

## Article

# The Diminished Public, and Black Christian Promotion of American Civic Ideals

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**Abstract:** Black public activism has been guided largely by black affinities toward the U.S. Constitution, including its core democratic liberalist premises. This range of constitutionally defined political possibilities has both animated (and confined) a sense of public imagination and agency for many black Christians. Divergences and convergences between black religion-based public confidence and dissent are examined here, with reference to three paradigmatic approaches: (1) civil religious patriotism; (2) religious counter-publics; and (3) socio-religious liminality and semi-publics. Contrasts and continuities between these approaches are examined with attention to the impact of these approaches on a beleaguered and diminished American public realm and their relative affirmations or negations of broad understandings and undertakings of public purposes.

**Keywords:** religions; politics; African Americans



**Citation:** Smith, R. Drew. 2021. The Diminished Public, and Black Christian Promotion of American Civic Ideals. *Religions* 12: 505. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12070505>

Academic Editors: R. Khari Brown and Ronald E. Brown

Received: 8 May 2021

Accepted: 1 July 2021

Published: 7 July 2021

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## 1. Introduction

Black Christians have been key agents in a centuries-long effort to prevent American democracy from succumbing to its own inherent contradictions and self-destructive tendencies. Strategic to the promotion and preservation of American democracy has been the reinforcement of the idea of a broadly construed American public, and a robust vision of the public good. A cadre of Black Christian leaders have featured among America's most courageous and vocal champions of these public ideals, with black churches serving as rich and reliable wellsprings of black civic capital and public-minded citizens.

This black public activism has been guided largely by black affinities toward the U.S. Constitution, including its core democratic liberalist premises. Political theorist William Gerber defines democratic liberalism as a “belief that individuals and institutions, including governments, should so act—or refrain from acting—as to liberate as many individuals as possible from as many shackles as possible, without overturning basic social machinery” (Gerber 1987, p. 111). This range of constitutionally defined political possibilities has both animated (and confined) a sense of public imagination and agency for many black Christians. However, no matter how far-reaching these conceptions of public have or have not been, black church leaders have often approached this publicly oriented trajectory out of a spirit of political necessity and religious conviction.

Although black Christian confidence in America's public purposefulness has not been unswerving, it has endured over many years, expanding and contracting along the way in response to existing circumstances and events. Black public confidence achieved notable heights with civil rights legislative victories during the mid-1960s and with Barack Obama's electoral victories in 2008 and 2012. Nevertheless, black confidence in American public purposes, while a prevalent response throughout these political peaks and valleys, has operated alongside quite opposite instincts about the efficacy of the public realm.

Racial incongruities formalized within American life have given rise as well to a black wariness and even defiance of ideas of what America publicly represents, at times translating into forms of active black resistance. On other occasions, it has taken the form of a black aloofness from American public sphere activities altogether. The politically quietist versions of this aloofness have been strongly associated with black churches prior

to the mid-20th century (Mays and Nicholson 1933; Marable 1983; and Reed 1986). They have become less common, however, within America's highly politicized and ideologized post-Civil Rights Movement context.

These have been black church tensions and debates over the efficacy of the American public sphere as well as over the religious importance to be assigned to public dynamics. What is alluded to in the latter instance is human attentiveness to a private realm where individual conscience prevails and where public demands give way to private and religious preference. To the extent that a conception of public purpose or of a common good is operative within those spaces, it may often be narrowly defined and at odds with more broadly construed public considerations embodied by public structures, including governmental executive, legislative, and judicial powers and constitutional mandates in-general.

Black church conceptual support of public purposefulness is an important form of public capital, but so too is black church instrumental support. Even where religious agents embrace conceptual commitments to public purposes, this may fail to be accompanied by civic and political actions and behaviors contributing to effective pursuits of broad public concerns and ideals. As Sherry Arnstein outlines in an influential article titled *A Ladder of Citizen Participation*, citizen participation in public life runs along a continuum from nonparticipation to token participation to empowered participation. She argues that the level of citizen participation translates into the degree of citizen power for "determining how information is shared, goals and policies are set, tax resources are allocated, programs are operated, and benefits like contracts and patronage are parceled out" (Arnstein 1969, p. 24). Arnstein operationalizes public purposes here in very instrumental ways and, as is true within similar sociological critiques of instrumental versus symbolic politics, her analysis suggests not all movement beyond the private and individualistic realm necessarily achieves a broadly beneficial public objective (c.f., Edelman 1964; Gusfield 1963; Mannheim 1936; Sennett 1974). Therefore, actions may be guided by what are envisioned as public aims but still make few instrumental claims upon public sphere resources, and the intended beneficiaries of these envisioned public aims actually may conform to a more parochial than public classification. For example, a social club has aims that extend beyond the private sphere, but may operate on behalf of a very parochially defined constituency and make few claims upon public sphere resources (e.g., public money, influence, and protection).

This article examines the positioning of black faith leaders (especially church leaders) toward the public domain, cognizant in these instances of varying degrees of public intentionality and impact evidenced by their conceptions and actions, and of varying degrees to which these black religious orientations have encouraged and undergirded broadly beneficial public purposes. Three paradigms of public positioning are evaluated: (1) civil religious patriotism; (2) religious counter-publics; and (3) socio-religious liminality and semi-publics. These approaches are discussed with attention to their impact on a beleaguered and diminished American public realm and their relative contributions to the strengthening of a robust public domain.

