

## **“If You’re Not Going to Respect the Policemen, You Are Not Going to be in the Movement”:**

### **The Tenth Plague and Biblical Theories of Liberatory Violence**

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On May 4, 1963 in the midst of the Birmingham desegregation campaign, three thousand Black men and women, most of whom were uninvolved in nonviolent marches, assembled downtown to at Kelly Ingram Park to openly clash with police. They expected to do battle with the police in the event that officers attacked the nonviolent protestors organized by Martin Luther King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and a state-wide organization. The marchers had dwindled in the preceding days to a few dozen teenagers, some as young as ten years old. Sheriff Bull Conner opened fire hoses on the host of uninvited and bellicose protestors and they responded with a hail of bricks and bottles in a battle that lasted more than an hour. In the midst of the chaos SCLC’s James Bevel tried to disperse rioters, shouting, “If you are not going to respect the policemen, you’re not going to be in the movement.” Contrary to Bevel, the crowd was very much a part of the movement--but a movement beyond the control of the pacifists.<sup>1</sup>

Bevel’s judgment of what constituted the “movement” was one shared by scholars for many decades. In recent years, historians have given more attention to different elements of the African American community that employed strategies other than nonviolence and opened questions about what constituted a more broadly defined African American Freedom Movement, which SCLC was only one component of. This paper will ask what defines the civil-rights era movement, in both political and cultural content; how can we best periodize the movement to understand what ideas and actions brought about change; what were the competing strategies within that movement; and in what ways did African American religion animate the advocate of these competing strategies? At the heart of the question is what were the implicit or explicit “change process theories” that African Americans drew from the bible, especially regarding divine or human agency and the methods of pacifism in contrast to the use of force, coercion, and violence to liberate the oppressed.

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<sup>11</sup> Glen T. Eskew, *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle*: Chapel Hill: (University of North Carolina Press) 1979

My interest as a historian and an activist has always been the question of causality in social movements: what ideas, strategies, and circumstances contributed to motivating people to form social movements that brought about social justice. I view movements as time-delimited formations: they rise and fall and have beginning and ends. This perspective runs counter to the contemporary scholarship that confuses genealogy of ideas or organizations as social movements—that stretches movements so far into the past and broadens the definition of subversive resistance so wide as to encompass all ideas and behaviors as part of a grand undifferentiated freedom movement. That is a narrative without meaning and causality and tells us little about what actually changed the world. While most scholarship moves the period lines back to what becomes meaningless and assigns revolutionary and transformative qualities to any form of resistance, I move the line forward and make a strong distinction between political resistance and cultural resistance. Knowing prime causal factors helps understand the past and may help understand the challenges of the present. To paraphrase Christopher Hill, bad history makes for bad politics.

### **Nonviolence and the White Liberal**

The role of the white liberal, or as in the case of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the abolitionist sympathizer, is at the heart of the conflicting and mutually exclusive liberation strategies, with Christian pacifism playing a central role in the appeal of the nonviolent strategy. This analysis of competing and contradictory strategies within the freedom movement runs contrary to the trend in scholarship that views the movement as fundamentally united with only tactical difference, e.g. that Robert F. Williams and Rosa Parks were part of the same movement with the same goals. In truth, it was impossible to assuage white liberal fears of black violence and publicly advocate and practice armed self-defense or the mass defensive violence that marked the Birmingham campaign. One strategy assumed that whites could be won by moral suasion; the other assumed they were beyond redemption and would only respond to coercion and force. White Americans who came to support the civil rights agenda were responding to one of these strategies; they either hoped to buy salvation or social peace.

Nonviolence as the motive force for change became a reassuring myth of American moral redemption--a myth that assuaged white guilt by suggesting that racism was not intractable and deeply embedded in American life, that racial segregation and discrimination were handily overcome by orderly, polite protest and a generous American conscience, and that the pluralistic system for resolving conflicts between competing interests had prevailed. The system had worked and the nation was redeemed.

It was a comforting but vacant fiction. In the end, segregation yielded to force as much as it did to moral suasion. Violence in the form of street riots and armed self-defense played a fundamental role in uprooting segregation and economic and political discrimination from 1963 to 1965. Only after the threat of black violence emerged did civil rights legislation move to the forefront of the national agenda; only after the Deacons for

Defense appeared were the civil rights laws effectively enforced and the obstructions of terrorists and complicit local law enforcement agencies neutralized.<sup>2</sup>

The Deacons for Defense were formed in Jonesboro, Louisiana in the summer of 1964 in response to Klan attacks on the community and civil rights workers. Over the next two years they expanded into 21 chapters and several hundred members concentrated in Louisiana and Mississippi. Though ignored by a generation of historians, they were a highly publicized challenge to Martin Luther King and the nonviolence movement orthodoxy in their own time, with major coverage of their organizing efforts in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Life*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Ebony* and several articles in widely read African American publications like *Jet* which had broad appeal among working class Blacks. The Deacons won several local desegregation victories and in 1965 organized a decisive showdown in Bogalusa, Louisiana that forced the federal government to restore constitutional rights for blacks in the South and enforce the 1964 Civil Rights Act.<sup>3</sup>

