

CHAPTER 11

Prophecy in the Streets: Prophetic Politics, Rhetoric, and Practices during the Civil Rights Movement

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INTRODUCTION

The range of descriptions of African American religious experiences has traditionally fallen between the sacred and the profane. Particularly, for African American religious experiences the Black Church has been viewed as the most sacred aspect of Black religious communities. Subsequently, the Black Church has been described as the driving force behind the agenda of Black leaders during the Civil Rights Movement.¹ However, it was not the Black Church that was the defining attribute of African American religious experiences during the middle of the twentieth century; rather, it was a particular idea that many held most sacred. The way African Americans testified to their own experience can be described as a prophetic testimony. The notion of prophecy was the force that inspired many leaders to use their day-to-day experiences as testimonies to start a movement that went beyond accommodation with the goal of transformation. In this context, prophetic testimony must be examined through the lens of political theology alongside history. The category of political theology helps to emphasize the deep connection between faith (a theological claim) and the exercise of faith (a political claim). In other words, political theology combines pragmatic functions of faith with the way it is practiced.

¹ Most notably this argument was made in David Chappell, *A Stone Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004). In this work he argued that the church movements and revivalism were the key elements that forced social and political change especially in the South.

There were many movement leaders who did not separate their faith connection from daily activities. For them, the Black Church was more than an institution used to appeal to a higher power. It shaped their very existence. Political theology helps to articulate this point. Specifically, political theology nuances how to understand prophecy. The Black Church tradition's prophetic ideology can be understood through the categories of prophetic rhetoric, the politics of the prophetic, and the prophetic practices of freedom.² Together these categories form a framework to better understand the religious influence of prophetic religion on the Civil Rights Movement.

PARADOX IN THE BLACK CHURCH

Frequently, the Black Church tradition has been viewed as the most sacred space for African Americans. Consequently, Black Church institutions have been acknowledged as the center for social justice movements within Black communities. Yet whether it is through examining the classical period of the Civil Rights Movement or a look at modern day religious leaders, there has not been one specific way that Black communities have sought to liberate their identities from a world that has not often recognized their humanity. Past examples include the crusades of organizations such as the Nation of Islam and the Pan-African Movement, while the Black Lives Matter Movement is a current example. This has led to numerous paradoxical responses to both civil rights and social movements from Black religious organizations. The paradox that occurs across the spectrum of Black Church institutions is deeply rooted in the historical context from which the traditions have developed.

During the period of enslavement in the United States slave masters recognized that religion could be used as a form of social control, especially in Southern states. Slave

² The reader should note that a fuller discussion of the specific meaning of these terms will occur later in this chapter. However, to be the separation of these three is mainly used for analytical purposes and not practical. In fact, many movement leaders would serve as good as examples for all three expressions of the prophetic, and it is difficult to discern where one aspect ends and the other begins in some cases.

owners allowed slaves to hear biblical scripture, but only in so far as it reinforced the narrative that required their subordination to their masters.³ Many slave owners realized that controlled religion could be used to make their slaves docile and subordinate. Slaves were typically allowed to have their own services where either a White overseer or another slave gave a sermon based on the guidance of the master. In other words, officially sanctioned Black churches were under the supervision of White pastors who used religion as a way to reinforce their social and political agenda.⁴ To further limit any form of autonomy in Black churches, laws were created that prevented slaves from assembling together for “worship” or for any other purpose between sunrises and sunsets, even with a White master present in many Southern states. The only exception to these rules occurred when the slave masters took their slaves to an ordained White minister who regularly conducted services.⁵ Furthermore, the influence of White masters on many Black Churches created a religious benevolence between slave and slave master that helped to keep intact the moral order that served to justify both the institution of slavery and the treatment of slaves. Slaveholders had a religious imperative to make money and to have a comfortable living, as long as they were faithful to God. Masters were supposed to take great interest in the slave’s security because it would benefit both the slave and the owner. They also had the responsibility of teaching the slaves good behavior and morality.

They believed that religious instruction of the Black slaves would promote both their morality and their religion. Black churches became the ideal institution to realize the creation of a Christian interracial community. In these communities, slave owners would benevolently rule over their slaves, who were presumed to be satisfied with their positions in life.⁶ This form of social control had some success with slaves. Most did not subscribe to the benevolent master motif that was impressed upon them, but the combination of

³ Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (NEW YORK: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁴ *Ibid*, 137.

⁵ *Ibid*, 138.

⁶ *Ibid*, 165.

various methods of oppression left many slaves in desperate need of hope from some source. Many who chose to challenge the dominant narrative had hope in a political freedom that was possible only in the afterlife. The language of the slave spirituals makes proclamations such as: "I'm gonna wait upon the Lord till my change comes."⁷ This represents one polarity in which the Black Church was pulled. Indeed, this ideology continued well beyond the period of African enslavement and into the Civil Rights Movement era.

Many African Americans chose not to participate in civil rights protests and demonstrations because of their firm belief in God's ability to create the necessary social change without human intervention. An interview with both Black church leaders as well as their parishioners during the 1960s is evidence of this perception. Gary Marx quotes a parishioner from a Detroit church who states her thoughts on political activism: "I don't go for demonstrations. I believe that God created all men equal and at His appointed time He will give every man his portion, no one can hinder it."⁸ Although this comment is only one anecdote, it was by no means an isolated incident. Perhaps the most recognized religious activist group during the Civil Rights Movement was Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). This organization sought tirelessly to incorporate political activism as a staple of the everyday practice of Christianity. However, despite its popularity there were many Black religious leaders who were highly critical of the organization because of its perceived over-involvement in politics. It has been estimated that as many as ninety percent of Black ministers shunned the activities of the SCLC.⁹

However, alongside this view of political and social activism in the Black Church tradition, there is another perspective that has an equally rich history. Social activism and divine liberation in the here and now have also been a distinct characteristic. African slave

⁷ Gary Marx, "Religion: Opiate or Inspiration of Civil Rights Militancy among Negroes," *American Sociological Review*, 32:1 (1967), 70.