## 2. Civil Religious Patriotism

Frequent attention has been drawn to a Christian-based "civil religion" operating "residually and informally" among the American populace, characterized by a belief in a divinely purposeful history and in the sacred agency of specially designated peoples (Bellah 1974, p. 34). These ideas achieved early systematic expression in Puritan criticisms of the increasing erosion of the sacred logic by which the American nation was to be defined and the need for American political leaders to return to the righteous purposes at the heart of their divine national mission of "socio-religious perfection" (Bercovitch 1978). African American leaders, especially Martin Luther King Jr., have been known to admonish in the spirit of the Puritans that America repent of its moral failings and fully embrace its guiding ideals. King's view of America as a nation of moral and political destiny was expressed

in a 1962 speech at the National Press Club, a year before it would be restated in similar terms in his speech on the National Mall:

We are simply seeking to bring into full realization the American dream—a dream yet unfulfilled. A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men no longer argue that the color of a man's skin determines the content of his character... this is the dream.

King concluded by saying: "When it is realized [people] everywhere will know that America is truly the land of the free and the home of the brave" (King 1962). Clearly during this season of King's leadership, the promise of America (although not fully realized) loomed large in his thinking, and there is an unmistakably patriotic conviction within his utterances.

Other prominent black clergy activists have been explicit in their convictions about the divine dictates of a unified American commitment to freedom and justice. Two-time presidential candidate Jesse Jackson, for example, remarked during his 1988 Democratic National Convention address that while America is characterized by "differences of religion, region, and race", American unity in the pursuit of public policies that are "morally right" are at the heart of America's "noble instincts" and "highest calling" (Jackson 1988). Noted Philadelphia pastor and economic empowerment advocate Leon Sullivan offered an especially generous interpretation of America's sacred mission. He stated: "Never in the history of mankind has a nation possessed the glory of America. It is as though the hand of God was above us, providing resources, possessions and accumulations of blessings". What was also to thank for this, according to Sullivan, was "a form of government and system that supersedes ... anything ever devised" (Sullivan 1972, p. 103).

Black civil religion has also been explicitly advanced by high-profile black Christian laypersons. Marian Wright Edelman, founder of Children's Defense Fund, was the primary speaker at a June 1996 "Stand for Children" rally at the National Mall, organized in support of a bill called the Child Health Insurance and Lower Deficit Act. Championing the bill, which was intended to expand health insurance for millions of children and pregnant women without health coverage, Edelman lifted up the bill's provisions but also a broad vision of America's common good and moral necessities:

This is a day about rekindling our children's hope and renewing our faith in each other and in our great nation's future. It is about America's ideals and not about any group's ideology ... We will not let anybody talk about two nations, one for them and one for us. We are one people.

Edelman's closing challenge to the audience (and to all Americans) was that they might become ever more committed to "America's and God's sacred covenant with every child," and to all that is "just and right in [God's] sight" (Edelman 1996).

These affirmations of America's divine favor and sacred obligations were echoed by another Christian layperson, Barack Obama, whose black church affinities informed his presidential leadership at key points. Obama spoke in his 2009 Inaugural Address of an America that had achieved great things through "risk-taking," "sacrifice," and "struggle," but that had been "badly weakened ... by greed and irresponsibility" and by a broader collective retreat from duties to ourselves, our nation, and the world. However, Obama assured the nation: "The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea, passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness". America's "better history" will prevail, stated Obama, because "giving our all to a difficult task... is the price and the promise of citizenship"; and "the source of our confidence [is] the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny" (Obama 2009). Obama's tone here was clearly upbeat, though not uncritical, and frames America's prospects in conditional terms, where living up to its potential depended upon its faithfulness to its constitutional and religious principles and its reliance on God.

This tradition received very recent high-profile expression from Raphael Warnock, the long-serving pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta who was elected to the U.S. Senate in January 2021. In a March 2021 speech on the Senate floor, Warnock argued for the preservation and expansion of voting rights as a core conviction within American democracy, extending from Thomas Jefferson to Martin Luther King Jr. to John Lewis (after whom the voting rights legislation Warnock was promoting was named).<sup>1</sup> Warnock stated: “there is something in the American covenant—in its charter documents and its Jeffersonian ideals—that bends toward freedom. And led by a preacher and a patriot named King, Americans of all races stood up [bringing] us closer to our ideals, to lengthen and strengthen the cords of our democracy.” Warnock remarked further: “Ours is a land where possibility is born of democracy—a vote, a voice, a chance to help determine the direction of the country and one’s own destiny within it” (Warnock 2021).