Martin Luther King repudiated the Deacons and held true to his belief in the national coalition with northern liberals. In reply to the Deacons, King argued that movement could not afford to alienate whites. "We can't win our struggle with nonviolence and cloak it under the name of defensive violence," King said in criticizing the Deacons. "The Negro must have allies to win his struggle for equality, and our allies will not surround a violent movement." Using force against the Klan "would only alienate our allies and lose sympathy for our cause." In 1958, King had set the course. "Only through a nonviolent approach can the fears of the white community be mitigated," argued King in *Stride Toward Freedom*. "A guilt-ridden white minority lives in fear that if the Negro should ever attain power, he would act without restraint or pity to revenge the injustices and brutality. . . . Many white men fear retaliation. The job of the Negro is to show them that they have nothing to fear, that the Negro understands and forgives and is ready to forget the past." If the Klan bombed one home, King urged blacks to submit themselves by the hundreds to more bombings until the terrorists, "forced to stand before the world and his God splattered with the blood of his brother . . . will call an end to his self-defeating massacre."<sup>4</sup>

Leronne Bennett was among the skeptics. The dilemma for blacks, according to Bennett, was to oppose power but not appear to be rebelling against the status quo. "The history of the Negro in America," wrote Bennett in 1964, ". . . has been a quest for a revolt that was not a revolt: a revolt, in other words, that did not seem to the white power structure as a revolt." Martin Luther King had solved the dilemma, Bennett said, by "clothing a resistance movement in the comforting garb of love and forgiveness."

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<sup>2</sup> Wording taken from my book, *The Deacons For Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement*. (UNC Press) 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> King, *Stride toward Freedom*, 1958, Julius Lester dates this conflict over methods back to abolitionism. "The Garrisonians were committed to a method: blacks were committed to the destruction of slavery." Lester, *Look Out Whitey*, P. 42.

In contrast, the Deacons and the “street forces” of Birmingham preached self-reliance rather than dependence on the government for rights and freedom; they sought reform by force and coercion rather than by pacifism and moral suasion; and they repudiated the strategy of winning white approbation through suffering. Freedom was to be won through fear and respect, rather than guilt and pity. In short, they believed that to be free, blacks had to act free.

### **Redefining The Movement**

The limitations of how the civil rights movement has been defined are manifest in the Birmingham campaign in 1963 and, more important, the Birmingham riots. While the focus of historians has been on the historic nonviolent protests, the national civil rights organizations failed to recruit adults and the marchers dwindled to a handful of children, some as young as ten-years-old. A parallel movement emerged in Birmingham of self-organized community members who rejected the tenets of nonviolence and were not concerned that their behavior would alienate white liberals who were crucial to the national civil rights movement legislative coalition strategy.

The first Birmingham riot occurred on May 3<sup>rd</sup> after police opened up with water cannons on protesters. Young black men and women, nonpacifists “street forces” who had previously lingered on the sidelines, now retaliated with bricks and bottles. The Battle of Ingram Park cited above followed on May 4<sup>th</sup>. The violent protests culminated in the early hours of May 12, as a massive riot broke out in response to two Ku Klux Klan bombings the night before. The May 12<sup>th</sup> Birmingham riot was a watershed movement event: Malcolm X argued that King was failing again in Birmingham until “Negroes took to the streets” forcing Kennedy to expedite the Civil Rights Act.<sup>5</sup>

From Birmingham forward, every peaceful nonviolent protest carried the threat of black violence. The Birmingham riots marked the end of nonviolence and the advent of a movement characterized by both lawful mass protest and defensive violence. “The lesson of Birmingham,” Malcolm X observed, “is the Negroes have lost their fear of the white man’s reprisals and will react with violence, if provoked.”<sup>6</sup>

This chapter of history is invisible in the popular mythology of the movement and even in most of the scholarly literature. President Kennedy’s appeared on national television on the night of May 12 to address the violence. “I call upon the citizens of Birmingham, both Negro and white, to live up to the standards their responsible leaders set last week in reaching the agreement, to realize that violence only breeds more violence. . . . There must be no repetition of last night’s incidents by any group.”<sup>7</sup> May 12, 1963 marked the end of nonviolence. Now whites knew that African Americans in the South did not fear

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<sup>5</sup> Malcolm X, “Message to the Grass Roots,” 10 November 1963, in *Malcolm X Speaks*

<sup>6</sup> Quoted from the New York Times by Walter Lippmann at <http://www.walterlippmann.com/mx-nyt.html>

<sup>7</sup> .” John F. Kennedy, “Radio and Television Remarks Following Renewal of Racial Strife in Birmingham,” 12 May 1964, 9:00. *Public Papers of the President of the United States: John F. Kennedy*, 196, pp.3, 397-98

alienating white liberals by the use of force and coercion and that for those outside the control of mainstream civil rights organizations, the strategy would be to raise the social costs of disruption to exceed the social benefits of maintaining a legal system of racial segregation and discrimination. And though Kennedy's May 12<sup>th</sup> speech was a turning point for the movement, to this day it barely if ever mentioned in movement histories.