⁸ Marx, "Religion," 72.

⁹ Alison Calhoun-Brown, "Upon This Rock: The Black Church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights," *Political Science and Politics*, 33:2 (2000), 172.

preachers such as Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner actively fought the injustices of slavery through political activism, going so far as to physically rebel and subsequently sacrifice their lives for justice in the now.¹⁰ Marx noted that Black churches became the first platform from which protest organizations began and even served as the meeting place where protests and strategies were planned.¹¹ It became the basis for a sophisticated social consciousness and the spearhead for advocacy of social justice and change. Thus, even during the period of slavery many Blacks recognized that emancipation from the politics of the slavery institution could start from a religious foundation found in the Black Church tradition.¹² Before the Civil War, there were many African Americans who attended churches with their White masters and heard sermon after sermon encouraging them to work with blind obedience. However, many of the slaves held their own services where they preached a much different message. Although slave ministers were not always literate, they would preach the messages foretelling of their deliverance and condemning the evils of slavery according to biblical passages. Such messages allowed them to have a view of God that identified with their suffering and that would also ordain their insubordination against the slave institution.¹³

Furthermore, the Free Church Movement arose in the North to not only counter religious teachings that supported slavery, but also in direct opposition to the racism toward African Americans that existed in the North and South. By the 1700s, there was a small number of African American churches with independence from White congregations although many Black congregations shared the same worship space as White congregations. Many of those Black congregations still faced discrimination and segregation from White churches who refused to see African Americans as equal. In 1791, Black ministers Absalom Jones and Richard Allen decided to protest the unjust treatment of Black people in the Methodist Episcopal Church by walking out during the service. Just

¹⁰ Kenneth Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution* (NEW YORK: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 158.

¹¹ Marx, "Religion," 65.

¹² Emancipation from the politics of the slave institution was necessary outside the period of enslavement. The politics of this institution governed policies in both the North and South for most of the 20th century.

¹³ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 169.

a few years later, both men played pivotal roles in the development in one of the earliest and most politically active Black church denominations, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church. The AME church openly opposed all forms of racism and discrimination and openly supported the political work of abolitionists to end slavery.

Although the Free Church Movement led to the creation of Black denominations with a strong sense of social activism and call to liberation, there were still some Black congregations with strong connections to White churches in South, even after the Civil War. Throughout churches in the South, African Americans tested the authority of their former master.¹⁴ Initially many African Americans attended White churches, but they began to recognize the hypocrisy of both the clergy and White parishioners and broke away from those churches. Hasan Jeffries elaborated on this process, specifically in Lowndes County, Alabama. In 1871, members of a local Baptist church in Lowndes officially broke away from the White church that it was a part of and created a new church. During this process, they gained their own religious autonomy and further shaped the religious tradition of the Black Church.¹⁵ Although these churches did not have sophisticated structures, they still served as the epicenter for African American social experiences and as a place for social networking with services that were essential to the survival of Black communities. These buildings also housed secret societies that strategized about facilitating the total emancipation of African Americans. Groups such as the Knights of Wise Men, the Knights of Pythias, and Odd Fellows mobilized resources that would be necessary to advocate for social change and freedom rights.¹⁶ Although their overall mission was to obtain freedom rights, they carefully and cautiously planned a way to achieve their goals. They meticulously calculated the cost and benefits for each way to achieve their goals and chose a few options to pursue. For example, they planned to obtain social autonomy by withdrawing completely from White churches, controlling

¹⁴ Hasan Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (NEW YORK: New York University Press, 2009), 11.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 12.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 13.

their labor, and becoming literate.¹⁷ Similar stories could be told about Black congregations in localities across the rural South.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE MEANING OF PROPHECY IN THE MOVEMENT

The purpose of exploring the paradox found in the Black Church is to understand how two seemingly contradictory ideologies can exist within the same religious tradition. This paradox also highlights the fact that there was not one specific religious lifestyle for Black communities historically, even within the Black Church. Finally, it alludes to the fact that the prophetic call is not inherent in African American religious traditions. Rather, the notion of prophecy works as a specific religious belief system that is translated into everyday practices. The influence of the prophetic tradition on the everyday lives of African American communities during the classic period of the Civil Rights Movement can be described using the term prophetic testimony. Prophetic testimony describes the relationship between individual religious encounters and how those encounters are simultaneously shaped by the community. To state it simply, individuals with deep religious convictions translate those convictions into activism on behalf of their community. In the context of the Civil Rights Movement, prophetic testimony created religious grounds for African Americans to demand their rights to be treated as human subjects. Furthermore, it created a God-ordained imperative for African Americans to do whatever was necessary to create communal thriving. Many Civil Rights leaders who embodied this view of prophetic testimony were not satisfied with merely gaining civic accommodations; rather they yearned for something much deeper. In many respects they were embarking on a quest to have their full humanity recognized both socially and politically.

