

Influence of religion on the civil rights movement

[Politics](#), [Civil Rights](#)



Religion has had a profound effect on numerous events throughout the course of American history. The Civil Rights Movement was not withheld from the influence of religion, particularly Christianity and Islam. Many of the key players such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, who were devoted to the cause of justice and equality for African Americans, gained their passion from their spiritual roots. Through these religious leaders organizations were established to fight for civil rights.

It was through these religious men and the religion of blacks that the fight for equality gained enthusiasm and courage to fight oppression and discrimination. Opposition also came from religion, however. Reverend Jerry Falwell and the white supremacists of the Ku Klux Klan, who fought against the Civil Rights Movement, based their justification for an inferior black race on their religious beliefs. The Civil Rights Movement, by the people and parties involved, was in itself a battle of beliefs.

How is religion involved in the progression and initiation of the fight for equality for African Americans? Christianity, being the a religion active in the Civil Rights Movement, has aspects within its doctrine that encourages equality. It contributed in giving African Americans the passion and the support to continue on in the struggle despite its hardships. ““ I come to preach, to liberate them’.... The thrust of the Civil Rights Movement...was that God was on the side of the oppressed, the poor, the downtrodden, the outcast, the persecuted, the exploited. God is on the side of justice” (Williams 119).

Those that believed in God also believed that this divine, powerful being was behind their every effort and would grant them victory in the battle for civil rights. They saw themselves as the persecuted and knew that their God would have compassion on them through their difficulty. Moreover, the Christian faith brought unity among African American because they saw others turning to faith for hope to gain equality and so they followed suit. “ According to several respondents, religion engendered in them collective identities and meanings that imbued a sense of purpose” (Williams 113).

It “ inspired the construction of perspectives proclaiming, ‘ people who were products of segregation must be viewed theologically as the poor, the handicapped, the downtrodden. And theologically we have a responsibility to use our faith—to not be afraid to confront the oppressor’” (Williams 113).

Many Christians believed it was their duty and their way of showing obedience to God by fighting those who discriminated against them.

Christianity was certainly a motivator and contributor to the Civil Rights Movement. It caused African Americans to not limit their movement to the potential of a human being.

Instead, they gained hope in believing that something more powerful than them was working to give them equality. Despite the unity and empowerment that blacks received from their churches, white churches mostly existed in the background and never really urged their members to partake in the Civil Rights Movement. Rather, they sat back in a more comfortable position and consented to the Supreme Court’s decision to

segregate. Integration, although it did occur, had a very slow progression in Caucasian churches and schools.

Roman Catholicism was the first Christian sect to completely integrate their parochial schools (Mathisen 575). With Catholics and most other sects of Christianity, preachers gave sermons to white folks, many of whom favored segregation. If a pastor spoke out about the injustices of discrimination and encouraged civil rights, they might be removed from their position as a clergyman. Moreover, Ku Klux Klan members were mixed in their churches as well. " Much of the minister's ardor is dampened when he returns to his flock though this is not to say that he bends completely to their will.

It is not without significance that some fairly strong announcements have been made on the local level" (Mathisen 574, 575). Based on their audience, white pastors had to weaken their sermons so that people would continue to attend their church and so they could maintain their job. Clearly, white Americans were not all opposed to integration. Rather, many of them just did not desire to sacrifice their lifestyle to help African Americans in their struggle for equality. Yet, this is not to say all Caucasians did not fight for civil rights, but the majority of them were not an active part of the movement.

Such a religious force in America that did not partake in the struggle for civil rights held back some of the potential of the movement. The Ku Klux Klan, notorious for their brutality towards others, fought against the efforts of Civil Rights activists. Despite their ruthless behavior, the Ku Klux Klan had members in law enforcement and within the church. Members of this

organization believed that only white Christian people should exist within America and that other races should be honored to be controlled by Caucasian Christians.

If others, such as the African Americans in their fight for civil rights, tried to gain an equal status, then the KKK would use ruthless tactics to suppress them. They defended their violent acts against African Americans by referencing their faith. A member of the KKK was asked in an interview, “What is your explanation of why there have been so many National Police Agents [F. B. I.?] involved in the case of the ‘missing civil rights workers’” (Mathisen 576)? The Ku Klux Klan member, knowing that the National Police Agents involved were in cooperation with the KKK, responded, “First I must correct you on your terms.

Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman were not civil rights workers. They were Communist Revolutionaries, actively working to undermine and destroy Christian Civilization” (Mathisen 576). Later on in the interview the KKK affiliate declared that Lyndon B. Johnson, a president known for his support of the Civil Rights Movement, “is a communist sympathizer” (Mathisen 576). This member was clearly discussing the Civil Rights activists. He proclaims that they were tainting the Christian religion, which is why they were killed and are “missing. This notion brings up religion as a contributor to their own views against African Americans. “The KKK uses words from the Holy Bible and teachings from Protestant Reverends to support its cause and justify its actions” (Fisher 1). They truly rationalize their superiority complex and their brutality to blacks by the Christian faith. By using Christianity, they too

obtained unity against the Civil Rights Movement. The Ku Klux Klan was not the only notorious adversary of civil rights. A prominent opponent of the fight for African American equality and was the Baptist minister, Jerry Falwell.

Falwell was a strong supporter of segregation and believed that based on the bible, "Africans were the cursed descendants of Ham, and worthy only of subservience to white people" (Kimberley 1). In Genesis of the bible Ham was cursed by his father, Noah, for disrespecting him. Through this, Reverend Falwell believes that African Americans should not gain any standing in society. To him it is the natural place of blacks to be below the status of whites due to the actions of their ancestors (Kimberley 1). Due to this, his position on civil rights legislation is very ardently against it.