The May riots were followed by another riot in Birmingham on 15 September 1963 in response to the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church. All of these riots were essentially acts of defensive violence and, as forcible collective protests, were an integral and important part of the African American Freedom Movement, though one that was at odds with the nonviolent movement. The tactic of collective force, conducted by what can be called "forcible resistance" elements, spread rapidly after the May riots in Birmingham to collective civil violence in Lexington, North Carolina; Savannah, Georgia; Charleston, South Carolina; and Cambridge, Maryland. During 1964-65 more black riots erupted in southern cities, including a second uprising in Cambridge and disorders in St. Augustine, Florida; Natchez, McComb, and Jackson, Mississippi; Jacksonville, Florida; Henderson, North Carolina; Princess Anne, Maryland; and Bogalusa, Louisiana. Significantly, the southern riots contributed to civil rights victories in many cities--in some cases, months before the Civil Rights Act went into effect.

Black violence, in the form of riots by autonomous street forces and militant armed self-defense, fundamentally changed the meaning of nonviolence and the role of King and moderate leaders; it provided moderates with a negotiating power that they had never enjoyed before. It was the threat of black violence, not redemptive suffering and moral suasion, that was now making the political establishment take notice of nonviolent protest. King understood the changing dynamics and readily deployed apocalyptic images of black violence in his speeches and writings. In his famous "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" written in April 1963, King posed nonviolence as the only alternative to an impending violent revolt that was being fomented by the forces of "bitterness and hatred" in the black movement. If nonviolence "had not emerged I am convinced that by now the streets of the South would be flowing with floods of blood," wrote King. "And I am further convinced that if our white brothers dismiss as 'rabble rousers' and 'outside agitators'--those of us working through the channels of nonviolent direct action . . . millions of Negroes, out of frustration and despair, will seek solace and security in black ideologies, a development that will lead inevitably to a frightening racial nightmare."

King added that the black man had "many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations" that needed to be released through nonviolent marches, sit-ins, and Freedom Rides. "If his repressed emotions do not come out in these nonviolent ways," he warned, "they will come out in ominous expressions of violence. This is not a threat; it is a fact of history."

King's repeated invocation of the threat of black violence, made credible by the Birmingham riots, left little doubt that the agents of this coercion and force were a part of a social movement that was forcing the nation to change. Yet no historian has taken time to interview a single one of the 3,000 street protestors from Birmingham or the tens of thousands of African Americans who took the streets to use force throughout the South in

the summer of 1963. That omission alone—a product of the narrow definition of the movement—prevents us from saying with any certainty what ideas and beliefs animated these partisans of collective force. Were they moved by Black religious beliefs and if so, which ones? While the street fighters remain silent to historians, we do know what working class advocates of armed self-defense like the Deacons thought, and that may provide some direction for future studies. But redefining the movement means not only inclusion but exclusion as well. What tactics were not part of the Freedom Movement? This brings us to the “culture of resistance”

### **When Does A Solution become a Problem?**

The "culture of resistance" or “infra-politics” framework argues that there was a continuous tradition of cultural resistance to oppression in the African American community, from slavery to the modern civil rights movement. Included in this would be religious practices that, born of oppression, sustained a sense of dignity and self-worth, affirmed ones value through divine sources, protected one’s sense of being and meaning, and provided hope in the afterlife. All of these adaptations were two-edge swords; retreating into an internal meant passivity, fatalism, and internalization of oppressor values. Martin Luther King described this phenomenon as the "force of complacency made up of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, have been so completely drained of self-respect and a sense of 'somebodiness' that they have adjusted to segregation."<sup>8</sup>

Resistance that is relegated to symbolic expressions in religion, music, and other cultural forms is evidence of political defeat, not victory. By giving too much weight to symbolic cultural resistance, we lose sight of the only form of resistance capable of liberating people from systems of domination--direct and open confrontation with authority through political resistance. The overemphasis on culture can lead us to impart politically subversive meaning to quietism, fatalism, apathy, and individualistic self-preservation

Fear, for example, was a positive functional adaptation for African Americans in specific context. Teaching young African Americans to avoid and fear whites helped generations survive slavery and Jim Crow. But a recurring theme in interviews with Deacons and throughout the literature reveals that fear had become an obstacle to the modern movement. Fear immobilized people when the opportunity arose for the movement to become public, collective, and confrontational. All collective cultural adaptations are dependent on the context in which events occur: in one context they help a people survive; in another they become self-destructive. The dual nature of cultural adaptations is not a new insight: it is reflected in the observations of David Walker, Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Dubois and Martin Luther King. As we will see, the opponents of pacifism often linked the willingness to use confrontational and forcible methods as psychologically liberating.

Oppressed people do not choose their cultural adaptations. But once developed, people build elaborate rationalizations and psychological defenses to justify them. Denied the

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<sup>8</sup> King, "Letter from Birmingham City Jail"

right to learn to read, groups will develop values systems that that afford them self-respect, e.g. assigning status to group loyalty, martial skills, physical courage, or artistic creative skills. People cannot live with self-hatred—they invent new values that measure self-worth with what they are forced to accept. When taking risks is out of the question, risk-taking or what might be called courage is disparaged and passivity is elevated to a desired value. A common folk saying in the African American community in the 1950s was, “There are no heroes or cowards in the cemetery; just dead people.” The message was to the point: Smart people are the ones that know that nothing changes; only fools depend on others. These rationalizations become building blocks for an integrated world view or cultural ideology, and it that ideology does not disappear as the context changes and new opportunities arise. In one context, cultural adaptations can preserve dignity, maintain a sense of identity, and function as a survival and psychological defense mechanism. In another context, they can result in feelings of humiliation, self-doubt and shame and inhibit actions that bring secure psychological wellbeing through liberation.

