of faith, assuredly reconceptualizing, as well, worship, songs, prayers, liturgies, and theologies to continually seek liberation as a matter of our soul salvation (Carvalhaes 2020, 5).

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