

BLACK RELIGIOUS INTELLECTUALS

T H E

FIGHT FOR EQUALITY

F R O M

JIM CROW

T O T H E

21ST CENTURY



CLARENCE TAYLOR

BLACK RELIGIOUS INTELLECTUALS

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BLACK RELIGIOUS INTELLECTUALS

THE FIGHT FOR EQUALITY
FROM JIM CROW
TO THE
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

CLARENCE TAYLOR

For Marsha, Jason, Tara, and Amanda

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BLACK RELIGIOUS INTELLECTUALS

INTRODUCTION

Black Intellectuals

A More Inclusive Perspective

Black religious leaders have played a central role in the intellectual life of the United States. The following essays examine representatives of this important tradition which has shaped not only intellectual history, but also the general history of the United States.

The popular image of black religious leadership is usually represented by examples of the charismatic male leader. This book studies well-known examples such as Al Sharpton and Louis Farrakhan and less well-known ministers such as Smallwood Williams and Theodore Gibson. The image of the charismatic male leader raises two important questions. First, what are the tactical limitations and strengths of such leadership? And second, is such a leadership a sufficient definition of what has been or should be black religious leadership? Chapters on A. Philip Randolph, Smallwood Williams, and Ella Baker and Pauli Murray suggest the need for a much wider definition of black religious leadership.

A brief survey of the social science literature demonstrates that black religious leaders are rarely studied for their intellectual contributions. With the exception of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and a few icons of the American civil rights and black power movements, there has been a general tendency among scholars writing on black intellectuals in the twentieth century to ignore the black religious community.¹ The people in this important community have had a rich heritage of intellectual discourse and fervent politics throughout its history and have been at the center of the struggle for social equality in America.

Because institutions of higher learning and professional schools excluded American citizens of African origins, the black religious community became one of the few avenues for blacks to gain leadership positions and challenge inequality. Black pastors, ministers, and other religious figures became the most prominent activists and black intellectuals in the country. They became writers and orators, interpreting and debating issues that had a direct impact on people of the African diaspora. Because of the brutal impact of racism, black intellectuals combined political activism with their intellectual work. Hence, through artistic and scientific achievements, theorizing, and cultural criticism black intellectuals have dedicated themselves to being "responsible for the race." This has also been true of black religious

intellectuals. Unfortunately, their important role has not been reflected in the academic literature.²

The most important work to date on black intellectuals is Harold Cruse's *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*. Cruse takes aim at black intellectuals for adopting a left-of-center politics, becoming too intellectually dependent on white leftists, and ignoring cultural black nationalism. They have failed, according to Cruse, to offer independent leadership to black America. A major fault with Cruse's work is that, despite its length and the large number of people examined in it, he fails to pay attention to black intellectual religious figures.

More recent publications have also ignored the black religious intellectual. Kevin Gaines's *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* critically examines the writings of several black intellectuals in the twentieth century, some of whom adopted various approaches for black equality. Some of the people examined in Gaines's book could be classified as integrationists, black nationalists, black radicals, and conservatives and accommodationists. His otherwise insightful and critical examination of several men and women and their various approaches to leadership and views on race, class, and gender oddly enough does not include any black religious thinkers. The same is true for William D. Wright's *Black Intellectuals, Black Cognition, and a Black Aesthetic*. Adopting what he calls an "Africancentric" approach, Wright questionably argues that, for historical reasons, black Americans have developed unique cognition systems in which their ideational components and organizational logic differ from those of white Americans. Hence, it is the job of black intellectuals to shape a black aesthetic that is in line with black cognition systems. Like Cruse, Wright blames black intellectuals for being confused and dependent on other intellectuals and too inhibited to act on behalf of black people. Like Cruse, Gaines, and others, Wright pays no attention to twentieth-century black religious personalities.³