Furthermore, prophetic testimony also involves living out the prophetic vision. For many movement leaders, prophecy articulated a socio-political practice that transcended

¹⁷ Ibid, 14.

culture.¹⁸ Prophecy plays a social role to mediate between humanity and the realities that are outside of their control, but nevertheless profoundly affects the fates of their community. Prophetic testimony created the responsibility for movement leaders to announce their prophetic vision. During the Civil Rights Movement it involved publicly denouncing social injustice and to speak the truth to systemic power structures. It involved the use of powerful rhetoric/language to invoke a move toward social justice. The prophetic announcement is a passionate plea towards an audience to critically engage in self-reflection. It is a contestation of political and hierarchical order.¹⁹ Finally, a prophetic announcement speaks imperatively and unequivocally not about a religious dogma but about the acknowledgement of the pain and suffering of disenfranchised people.²⁰

PREDECESSORS TO THE CIVIL RIGHTS ERA

It is important to note that there are many examples of how African Americans relied on a prophetic vision through churches and other religious organization prior to the classic Civil Rights Movement era. African American preachers and abolitionists such as Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, David Walker, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and many more fought to have the right of all African Americans recognized. However, there were also several organizations that mobilized large numbers of African Americans and Whites in the struggle for freedom and equality. An early example of politics of the prophetic involved the mobilization of both Black and White women in the Women's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).²¹

¹⁸ Vincent W. Lloyd, *Race and Political Theology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 235.

¹⁹ Walter Steven, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and Imagination* (NEW YORK: Vintage, 1951).

²⁰ Ibid, 237.

²¹ Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

By the end of the nineteenth century, many women were able to take advantage of the rights that they and their husbands won during and after Reconstruction. Most importantly, they were able to capitalize on the opportunity to receive an education. They were most often educated at seminaries, which offered free education. These women left the seminaries with zeal to fight for racial and gender equality. Education provided a real possibility for some women of color to exercise political freedom. They were driven by an ethos of usefulness. Their theological training gave them the spiritual conviction to strive for changes in society. The WCTU also served as a testimony to their prophetic faith and its application. These women of color, in some cases, had even more opportunities than White women.²² By joining organizations like the WCTU, women of color did not have to choose between education and marrying. They were able to create interracial alliances with White women. White women in these organizations knew that they needed the support of African American women to be truly effective. They used their religious motivation to fight for access to political power. However, around the turn of the twentieth century White supremacy usurped this movement to isolate the issue of race to divide the White women from the women of color.

One incident that facilitated this division was the 1898 Wilmington White Supremacist Campaign in North Carolina. Democrats, in an effort to regain political power in the state, formed a campaign to unite the White population against African Americans. They used newspaper propaganda and dynamic speeches to present the progressive alliance between the Black and White working class as a threat to all White people. Specifically, Blacks were portrayed as dangerous to the safety of White women, which effectively ended the interracial meetings of the WCTU. As the campaign continued, Black voters were intimidated from voting by groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. Similar strategies were used throughout the South to dissuade interracial alliances and to limit the impact of groups such as the WCTU.²³ Although this alliance did not last long, it showed that even in a period that predated the classical period of the Civil Rights Movement, the

²² Ibid, 56.

²³ Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow*.

prophetic vision capable of social transformation was alive and well. It also demonstrates the power of the prophetic to transcend racial and gender alliances to fight for justice.

RHETORIC OF THE PROPHETIC

The field of political theology provides the context to understand the function of prophetic testimony during the Civil Rights Era and to analyze the categories of rhetoric, politics, and practices during the Movement.²⁴ African American leaders during the Movement were motivated by a view that saw prophecy as more than a rhetorical position, or way of speaking. They saw it as an office that they felt compelled to hold. Taking the office of a prophet required a public practice that was open to revision.²⁵ When leaders took on this position, they also made the decision to engage their communities with prophetic speech. They did not meet any specific requirement to take up the position; rather, they simply shared the common conviction to engage in critiques of society and culture. Their prophetic testimonies condemned various forms of socio-political injustices. Many of these leaders relied on the biblical roots of their faith to inform the voice that they used as a prophetic critique of the U.S. during the second half of the twentieth century. Martin Buber notes of the office of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible, "Biblical prophets neither decree fate nor predict the future but rather seek a decision about the constitutive commitments and practices of the people they address."²⁶ Thus, leaders during the Civil Rights Movement not only saw their prophetic testimonies as critiques of society but also of faith practices and religious institutions. They questioned what it meant to be American and Christian with respect to the norms of racism, segregation, and the consistent defiling of human life by White Christians throughout the United States.

The rhetoric used during the classic period of the Civil Rights Movement has been analyzed by various scholars. Houck and Dixon note that the notions of biblical prophecy

²⁴ Lloyd, *Race and Political Theology*, 235.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Martin Buber, *The Prophetic Faith* (NEW YORK: Harper & Row, 1949) 81.

were the rhetorical hinge on which the movement pivoted.²⁷ It was not confined to churches or pulpits. Prophetic rhetoric was used at funerals, during marches, in political speeches, at conferences, during interviews, and in practically any place where there was an audience. There were many movement leaders who helped to transform a nation through their prophetic speeches. There are famous speeches from well-known movement figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, Stokely Carmichael, and Ella Baker. It is no secret that the speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. helped to shape an entire nation's view on the civil rights struggle. His "I Have a Dream" speech was the keynote address during the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. In that speech he spoke of his biblical vision for a world that provided equal opportunities for all people regardless of skin color. His speech called out many racist practices in Southern states and was pivotal in placing civil rights legislation at the top of the political agenda for the White House. This speech remains one of his most recognizable speeches today. However, alongside the famous speeches, there were other ones that were equally as impactful. Leaders such as Cleveland Jordan, Ed King, Lawrence Campbell, Dave Dennis, and Mamie Till-Bradley all made use of prophetic rhetoric to advocate for their cause.

