Humanity Defined, Hypocrisy Defied: Sacralizing the Black Freedom Struggle, 1930–60

Dennis C. Dickerson*
Vanderbilt University

The white ecclesia in the United States either opposed or equivocated on the matter of the humanity of African Americans. The 1939 unification of majority white Methodist bodies, for example, structurally segregated black members into a separate Central Jurisdiction. This action mimicked practices in the broader body politic that crystallized in American society both de jure *and de facto systems of second-class citizenship for African Americans. This hypocrisy mobilized adherents of Gandhian non-violence and elicited from them tenets and tactics which energized moral methodologies that defeated a church and civic collusion that perpetrated black subordination. Interracial alliances derived from the ecclesia and parachurch organizations articulated non-violence as a moral precept that sacralized a grassroots civil rights movement. This initiative morally discredited the racial hypocrisy aimed at America's formerly enslaved and segregated population.*

Any observer of the religious landscape in the United States in the early decades of the twentieth century would have viewed the Christian churches, whether Methodist, Baptist or Presbyterian, as rigidly segregated by race and poisoned by the proposition that African Americans belonged to a scripturally and socially proscribed population. Such commentators hardly needed any racial reminders from the nineteenth century, when some Christians had sanctioned slavery on a biblical basis and others, while seemingly sympathetic to blacks, either tolerated slavery or recommended that black people fill pulpits and pews only within a segregated ecclesia. These patterns of black and white separation, which tracked and reinforced the same structures in larger society, assumed that African Americans were unfit either as preachers or as parishioners to occupy the same ecclesial

* E-mail: dennis.c.dickerson@vanderbilt.edu.

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space as whites. The Methodist unification of 1939 egregiously illustrated how Christianity, across the white denominational spectrum, sacralized racial segregation and adopted it as an ecclesiastical tenet. African Americans and their allies, through Christian and interfaith resources, resisted a racial order in the United States built on black inequality. Resistance in the United States to the ecclesial consolidation of racial hierarchy mobilized transnational resources, mainly through the diffusion of Gandhian non-violence, to fight this American manifestation of caste.

In 1939, the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church met in Kansas City (Missouri) at a 'Uniting Conference' to merge these majority white religious bodies. Far from representing an ecclesiastical achievement, one scholar, Morris L. Davis, viewed the merger as a 'further institutionalization of racism.'[1] Indeed, Davis argues, it was 'a severe setback and a lost chance for the new church to take a stand against the prevailing injustices of racist U.S. culture.'[2] A seemingly reinvented Methodism calcified segregation by compelling its black membership into a separate Central Jurisdiction, a synodical component that was racially rather than geographically constructed. To force black Methodists into a segregated, subordinate body, the all-black Central Jurisdiction was to affirm that Christianity's encounter with twentieth-century modernity required an official ecclesiastical accommodation to African American inequality.[3]

As plans unfolded for the Central Jurisdiction, one black Methodist said that this decision 'violates the principle of brotherhood dominant in the life and teachings of Jesus and embodied in the organized fellowship of Christian believers in the church.'[4] Davis observes that Methodist unification signified that 'whiteness emerged more concretely into American culture as the primary marker of the pinnacle of human progress [embodied] in American Christian Civilization.' Moreover, he pointed out, 'the Christian

[1] Morris L. Davis, *The Methodist Unification: Christianity and the Politics of Race in the Jim Crow Era* (New York, 2008), 1. See also Peter C. Murray, *Methodism and the Crucible of Race* (Columbia, SC, and London, 2004), 36–44.
[2] Davis, *Methodist Unification*, 1.
[3] Ibid. 131–2.
[4] James S. Thomas, *Methodism's Racial Dilemma: The Story of the Central Jurisdiction* (Nashville, TN, 1992), 43.