William Banks, Cornel West, Henry J. Young Jr., Randall Burkett and Richard Newman, and Mark Chapman are among a handful of scholars who do pay attention to black religious thinkers. In *Black Intellectuals* Banks notes the contribution black clerical figures, black churches, and other black religious institutions have made to higher education, science, literature, journalism, history, politics, and the black freedom struggle. However, Banks's examination of black thinkers in the twentieth century does not pay attention to religious intellectuals. In his survey of intellectual life in the twentieth century, he discusses W. E. B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, James Weldon Johnson, figures of the Harlem Renaissance, including Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Wallace Thurman, and the black left of the 1920s and 1930s, but he does not mention black religious thinkers. The same is true of the later part of the century. Banks explores the writers of the 1950s, the civil rights movement, black power movement, and black thinkers of the 1980s, but he fails to turn his attention to religious intellectuals. In fact, he notes that by the 1960s the "ministry, once an important

career for black intellectuals, declined in importance. The eminence of theologians such as Howard Thurman, Gardner Taylor, and later Calvin Butts could not stem the tide of blacks aspiring to secular intellectual careers.”⁴ In his biographies of 116 black intellectuals who lived in the twentieth century, only two are ordained ministers.⁵

In West’s book, *Prophetic Fragments*, the only black religious intellectual who receives any attention is Martin Luther King Jr., whom he labels an “organic intellectual.” Although black clerical figures are mentioned in other essays, none are seriously examined. This is also true in West’s *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*. In chapter 4 of the book, “Prophetic Afro-American Christian Thought and Progressive Marxism,” West examines what he calls the “prophetic Christian tradition” and takes the reader on a journey in American history by listing “prophetic Christian leaders” who critiqued slavery from Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner to proponents of black theology who critiqued “U.S. capitalism.” Although it is unlikely that West would not deny the importance of black religious leaders, there is only a cursory examination and no in-depth look at these “prophetic Christian leaders.”⁶

But major exceptions to this trend have been Henry J. Young’s *Major Black Religious Leaders since 1940* and Randall Burkett and Richard Newman’s *Black Apostles: Afro-American Clergy Confront the Twentieth Century*. Young examines the early development, religious philosophies, and contributions of several black scholars to religion and the black freedom struggle. Among the fourteen thinkers are W. E. B. Du Bois, the theologian and scholar Howard Thurman, the leader of the Nation of Islam Elijah Muhammad, Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson, and advocate of black theology James Cone. Young maps out how these figures connected black liberation to religion. According to Young, “Black religious leaders have integrated the religious and social dimensions of existence into a functional approach to social reform.”⁷

Burkett and Newman’s edited book consists of chapters from various scholars who scrutinize the thoughts and activities of fifteen black thinkers who helped shape African-American religious thought in the twentieth century. Among the fifteen are Edward Wilmont Blyden and his doctrine of race personality, which stressed that all races are unique and make contributions to humanity; Arnold J. Ford’s notion of black Judaism and the redemptive role of people of the African diaspora; Gordon Blaine Hancock’s advocacy of moral and social uplift, support of the New Deal welfare state, and inter-racial cooperation; sociologist George Edmund Haynes’s theory of racial harmony, and William J. Seymour’s Pentecostalism.⁸

Major Black Religious Leaders since 1940 and *Black Apostles* were published in the late 1970s. Despite their contribution to understanding the role of black religious thinkers, scholars since the publication of these works, almost without exception, have paid little attention to black religious thinkers when writing on black intellectuals in the twentieth century.

One exception that specifically focuses on post-World War II black religious intellectual thinkers is Mark Chapman's *Christianity on Trial: African-American Religious Thought before and after Black Power*. The author has selected five major figures, Benjamin Mays, Elijah Muhammad, Albert Cleage, James Cone, and Delores Williams, all of whom represent a certain movement in the black religious experience that interrogates the relevancy of Christianity to the African-American liberation struggle. The ideological leanings of these men range from Christian integrationist to black theology and black womanist advocates. Unlike other scholars examining black religious thinkers, Chapman turns his attention to sexism. However, sexism is only discussed when the author turns to Williams's womanist views. Gender as a means of identity across sex is never scrutinized in the work. Moreover, the fact that sexism is only mentioned when Williams's womanist views are examined leaves the impression that sexism and gender are the concerns of women alone.⁹