To diminish the differences in strategies, to create an undifferentiated resistance struggle that spans centuries, is to blur the distinction between adaptation and liberation, resistance and revolt. This empiricist view point renders all strategies equally effective, including adaptations that accept the immutability of segregation, such as fatalism, passivity, deference to authority, and quietism. It is erroneous for scholars to attribute eternal positive attributes to survival mechanisms that can become self-destructive cultural adaptations. To redefine the movement means to identify those adaptations that eventually perpetuated oppression and differentiate them from the truly subversive beliefs and behaviors that advanced the Freedom Movement. That also means assigning proportional value to those beliefs and behaviors that may have sustained the flickering flame of humanity in trying times, but never had the impact of the fire of open and collective revolt.

### **Mutually Exclusive Strategies**

Political revolution in the civil rights era required a cultural revolution: a revolution in cultural ideology in which old beliefs and behaviors were not simply challenged but replaced. Fatalism had to be vanquished and replaced with activism. Solitary hope for rewards in the afterlife had to be replaced with confidence in the liberation in the present. The Deacons’ organizing method was exemplary behavior intended to shock local people out of cultural adaptations that, while useful in one context, had become obstacles to their participation and change in a new context with new opportunities. Malcolm X was adroit at the psychological assault on cultural maladaptations—his declaration that “you can’t legislate manhood,” despite its patriarchal meanings, embodied the contemporary cognitive-behavioral concept that it is easier to behave your way out of bad thinking than think your way out of bad behavior.

Not everyone agreed with this cultural war on maladaptive beliefs and behaviors, and this disagreement at the strategic level meant that there were two fundamentally different and competing strategies at work in the movement and that Black religion may have played a role in both. I will address these “change process theories” of pacifism versus coercive

force later and examine how both may have drawn on contradictory Black religious teachings.

Behavior in relation to the state must be considered in defining what drives social movements. Collective behavior is political behavior and how we periodize social movement depends on leaps and breakthroughs that initiated a sustained and expanding movement. A few years ago the “Montgomery to Selma” periodization of the civil rights movement was popular, but that has since been eclipsed by theories that push the beginning of the movement back to World War II and some back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Interestingly, the contemporaneous accounts of the civil right movement generally viewed the 1960 lunch-counter sit-ins as the beginning. A question historians should always ask is whether or not their historical subjects would recognize the world that historians have recreated i.e. would the Freedom Summer volunteers think they were part of a continuous movement that began nine years before in Montgomery with a boycott, or would they trace their political beginnings to the 1960 sit-ins?

The new research on the 1953 Baton Rouge bus boycott, which was the template for the 1955 Montgomery boycott, is illustrative of how the old “Montgomery to Selma” periodization is not historically accurate. In Baton Rouge, the bus boycott began when a group of black women refused to get off the bus and were confronting the white bus driver on the restrictive seating. Rev. T. J. Jemison happened by the fracas and persuaded the women to leave the bus and transformed what was essentially a sit-in into a boycott.<sup>9</sup> The Baton Rouge boycott’s goal, as was the Montgomery boycott’s goals, was to get people *off* the busses where they were breaking laws and, in doing so, directly defying the legitimacy and authority of white supremacy. In addition, both boycotts initially accepted the legitimacy of segregation and were only challenging those features of it that were needlessly burdensome on Blacks. Indeed, in Baton Rouge the suit to desegregate the busses was dropped seven days into the boycott despite the objections of thousands of people at a mass meeting. I once asked an older activist why did they not stage a sit-in on the busses rather than a boycott. “That would have been suicide!” he exclaimed. But six years later a group of young African American men did essentially the same thing, and set off a mass movement rather than a pogrom.

When the Baton Rouge and Montgomery boycotts *removed* African Americans from direct confrontation with the institution of segregation, they lost the ability to do what the sit-ins eventually accomplished in 1960: launch an electrifying national movement of direct action protest in direct defiance of the law. The boycott strategy, as with the voter registration strategy, was clearly aimed at minimizing confrontation. The Kennedy administration and their allied foundations made a strong and generally successful effort to divert the movement away from direct action protests and back to non-confrontational strategies; indeed, Freedom Sumer in 1964 explicitly forbade desegregation testing of the newly enacted civil rights act.

The boycott strategy and ceded to whites the authority of segregation laws over black people and the right to arrogate to themselves exclusively white public space. As a result

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<sup>9</sup> “Signpost to Freedom” television documentary. Transcript at <http://goo.gl/tKIV5>



of the diversion from direct confrontation, the public in Montgomery lost interest in the boycott and the movement has all but collapsed in 1956 and was only salvaged when the federal courts ruled against the Montgomery Ordinance in June of 1956. For the next four years, the bus boycott failed to spread and King foundered as he unsuccessfully attempted to replicate the strategy around the South.

Montgomery was a great moment in African American history, but it was a false start of the movement because it relied on a tactic that did not appeal to a new generation that wanted to directly confront and defy white authority.<sup>10</sup> Movements don't have four-lapses--by definition movements "move" or they die. In large part the boycott strategy failed because there were other strategic options that were mutually exclusive. One could boycott a bus system in virtual anonymity and never take a risk. That was not possible with the new confrontational strategy that launched the modern civil rights movement in 1960.