Mamie Till-Bradley has recently become more recognized for her contribution to womanist scholarship. She has become iconic in the field because of her representation of the grieving Black woman who finds strength through her pain. Through her courage and conviction, she helped to inspire a generation of activists, while simultaneously helping to define Black womanhood in the midst of oppression.²⁸ Her actions in 1955 following her son Emmett's brutal murder in Money, Mississippi, made her a hero for many people. She had his remains shipped back to Chicago and insisted on an open-casket funeral. She wanted any and all to see the vile ugliness of racism in America. The

²⁷ Davis Houck and David Dixon, *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006) 6.

²⁸ Katie Cannon, Emilie Townes, Angela Sims, *Womanist Theological Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011) 176.

images from the casket appeared in several prominent newspapers and magazines.²⁹ During the trial of her son she traveled to Sumner, Mississippi, and gave a speech relaying her agony and pain.³⁰

Perhaps her most memorable speech occurred on October 29, 1955, several weeks after her son's murder trial had officially ended in a not guilty verdict.³¹ At a Baltimore rally for the NAACP at Bethel AME Church, Till-Bradley evoked prophetic rhetoric by using God's presence as guidance to how her suffering would move the struggle for freedom and civil rights forward. She stated both religiously and secularly what the death of her son meant to her: "I thank God that he felt that I was worthy to have a son that was worthy to die for such a worthy cause... I have invested a son in freedom and I'm determined that his death isn't in vain."³² Throughout her speech she called for many to sacrifice their comfort to "make this world one we would be proud of."³³ She likened her loss to Abraham when he had to sacrifice his only son Isaac. She reiterated the point that everyone must come to terms with reality someday: in order for lasting change to occur, people must be committed to the cause, and true commitment meant the willingness to sacrifice everything for justice and freedom. For her this included her own son.³⁴

The most powerful moment of this speech was when she called out the virulent racism that haunted America, and more specifically Mississippi. She described her anxiety trying to find out information about her son. While Soviet Russia had an "Iron Curtain," while the state of Mississippi had what she called a "Cotton Curtain."³⁵ It was nearly impossible for her to find the whereabouts of her son. No one wanted to utter the unspeakable. She stated that her aim in telling her story was to pinpoint the conditions that made her son's death possible and the conditions that made the country a farce of

²⁹ All the newspapers where his image was published were Black-owned because White newspapers and magazines would not publish the images.

³⁰ Houck and Dixon, *Rhetoric Religion*, 131.

³¹ *Ibid*, 132.

³² *Ibid*.

³³ *Ibid*, 133.

³⁴ *Ibid*.

³⁵ *Ibid*.

a democracy. Despite her despair and the grief that she felt, Mamie Till-Bradley ended her speech with hope for transformation in the now. She stated: "I don't think that freedom is so far away that we are not going to enjoy it. I think that pretty soon this thing is going to be over. In fact, it's over now, we just haven't realized it. The tooth has been pulled out, but the jaw is still swollen."³⁶ This speech by Mamie Till-Bradley embodied the meaning of prophetic rhetoric as a feature of prophetic testimony. She called out the social injustices, using her faith to sustain her. She also articulated a call to action that necessitated a response by all. She was able to use her own experiences as an announcement of a prophetic call to the American populace.

Mamie Till-Bradley's prophetic voice mirrored the power of another hero of the movement—namely, Fannie Lou Hamer. Hamer was born the youngest of twenty children in 1917, and at an early age she realized that there was something wrong with the state of Mississippi.³⁷ Much like Mamie Till, Hamer was willing to sacrifice everything for the cause of justice and freedom. She entered the movement officially after attending a Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) rally in 1962 and hearing speeches by James Bevel and James Foreman. Perhaps her most memorable speech was in Atlantic City, as a representative for Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) during the Democratic convention in 1964. During this speech she asked the pivotal question "Is this America?"³⁸ Her question was aimed at the utter hysteria that White America seemed to be in, as African Americans fought for justice and equality. This question confronted America with its history of violence and racism toward people of color, whose only desire was to reclaim their humanity in a world that failed to fully acknowledge their existence. During her speech she stood firm on her conviction and told the truth about the political farce in Mississippi, which disguised itself as the democratic process. Her speech was so powerful that President Lyndon Johnson censored her nationally televised speech by interrupting it to give his own televised speech. The prophetic voice of this poor

³⁶ Ibid, 145.

³⁷ Vicki Crawford, Jaqueline Rouse, and Barbara Woods, *Women in the Civil Rights Movement*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 27.

³⁸ Ibid, 29.

sharecropper from Mississippi was so distinct that she was able to intimidate the most powerful man in the United States more than the most recognizable figures of the movement. Hamer's speech in Atlantic City did not occur in a religious setting, but it was filled with her religious convictions.