One reason for the dearth of study on black religious intellectuals has to do with the emergence of a class of African Americans, at the end of the twentieth century, who were studying more secular university disciplines and going into fields other than the ministry. These fields included history, literature, sociology, philosophy, the various sciences, and art. For this group of university-trained scholars, intellectuals such as Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, Rayford Logan, Anna Cooper, Franklin Frazier, Alain Locke, and Mary Church Terrell became (and remain) a major focus. Literary and artistic figures of the Harlem Renaissance and later periods such as Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Paul Robeson have also received a great deal of attention, while the ideas of those outside of the academy and the arts, especially those in the ministry, have received scant attention. For the most part they are seen only as activists, and very little attention is paid to them as intellectuals. Even less attention is given to their religious outlook. One can assert, without embellishment, that when examining the black intellectual tradition, especially in the twentieth century, scholars have, for the most part, secularized this endeavor.

Secular black scholars and activists have also had a long history of criticizing the black church. This represents another reason for the omission of black religious intellectuals in discussions of black intellectuals of the twentieth century. This criticism begins in the 1920s. Critiques offered by those in the Harlem Renaissance, black nationalism, and growing black radical left depicted the black clergy and black churches and religious figures at best as irrelevant and at worst as detrimental in the fight for freedom. Writing during the Harlem Renaissance, sociologist Charles S. Johnson argued that black churches were growing more distant from the New Negro. Johnson contended that "a new type of Negro is evolving—a city Negro":

In the new environment there are many and varied substitutes which answer more or less directly the myriad desires indiscriminately comprehended by the church. The complaint of the ministers that these "emancipated" souls

“stray away from God” when they reach the city is perhaps warranted on the basis of the fixed status of the church in the South, but it is not an accurate interpretation of what has happened. When the old ties are broken new satisfactions are sought . . . it is not uncommon to find groups who faithfully attend church Sunday evenings and as faithfully seek further stimulation in a cabaret afterwards.¹⁰

During the civil rights era black churches and certain black ministers played a central role in the freedom struggle, but by the mid-1960s, with the emergence of the black power movement and the birth of black theology, black religious figures again came under attack. Religious figures in the civil rights movement were described as members of a class of Uncle Toms, working for the cultural hegemony of the larger white society. According to proponents of black theology, black churches and black ministers lost their revolutionary fervor by the dawn of the twentieth century and became advocates of accommodation. Those who saw ministers as Uncle Toms have little reason to study them.

Another significant reason for the lack of focus on black religious thinkers is that those writing on black intellectuals find the secular revolutionaries, such as Du Bois, Cyril Briggs, Hubert Harrison, C. L. R. James, and, most recently, Amiri Baraka, much more attractive characters. One explanation for the amount of attention these figures receive could be that in large part they reflect the politics of those writing about these revolutionaries.¹¹

It is not only black religious intellectuals who have been neglected by social scientists; religion in general has been slighted by the social sciences. Recently this has begun to change. There is an emerging literature on church history and religion in most disciplines.

The problem with many general works that have examined American religious intellectuals and American intellectual thought is that they exclude African Americans entirely. This nonrecognition of black religious intellectual thought dismisses the intellectual capital and activities of African Americans. The scarcity of information about black religious figures as intellectuals presents an incomplete picture of black intellectual traditions. The near non-appearance of black religious thinkers in the literature on black intellectuals and American religion forges the view that few if any religious figures were among this group. It also leaves the racist impression that African Americans stress intuition and not analytical thought.

W. D. Wright contends that black intellectuals have always considered “themselves the voices of black people . . . and have assigned themselves a role to help Blacks develop and to achieve full freedom in America.”¹² This is also true of black religious intellectuals. People of the African diaspora have consistently contested the low socioeconomic and political position assigned to them by the larger white society. Just as important, they confronted the racist images employed by white America to justify black subjugation, vigilante and state terror, and the continual project of denying them social citizenship and a

sense of belonging. In order to understand and confront these challenges many turned to various forms of religion. Hence, African-American religious figures have been fiercely engaged in attempts to improve the lives of blacks in America. African-American religion should be treated as a significant part of the American religious, intellectual, and political traditions.