The 1960 lunch-counter sit-ins were a revolutionary strategic departure from the boycott. They were implicitly based on the notion that the costs of social disruption had to exceed the benefits of continued oppression. They were not a continuation of boycott strategy but rather a radical break with the past. The sit-in protestors defied and undermined white authority, delegitimized Jim Crow law by invoking a higher moral right, and employed exemplary courage as a psychological assault on the cultural adaptation of fear. Finally, they made fiction of the argument that confrontational tactics were "suicide," a viewpoint that nonviolent partisans would later deploy against armed self-defense. The key was, contrary to James Bevel's advice, to defy, not respect, the police.

The civil rights era of the Black freedom movement ran its course 1960-1965. It was a contest of mutually exclusive strategies toward the same goals—which were full and equal rights. In part, the conflicting strategies grew out of different assessments of what the cultural barriers were to mass participation in the movement and different assessments of the role of white liberals—in particular the fear of alienating liberals through violence or confrontational tactics. The Deacons and other forcible resistance elements rejected the strategy of the Black-liberal alliance based on moral suasion and embraced coercion and a strategy of raising the social costs of oppression. As we shall see, they represented the "10<sup>th</sup> Plague" of the Exodus; the belief in the intractability of the dominant group and the power of coercion through divine or human agency.

### **Cultural Ideology and Religion**

In what ways were the Deacons and other forcible resistance groups that were opposed to nonviolence and who were instrumental to the movement's success, motivated by African

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<sup>10</sup> After the boycott started, local officials enacted ordinance 1921 ordinance prohibiting the "hindering" of a bus and 156 boycotters and King were arrested, but the intent of the movement was not to defy pre-existing laws and the arrests were not the result of direct confrontations over space or access to transportation.

American religion, be it pacifism or some notion of amoral nature of the oppressor and a belief in divinely sanctioned violence? The concept of “cultural ideology” is helpful in answering this question.

Culture is learned, socially transmitted behavior. It includes the ideas, values, norms, mores, and sanctions in the form of rewards or punishments that maintain the culture. Cultural Ideology is an aspect of culture as a whole. Every culture and sub-culture develops this shared, collective map and rulebook of the world that they interact in. Richard Clemmer offers a succinct description of culture and cultural ideology:

*Culture* is the system of shared meanings, symbols, behaviors, patterns, values, attitudes, and material items that give a group of people an identity, both to themselves and to others. *Cultural Ideology* is the cognitive dimension of culture, a cognitive map, an intellectual, logical model of the world and its constituent parts which supplies thereby a model of the natural world, of the place of the humanity within the world...It also provides a model for the social world and its components which tells who a group is, how and why they differ from others, and which allocates members of the group to social categories constructed on the basis of age, gender, descent, marital status, wealth, occupation, skill, power and so forth. It provides the normative aspects of the culture, a hierarchy of values for evaluating the components of the social world, and so motivates people and encourages them to put forth effort.<sup>11</sup>

A group’s cultural ideology or “collective worldview” explains the causes and solutions of social and political problems, including how to overcome oppressive conditions. It defines how common goals are to be achieved by action or inaction. It offers elaborate justifications, and rationalizations to legitimate a group’s beliefs and behaviors, including political strategies. An oppressed group’s cultural ideology contains the shared beliefs about the causes for their oppression; who are their allies and enemies in their struggle; the social change processes that bring about liberation in society; and more specifically, how collective action can change government policy changes. To use a metaphor, it is the mental “software” operating in the background that guides out actions consciously or not. It answers questions that we don’t even know we asked. Some religious ideas are imbedded in a group’s cultural ideology and this is where we come to the role of religion in social movements.<sup>12</sup>

Cultural ideology offers a group a road map to understanding, rationalizing, and legitimating political behavior, including, during the civil rights era, the notion that whites were open to moral suasion and that force and coercion are moral responses to an immoral society. From generation to generation, all cultural ideology is either

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<sup>11</sup> Clemmer, Richard O., *Roads in the Sky: The Hopi Indians in a Century of Change*, (Perseus Books) 1995, p. 122

<sup>12</sup> The concept of “cultural ideology” originated with Mannheim (1946) as a dominant culture ideology but has evolved into a concept that applies to all cultures.

transmitted or transcended, i.e. the new generation adopts what is useful and rejects what is outmoded. Cultural ideology is like a rule book that prescribes and proscribes behaviors; but every generation is born into new circumstances and, accordingly, accepts some elements of the old adaptive culture and rejects other.

This was obvious in the South where the civil rights movement became a movement of children—children born into a world when mechanization had released them from the bonds of agriculture; when the cold war had raised questions about the nation’s commitment to professed values of equality; when television brought the violence of segregation into every home; when the Brown decision had elevated expectations; and when the United States had, ostensibly, just fought a war to repudiate the racist ideology of National Socialism. By 1960, everything had changed except segregation and discrimination—and the cultural ideology of the older generation of African Americans. A new generation of Blacks would play midwife to a new ideology and exemplary action would culturally shock and model new attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. The new world and the maladaptations of the old ideology called into existence new agents of change: Malcolm X., Robert F. Williams, and the Deacons for Defense.