The civil religious patriotism paradigm represents one trajectory of the relationship between black faith praxis and public ideals and it is the one with seemingly greater popular appeal. It is also the trajectory that has produced the most systematic claims on public sphere resources and generated the most instrumental political benefits and social reforms. The incorporationist politics of Civil Rights Movement clergy activists and of post-movement black preacher-politicians illustrate this correlation. However, the contemporary political efficacy of this civil religious, politically incorporationist tradition is contested by some African American faith leaders. Religion scholar Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., for example, warns that black celebration of Obama’s “singular achievement” in becoming the first black president, along with black “desire for access” to his presidency, turned many blacks into “born-again patriots” (Glaude 2013). Glaude’s criticism of black patriotic enthusiasms is tied to larger concerns about the extent to which such views work against social transformations required for addressing black social urgencies. Based upon that measurement, he argues that the twenty-first century Black Church has died in its role as “a repository for the social and moral conscience of the nation”. Evidence of this, says Glaude is how “rare” it is “when black churches mobilize *in public and together* to call attention to the pressing issues of our day” (Glaude 2010, *italics his*).

This points to the existence of another trajectory in the relationship between the religious and public sphere, and one where there appears to be less confluence between black faith praxis and American governmental praxis, greater ambiguity related to instrumental political benefits generated by these forms of black faith praxis, and more pronounced reservations overall about American political possibilities.

### 3. Religious Counter-Publics

Since at least the early 1800s there have been sectors of African Americans who have viewed the American social context as sufficiently inimical to black social fulfillment that breaking free from its structural and ideological hold has been an urgent concern. For them, the perspective has been that racism in America is too virulent and pervasive, and opposition to it too defined by liberal political and religious gradualism, to anticipate a dramatically different future for blacks within the American social framework.

There was a politicized black resistance to American politics that scorned American pretensions in promoting black progress and that pursued alternative black political space (ideologically and geographically speaking) where black social interests could be addressed more genuinely. This potentially more radical brand of political and theological resistance toward American formal-sphere activities has reverberated throughout black Christianity, at least as early as the back-to-Africa advocacy of black clergy such as Alexander Crummell and Henry McNeil Turner during the late-1800s, and subsequently in the 20th century black separatist convictions of religious syncretist groups such as the Nation of Islam and Black Hebrews (Smith 1998). These nineteenth and early twentieth century Black Nationalists provided ideological intentionality through an explicit black self-determinationist rationale, while also constructing cultural and organizational spaces that served as liberated operational spaces for black constituencies pending their eventual departure from Ameri-

can terrain altogether. Black Nationalist groups such as the Nation of Islam maintained vibrancy through the mid-1900s, reaching a peak membership of 50,000 to 100,000 persons in the 1950s and 1960s and enjoying an influence through the leadership of Malcolm X and later Louis Farrakhan that extended well beyond their formal membership base.

A similar social wariness and separatism was characteristic of many black churches at least through the mid-20th century. A deep-seated theological reasoning has undergirded this black Christian wariness of American politics, where the concern has been with transcending temporal forces and authorities regarded by many black Christians as largely unmeaningful and, in the minds of some, unredeemable. Within conversionist forms of black Christianity (especially Pentecostal, Holiness, charismatic, and many Baptist expressions), the emphasis, at least prior to the Civil Rights Movement, was on a duality between the church and the “world,” and on maintaining social separation and spiritual distance from “worldly” affairs. This dualistic emphasis on “the transformation of personal identity as opposed to the larger social order” accounts for the politically quietist reputation black churches gained prior to the Civil Rights Movement (Baer and Singer 2002, p. 178).

Much of the scholarship on black churches during the first half of the twentieth century depicted black churches as lacking not only in political involvement, but also in political interest—with black clergy characterized frequently in this way. For example, in their 1933 study, Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph Nicholson suggested a strong “other-worldly” disposition among black churches (fueled by black preaching) where, “seeing little hope in this world,” black Christians have “projected [their] hopes in a heaven above” (Mays and Nicholson 1933, p. 93). Referring to black churches in the period up through the mid-1900s, E. Franklin Frazier described black religion as “other-worldly in its outlook, dismissing the privations and sufferings and injustices of this world as temporary and transient” and concluded that it functioned often as a compensatory refuge from a hostile society (Frazier 1963, p. 51). This view of black churches persisted even after the Civil Rights Movement, with C. Eric Lincoln in the 1970s referring to a continuously strong tendency among contemporary black churches toward meekness and a “willingness to let Jesus bear the burdens of resisting an oppressive social order” (Lincoln 1974, p. 108). Similarly, Adolph Reed Jr. assessed black churches, as late as the mid-1980s, as politically “antiparticipatory” by nature, and criticized black ministers for operating too often in ways contrary to the advancement of a participatory, democratic black culture (Reed 1986).

While the expanded social engagement by black clergy during the Civil Rights Movement and after was welcomed in many quarters, the trend toward increased clergy politicization also made some within black church circles question whether clergy social entanglements had gone too far. Several black evangelical writers expressed concerns in the 1960s about the overtly political directions in which black clergy were moving. For example, black evangelical writers such as Howard O. Jones charged black churches with having “failed” and having become “spiritually weak and deficient” due to a loss of “vision as to the purpose of the church” and due to drifting “far from the divine pattern and program of the church” (Jones 1966, pp. 27–28).