African-American religions are not fixed categories but always under construction. Thus, people of African origins have been consistently constructing religious notions useful for black liberation. The categories of race, gender, and citizenship have been tied to the quest for equality and freedom. African-American religious thought has been a crucial tool in understanding and confronting these struggles.

For many in the black religious community in the United States and some outside of it, connecting religion to political struggle has remained an important element of analysis and the freedom struggle. Black men and women who combined politics with a religious worldview were able to motivate numerous people at the same time that a black secular left was being silenced by right-wing and moderate forces outside and within the black communities. The messages and reasons why some politically active religious figures were successful in attracting attention is the major focus of this work.

A variety of leadership styles and models as well as ideologies have been evident in the black religious communities. These ideas have blurred secular and sacred, combining church and state, religious beliefs and secular doctrines. Some religious figures examined in this book combined religious tenets with modern views, such as socialism and the welfare state, and liberal theology advocating a discourse of universal equality, social justice, and equality under the law. Others adopted premodern notions, challenging present modes of inquiry and knowledge based on science and instead relying on earlier forms of knowledge that were more religiously grounded. All these active figures carved out a political space proving that religion was not the sole property of conservative forces but belonged to liberal, left, and other religious people who do not fall into specific political categories.

Black religious intellectuals have adopted a universal approach because of their argument that they are responsible for the well-being of the race and nation. The religious figures in this book have adopted what philosopher Antonio Gramsci described as “organic intellectuals.” They are not ivory tower intellectuals divorced from their constituents. They came from and represent the interests of the social group they represent. These religious figures struggle for what philosopher Michel Foucault called the “exemplary” and the “just-and-true-for-all.” All of these figures are subjects who defy being defined simply as the other by those having power. The figures in the book attempt to expand the meaning of citizenship in the United States to include people of African origin. Their argument has rested on the premise that inclusion benefits not only them but also the entire nation. They instead labored at defining themselves and the social group they represent.¹³

This book is not limited to a specific region but examines religious per-

sonalities in various parts of the nation from the second decade of the twentieth century to the start of the new millennium. At the beginning of this period migration led to massive growth of black urban centers. As black communities grew, churches and other religious entities were formed, and existing ones experienced congregational growth. The development of urban black communities and religious institutions helped spur the expansion and activities of civil rights organizations and grassroots movements. Historians and other scholars have documented the role church people have played in the black freedom struggle. What is less evident in the literature is the way black religious intellectuals interpreted and conveyed the black freedom struggle by using religion, gender, citizenship, and other markers of identity to frame it. One important objective of this work is to do just that. Examining how some of these black religious thinkers constructed blackness and black manhood is an important theme in several of the chapters. For these leaders denomination and church affiliation are less important than how they situated their struggles in a specific religious or secular context. The figures examined range from Pentecostals to atheist.

Chapter 1 takes a look at the religious world of A. Philip Randolph. One may ask why Randolph is included in a volume that focuses on black religious intellectuals. Because, like the other figures in this work, the leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), although a socialist, did not rely on Marxist or socialist discourse to interpret and explain the struggle of the BSCP against the Pullman Company; instead, he relied on biblical and religious ideas to construe and elucidate to porters and the nation the contest for recognition of the union as the sole collective bargaining agent for the porters.

Most scholars writing on Randolph have argued that the labor organizer and civil rights leader was a nonreligious figure who was critical of black ministers and churches. They assume that because Randolph declared himself an atheist and on occasion voiced disdain for black preachers and religion, he either had little to do with the black religious world or, at best, manipulated it in his fight against the Pullman Company. However, few historians and scholars have examined how he used religion and religious symbolism in the struggle to win recognition of the Brotherhood from the Pullman Company. The records of the Brotherhood demonstrate that Randolph used religious language and symbols when communicating with individuals and the membership of the union. His reliance on religious symbolism was more than manipulation. It reflected the impact the African-American religious world had had on him. Because he was an atheist does not mean that Afro-Christianity did not have an impact on his ethical views. This chapter examines the impact black religious cultures had on Randolph and how he relied on the black religious community. When identifying black religious intellectuals this book goes beyond boundaries constricted by denominations and even proclamations of religious faith. By including Randolph in a book on black religious thinkers it focuses on how religion became central to their

interpretation of the social, political, and economic conditions faced by people of the African diaspora in the United States.