No group’s cultural ideology is uniform and based on consensus. It contains contradictory beliefs drawn from religion, popular culture, national culture, and collective experience. Christian pacifism and the belief in righteous armed self-defense can co-exist in the same cultural ideology, though these beliefs come into conflict when acted out in the political arena. In redefining the movement, we look to cultural ideology for the sources of strategies and ask what beliefs justified what actions in different times and places? What motivated the nonviolent teenager protestors in Birmingham may have been something quite different that what motivated the 3,000 forcible resisters who showed up at Kelly Ingram Park to defend them.

Because cultural ideology affects people in unconscious ways and contains contradictory ideas, people too can have competing motives for their behavior and political strategies.<sup>13</sup> Black religion may supply only one only motive or even contradictory motives, as we will see later. People could embrace Christian pacifism on Sunday and take up a gun and defend their communities on Monday because they had mixed and contradictory beliefs and motives. The cultural ideological beliefs that motivated the Deacons could have originated from many sources: religious education, fraternal orders with their notions of honor and personal dignity linked to willingness to defend family and community; social norms and standards of measuring a persons worth and standing in the community; popular culture; personal ethics; military training; gender roles; dominant cultural values of manhood, pride, personal dignity; natural rights and revolutionary Lockean concepts conveyed in public schools; and the vestiges of secret warrior societies and African culture in general. A similar variety of influences could be attributed to the different motivations of the women who part of the forcible resisters in Birmingham and other Southern communities.

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<sup>13</sup> See Victoria M. Esses and Richard A. Vernon (Eds), *Explaining the Breakdown of Ethnic Relations*, (Wiley-Blackwell) 2008.

In practice, though, only one belief will dominate and guide a person's behavior. Hence the ready rationalizations and justifications that ideology provides when one acts in ways that contradict other beliefs.<sup>14</sup> The concepts of cultural ideology and competing beliefs lays the groundwork for asking the final question in redefining the movement: was Black religion an impelling force for the movement?

### **So Was it Religion?**

In my book on the Deacons, I do not attribute the member's motives to religious beliefs, although most of the Deacon leadership was active church leaders (It is important to note that the Deacons were a male exclusive organization which means that patriarchal notions are intermixed in their belief systems, unlike the forcible resistance elements that included women). Based on my interviews with them and their comments that were recorded during the movement by journalists and film makers, including film of two secret Deacon meetings in Natchez in 1965, I concluded that they drew their values--the right of armed self-defense and the right and duty to protect family and community--from other sources, primarily the belief system of masculine values in the numerous fraternal organizations. For me the question was, "How were these values transmitted intergenerationally through the decades?"

The Deacons offered many insights into what the rural "Folk Religion" church leaders were preaching in those times, a topic that has not been, to my knowledge, systematically researched as compared to the substantial research on liberation theology emanating from the large cities and national denominations. Robert Hicks, the founder of the Deacons chapter in Bogalusa, told an interviewer that when people asked ministers why did God

...make the black man so that the white man could sin and persecute the black man? These are a lot of problems that can't be answered. Ministers say it is not for us to question why God did such things. But see, this an age of God...This young race of people are full of whys and we don't have an answer for them. What can I tell a person 'That it's not for you to know and God made it so and he want it to be so and this is the way it is?'<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Here, the theory of "aversive racism" is useful. The theory argues that even when white people profess to have egalitarian beliefs, they can justify ideas and actions that devalue African Americans if there is a "plausible alternative explanation" for their beliefs or behavior, i.e. "What I am doing can't be racist because I know a black person who agrees with me." I expand this concept to all contradictory belief settings and suggest that as long as one has a plausible alternative explanation for what they think might be an immoral act, that they will invoke that explanation to avoid shame or guilt. So armed self-defense may be a sin based on one's religious beliefs, but the knowledge that Martin Luther King used armed guards in Montgomery might be taken as a special dispensation.

<sup>15</sup> Hicks, Robert. Interview by Robert Wright, transcript, August 10, 1969. Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C., pp. 56-57.

Local churches were not supportive of the movement in any of the more than twenty-one communities that had Deacon chapters, mostly in Louisiana and Mississippi. Hicks' assessment of the role of the Black church in the South echoes what most of the Deacons told me:

Now I can't speak for the Catholic church because I am not Catholic, but when you talk about the Baptist, I'm a hard-shell Baptist and I know they are not doing a damn thing. You hear me? They sit up there and take black people's money and those preachers are not doing anything... Until today we never had one black preacher participate out of, I'd say twenty-five, forty churches within the city. We have not had one black preacher in this town say a word.<sup>16</sup>

Hicks and Deacon members spread over hundreds of miles shared the same opinion—they were clearly drawing on a shared believe system. In the civil rights era, Black cultural ideology contained ideas about how liberation would occur. That included an assessment of the obstacles to freedom—what was the role of the local Black church; what would the ministers be preaching about the movement; would white people be responsive to appeals based on morality and reason? As in the 19<sup>th</sup> century abolition movement, African American were asking whether or not white Christian beliefs would convince whites that slavery violated Christian precepts of common humanity and dignity. In the modern civil rights movement, the same questions arose about the moral receptiveness of whites or the necessity of coercive force. Some thought it would be a mistake for African Americans to make their salvation dependent on white beneficence. Clearly, the Deacons were not inspired by the fatalism and quietism of black folk religion, but that does not rule out that they may have been drawing on other lessons from Black Christianity.