Hamer embraced a religious hope to help create future change. She described the beating that she took at the hands of the prisoners under the order of White officers. She prayed that God would have mercy on them because she understood the righteousness of her cause. She also spoke out against the hypocrisy of White American and White Christian values. She was imprisoned, persecuted, and beaten all on account of wanting to exercise a constitutional right. She stated: "All of this is on account of we want to register, to become first-class citizens. And if the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?"³⁹ Although Hamer's prophetic vision was not realized in 1964, her ability to call out political hypocrisy in the South was instrumental in the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Despite the powerful speeches by many great speakers, they were not enough to create the social reforms that defined the Civil Rights Era. Key leaders in the movement understood that their prophetic vision could be utilized to create vibrant concrete political organizations that could help their communities.

POLITICS OF THE PROPHETIC

Another important aspect of a rich notion of the prophetic is how these ideas connected with a communal view of justice in society. A prophetic view of justice combines individual norms and values with the concerns of the community to create a new perspective on the meaning of equality. In the context of the Civil Rights Movement Era the practice of justice involved allowing disenfranchised communities such as African Americans to be

³⁹ Ibid, 32.

involved in institutions that fought for full equality in all aspects of life. Movement leaders who had a prophetic view of politics knew that their sense of justice had to infiltrate both laws and institutions.⁴⁰ The starting point for the way many leaders understood justice began with their perspective on human ethics. Accordingly, humanitarian ethics could best be simplified as the moral obligations that one person holds toward another solely because they are human. The moral philosopher Emmanuel Levinas expresses this outlook by imagining a human being that is stripped away from all social roles, clothed with nothing but human vulnerabilities. Justice means to give each person everything that is owed to them.⁴¹ The responsibility to someone else, in their most vulnerable state, was viewed as the basic principle for justice.

A key to the political success of leaders during the classic Civil Rights period is that they were motivated by the need to interrogate societal norms. Vincent Lloyd, a scholar of Black theology, argues that the most effective civil rights leaders such as W.E.B. DuBois, Martin Luther King Jr., Anna Julia Cooper, and many others were able to critically analyze the norms that shaped the daily existence of Black Americans. These leaders knew that without this criticism the separation between norms and laws was arbitrary. For many African Americans who lived in the South, it was easy to take for granted the difference between written laws and social norms, largely because Jim Crow laws consisted of both formal and informal codes that ranged from formal policies that prevented African Americans from eating in the same establishments as Whites to informal policies that monitored the way African Americans greeted Whites. When movement leaders used prophetic politics, they named the laws and institutional structures that continually perpetuated the disenfranchisement of the Black population and, in effect, created an intentional separation between norms and laws. Creating a distinction between laws and norms produced a tension between the freedoms that many Americans claimed to believe and how those same beliefs were influenced by their views on race. Specifically, many White Americans professed a belief in fairness and equality

⁴⁰ Vincent Lloyd, *The Problem with Grace*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011) 168.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 168.

for all as a societal norm. However, movement leaders questioned this norm of equality because legal precedents in both the North and South denied many African Americans the ability to achieve full equality through public accommodations and access to political power. This point is crucial when examining the historical roots of tensions between laws and norms in society. Various political organizations during the Civil Rights Movement used this philosophy to attack racist White supremacist structures that perpetuated inequalities. These organizations fought against inequality in the classroom, in the courtroom, at lunch counters, and in many other areas.

Prophetic politics can be examined historically through the political institutions that African Americans relied upon to express their prophetic vision. This includes the way Black churches and religious institutions mobilized under a message of political equality. The political aspect of prophecy describes the connection between laws and dominant ideologies that worked to perpetuate a culture of White supremacy. The prophetic vision was preached in the pulpit of congregations and then taken to the streets by congregants. Organizations like the NAACP, SNCC, SCLC, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) were a few of the organizations that embodied principles of the prophetic politics. These diverse organizations used many different approaches to counter racist institutional policies.

Black churches also played a pivotal role in expressions of the prophetic vision. At various points during the Civil Rights Era, movement leaders such as Bob Zellner, Stokely Carmichael, and Eli Zaretsky used churches as headquarters to think through and implement political strategies to attack Jim Crow laws.⁴² Black Churches were mobilized to meet the needs of the community and to help create a sense of autonomy for African Americans. Much like the years following the period of Reconstruction, churches served as a place to network and to provide services that many African Americans could not obtain otherwise. In some instances, leaders of these churches formed organizations that took the place of larger organizations such as the NAACP, which was banned in several

⁴² Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) 373.

states.⁴³ According to sociologist Aldon Morris, these new organizations brought the same vibrant culture that permeated through their churches into political actions and community activities.⁴⁴

The Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth exemplified the political aspect of prophetic testimony through his leadership as a pastor and community organizer during the Civil Rights Movement. In 1956 the state of Alabama forced all NAACP organizations in the state to disband. However, Shuttlesworth would not let the organization die so easily. He reorganized the NAACP as the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR).⁴⁵ His organization proved to be more troublesome for White supremacists in Alabama than the NAACP ever was. The ACMHR engaged in boycotts, pickets, and demonstrations, and the group filed lawsuits to attack White Jim Crow legislation.⁴⁶ It was the ACMHR who decided to protest segregated busing in Birmingham when the court ruled bus segregation as unconstitutional. Shuttlesworth used the mobilization of his church and organization to challenge White dominance and social order. These attacks were not without its consequences. The night before he led the bus boycotts, his home was bombed with his family inside. He received death threats on a daily basis and his phone was tapped by both the Klan and local police. His church was constantly under attack, his wife was harmed, and even his kids were attacked. Despite this retaliation, his organization continued to attack White supremacy by pushing the city to hire Black police officers, allow Black access to public accommodations, desegregate schools, and above all enable the right to vote.⁴⁷

Although the Black church was sometimes a sanctuary for the political voices of African Americans in both the North and South, this was not the case in every situation. There were many situations where the Black church did not have political mobility or

⁴³ Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (NEW YORK: The Free Press, 1984), 43.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 47.