There were affinities between this sort of theological objection to close associations between religion and politics and a black religious wariness of mainstream America rooted in an awareness of America’s historical unresponsiveness to black racial grievances. Both instincts fed a lack of enthusiasm from a wide spectrum of blacks toward the American public sphere. Black religious commitments to community were strong, but community in these instances was determined (through circumstances and convictions) by an operational and ideological independence from the American public sphere. Due to black public exclusion and black self-determinationist desires, black religious actors staked-out their own “private” realms of identity and operation.

An emphasis on private agency over public agency has been strongly associated with Tuskegee Institute founder Booker T. Washington. In assessing black social prospects in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century, Washington concluded black social advancement was best achieved through leveraging resources for black self-improvement



from within the black community and from sympathetic whites rather than through agitating for political rights. Washington stated: “I believe it is the duty of the Negro . . . to deport himself modestly in regard to political claims, depending upon the slow but sure influences that proceed from the possession of property, intelligence, and high character for the full recognition of his political rights.” As part of this famous 1895 speech before a predominantly white audience in Atlanta, Washington also pledged his commitment to “interlacing [black] industrial, commercial, civil, and religious life with [whites’] in a way that shall make the interests of both races one. In all things that are purely social we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress” (Washington [1903] 1965, p. 156).

Here, Washington outlines an approach to racial interaction where blacks would impose no public claim in pursuit of political rights or economic opportunity but, rather, would mainly seek to maximize developmental opportunities within their reach and in partnership (when possible) with sympathetic, altruistic whites. Meanwhile, economic development would serve as both the primary black developmental goal and as the arbiter of any other black social or political objectives. This represents a quite truncated conception of public imperatives and possibilities as well as an exaggerated estimation of collective benefits accruing from strategies reliant upon private and voluntary sector action. Nevertheless, Washington’s position gained broad support within the southern white community and among a large number of blacks as well, and it also helped reinforce subsequent preferences for private sphere over public sphere strategies within several streams of black religious life.

There were clear parallels between Washington’s framework and the separatist, insular approaches of many black churches during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. Washington’s privileging of economic empowerment, for example, achieved substantial religious buttressing from twentieth-century black preachers such as Father Divine, who presided from the early 1910s through the 1950s over a movement steeped in “Christian”-based teachings of prosperity derived largely from nineteenth- and twentieth century “New Thought” philosophies. Among the tenets of New Thought were that “heaven was on earth, God existed in everyone, and health and wealth were derived from positive states of mind” (Watts 1992, pp. 58–59). Through his focus on economics, Father Divine and his multiple “Peace Mission” congregations in various cities amassed economic holdings that included restaurants, stores, small businesses, farms, hotels (with one on the Atlantic City beach), and residential properties. Divine remained largely aloof from politics during the first couple decades of his ministry. He made forays into politics, however, through a “Divine Righteous Government Convention” he convened in 1939 to oppose segregationist practices and what he regarded as demeaning and disempowering social welfare programs. He also advocated for civil rights and by the early 1950s was promoting reparations for descendants of enslaved Africans (Harlem World Magazine 2017; Weisbrot 1983). Nevertheless, as Jill Watts argues, Father Divine’s political impact and larger public claims were often impaired by the religious particularities and economic preoccupations of his movement (Watts 1992, pp. x–xiii, 123–43).

The example Father Divine’s movement presents as a simultaneously insular and public-facing ministry, along with his critique of disempowering social welfare and charitable approaches, is instructive in assessing other semi-public ministry activities. Black churches have been key sources of social services in black communities—by default during systematic denials of public resources throughout much of American history, and by well-developed instincts, aptitudes, and capacities proceeding into the post-movement context (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Chaves and Higgins 1992; Chaves and Tsitsos 2001). Historic black denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church were at the forefront of black civil-society institution building during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially schools. By the early twentieth century, the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) emerged as a major civil society sector resource as well, not so much through the creation of parallel parachurch institutions but rather through its congregational and

ecclesial structures. As David Daniels, III points out, COGIC structures facilitated “communicative, associative, educative, and expressive” objectives—but often in ways less closely aligned with mainstream public agendas than other black denominations and civil society organizations (Daniels 2011).

Therefore, black churches have developed a rich array of social service programs, economic development initiatives, and para-church organizations (including schools). Although strategic and effective in addressing social gaps within black communities, concerns have been voiced about the extent to which these activities may work against broader structural claims upon the more resource abundant public sector. Longstanding criticisms of self-help approaches (dating back to early twentieth century criticisms of Washington’s self-help approach) have pivoted more recently toward cautions to black churches who are allowing constrictions of their political voice and independence by accepting government money in support of church-based social services (see, e.g., Roberts 2003). A slightly different concern about churches receiving government money is that it may represent a diversion of public money away from public purposes to what may be arguably parochial purposes—as has been argued with respect to public vouchers used for private schooling (Smith 2013). Whether the concern is over a weakening of black church positioning as government critic or diversions of public resources toward parochial aims, broader black claims on public resources and benefits are diminished.