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churches, in both North and South' extended their blessing to this racially tainted triumph of Methodist unification. As a result, 'in the church and in the rest of America, Christianity was nationalized and racialized.'[5]

Perhaps more poignantly, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, a venerable Wesleyan body established in 1816 and a serious institutional onlooker, reviled the Methodist unification. Bishop John A. Gregg, speaking for his colleagues in their episcopal address to the 1940 AME General Conference, emphasized that: 'we hold that any church or communion that would segregate its members or practice any form of denial or discrimination on account of race or color, is less than Christian.'[6] Because African Methodists affirmed the humanity of blacks and eschewed the racial hypocrisy of Wesleyan whites, Gregg declared: 'Freedom, Liberty, and Equality of opportunity for all, in both church and state, are the foundation upon which the AME Church was built [and] upon which foundation it stands today.'[7] In affirming the humanity of blacks, a precept that the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, had espoused in the eighteenth century, the AME Church, which had been launched during Wesley's lifetime, became America's oldest continuous Methodist body. This moved Bishop Gregg to note that the racial fissures within the mainly white Methodist denomination shown in their 1939 unification removed them from any possibility of safeguarding black rights. 'Since the Methodist bodies represented by white churchmen have merged forming a new organization,' Gregg asserted, 'the African Methodist Episcopal Church becomes the oldest Methodist communion in the United States.'[8] With others in the black ecclesia and with parareligious groups, they, rather than white churches, occupied the moral high ground in pro-black advocacy.[9]

Hence, the Methodist unification was a clarifying event that displayed a formal ecclesial embrace of racial hypocrisy by white churches and a determination to reinforce parallel societal structures that compelled black subordination. Though the Methodist Church,

[5] Davis, *The Methodist Unification*, 132.
[6] *The Episcopal Address, presented by Bishop John Andrew Gregg to the Thirty-First Quadrennial Session of the General Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church at Detroit, Michigan, May, 1940* (n.pl., 1940), 21.
[7] Ibid. 21.
[8] Ibid. 37.
[9] Ibid. 37.

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like the southern branches of the Presbyterians and Baptists in the 1940s, acknowledged that racial discrimination was a scourge and urged better treatment of African Americans, its leadership recommended that no legislation be enacted to achieve black equality. The Fraternal Council of Negro Churches (FCC) had been formed in 1934 to rebuke such displays of compromised Christianity. The black church federation started because the Federal Council of Churches would not support a congressional initiative to outlaw lynching and to renounce the Ku Klux Klan. Though the Federal Council at its 1946 meeting denounced segregation, some wanted to remove Benjamin E. Mays, an officer, from the stage where President Harry Truman was scheduled to speak.[10]

A vigorous pushback from James Farmer and A. Philip Randolph in the immediate aftermath of this Christian apostasy, however, asserted the humanity of African Americans and put in place religiously imbued initiatives that aimed to upend the discourse and ecclesial influence of white Christian racism. A competing narrative developed by Farmer and Randolph, two black freedom advocates with deep roots in African American Methodism, challenged the racist meaning of Methodist unification and put it on the moral defensive. Farmer, the son and namesake of a Methodist Episcopal minister, matriculated at the School of Religion at Howard University where his father taught the Hebrew Bible. At the time of the unification, Farmer's anger over the new denomination's segregation decision caused him to refuse to be ordained in a Jim Crow church, and instead to resolve to work to 'destroy segregation.'[11] 'How was I to preach Christ in a church,' Farmer asked, 'whose structure gave him the lie?' This ecclesial system would contradict Jesus's gospel.[12] Farmer's view echoed a similar denunciation from a fellow member of the Central Jurisdiction, Mary McLeod Bethune, an appointee of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the president of a black Florida college funded by the denomination. Bethune, a member of the all-black Stewart Memorial Church in Daytona Beach, declared that she did not

[10] Murray, *Methodism and the Crucible of Race*, 56–7; Mary R. Sawyer, 'The Fraternal Council of Negro Churches, 1934–1964', *ChH* 59 (1990), 51–64, at 52.
[11] James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1985; repr. Fort Worth, TX, 1986, with new preface), 146. References are to the 1986 edition.
[12] Ibid. 143.