⁴⁵ Steven Lawson and Charles Payne, *Debating the Civil Rights Movement* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006) 123.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 124.

stability because it was co-opted by the efforts of Whites, in both the North and South. Another prophetic visionary, Albert Cleage Jr., serves as an example. Cleage was deeply concerned with the political manifestations of his theological beliefs. He was an advocate of the Black Power Movement before Stokely Carmichael popularized the term. Cleage's perspective was unique because his theology served as the starting point for his political views on the meaning of Black Power. Through Cleage's Black Nationalist ideas he combined religious and political strategies to address the pressing social problems in both local and national arenas. Cleage was greatly influenced by his mentor at the Plymouth Congregation, Reverend Horace A. White. White challenged the social control of the Ford Motor Company over Black churches and Black interests. Ford had made a deal with many Black church pastors to gain workers. Ford agreed to hire non-union Black workers in their factories only if they could show proof of their church affiliation. Thus, many Black churches in Detroit were not autonomous because they had obligations to the Ford Motor Company. Cleage's experiences with Reverend White left a strong impression on him. He would spend the rest of his life ensuring that his own church remained an independent institution and not subject to corporations such as Ford. He fully understood the ways that Black churches could be co-opted by industrialists or other corporations who did not care about the concerns of the Black community. After graduating from seminary, Cleage became outspoken against police brutality, employment discrimination, and racial segregation of housing in the North.⁴⁸ When he started his own church on 12th Street in Detroit, he blended theology, social criticism, and a call to action. His approach was especially appealing to young professionals and activists.⁴⁹

Cleage's new church took his Black Nationalist ideas and applied them to public school systems and the practice of urban renewal. His organization called GOAL protested tax increases that would disproportionately affect poor African American children in local school districts. His radical view for immediate reform clashed with the gradual approach

⁴⁸ Dillard, *Religion and Radicalism*, 152.

⁴⁹ Angela D. Dillard, "Religion and Radicalism: The Reverend Albert B. Cleage, Jr. and The Rise of Black Christian Nationalism," in Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Freedom North* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 152-162.

of the NAACP and even some of his former church mentors. Cleage's prophetic politics was guided by an activist faith that was an unflinching political commitment. His deeply held religious convictions helped him to understand that his political views could not be separated from his practice of theology. Thus, for Cleage, his political activism also served as his prophetic testimony to the insufficiencies that he found in Black church institutions to address some of the needs of its adherents. Although rhetoric and politics were both effective ways for African Americans to use their religious experiences as testimonies, the most common way to testify to their experiences was through their day to day activities.

PROPHETIC PRACTICES OF FREEDOM

Daily practices were perhaps the most important way that African American leaders displayed their understanding of a prophetic vision. During the Civil Rights Movement, many leaders fought for more than just public accommodations; they sought to have the rest of America acknowledge their personhood. In this respect, social and political activism went beyond fighting for any specific policy-making initiative. It involved demanding that the subjective experiences of marginalized groups be recognized through daily interactions. The pursuit of human dignity became the definition of freedom for leaders in African American communities. Said differently, these individuals used day-to-day interactions as a testimony for their vision of the future, and how to bring that vision to fruition in the present. Spiritual convictions allowed some activists to have an unwavering faith in themselves and their communities as they fought for justice and equality.

Many movement leaders understood a basic principle on how to truly secure freedom despite resistance from both individuals and institutions that tried to deny them their humanity. For these leaders, freedom had to be an intentional daily practice. Philosopher Michel Foucault gives helpful insight on how freedom can be intentional. He states: "Freedom is practice...the freedom of [the individual] is never assured by the laws and the institutions that are intended to guarantee them. This is why almost all of these laws and institutions are quite capable of being turned around. Not because they are

ambiguous, but simply because 'freedom' is what must be exercised...I think it can never be inherent in the structure of things to (itself) guarantee the exercise of freedom."⁵⁰ No group understood this principle of practical belief better than the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. They were able to carry over their religious faith into their daily actions. Prophetic practices of freedom are the actions that individuals or groups take to shape their own destiny and serve as a way for disenfranchised people to recognize their human dignity at an individual level. They understood that it was only after recognition of one's own self-worth that the struggle to combat oppressive structures was possible.⁵¹

What cannot be overstated about the success of the Civil Rights Movement is that it was in large part because of the individual action of local people. Rhetorical speeches and political activism from various organizations no doubt played an important role. However, to be clear, it was the involvement of local people in their communities fighting for justice daily that really transformed a nation. Historian John Dittmer attributes the success of the Civil Rights Movement to the activities of local activists such as Amzie Moore, Victoria Grey, Annie Divine, and the other more recognized figures such as Medgar Evers and Fannie Lou Hamer. These individuals and many others had energy and enthusiasm to organize communities, register voters, boycott buses, and stage protests. Other practices that leaders employed included freedom songs, poetry, and self-empowerment through education.⁵² The willingness of local people to act on their own behalf helped them to overcome the seemingly insurmountable racist institutions in places throughout the North and South.

⁵⁰ Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, (NEW YORK: Random House, 1984) 245.