Though a pattern extending well beyond black churches, black churches have operated as key promoters of black privatism and self-determination—and not only the numerous smaller, socially marginalized congregations, but in some instances very large, influential churches. One pastor who was an especially high-profile and articulate spokesperson for black privatism was J.H. Jackson of Chicago’s Olivet Baptist Church. Jackson was a conceptual heir to Booker T. Washington in the sense that both men were committed to the sanctity of individual conscience, not only with respect to black moral free agency, but even as it relates to the freedom of whites to hold racist beliefs. As religion scholar Peter Paris points out, Jackson felt whites had the right to operate free of outside imposition within that realm of conscience—at least as long as it did not impose on the free exercise of conscience by others or in any other way violate what he affirmed to be the constitution’s legal and legitimate aims (Paris 1978, pp. 52–56). Even though for Jackson (similar to Washington), white America’s unjust treatment of blacks violated and undermined constitutional freedoms, protections, and equal treatment promised to all citizens, Jackson only supported responses to these injustices that did not violate American law or constitutional principles (including the freedoms afforded even to racists, or the legitimacy to be accorded to government operations and procedures) (Paris 1978, p. 56).

Whereas black emigrationists, nationalists, and many religiously motivated separatists viewed private, independent space as a domain removed from and in conflict with American public space, an implication of Jackson’s views was that the private domain was both an extension and actualization of American public purposes as embodied in the constitution. From this point of view then, persons acting in a lawful way within the domain of independent conscience were fulfilling both their sacred rights of private agency and the noblest public aims of the Constitution. Nevertheless, the intentionality here appears first and foremost to pertain to what is private, opening out only coincidentally on what is public.

This privileging of private over public domain has persisted among quite a few contemporary black megachurches. Gayraud Wilmore commented in the early 1980s upon a trend within black communities and black churches toward giving “highest priority ...to the confrontation of white power in one’s private life” (Wilmore 1983, p. 194). Similarly, journalist Hamil Harris commented in 1997 on a tendency among contemporary black megachurches to neglect “corporate salvation [in order] to focus on individual gains” (Harris 1997, p. 52). Both comments point to evidence of a shift away from the robust conception of public ideals and public action King and other leaders championed during

the Civil Rights Movement and a reclamation instead of black self-help and independency traditions dating back to the late-1800s.

The deep descent into individualism in the decades after the Civil Rights Movement and widespread retreat from public obligation was captured in the title and analysis of Christopher Lasch's widely read book, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. In this book, Lasch describes a 1970s American narcissism characterized by inordinate "self-love," "self-absorption", and a living "for the moment" rather than for one's "predecessors or posterity". Lasch argues: "We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future". This disconnection from a temporal past or future, this lack of public purposefulness, amounts to a "spiritual crises", says Lasch, in ways that hint (at least superficially) at "earlier outbreaks of millenarian religion" (Lasch 1979, p. 5).

A disconnection from public purpose did not improve after the 1970s. A 2009 book by Christian Smith on "The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults" suggests this "spiritual crises" has only worsened. In summarizing the results of extensive interview data collected nationally from young adults, Smith details a contemporary dynamic in many respects aligned with Lasch's critique. Smith observed: "The majority of those interviewed stated ... that nobody has any natural or general responsibility or obligation to help other people". Furthermore, says Smith: "Even when pressed ... about victims of natural disaster or political oppression ... about helpless people who are not responsible for their poverty or disabilities ... about famines and floods and tsunamis ... they replied ... If someone wants to help, then good for that person. But nobody has to" (Smith 2009, p. 68).

Although the analysis by Lasch and by Smith draws substantially on experiences and expressions of white Americans, black Americans (including black Christians) are not exempted from their critique. The privileging of private over public commitments, operationally and ideologically, became increasingly evident in the decades since the Civil Rights Movement—gaining technological strength from the latter-20th century emergence of the internet and social media communications matrices.

#### 4. Socio-Religious Liminality and Semi-Publics

During the American slavery era, gatherings by enslaved Africans, including religious gatherings, were tightly controlled or prohibited altogether. Consequently, enslaved Africans often resorted to innovation and subterfuge, not only in their coded forms of musical expression but also in the ways they approached their early church formations. As historian Albert Raboteau documents, enslaved Africans would "steal away" to the woods at night for worship gatherings that were more consistent in style and content with their existential experiences and eschatological yearnings—all the while careful to avoid discovery by slaveholders of these "hush harbor" churches. In this sense, enslaved Africans lived between two expressions of Christianity says Raboteau: "institutional and noninstitutional, visible and invisible, formally organized and spontaneously adapted" (Raboteau 1978, pp. 212–13).

These characterizations of institutional and noninstitutional and formal and spontaneous church formations are also descriptive of contrasts throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries between larger, more established black Christian expressions and smaller, emerging expressions. Early twentieth century scholars noted the large frequency of black "storefront" churches (churches meeting in small buildings once used as stores or in residences and possessing relatively low numbers of active members). In a 1940 study of 266 black storefront churches in Chicago, sociologist St. Clair Drake noted these churches averaged approximately 30 members.<sup>2</sup> Mays and Nicholson argued that these smaller black churches lacked capacity for effectively serving community needs and that their numbers should be reduced by merging, more socially resourceful institutions (pp. 19, 227). These smaller churches may not have viewed the matter in this way, however, viewing their smaller, noninstitutionalized status instead as conducive to ministerial independence and not as a ministerial deficit.