Chapter 2 turns to Brooklyn, New York, for a close examination of competing religious ideologies during the cold war. Despite the attempt by the anti-Communist network to silence left voices during the cold war, liberal and radical religious voices were heard. The chapter explores three major religious voices among the black clergy of Brooklyn both before and during the cold war. Despite the marginalization of such prominent left figures as W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, and others who were associated with secular radical forces, Brooklyn's African-American Christian clergy grounded their progressive politics in Christian doctrine, and they were quite vocal.

The three major voices that were apparent during this period were Afro-Christian liberalism, black Christian radicalism, and black Pentecostalism. All three voices challenged racial inequality, and, to a certain extent, class inequality. Afro-Christian liberalism and black Christian radicalism blurred the lines between the sacred text and secular political dogma while black Pentecostalism adhered to what it saw as a "pure" Christianity to address those social, political, and economic problems confronting the black Brooklynites. Central to all three movements was identity. Closely connected to their ideological views was the presentation of blackness by these three groups. While challenging racial inequality, Afro-Christian liberalism virtually never turned its attention to gender and sexuality. The insider, power broker, connected to those with power was strategy and image presented by Afro-Christian liberals. While certain black Christian radicals challenged patriarchy, that was not central to their religious-political critique. The "defiant man" and revolutionary were central to their form of identity politics. Their critique of black church cultures emphasized the issues of class and race. Black Pentecostalism also emphasized a class and race view that criticized a society that denied blacks access to material comforts. They instead offered a spiritual alternative that could result in changing the world.

One of the most dynamic religious leaders of the post-World War II period was Bishop Smallwood Williams, founder of the Bible Way Church of Our Lord Jesus Christ World Wide, Inc. Because of his interpretation of the scriptures, he became an advocate of an individualist approach to struggle rather than a collective one. He presented an important brand of black Pentecostalism and leadership style. He embraced Afro-Christian liberalism and called on the state to intervene in the fight for racial and economic justice. Unlike other Pentecostal pastors of his day, his sermons and writings combined the secular and the sacred. He argued that black pastors must be politically active by being advocates for social justice. However, he was not just a religious and political theorist but also an activist who struggled to end segregation in Washington, D.C. But Williams's style of leadership was just as important as his activities. The bishop took part in a gendered form of politics by advocating patriarchal and masculine ideology. Thus, he became an advocate of essentialist gender roles in the public sphere. Because of his

interpretation of the Scriptures, he became an advocate of an individualist approach to struggle rather than a collective one.

Chapters 4 and 5 move from the North to the South and turn attention to two of the most prominent black leaders of Miami in the twentieth century, both of them of Bahamian origins. John Culmer, considered the city's leading black voice during the 1930s and 1940s, adopted a method of accommodation in a period when there was little militant civil rights activism. Culmer indirectly challenged Jim Crow by adopting what historian Neil McMillen calls "feasible limits." He maneuvered around the Jim Crow system by stressing harmonious race relations. His objective was to win concessions for African Americans in Miami within a white supremacist structure. For Culmer, the best means to an end was not to count on a liberal state or the use of coercion but to rely on the good will of the white elite. Culmer contended that the white elite was more interested in developing harmonious race relations than racial terror.

On the other hand, Rev. Theodore Gibson emerged at the height of the civil rights era as a leading proponent of integration in Miami, Florida. His objective was to win equality for African Americans by legally dismantling Jim Crow. However, despite their differences in approach, both Culmer and Gibson took part in cultural politics by attempting to reshape the black image. They used the signifiers of class, race, and nation as a means in the incessant black liberation struggle. In a period of Jim Crow, Culmer relied on a class-based politics that portrayed the black elite as guardians of a black bourgeois culture. He portrayed himself and others of his class as abiding, congenial, and hardworking, as embracing middle-class values, and as advocates of law and order. A politics of respectability was evident in his approach to politics. Gibson embraced cold war liberalism and reliance on the state. The Episcopalian rector, like Culmer, constructed a black image that was not subversive of the state but loyal and anti-Communist and deserving of full citizenship.