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want African American youth in future decades to associate her with approving 'anything that looked like segregation.'[13]

Because Farmer believed that anti-black racism permeated the white ecclesia, he chose a seminary thesis topic that would allow him to explore the origin of this sinful reality. He admitted to 'brooding over these questions' that informed the segregationist posture of the Methodist Church, this erstwhile anti-slavery religious body, and how white Methodists' stance morphed into a sinful ambivalence toward the humanity of African Americans.[14] Hence Farmer, in his bachelor thesis at Howard University (which was supervised by Howard Thurman), entitled 'A Critical Analysis of the Historical Interrelationship Between Religion and Racism,' explored 'the functional role of religion regarding race' and how religion buttressed 'the secular social values' of white Christians.[15] He surmised that 'parts of Protestant and especially Calvinist thought and ethics' interacted with capitalism to exploit 'distant lands peopled by strange folk of darker hue.' Anglo-Saxon culture, he wrote, had developed 'racist doctrines' that formed the basis of both slavery and segregation.[16] Farmer's focus going forward was to 'destroy segregation' through an alternative moral methodology that lay 'in the use of the Gandhi technique' in a sphere which was much broader than a pastoral vocation within the structural boundaries of his church's Central Jurisdiction.[17]

For this reason, the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), not the Methodist Church, became the vehicle of conscience through which Farmer would attack segregation. Notwithstanding FOR's pacifist objectives, Farmer and a cadre of like-minded and morally motivated activists believed that a component of the organization should focus on opposition to the violence of segregation. One of them, Joe Guinn, had like Farmer been involved in the Methodist student movement. Guinn and Farmer applied the moral armament of non-violent direct action to sit-ins to desegregate restaurants and transportation, using them as venues to test the effectiveness of the 'Gandhian technique.' To regularize this moral methodology, Farmer and a few others launched in 1942 the Congress of Racial

[13] Barbara Dianne Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 129.
[14] Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 143.
[15] Ibid. 143, 145–6.
[16] Ibid. 145.
[17] Ibid. 146.

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Equality (CORE) as a derivative organization of FOR. Archibald J. Carey, Jr, the activist pastor of Chicago's Woodlawn African Methodist Episcopal Church, whom Farmer described as their 'patron saint', nurtured the group and provided them with office space in the basement of the parish church. Farmer recalled that 'when CORE needed money above that which could be raised by passing a hat at membership meetings, Arch would take up a collection in his church'; he also allowed them to use the church's 'mimeograph machine' to facilitate communications for CORE.[18]

Farmer's protest against ecclesially endorsed segregation morphed into a nationally transformative insurgency that helped to energize the non-violence movement in the succeeding decades of the 1950s and 1960s. Concurrent with Farmer's sacrally informed initiatives was A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington Movement (MOWM). Randolph, like Carey, drew activist energy from a major tributary of the Wesleyan social holiness that had emerged in the independent African Methodist Episcopal Church. The denomination's long tradition of fighting slavery and segregation, and of sharing this impulse with black Methodists in a white dominated ecclesia, provided a formidable institutional basis from which to sustain the pro-black advocacy that Carey and Randolph pursued in the 1940s.[19]

Archibald J. Carey, Jr, the son and namesake of the AME bishop Archibald J. Carey, Sr, was visible as a black spokesman and cultivated the socially conscious reputation of his Woodlawn congregation. He was also an attorney, a Republican who was elected in 1947 as a Chicago alderman. In 1948, he challenged the city council to enact a proposed ordinance to ban discrimination in publicly aided housing. Though unsuccessful, this initiative and his crucial support of Farmer and CORE pulled Carey onto a vanguard of sacrally motivated insurgents whose ecclesial witness belied the practices of white Christians too timid to advocate for the full humanity of African Americans.[20]

[18] Ibid. 109, 147; compare also Dennis C. Dickerson, *A Liberated Past: Reflections on AME Church History* (Nashville, TN, 2003), 62.
[19] For an account of this period, see Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 185–291; compare also Dennis C. Dickerson, *The African Methodist Episcopal Church: A History* (New York and Cambridge, 2020), 24, 378–95.
[20] Dennis C. Dickerson, *African American Preachers and Politics: The Careys of Chicago* (Jackson, MS, 2010), 95–103.