African American Christianity had contradictory meanings. The Book of Exodus was the font of Black Christianity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as numerous scholars have noted. Scholars tend to see in Exodus the themes of Diaspora and deliverance; but Exodus also contains a message about the paths to liberation and the roles of moral suasion and force. In Exodus, the Egyptians under Pharaoh derive material benefits from exploiting the Jews and are not responsive to moral and rational argument or attempts to draw dissonance from ones religious or ethical beliefs for one group but not for another. Indeed, Pharaoh with his “hardened heart” was even impervious to the coercion and force of the first nine plagues that God visited upon him to free the Jews. As a metaphor for the civil rights movement, the Egyptians are the white majority and the Jews are African Americans. Exodus contains an implicit “change process theory” that argues that people who exploit and oppress you are not likely to change unless compelled to do so by divine or human agency.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

Pharaoh did nothing in response to the first nine plagues, as Moses had predicted. It was the 10<sup>th</sup> plague that moved the mighty Pharaoh to action, yet left his heart as hard as ever. The 10<sup>th</sup> plague, viewed from a socio-political perspective, was that moment when the social costs of oppression exceeded the social benefits for the oppressor. One has to ask if this reading of the Exodus story, with its implicit notions about moral suasion and coercion in a racist society, was one that African Americans like the Deacons made?

Granted, in Exodus, God, not humans, is the agent of coercion and violence. But the Old Testament also contained stories in which humans were the change agents. The Rev. Moses Dickson, who in 1844 founded the revolutionary anti-slavery organization, the Order of the Twelve Knights and Daughters of Tabor, explicitly invoked the biblical story of Deborah and Barak and the Battle of Mount Tabor. At Mount Tabor, God assists Barak's army of 10,000 in their battle against the forces of Jabin, King of Canaan. Indeed, Barak's army, with the blessing of God, smites every one of Sisera's army. As Albert Raboteau writes, Dickson used the Old Testament and Exodus for "divine support" that revived memories of Gabriel and Vessey and Nat Turner. Though historians have yet to verify that the Knights of Tabor indeed existed, and in the numbers that Dickson claims, as Raboteau says they would certainly have been a "holy liberation front" impelled by African American religious beliefs, and not by pacifist teachings.<sup>17</sup> We can safely assume that African Americans continued to read the Book of Job into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the Battle of Mount Tabor, as well as the 10<sup>th</sup> Plague, provided some rationale for political force and coercion in contradiction to the pacifism of the Sermon on the Mount.

Other African Americans mined biblical text to justify their calls for violent slave resistance. David Walker in his famous 1829 "Walker's Appeal" calling for violent resistance offers a covenant liberation theology—that God's will was for African Americans to resist and overthrow slavery. The popular support for violent resistance to slavery was also reflected in the near passage in 1843 of a resolution based on Henry Highland Garnet's "Call To Rebellion" at the National Negro Convention meeting in Buffalo, New York.<sup>18</sup> Gayraud Wilmore notes that the idea that "God works generally through human agencies was clearly in step with the teachings of the nineteenth century theologians of the mainline black denominations."<sup>19</sup>

African American religion changed over time, according to Wilmore, particularly in the development of a survival-oriented folk religion and a "deradicalization" in the smaller churches. Black religions strength was in its fluctuation "between the moods of protest and accommodation" and these "two divergent tendencies in black ethics and religious life—the fist tending toward stubborn radicalism, the other toward hypocritical compromise—represent two strands of the survival tradition." Authentic African

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<sup>17</sup> Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. Oxford (Oxford University Press) 1978

<sup>18</sup> "Walker's Appeal at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/walker/menu.htm> on-line, Garnet "Call To rebellion" at <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/etas/8/>; and throughout Glaude, *Exodus*, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> Wilmore, *Black Religion*, p. 254, 259, 260.

American religion, which Wilmore identifies as the survival tradition, was marked by “alternating phases of withdrawal from and aggressive opposition toward the white world.” At its most aggressive, African American Religion embraced the “10<sup>th</sup> Plague” strategy in its estimate of the white conscience and its belief in forceful liberation.

In the modern era, it is not clear if Black Christianity provided any inspiration and legitimation for the more radical forcible resistance elements of the Black freedom movement. The research simply is not out there. We do know that the Deacons were religious men, but, as noted, the Black church in the rural and small town south was indifferent if not hostile to the movement and preached a message of fatalism. The Deacons associated nonviolence with the New Testament injunction to “turn the other cheek.” The term originates from the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus says “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye’ and a ‘tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”<sup>20</sup> It was a message that reverberated throughout the Black church in the 20th century and was part of the Black cultural ideology, but a religious injunction that the Deacons rejected and disparaged as hopelessly politically naïve. There were two contradictory “change process theories” in the bible—exemplified by the 10<sup>th</sup> Plague of Exodus story and the Sermon on the Mount. It is possible that the Deacons absorbed the meaning of and were motivated by the “10<sup>th</sup> Plague” message—that their modern-day Pharaohs were beyond redemption. But it will take a new round of interviews with the Deacons and their fellow church people to determine if and how this was discussed in the church and in their lifetime.