Chapter 6 critically examines the career of the Rev. Al Sharpton and his later attempt to reconstruct his image and situate himself in the struggle for social and racial justice. No other black religious figure has drawn so much attention in New York City since the days of Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and Milton A. Galamison as he. Considered a "natural born leader" by some of his followers and a charlatan by some of his adversaries, this leader and intellectual in a postmodern world has managed to evolve into a cultural icon and major player in city and national politics. He has offered a flamboyant leadership style that continues to stress a nationalist approach. But as his popularity grows, he has attempted to reach an audience across race, class, and gender categories.

By the 1980s, Minister Louis Farrakhan, head of the black nationalist messianic sect, the Nation of Islam, became the most controversial black ministerial figure in the United States. Biographies and numerous articles have been written on the dynamic and controversial Muslim leader. His

Million Man March in October 1995 attracted hundreds of thousands of black men across the nation to Washington, D.C., and proved that despite the attempt by the media, politicians, and others to demonize him and the relatively small membership of his organization, he remains one of the most popular figures among African Americans. Chapter 7 explains the reasons for Farrakhan's popularity by tracing the history of the Nation of Islam (NOI), Farrakhan's and the NOI's construction of black victimization and triumph, and their strong reliance on patriarchy. Unlike other figures examined in this book who have fought for legal and cultural citizenship, Farrakhan in his early leadership fought against belonging to the American nation-state and today remains ambiguous about it at best. To be sure, Farrakhan has attempted to reconstruct his image and that of the NOI by moving away from its racial essentialist position to one of religious ecumenicism. He has even claimed to abandon his goal of creating a racially exclusive nation with black men as the central force in it. He has even dedicated himself to bridging and healing the rift between blacks and Jews.

The work concludes by focusing on the activities of Ella Jo Baker and Pauli Murray. While some of the men examined in this work relied on patriarchal models of leadership and did not challenge sexism at the same time that they fought racism, Baker and Murray were two leading opponents of the patriarchal mission of male ministers and Christian institutions. They directly confronted a male leadership that refused to accept a more inclusive definition of equality. Baker and Murray were involved in two systematic struggles. On one level they confronted the racism of the broader society, and on a more immediate front they were forced to deal with the chauvinism of their own ranks. Their efforts should now cause scholars and activists alike to reconsider the utility of relying so centrally on a model of charismatic black male leadership. Their efforts demonstrate that black religious leadership has always been much broader than simply a black male model. Finally, the concept of leadership itself needs to be reconsidered. While all of the figures in this work have used this approach, I contend that in a time of turbo-capitalism, the movement of production by those who control capital, the weakening of the institutions of labor, the destruction of the welfare state, and the ecological and crimes committed by multinational corporations, the charismatic or prophetic leadership championed today by black religious intellectuals and leaders is quite problematic. In the absence of strong and coherent social movements for social justice, charismatic leadership has led to, at best, power-broker politics.

Black Religious Intellectuals: The Fight for Equality from Jim Crow to the Twenty-First Century is not a comprehensive examination of black religious leadership but argues that more attention needs to be paid to the thoughts and ideas of black religious figures because they have greatly contributed to the black intellectual and American political tradition.

CHAPTER I

Sticking to the Ship *Manhood, Fraternity, and the Religious Worldview of A. Philip Randolph*

On July 16, 1926, the African-American socialist, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and avowed atheist, A. Philip Randolph, issued a letter to the Organizing Committees, Organizers, Secretaries and Treasurers of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), declaring: "We are now in the high tide of our struggle. Let us rejoice and be glad, for the God of Justice and freedom is our captain and salvation." Randolph gave instructions to the recipients of the letter that his statement should be read at meetings of the Brotherhood. For a person who described himself as an atheist and antireligious this language seems odd, because he invoked the very entity that scholars have noted he rejected.¹ Even the term *rejoice*, a biblical term, seems out of place for a person who has been accused of rejecting the religious world of his father.