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A. Philip Randolph, president of the all-black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, was similarly significant as a practitioner of non-violence whose militancy drew from sacral sources. Despite a misleading reputation for agnosticism and even atheism, Randolph, a fierce critic of white Christian racism, fully embraced his AME heritage. According to Cynthia Taylor, one of his biographers, he identified with the insurgency of the AME founder, Richard Allen, whose "wrath against religious jimcrow … struck a blow for civil rights and first-class citizenship" for African Americans.[21] Allen's example in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Taylor observes, 'served as a role model for [Randolph's] own lifework fighting for black civil rights.'[22] Though a generation older than Farmer, Randolph's Gandhian-inspired activism, centred in grassroots mass mobilization, infused fresh religious energy into the black freedom struggle immediately after the segregationist actions that emerged from the Methodist unification.

Farmer and Randolph contemplated a possible partnership in implementing a Gandhian program, based on non-violent civil disobedience and non-cooperation.[23] Randolph had already threatened President Roosevelt in 1941 with a mobilization of 10,000 blacks in his March on Washington Movement, which proposed to descend on the nation's capital to demand an end to racial discrimination in the burgeoning defence industries. In response, Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802, which opened steel, auto, shipbuilding and other mass production facilities to African Americans; failure to comply would cause firms to forfeit lucrative federal contracts. A Fair Employment Practices Committee was established to enforce this presidential mandate.[24] In 1942, Randolph turned to Gandhi's moral methodology as a resource for MOWM. His familiarity with the history of black boycotts against racist vendors in transit, restaurants and retail outlets, and his recent observations of sit-down strikes and other examples of labour protest in the New Deal era to win union recognition from employers, informed his thinking about what strategies were available to advance black civil rights. The

[21] Cynthia Taylor, *A. Philip Randolph: The Religious Journey of an African American Labor Leader* (New York, 2006), 13, citing Randolph's lecture, 'African Methodism and the Negro in the Western World.'
[22] Taylor, *A. Philip Randolph*, 13.
[23] Ibid. 158–9, 162–6; see also Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 154–7.
[24] Taylor, *A. Philip Randolph*, 130–4.

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integration of Gandhian non-violence into his repertoire of movement methods enhanced his deployment of civil disobedience by infusing this strategy with moral meaning.[25]

At that time, Randolph considered a partnership with Farmer and CORE to launch a multi-front, Gandhi-like campaign to resist violations of African American civil rights. As a FOR official, Farmer had begun in 1941 to ponder Gandhian non-violence. He internalized the Gandhian tenet that in encountering racist practices the protester 'must, as a matter of conscience, as well as strategy, withdraw from participation in racist practices'.[26] However, he had doubts about sharing this initiative with Randolph, owing in part to what he perceived as the lack of 'training and discipline' in non-violence within the black population. Farmer convinced Randolph, the more experienced activist, to heed these warnings, whilst still urging CORE chapters to cooperate with Randolph's March on Washington Movement.[27] Engagement with the moral methodology of Gandhian non-violence enlarged the religious sensibilities of both Farmer and Randolph. Farmer's 'brooding' over white ecclesial racism, on the one hand, and the unprecedented possibilities of Gandhian non-violence or satyagraha (meaning 'soul force') on the other, moulded him into more than what his father had envisaged for him as a minister in a segregated church. At the same time, Randolph, who was equally adept in his own creative deployment of moral methodologies, harnessed the March on Washington Movement (MOWM) to the operational proficiency of the African American ecclesia.

Randolph, notwithstanding Farmer's reservations about the immediate readiness of blacks for a mass disobedience campaign, maintained MOWM momentum in challenging racial segregation. In Chicago, the site of an active MOWM affiliate, a grassroots rally was planned in 1942 with Charles Wesley Burton, a black Congregational minister, as local chair.[28] Other clergy in the AME Church and sundry other congregations comprised Randolph's ecclesial infrastructure. Perhaps the most prominent among Randolph's supporters was Archibald J. Carey, Jr, who invited the MOWM

[25] Ibid. 158–9.
[26] Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 74–5.
[27] Ibid. 155–7.
[28] Taylor, *A. Philip Randolph*, 136–8.