By mid-twentieth century, demands for liberalization and democratization targeting entrenched leadership structures and cultural traditions were extending to black institutional life as well. Successive waves of younger-generation black social reformers led the way within black communities, challenging narrow cultural framings and pushing toward sometimes unfamiliar operational spaces removed from established institutional spaces. Evidence of strong post-institutional inclinations within contemporary life has been mounting and revealing a loosening institutional grip within governmental sector institutions, civic and educational institutions, and religious institutions (Wuthnow 1990; Roozen and Nieman 2005; Sennett 1974). It has been a movement away from form and towards formlessness, away from permanence and towards impermanence, and away from rootedness and towards rootlessness.

Since the Civil Rights Movement, the distance between the black institutional sector and younger-generation leaders has become increasingly noticeable, operationally and also ideologically. Issues post-movement youth have been concerned with have included the unfinished empowerment agendas of the poor, of women, and of LGBTQ persons—none of which were issues systematically embraced by many black organization or churches during the Civil Rights Movement or afterwards. Post-movement agitations over widespread and unrelenting black economic marginalization built upon similar emphases during the movement, including the anti-poverty activism mobilized as part of the Poor People's Campaign with which Dr. King was engaged at the time of his assassination. King's public policy demands outlined in an "Economic Bill of Rights" included \$30 billion for fighting poverty, guaranteed full employment and income, and the construction of 500,000 affordable homes each year.

Though less instrumental in their systemic goals, organizations such as Nation of Islam (NOI), Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Black Panther Party (BPP) also advanced Movement-era critiques of intrinsic structural inequalities. NOI was known for its advocacy of black economic self-reliance and for its opposition to black integration into American mainstream organizations and social structures. The BPP promoted extra-systemic approaches to social change, as well including a collective commitment to armed black self-defense. Though not as inclined as NOI and BPP toward extra-systemic action, SNCC also embodied an impatience with mainstream black leaders' gradualism and integrationism, and pressed for broader, more structural forms of change. SNCC leaders John Lewis and his successor as director Stokely Carmichael were strong advocates of taking the movement in less conventional and provincial directions, including by forging closer interactions with social justice and anticolonial movements throughout the Global South. These younger-generation activists often evidenced fierce ideological resistance to the social and cultural positioning of black churches, signaling what would become increasing levels of younger-generation and urban black poor divergences from black churches in the post-movement context.

Additionally, there was a deepening of black urban poverty by the late-1960s with the exodus of social resources from urban core neighborhoods as businesses, persons with means, and even churches relocated to suburban contexts. Meanwhile, black urban core neighborhoods became characterized by declining schools, underemployment, over-criminalization, and over-incarceration. By the turn of the century, the social distance between churches and low-income black urban residents was pronounced to the point that roughly 70 percent of low-income black residents were reporting they were not members of a church and about 40 percent of residents had not attended a religious service more than once or twice the previous year (Smith 2003, pp. 41–42).

Post-movement black youth activists mobilized around economic concerns, including activists from an expanding segment of black tertiary students, the hip-hop movement (beginning in the 1980s), and Black Lives Matter (by the 2010s). pushing the progressive social change agenda of black activist youth during the 1970s and 1980s (much like black power-oriented youth during the 1960s) outpaced the social change objectives of some of their elders, and post-movement black activist youth pushed toward more comprehensive

change than what tended to be promoted by many of the civil rights organizations and black church leaders at the time. This led to further younger-generation drift away from black establishment organizations and churches and toward younger-generation formations of organizations catering to their own political interests and professional pursuits.

The prospects for youth leadership (including for black youth) began to change by the early 1990s, in large part because of the emergence and availability of flexible, far-reaching internet platforms through which youth political and religious concerns could be promoted. Research by political scientist Cathy Cohen points to a preference by younger generation activists across all racial groups for web-based forms of activism over traditional organizational forms of activism, due largely to “the ease of participation” in web-based activism and because such acts “do not require the direct coordination of large or small groups” (Cohen 2010, p. 181).

Many younger-generation blacks who embraced this more independent approach to social involvement sensed a kindred spirit in Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential candidacy, viewing him as embodying a critical-outsider politics and post-institutional social movement. Millions of younger generation Obama supporters connected with his campaign via social media and various forms of electronic communications, consistent with their inclinations toward fluid rather than fixed forms of engagement and approaches to community formation. Obama was described in 2008 (sometimes derisively and sometimes as a statement of fact) as a leader who is “all things to all people.” An extensive 2008 New York Times article defined Obama’s ability to identify and be identified with an extensive range of sometimes conflicting constituencies and positions (while often avoiding being tied to any of them) as “pragmatism” (Becker and Drew 2008). In this sense, Obama’s campaign was larger than politics, it was larger than religious traditions, yet it embraced both of those things. For example, an appealing aspect of Obama’s leadership profile leading up to this 2008 presidential campaign was his connections to progressive black church traditions, as garnered from his membership at Chicago’s influential Trinity United Church of Christ. However, when Obama’s political foes attempted to align him with controversial elements of the preachments of Trinity’s pastor, Jeremiah Wright, Obama distanced himself from the social capital once afforded by his association with Wright and Trinity.