Indeed, many Randolph scholars have noted his views on religion and concluded that the union leader and civil rights activist was hostile to religion and in particular to the black clergy. Biographer Jervis Anderson argued that although Randolph was the son of an AME preacher and attended Methodist and Baptists churches when he moved to Harlem at the age of twenty-two, he stopped being a "son of the church." His interest in black churches was "more intellectual than religious" (as though the two are diametrically opposed). In fact, Anderson contended that Randolph started having doubts about religion before he left Jacksonville, Florida, and that "after being drawn into the world of politics and protest, Randolph had stopped going to church altogether." Anderson asserted that Randolph did not brush off black churches but made a distinction of the social, political, and economic value compared to their spiritual dimension. Anderson writes that during interviews Randolph told him that the black church was "the most powerful and cohesive institution in Negro life." Anderson concluded that Randolph "had ceased to believe it had value as a religious institution." He believed there were too many black clergy who were selling heaven to the people.²

Anderson placed Randolph in the militant political camp of W. E. B. Du Bois. "It was [Randolph] who rallied the most militantly around the Du Bois

banner [as opposed to Booker T. Washington's]. He had found *The Souls of Black Folk* to be the 'most influential book' he ever read."³ Thus, Du Bois's politics shaped Randolph. Anderson makes no mention of religion having any impact on Randolph's worldview. Biographer Paula Pfeffer has also made the claim that Randolph had divorced himself from a religious worldview. According to Pfeffer, Randolph believed "that the black church was a reactionary institution because it bowed to the money power in the community." Randolph and his associate, socialist Chandler Owen, "also criticized black preachers for failing to educate the people and rouse them against the evils of disfranchisement and lynching. The editors of the *Messenger* [Randolph and Owen] thought the churches would be performing a higher function if they served as places to house cooperative stores."⁴

In her portrayal of Randolph's atheism, Pfeffer notes he believed the black churches were inadequate. "Not only did emphasis upon the next world dilute pressure for change in this one, but black preachers failed to encourage their flocks to protest racial oppression because of the financial support they received from white capitalist philanthropists. As these benefactors were also opposed to labor organizations, whether black or white, black churchmen were antagonistic toward the BSCP, giving Randolph no cause to change his opinion of the clergy." However, Pfeffer contends that Randolph recognized the social significance of black churches, and so attempted to manipulate black church culture. "Despite his opposition to the church, Randolph now realized, as he had not earlier, the dependence of his followers on the institution. He therefore submerged his own disbelief and appealed to the porters in biblical terms and with evangelistic zeal on behalf of the cause, never hesitating to remind his listeners that he was a preacher's son." She notes that he selected black churches to hold meetings and that the meetings began with prayer. The problem with her assertion is that it is too sweeping and mechanical. Pfeffer presents Randolph as much too calculating, manipulative, and divorced from religion, but nevertheless able to scheme and fool his followers into believing he was one of them. Moreover, there is no mention in her biography of the agency of the black religious community in the struggle to obtain collective bargaining rights for the porters. The head of the Brotherhood held meetings in black churches because he was aware of the connection of black religious institutions and because the members of the clergy were willing to ally themselves with Randolph's efforts. Consequently, it is important not just to see Randolph and the Brotherhood as the only active agents but also to view people from the black religious community as playing a pivotal role in the struggle.⁵

Like Pfeffer, historian Benjamin Quarles declared in his essay "A. Philip Randolph, Labor Leader at Large" that Randolph had an adversarial relationship with black ministers. "Opposition also came from the black clergy, particularly from those black congregations that depended upon white financial support. Reflecting their religious rationality more evangelical denominations were either antiunion or indifferent ('the greater the religiosity, the less

the militancy,' writes Preston Valien). He could not rely on the black clergy. Not able to count on black churches, Randolph sought assistance in other black quarters."⁶

Daniel Davis's *Mr. Black Labor: The Story of A. Philip Randolph, Father of the Civil Rights Movement* mentions Randolph's father and his activities as an AME preacher but does not discuss the impact of black religious culture on Randolph. The author admits that as a child Randolph read each chapter of the Bible several times under his father's supervision. According to Davis, Randolph spent hours reading the Bible, Shakespeare, and other classics. In fact, Davis points out that Randolph's favorite hero was the Apostle Paul. However, despite his studying the Bible, there is no mention in the text of the impact the Book had on how he saw the world or on his association with the black religious community.⁷

The problem with the construction of Randolph by Anderson, Pfeffer, and others is that it presents Randolph's politics as strictly secular, arguing that his relationship with the churches was a manipulative one. It was a fact that for all of his childhood and teen years he was immersed in a community where black religious church culture played a central role. By viewing Randolph as an antireligious person who was hostile to the black clergy his biographers assume that one who rejects the existence of God has managed to become free of any religious influence at all.