⁵¹ Brad Stone, 'Prophetic Pragmatism and the Practices of Freedom: On Foucauldian Methodology,' *Foucault Studies*, 11 (2011), 103.

⁵² The process of freedom through education occurred in several different ways. Albert Cleage and others used religious education as a form of self-education as they learned to believe in a God that looked like them and understood their suffering. Other activists such as Stokely Carmichael would empower themselves through educating themselves about their African heritage. In some instances, self-empowerment through education led to the creation of African American Studies programming in school throughout the country. In any case, no matter the result, many African Americans sought to empower themselves through education.

Prophetic practices of freedom are best demonstrated through the work of local leaders in their community. Two lesser-known African American female leaders who played vital roles in advocating for social changes in their community were the late Margaret Block and Flonzie Brown-Wright. As a field secretary for SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), Block was involved in social activist campaigns during the Civil Rights Movement in three different counties in Mississippi. She worked alongside some of the most prominent figures of the time, including Fannie Lou Hamer, Stokely Carmichael, and Lawrence Guyot. Block's character was enduring because of her ability to speak truth to power regardless of the circumstances. She played the role of the prophet by speaking against social injustices even within the organizations that were dedicated to fighting for freedom. For example, although she was a member of the SCLC, she criticized the organization for its patriarchal leadership structure. Eventually, she left the organization to join SNCC because it provided her with more opportunities to create change. Block's life showed that in many cases the prophetic vision of Black women allowed them to be the foot soldiers of the movement, who created all of the networks, made all of the phone calls, and provided basic necessities for the volunteers for the various political campaigns.

Block also strongly believed in the power of the freedom songs as a prophetic practice. These songs were spiritual in the sense that they helped to remind activists why they were fighting for justice. At the same time, these songs were great for organizing the masses. On Sundays the songs were sung in church, but by Wednesday they were freedom songs that were sung on the streets and in marches throughout the country.⁵³ Block also had prophetic critiques of formal religious institutions such as churches. She understood how religion was able to simultaneously inhibit the efforts of some activists while at the same time it had the ability to motivate others into action. Her brand of Christianity did not focus on church involvement or adherence to a specific doctrine. In

⁵³ Dittmer, *Local People*.

fact, far from it, she often shunned organized religion and church practices.⁵⁴ However, Block also held her own deep religious convictions. She believed that through embodying the everyday practices of Jesus, she could truly experience the Christian faith. Her poetry served as another expression of her prophetic practices. An excerpt from the poem "Justice and Jive" reads:

Where was Justice when slavery abounded, Perhaps she was helping Old Master keep Swobo's nose to the ground. They took away his children, his culture, his language and his identity but they could not take his dignity. Madame Justice, you can't hide, we charge you with genocide. You call it Justice but it's just another word for Jive.⁵⁵

Block's poetry demonstrates her ability to unequivocally call out America's hypocritical conception of justice. Her poem shows how the Constitution had guaranteed the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, yet it had simultaneously denied those same rights to slaves. Rather than providing African Americans with the opportunity to pursue freedom, the Founding Fathers allowed the Constitution to be used to take away the language and culture of the slave population. By creating two separate standards for the pursuit of freedom, their view of justice was worthless because it did not apply to everyone. Block's poems also described many other historical moments when African Americans were forced to realize that they did not fit into America's depiction of justice.

Another individual who exemplified prophetic practices of freedom through her everyday life was Flonzie Brown-Wright, who continues to be a prolific civil rights activist in her home state of Mississippi. Her journey into social activism is an unlikely one. Yet it also serves as an example of how no limitations determine when someone can receive the prophetic call. In the preface of her autobiography she wrote, "I have always believed that I was endowed with a special gift from God, a gift that has taken me to heights that

⁵⁴ Alan Bean, "In Memoriam: Margaret Block," July 11, 2015, <https://friendsofjustice.wordpress.com/2015/07/11/in-memoriam-margaret-block/>, last accessed July 11, 2019.

⁵⁵ Margaret Block, "Justice and Jive," <http://www.crmvet.org/poetry/pblockm.htm>, last accessed July 11, 2019.

I could not have reached had it not been for His kindness and mercy.”⁵⁶ Thus, like many movement leaders who lived out the prophetic faith, her religious conviction was not based solely on a particular doctrine or church teaching, rather it was based on a deeply spiritual call that she received from God.

Brown-Wright was born on August 12, 1942, in Farmhaven, Mississippi, and grew up alongside her older brother Sydney and her younger brother Frank Brown. During her childhood in a rural Mississippi small town, she did not personally experience racism. However, she would later admit that as a child, she recognized the disparity in the educations that Black children in her neighborhood received. Soon after high school she married her high school sweetheart and moved to California.⁵⁷ While she lived in California, Brown-Wright had two children with her husband. During her time in California she received her first exposure to the Civil Rights Movement. She lived in Los Angeles during the 1960s, and could only stare in disbelief when she saw footage from the protests in Watts and other places throughout the state.⁵⁸ She has readily admitted that at that time in her life she knew very little about the Civil Rights Movement even though it was happening in front of her eyes. Her only concern was to be the best mother and wife that she could be. In late 1962, everything changed for Flonzie Brown-Wright. Her marriage fell apart, and she officially divorced her husband, followed by a decision that would change her life forever. She decided to move back home to Canton, Mississippi.