Therefore, as a presidential candidate the cultural and ideological particulars of Obama’s leadership profile tended to become absorbed in his universals. Although a self-identifying African American Christian and Democratic Party representative, his blackness, Christian-ness, and partisan identifications could seem palpable one moment and be overcome the next by a seemingly instinctual religious understatement, post-racialism, and non-partisanship. In this respect, Obama mirrors America’s increasing fluidity on matters of religious identity, and the growing unwillingness (especially among younger generation Americans) to be bound by static categorizations or traditions (whether faith-related, cultural, or otherwise).

In one respect, these contemporary fluidities and independent tendencies are part of a steady movement during the last fifty years in the direction of decentralized authority (especially in an organizational sense) and of declining formal religious involvement. Americans have been demonstrating less interest in dynamics where authority is centralized within a handful of institutions or leaders in a given sector or context—whether that centralization has taken the form of the denominational bodies that have staked out much of the ecclesiastical landscape or organizations that enjoyed a long-running dominance within a specific sector such as the YMCA/YWCA (as part of the youth development sector) or the NAACP (as part of the civil rights sector). In each of these cases, organizations in which sectoral authority and influence had become centralized were increasingly overtaken by a mobilization of newly diversifying and independent initiatives.

Fluidity and autonomy have also manifested at the level of individual religious affiliation and affinities. Scholars have noted an increase over the last fifty years in the number of persons choosing not to align with formal institutional and conceptual frameworks of religious life. While a growing ‘secularization’ could be readily argued as a characteristic

of modern European contexts, the characterization was not as easily or accurately applied to the U.S. given persistently high levels of formal religious involvement (at least among working-class and middle-class Americans) (Stark and Finke 2000, p. 79). Although persuasive mid-20th century arguments were put forth nonetheless about a rising tide of American secularism, a dimension missing from these arguments that would gain greater clarity in the latter-20th century and early 21st is that the decline in formal religious engagement was real but mainly among specific demographic sectors of the American population (Cox 1965). It was specifically the very poor, the very rich, and younger-generation, well-educated urban dwellers that were noticeably disconnected from formal religious life (Smith 2003; McRoberts 2005; Sullivan 2012).

According to a 2019 national survey by Pew Forum, 26 percent of Americans over 18 years of age indicated having no religious affiliation, an increase of ten percentage points since a similar Pew Forum survey in 2009. The percentage of Americans indicating no religious affiliation in a 1990 survey was only 8 percent, which means that from 1990 to 2019 the percentage of religiously non-affiliated Americans has more than tripled. What also is striking about the 2019 Pew research is that approximately one-third of the religiously unaffiliated respondents in the study have not matriculated beyond a high school education and a comparable percentage have household incomes no greater than \$30,000 (Pew Research Center 2019).

While many Americans continue to place importance on matters of faith, a growing number of those persons approach matters of faith informally rather than formally and individually rather than institutionally. Moreover, these individualized approaches do not represent necessarily a categorical withdrawal from public space, although as sociologist Richard Sennett persuasively argues, the extent of the retreat into individualism within modern democracies is of a scale to warrant grave concerns (Sennett 1974). An important distinction is made within secularization theories between secularization as a pursuit of emancipation from “religious” control as embodied by institutionalized religion, and “metaphysical” control inhering in Godly authority.<sup>3</sup> Although it may not be clear-cut which factor is being resisted among persons disinclined toward explicit religious identification or affiliation, the fact that many of these persons describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious” seems to suggest the disinclinations are more toward formal-institutional aspects of faith than metaphysical aspects.

What declining interest in formal and institutional spaces may also represent is the growing momentum of alternative constructions of interactional spaces, where engagement takes place from the personally controlled distances afforded by electronic communications technologies. Virtual communities resulting from an abundance of electronic social networking possibilities (whether broad generic networks such as Facebook or issue-specific networks such as Color of Change) have become appealing forms of public engagement, primarily because they are strongly democratic forums that anyone can access and engage without mediation by hierarchies. According to Cohen’s 2010 study, sizable percentages of black, white, and Latino youths reported engaging in blogging and email-conveyed petitions and political letter writing campaigns (roughly 15 to 20 percent of black and Latino youths and roughly a quarter of white youths) (Cohen 2010, p. 181). The platforms available to the “cyberactivists” Cohen referred to in 2010 have expanded to include platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and more. Far-reaching platforms such as these allow individuals to give voice to convictions and causes without being subject to the controls and censures encountered when operating within institutional spaces—and creates (at least theoretically) a critical distance from which to “speak truth to power”.

Fluid and autonomous structuring has been a defining characteristic of the Black Lives Matter movement. Black Lives Matter (BLM) emerged as a mobilization primarily by youth and young adults in response to the 9 August 2014 killing of an unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown, by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. With many viewing the officer’s killing of Brown as an unacceptable use of deadly force (and against the backdrop of a series of widely condemned killings of unarmed black youths by white

law enforcement officers), massive protests erupted in Ferguson and around the country in response to Brown's shooting. Most of the persons who took to America's streets in protest were millennials and post-millennials, representative of a new generation of social justice activism operating largely outside projected spheres of influence and authority by faith-sector and advocacy-sector infrastructures.