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leader to speak at Woodlawn Church.[29] Similarly, in St Louis, MOWM partnered with the Interdenominational Ministers Alliance that included support from leaders from the African Methodist Episcopal Zion, Colored Methodist Episcopal, Baptist and Presbyterian churches, as well as other religious leaders.[30]

Neither Farmer nor Randolph pursued the contemplative facets of Gandhian satyagraha nor their grounding in Hindu and Jainist principles. The spiritual armaments of Gandhi's Hinduism and the ahimsa doctrine of non-retaliation embedded in Jainism were at best secondary to the praxis that Gandhian non-violence offered. Nonetheless, the two activists, while anchored in the insurgent sensibilities of black Methodism, blended their religious heritage with the interfaith resources that undergirded the principles and practices of non-violence. The interreligious character of non-violence, though muted, took these activists beyond the ecclesial and discursive boundaries of white Christian reckonings with race. The mutually reinforcing critiques of black religion and Gandhian satyagraha against the racial ideology of white Christians energized the religious thrust of the non-violent movement in the United States, sacralizing their defence of black humanity and mobilizing grassroots African Americans in their fight for equality.

Nonetheless, historian Stephen Tuck argues that 'religious rethinking and skepticism of prevailing beliefs' characterized African American discourse about matters of faith in the interwar period. He testifies to a spirited discourse and deep conflicts about religious belief and unbelief within the civil rights movement, as well as the seeming lassitude of black churches toward the African American freedom struggle.[31] Notwithstanding this discursive component of black religious conversation, Tuck overlooks the innovative alignments between Gandhian satyagraha and the black ecclesia. Rather than a 'rethinking and skepticism of prevailing beliefs', this engagement with Gandhian non-violence signified a blending and enhancement of a revived black religious insurgency already embedded in the faith tradition of the militant wing of the African American

[29] Ibid. 169.
[30] Ibid. 147.
[31] Stephen Tuck, 'The Doubts of Their Fathers: The God Debate and the Conflict between African American Churches and Civil Rights Organizations between the World Wars,' *Journal of Southern History* 86 (2020), 625–78.

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ecclesia. The interfaith interactions that tied together peace, pacifism and non-violence channelled into the African American religious community a fresh discourse about what moral methodologies were available to affirm the humanity of black people, to liberate them from societal subordination, and to construct parareligious assemblies that challenged the racial hypocrisy of white Christianity. Tuck's study focuses on the internecine squabbles between black pastors and parishioners and civil rights organizations.[32] This ignores broader reckonings with fresh precepts and praxis that Farmer, Randolph and others introduced into African American religious discourse and poured into an emergent non-violence movement in the United States.

The sacralization of non-violent discourse that Farmer and Randolph had already 'kicked into high gear' in the 1940s, had its genesis in the previous decade on two seminary campuses, namely Yale Divinity School and the School of Religion at Howard University. At Yale Divinity School, six black students matriculated and, in 1930, organized themselves into the Upsilon Theta Chi society.[33] Their aim lay in 'Service and Sacrifice for Christ' and in engagement with insurgent African American clergy involved in reinventing the black church. In cooperation with a white faculty adviser, Jerome Davis, professor of practical philanthropy at Yale and a pacifist, the black divinity students sponsored a conference on 'Whither the Negro Church?' which took place in 1931. These divinity students and a significant cadre of clergy believed an energized black ecclesia was needed to rebut the vacillating posture of white Christian churches, which either affirmed the humanity of African Americans or advocated an outright denial of their civil rights. The aim of their seminary training and organization was 'to produce a new type of leadership' whose purpose lay in 'the uplift of the Negro race and other oppressed peoples.'[34] The black seminarians also sought 'the creation of a new social order based upon the principles of Jesus.'[35] These sensibilities provided an easy segue into explorations of

[32] Ibid. 633.
[33] Jerome Davis, 'Foreword', in William H. Holloway, ed., *Whither the Negro Church? Seminar held at Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Conn., April 13–15, 1931* (New Haven, CT, 1932), 3.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.