A closer examination of Randolph's writings and activities during the early part of the struggle for recognition of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters as the collective agent for porters reveals that Randolph had a more complicated relationship with black churches, ministers, and African-American religion. This son of an AME preacher did not turn away from black ministers but sought alliances with them and relied on the black church community. Randolph did not view the black religious community as homogeneous but saw a divided one, especially when it came to support of the Brotherhood. Despite the opposition of many clergy to the Brotherhood, there were religious activists who committed themselves to the union.

Just as significant to the alliance between the Brotherhood and certain progressive ministers was Randolph's reliance on biblical phraseology rather than on a secular language; when interpreting the battle for recognition of the BSCP, he displayed a familiarity with black religious culture. This reliance on religious language throws into question the construction of a Randolph who completely divorced himself from or was completely immune to religious influences. Randolph's use of religion cannot be explained as pure manipulation or exploitation devoid of any religious influence. Despite his professed atheism, his language demonstrated he was shaped in part by the black church and African-American religious culture. While rejecting the existence of God, Randolph still embraced a religious ethos espousing religious themes such as hope and salvation, faith and deliverance, and the triumph of good over evil. He clearly depicted a moral order to the universe in tune with the world of black church cultures and the religious thinking of the larger society.

Gender, race, class, and sexuality are important categories when trying to understand identity, but these categories cannot be viewed in a vacuum, isolated from one another, when one is examining identity formation. People have several identities, and these identities interlock, playing on one another. The language of manhood was unifying because it was an idea that was shared by many Americans. American society was viewed in gendered terms. The public sphere of politics and work outside the home was viewed as the male realm. The private world of home and family was viewed as the female realm. This view of divided gender spheres survived well into the twentieth century, and was held by many people across racial and ethnic lines. In forging a collective identity for the BSCP, Randolph and members of the Brotherhood engaged in the rhetoric of proper spheres for black men and women.

Like gender, race and religion played an important role in the construction of black manhood. In the case of A. Philip Randolph and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, they became important identity markers in the definition of the union man. In fact, being a good member of the union was described as being a good "union man." Even the name of the union, "the Brotherhood," also reflects this male emphasis. Standing up for the race was being a "race man." Randolph challenged the view of manhood that had become synonymous with white men in a racist society by defining black manhood as masculine, intelligent, dedicated to the family and race, fraternal, and religious and moral. Thus, African-American religious cultures played an important role in defining black manhood, and race played a role in contesting the definition of manhood.

While proclaiming a disbelief in a deity, Randolph did not completely divorce himself from black religious culture or community. In fact, he embraced various aspects of Afro-Christianity, including interpreting the struggle in religious terms rather than relying on a discourse of class struggle.

Randolph's model of unionism was similar to what historian Susan Curtis calls the New Protestantism that emerged in the late nineteenth century. With the advent of rapid industrialization, urbanization, and immigration, working-class people faced a host of problems in the workplace and at home in urban centers. The Victorian morality of self-reliance and the belief in the Horatio Alger myth gave way to a greater stress on the social gospel and greater emphasis on an activist government state. Preachers and others reformulated the old Victorian morality and instead argued that growing societal problems caused by industrialization had to be handled, not by individuals but by society as a whole. Advocates of the New Protestantism moved away from individual initiative to cooperation. They became advocates of the social gospel. Like the old Victorian Protestantism, stress was on marriage and family and improving the material and spiritual conditions of the working class. Under the New Protestantism people had two obligations: one was to improve oneself, the other was to improve society. Improvement would be brought about through collaboration and societal help. This New Protestantism laid the groundwork for reform movements to eradicate poverty