At this time, Brown-Wright did not know her purpose in life. All she knew was that she was a single mother, living at home with her parents, and struggling to meet her daily needs. For two years after she returned home, she wrestled with self-doubt, the burden of being an unemployed single mother in the South, the vulnerabilities of being a young Black woman, and various other uncertainties in her life. She has since admitted that her strong faith in God was the only thing that carried her through the most difficult time in her life. It was at this time that she found her purpose in life and a call that she

⁵⁶ Flonzie Brown-Wright, *Looking Back to Move Ahead: An Experience of History, a Journey of Hope* (Dayton: Profile Digital Printing, 2000), vii.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 31.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 45.

would spend the rest of her day pursuing. She remarked at the end of her two-year struggle that she felt called by God to participate in the ongoing struggle for freedom for African Americans in Mississippi. She wrote: "My decision to become involved in the struggle for mankind was not an easy one. I believed that was what God wanted me to do."⁵⁹ She also admitted that at first she was reluctant to answer her call. She would think of excuse after excuse to avoid the call that was aching away at her heart. At first, she did not believe she could embark on the task she had been called to because she was not a famous leader. Then she heard a voice that told her that God uses ordinary people for great tasks. Eventually Mrs. Brown-Wright was motivated by her spiritual convictions to be a force for change in the daily lives of Black citizens in Canton, Mississippi. She would later write a poem to express her prophetic call:

There are people who are hurting. There are children who are sick. There are elderly who need you. Go! There are people who need a sense of value. There are young mothers who need a listening ear. There are people who have faced discrimination in all forms. Go! There are People who need encouragement to register and vote. There are people who need job training. There are people who need to have their minds liberated. Go! You've got to Go! I am Molding You For Service. You've got to Go! I am preparing you to take a message to a hurting world. Go! Go! Go!⁶⁰

Since the moment that Brown-Wright decided to embark on her own freedom practices, she never looked back, dedicating over fifty years to the cause of freedom. She became caught up in the movement after the assassination of famed civil rights leader Medgar Evers. In 1963, she reopened an NAACP office that had been closed for years. At this time, the biggest impediment to the freedom of African Americans in Mississippi was the right to vote.⁶¹ In this vein, Brown-Wright and others created freedom schools to teach

⁵⁹ Ibid, 41.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 43.

⁶¹ The state of Mississippi was notorious for its poll tax, which legally discriminated against Black voters. It was also known for its 21-item registration questionnaire

the African American population how to register to vote. They would prepare them for several obstacles that they would face when they tried to register, such as how to complete the twenty-one-question registration card, how to face violent resistance from Whites, how to interpret the constitution, and how to handle being attacked by police officers. She would also host "freedom meetings" at local churches and organizations.⁶² These meetings were used to devise strategies to counter voter suppression and to increase the number of Black voters. Brown-Wright and others helped to galvanize participants at these meeting using "freedom songs." These songs were used to help activists to be mentally prepared for the challenges they faced as they pursued their right to vote. Brown-Wright also scheduled home visits to meet with those who were interested in registering to vote but were too intimidated by groups like the Ku Klux Klan to do so. Eventually, her efforts began to payoff and more Blacks registered to vote. Her involvement in this effort had great religious significance on her life. She wrote: "One person would come in to register, soon to be followed by an entire household. This feeling was the same as 'getting new religion'"⁶³ Her prophetic work to register voters culminated in 1968 when she was elected as the first African American female election commissioner in Mississippi.

CONCLUSION

distributed only to Blacks. They also used various other methods of voter disenfranchisement; this allowed places such as Canton, Mississippi, to have fewer than two hundred registered Black voters. This number is particularly startling because the large populace of African Americans in Canton. Over seventy percent of the total population (30,000) was African American.

⁶² At first many Black churches were reluctant to host freedom meetings because of the fear of terrorist acts. This statement reinforces the point that Black churches were not always safe havens for African Americans, thus they could not be the producers of an imperative for social change. Rather individuals used their convictions to persuade churches of the moral imperative to create change.

⁶³ Brown-Wright, *Looking Back to Move Ahead*, 73.

Both Margaret Block and Flonzie Brown-Wright demonstrate how the notion of prophecy is reflected in everyday lives. For these women their prophetic vision was more than a call to action; it was the way to spend the rest of their lives. Their daily encounters served as testimonies to their prophetic vision. Their stories are a part of a larger narrative that typified much of the religious activism that occurred during the Civil Rights Movement. Many individuals, communities, and churches were captivated by an idea that empowered them to pursue justice, freedom, and equality. A rich conception of prophecy allowed movement leaders to develop tactics to aid them in their fight. Specifically, they utilized prophetic rhetoric, politics, and practices to advocate changes that would challenge an entire nation. By following their prophetic call, they were able to ensure lasting changes that would benefit generations of African American men and women that would follow them. They proved that indeed individuals dedicated to pursuing a vision could create social change.

Discussion Questions

- 1.** How were African Americans able to use speeches as a tool to fight for justice during the Civil Rights Movement?
- 2.** What political organizations did African Americans develop to challenge segregation in the North and South during the Civil Right Movement?
- 3.** What role did churches play in the way that many African Americans were able to advocate for social change?
- 4.** How were freedom songs used by movement leaders during social protests?

Writing Prompt

What do the stories of Margaret Block and Flonzie Brown-Wright tell us about the ways that individuals can fight for social justice in their daily lives? How have prophetic rhetoric, politics, or practices been used in contemporary movements to advocate for social change (Black Lives Matter, #Metoo, etc.)?