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Gandhian non-violence, a praxis of resistance and a moral methodology aimed at societal reconstruction.

The presenters, all 'cutting edge' commentators,[36] believed that black churches should be retrofitted to spur social insurgency,[37] and that they should be pungent critics of Caucasian Christians too embedded in racial privilege to oppose anti-black discrimination.[38] Nonetheless, a fault line developed in their discussions. Some expressed scepticism about Caucasian Christian credibility on black and white issues.[39] Others reported promising experiences with interracial clergy interactions.[40] A. Philip Randolph, whose later engagement with Gandhian methodology would shift the black struggle onto another plateau of activism, thought that 'the Negro Church needs an economic philosophy and program' that aimed 'to improve the living standard of its membership.'[41] Conference participants generally agreed that alliances with the labour movement and its confrontation with corporate hegemony would benefit proletarian parishioners who comprised the majority in black churches.[42] John M. Ellison, however, lamented that it was 'emotional pleasure' that drove African Americans to attend their churches. 'Perhaps the greatest questions of economics', he suggested, 'have not entered very largely in the mind of the masses and very lightly in the minds of a

[36] The presenters were recorded as John M. Ellison, Professor of Sociology and Ethics, Virginia State College (from 1941, first African American president of Virginia Union University); George Edmund Haynes, Secretary of the Department of Race Relations of the Federal Council of Churches; Benjamin E. Mays, Director of 'A Study of the Negro Church', Institute of Social and Religious Research; Henry Hugh Proctor, pastor of the Nazarine Congregational Church, Brooklyn; A. Philip Randolph, General Organizer and President of Sleeping Car Porters; Frank T. Wilson, Executive for Colored Student Work, YMCA National Committee; and Jerome Davis (the only white speaker). See Holloway, ed., *Whither the Negro Church?*, 4 (contents) and 48 (roster of delegates).

[37] See, for example, John M. Ellison, 'The Negro Church and Economic Relations—II', in Holloway, ed., *Whither the Negro Church?*, 11–13.

[38] See especially the discussion following the paper by Henry Hugh Proctor, 'The Negro Church', in Holloway, ed., *Whither the Negro Church?*, 33–6.

[39] See, for instance, George E. Haynes, 'The Negro Church and our Changing Social Order', in Holloway, ed., *Whither the Negro Church?*, 17–21, esp. at 18, and also the discussion following Haynes's paper in ibid. 21–3.

[40] Proctor, 'The Negro Church', 31–2.

[41] A. Philip Randolph, 'The Negro Church and Economic Relations—I', in Holloway, ed., *Whither the Negro Church?*, 5.

[42] See the discussions following the papers by Randolph and Ellison, in Holloway, ed., *Whither the Negro Church?*, 5–10 and 13–16.

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great many church leaders.'[43] Frank T. Wilson and Benjamin E. Mays, who would later mobilize African American religious intellectuals toward an embrace of Gandhi, saw too few possibilities for partnership with white churches to encourage black resistance to Jim Crow. Wilson observed that white missionary education societies that funded black colleges 'tend to retard the development of free and creative personalities within Negro students.'[44] Mays frankly asserted that 'there are some Negro groups in the South who hardly want to hear a white southern man preach.'[45]