This was a generational contestation over moral authority, pitting younger-generation activists against public-institutional-sector claimants and faith- and advocacy-sector claimants. The public-institutional sector (especially law enforcement) was morally discredited in the eyes of BLM activists precisely because of their demonstrable devaluation of black lives. Faith-sector and advocacy-sector leaders tended to lack moral authority for BLM activists because many demonstrated insufficient urgency in their responses to heavy-handed and unjust law enforcement engagements in black communities. It was primarily youth and young adult protesters who faced down heavily militarized police in the streets of Ferguson in the days after Brown's death, and in other cities around the U.S. as well. For the most part, well-established clergy leaders and advocacy sector organizational leaders were not part of the initial waves of these street-level protests.

BLM mobilizations in response to the 25 May 2020 police killing of George Floyd were even more massive, and global, and once again demonstrated BLM's unbounded organizational approach. BLM-related street protests and gatherings of various kinds emerged in cities and small towns across the U.S., and throughout the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia, and the South Pacific. There was no central coordination of these mobilizations and no primary leaders; these mobilizations were connected only by shared convictions about the injustices of police violence against black and brown people and about the need to rise up in opposition to these injustices. BLM, then, has been simultaneously public with respect to its issues and concerns and non-institutional (even anti-institutional) in its operations.

Nonetheless, to the extent that leveraging the institutional landscape is essential to advancing public purposes, many virtual or non-institutional networks have operated at a disadvantage in their capacities for producing instrumental public outcomes and benefits. BLM represents something of an exception in this regard however in that, while largely eschewing institutional alignments and approaches, the numerical and tactical strength of their protest-oriented network has helped push institutions of various sectors toward racial reckoning and reforms. Although protest movements loosely connected to institutional capacitation tend to struggle in instrumentalizing their objectives, BLM activism (similar to that of several large-scale protest movements, such as the Civil Rights Movement) has had a generative effect within public policy realms within institutional cultures and practices. Social movement theorists have noted, however, that there are strong pulls on social movements toward eventual institutionalization; the alternative quite frequently being dissipation and extinction (Piven and Cloward 1978).

As Dr. King wrote in *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, published in 1967: "Recognizing no army can mobilize and demobilize and remain a fighting unit, we will have to build far-flung, workmanlike and experienced organizations in the future if the legislation we create and the agreements we forge are to be ably and zealously superintended" (King 1967, p. 159). Activist youth committed to fighting on once the Civil Rights Movement began to decline would require an expanded institutional base, and very few were successful in attaining that. Among the primary institutional bases drawn on by youth activists during the movement were churches and colleges—neither of which were youth controlled and neither of which were to be counted on to consistently support youth activist goals. Even the handful of primary movement organizations, such as the SCLC, SNCC, CORE, and NAACP, could provide leadership platforms for only a small number of youth activist leaders.

What was true of post-Civil Rights Movement activists remains true today; mainly, that emerging leaders and activists will not always wait on institutions to prove themselves receptive to current concerns and needs. Instead, emerging leaders will seek out spaces

where their priorities are voiced and addressed—even if it means creating their own (largely virtual) collective networks and spaces, or operating in individuated, free-form ways. Whether “movements” operating under these conditions can endure or prove instrumentally effective will be determined case-by-case—but the historical indicators are not favorable for the most part.

What is clear is that younger-generation black leaders embrace liminality and in-betweenness. The public promise and prospects of that approach are exemplified by BLM. However, there are countless others whose liminality permits only faint and weak connections to broad public purposes. Acknowledging that danger is an essential step toward maximizing potential contributions to American public ideals by numerous emerging leaders.

## 5. Conclusions

African American religious leaders have been keenly alert to the imperatives and impositions of American public purposes and power, approaching those realities sometimes guardedly, sometimes enthusiastically. However, a consciousness of a public realm with an inordinate influence over livelihoods and affairs (in good ways and bad) is likely more universal among African Americans than among most other groups in America. African American religious leaders have made their perspectives known on these matters, with some of the most vocal supporters and critics of American public commitments and practices coming from within the black community.

There have been rich traditions of black religious promotion of American public ideals and black religious grievance over American public realm failures, and these traditions are instructive in all their contrasts, continuities, and causalities, and for what they model theologically and politically for church–state relations. Black religious leaders have demonstrated theological and political pragmatism in their approaches to the American public realm, and they have also approached this realm out of more prophetic inclinations. Both approaches have their merits, and both in their own ways have pushed America further along toward fulfillment of its public ideals. This black public wellspring is essential during this time of public diminishment by rampant individualism and privatistic and anti-democratic assaults on public obligations and the public good.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The legislation in question is the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act (introduced in the Senate as the John Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act).
- <sup>2</sup> St. Clair Drake, “The Negro Church and Associations in Chicago,” 1940, pp. 308–9, an unpublished manuscript cited in Myrdal (1944, p. 862, fn).
- <sup>3</sup> Cox quoting C.A. van Peursen, (Cox 1965, pp. 1, 158).

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