Beyond the Deacons, what was the inspiration of the forcible resistance elements, the “street forces” of Birmingham and a dozen other rebellions 1963-1964? Historians have been hard pressed to come up with an explanation for the sudden shift away from Christian nonviolence leadership and toward the secular black power movement that arose from the ashes of the Watts Riot that began on August 11, 1965. The shift makes sense only if we recognize that two parallel movements existed throughout the civil rights era—one that was religiously motivated and one that was more secular and grew out of political and moral opposition to racism in general. Following the theory of competing beliefs within a broader cultural ideology, these secular movement actors probably subscribed to both belief systems but their political ideas held sway over Christian pacifist teachings. It was the secular movement that inhabited the sidelines and when the narrative of the movement was written, it was the narrative of the religious leadership of the national movements. The outcome is a distorted view of the freedom movement as overwhelmingly impelled by religious precepts.

There were other influences that point the way for new research. The messages of popular cinema, especially Saturday matinee westerns with the morality tales of heroic defenders of the community against corrupt wealthy overlords and outlaws, must have had some influence. Movie theatres were segregated in the South, but the Western was a

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<sup>20</sup> Matthew, 5:38-42, NIV. Also found in the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:27-31 NIV. The Old Testament contains a similar passage in Lamentation 3: 30 NIV.

popular genre for African Americans and were serialized on television in the 1950s. In 1966, Charles Evers received deafening applause at a Memphis meeting when he said that he and his followers in Mississippi were "coming to meet [James Meredith] and we're coming like Buck Jones and Tim McCoy, blazing away."<sup>21</sup> The history books, tattered hand-me-downs that they were, in African American schools were filled with revolutionary era republicanism and its rhetoric of the right to armed rebellion against tyranny, despite the racist and patriarchal themes.<sup>22</sup> Deacon leader Bob Hick observed that "America was built on violence. When we talk about great patriots, you talk about Patrick Henry, Give me liberty or give me death," said Hicks. "Here was a man who went out and armed himself, people armed themselves in defense of what they thought was right. Now on the other hand, we are a group of black people in this country that have the same right that Patrick Henry and other people had in forming this country when the separated from England."<sup>23</sup> Clearly, Hicks' beliefs about armed self-defense found some justification if not inspiration in the Revolutionary War mythology.

It is true that religious vernacular was common in the movement for the nonviolent and forcible resistance elements both. But in labor towns like Bogalusa, St. Francisville, Jonesboro, and Natchez, the decisive militant leadership came from union men who had acquired their skills in public speaking, leadership, and negotiation by leading the segregated union locals and the plethora of black fraternal orders. It is erroneous to conclude that a movement's political content—the ideas that inspire and drive the movement—is determined by the movement's organizational form, i.e. the use of traditional cultural vernacular and organizational styles to express new ideas. Social movements normally employ vernaculars and organizational rituals that their members find familiar and comfortable—and that provide a common identity. As the movement evolves, it casts off the old adaptive cultural practices that were predicated on the belief that subjugation was immutable and compliance offered some measure of relief; and at the same time they create new cultural forms based on a new vision of the world and its possibilities.

## Conclusion

Redefining the civil rights era movement means both broadening and narrowing our categories of analysis. Scholars need to open the doors of the movement to people who played a crucial role in empowering it. That means returning to places like Birmingham and learning the stories of the people relegated to the margins of history. Women were evident in the photographs of the Birmingham forcible resisters: in what ways did gender shape their cultural ideology and religious beliefs? Redefining the movement means narrowing our categories and searching for direct causality so that not every victory is attributed to every belief or behavior that may have preceded the success, *post hoc ergo proper hoc*. Understanding the religious and secular motives of movement actors requires that we broaden our conception of what social change process meanings were conveyed

<sup>21</sup> Jet, "Meredith Threat to Arm Not the Answer, says Dr. King," June 23, 1966.

<sup>22</sup> See Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, 1976, (Oxford University Press)

<sup>23</sup> Hicks Interview.



in African American religion and what secular beliefs were competing for domination in the Black cultural ideology. In a practical sense, we need to know what was preached in church in Southern rural areas and small towns and what was heard by the congregants. We know what the religious leaders who led the national movement believed; now we need to know the animating beliefs of those who did not “respect the police” but were at the heart of the freedom movement.

Finally, to come full circle, at the beginning I said bad history makes for bad politics. In the aftermath of Katrina white liberals were an integral part of the exclusionary movement to eliminate poverty by eliminating poor people from the envisioned new city. Those who professed egalitarian and anti-racist values supported the plan to demolish most of the black neighborhoods and convert them to parks and retention ponds; they supported the white encroachment on black political governance to the extent that all 5,000 African American teachers were fired and the school system was effectively taken over by white state officials; the prolonged evacuation and slow recovery resulted in a white majority city council, white majority school board, and white majority inner-city legislative delegation. Throughout this period, local white religious leaders either supported the depredations against the Black community or played the role of silent bystanders. Episcopal Bishop Charles Jenkins, the lone white religious dissenter, put it succinctly: “Every denomination in New Orleans has been compromised.”<sup>24</sup>

It is obvious that the same strategic questions that faced the civil rights movement face the African American community in New Orleans today and may face African Americans in future natural disasters or economic calamities: can white liberals be relied upon to support African Americans in times of crisis? If African Americans remain a political minority in a city that was once 70% black, will they best be served by appealing to the moral conscience of local whites or will they, as the civil rights movement did, look within for salvation from outside or by raising the social costs of disruption above the social benefits of oppression?

**End.**

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<sup>24</sup> Author’s notes on Jenkins presentation.