He has been reported to have said that the Civil Right Movement is a 'civil wrong' (Kimberley 1). Clearly, religion was used on both sides of the spectrum as a means to rally for a cause. While it was used by blacks for their crusade, some whites relied on it as tool to keep segregation and maintain discrimination. Martin Luther King, Jr. is one of the most famous leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. It is through him and others like him that African Americans gained justice and equality. One of the motivators of this intelligent, talented orator is most certainly his faith.

Before ever becoming a part of the battle for civil rights, King was a devoted Christian and minister of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church (King 47). He, then, carried these beliefs into the Civil Rights Movement. "There comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression" (Kelley 463). King continues on in a freedom sermon, "I want say that we're

not here advocating violence... We have never done that... I want it to be known throughout Montgomery and throughout this nation that we are a Christian people... We believe in the Christian religion.

We believe in the teachings of Jesus. The only weapon we have this evening is the weapon of protest" (Kelley 463). The reactions to these words were astounding. People identified with this idea and it gave them passion and courage to pursue equality. " All through that statement of religious identity the people shouted and applauded, moved with King, pressed him forward even as he urged them toward their own best possibilities" (Kelley 463, 464). By their religious unity the Civil Rights Movement becomes undeniably contagious.

As faith is mentioned, everyone joins in the excitement of the crowd and begin to trust that with numbers they can protest and achieve equality. Martin Luther King, Jr. 's most famous speech " I Have a Dream" contains within it references to religion, faith, and hope. " And when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up the day when all of God's children —black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and

Protestants —will be able to join hands and sing the words of the old negro spiritual, " Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last" (Finkenbine 190). This speech, like many of his others, held within it the idea of nonviolence. King looked to an Indian leader named Mahatma Gandhi as a guide to his desire to resist violence in the Civil Rights Movement. Despite this, he always turned to the Bible as a source to defend this action. King

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puts it best when he said, ' The spirit of passive resistance came to me from the Bible, from the teachings of Jesus.

The technique came from Gandhi" (Kelley 468). Religion was certainly Martin Luther King, Jr. 's driving force as he became a prominent leader of the movement. He used Christianity as a means to support his every action and without its inspiration he would not have had nearly as great an effect on the Civil Rights Movement. Through him, African Americans came together inspired to make a change to society and not stand for injustice. Another contributor to the Civil Rights Movement was a man known as Malcolm X. He, like numerous other African Americans, took to practicing the religion of Islam.

Elijah Muhammad, a member of the Nation of Islam (NOI), influenced Malcolm X and many others into pursuing these beliefs (Kelley 478). Black Muslims viewed themselves in American society as " an isolated and unappreciated appendage" (Mathisen 576). Muhammad saw the black race as not wanted and believed that the only way to achieve peace in such a circumstance is to remove those that do not desire them. Moreover, he taught that white people belong in Europe and that, " there will be no peace until every man is in his own country" (Mathisen 576).

Black Muslims stressed their own identity and black racial supremacy. They had little desire to integrate and would have rather made America their own Islamic nation. With such a heavy goal, they decided to become a part of the Civil Rights Movement and obtain the rights that they believed were due to them. Malcolm X was brought into the Nation of Islam and it became his

inspiration to gain equal rights for African Americans. He actually, despite Elijah Muhammad's influence, was the leader who made the Nation of Islam a prominent and powerful force in the United States.

Unlike Martin Luther King, Jr. , Malcolm X believed in violence as a means for blacks to gain better standing in society. People looked to him as the militant, uncompromising man who would use violence when needed to scare whites into accepting their conditions. He too believed, as many black Muslims, that building black institutions and defending blacks was far more important than integrating into society. Through men like Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad, " the Nation of Islam attracted thousands of urban blacks to the disciplined life of abstinence, prayer, and black self-determination" (Kelley 478).

Although their techniques were different in achieving civil rights for African Americans, this religion of Islam motivated people just like Christianity to fight for equality and justice. As religious leaders began to speak up and stand up against the prejudices that African Americans faced, organizations began to form to further the effectiveness of the struggle for civil rights. One such organization is Congress for Racial Equality, or CORE. This group, which organized direct nonviolent protests, branched off of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. The Fellowship of Reconciliation was a Christian pacifist group formed during World War I.

They, like Martin Luther King, Jr. , believed in the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi and implemented Christian values into their approach (Kelley 450). The Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) focused on destroying

legalized segregation, particularly on downtown stores and municipal facilities. Another association that sprung up out of religious roots is the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). By 1957, Martin Luther King, Jr. and several black ministers from the South came together to form this organization which was based on the "Montgomery experience" (Kelley 470).

One of their major accomplishments during this time was that they held conferences and organized people, such as when a group of some twenty thousand people came together in Washington, D. C. to pray for civil rights legislation. The fact that a mass amount of people came to pray that day gave others in the church the inspiration to look beyond their own means and to see things occurring which have never before. This gave African Americans hope and led more of them to these gatherings since they know that their desire for justice can be heard. Religion had a major effect on the Civil Rights Movement.

Even when it was on an individual level such as with Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, the effects of religion trickle down into the masses. Speech after speech, African Americans became inspired and empowered by them and began to believe in things beyond their own human capacity. Blacks turned to divine beings as a means to achieve equality and justice. Religion helped teach them to ignore the years of discrimination and damage to their self-esteem. It gave them the power to stand strong in the face of hurt and in the face of humiliation.

Without religion, the Civil Rights Movement would not have had the unity, and hope that allowed it to continue on. At the same time, however, the enemies of the movement found their muse to keep segregation and discrimination. Religion was then used by them too as a means to protect their way of life and maintain the status over blacks that they had ingrained in them since the time of slavery. Religion had a mixed influence over the movement, but in the end African Americans would see the day when they gained those civil rights. They would see the day when blacks have equality under the law in America.