In the discussion with George E. Haynes, Secretary of the Department of Race Relations of the Federal Council of Churches, one black Yale seminarian, Edward G. Carroll, discussed with Haynes the importance of the Student Christian Movement (SCM). Although he was concerned that SCM was 'drawing the youth's attention away from the church,' Carroll insisted, the organization was also 'drawing it to religion and life,' meaning engagement with pressing racial and international issues that churches too often eschewed; it was also providing future leaders with a religious perspective.[46] SCM, through its affiliation with the World Student Christian Federation and in conjunction with the YMCA office of Frank T. Wilson, arranged in 1935 and 1936 for Carroll and others to travel to India and neighbouring countries in a Pilgrimage of Friendship. As they brooded over the subordinate status of African Americans, Carroll and others in the Upsilon Theta Chi society, together with their adviser, Jerome Davis, thought 'the Negro Church' required 'a more prophetic and fearless technique in making applicable the implications of the religion of Jesus in relation to our social order.'[47] Carroll's consciousness, however, was especially aroused as he and fellow black seminarians endorsed an insurgent view of 'the Negro Church' that Davis also articulated. The drafting committee for the conference resolutions, which included one Upsilon Theta

[43] Ellison, 'The Negro Church and Economic Relations—II', 11.
[44] Frank T. Wilson, 'The Negro Church and Education', in Holloway, ed., *Whither the Negro Church?*, 24–6, at 24.
[45] Benjamin E. Mays's contribution to the discussion following Wilson's paper, 'The Negro Church and Education', in Holloway, ed., *Whither the Negro Church?,* 27.
[46] Carroll's contribution to the discussion following Haynes's paper, in Holloway, ed., *Whither the Negro Church?*, 29–30.
[47] Jerome Davis, Harry W. Roberts and E. F. Goin, 'Resolutions', in Holloway, ed., *Whither the Negro Church?*, 45–7, at 47.

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Chi member, wrote that 'every Negro church must discover and develop a type of leadership that would do for America and the Negro race what Gandhi had done for India and what Jesus has done for the world.'[48] Carroll and his fellow seminarians were challenged to explore whether the praxis of Gandhian non-violence, a moral methodology embedded in interfaith sensibilities, might be harnessed to an African American religious heritage of pro-black advocacy. Notwithstanding these daring declarations, Carroll, a Methodist, entered the ministry in a denomination that, after 1939, consigned him to a racially restricted parish in the newly concocted Central Jurisdiction.[49]

The discursive event that occurred at Yale Divinity School in 1931 paralleled a more substantial examination of Gandhian non-violence at the School of Religion at Howard University. This developing discourse, which extended through the 1930s and into the ensuing decade, included the university president and successive divinity deans and faculty. Like his counterparts at Yale, Mordecai W. Johnson, a Harvard trained Baptist minister and the first African American president of Howard University, linked Gandhi, a holy man, to the black struggle for freedom. In 1930, Johnson observed that the 'movement for the redemption of the Indian people, through the endurance of suffering' possessed spiritual and political relevance to African Americans.[50] To highlight this observation, Johnson 'celebrat[ed] Gandhi's example' at Howard's 1934 religious convocation.[51] Moreover, Johnson made strategic appointments of Benjamin E. Mays and William Stuart Nelson as deans of the School of Religion, and Howard Thurman as dean of Rankin Chapel, which not only shaped the training and formation of black clergy but also sustained Johnson's Gandhian advocacy.[52] Mays, for example, envisaged the seminary as a venue to educate what Randal M. Jelks has described as 'an insurgent Negro professional clergy'; that is, he saw 'a professionally trained Negro clergy as educated religious leaders and insurgent militants to defeat Jim Crow laws and

[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid. 29, 47.
[50] Thomas John Edge, 'The Social Responsibility of the Administrator: Mordecai Wyatt Johnson and the Dilemma of Black Leadership, 1890–1976' (PhD thesis, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2008), 251.
[51] Ibid. 252.
[52] Ibid.

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customs.'[53] Additionally, in 1936, Mays travelled as part of a delegation to attend the World Conference of the YMCA in Mysore (India). The trip permitted him to spend time with Gandhi, who told him that non-violence 'must be practiced in absolute love and without hate.' Non-violence, Gandhi added, was a moral methodology that cares for 'the welfare of the opponent' as well as for that of the cause's adherents, according to interfaith mandates on non-retaliation.[54]

Similarly, Thurman headed a delegation in 1935 and 1936 to the Asian subcontinent that included his wife, Sue Bailey Thurman, and Edward G. Carroll, now a pastor, and Carroll's wife, Phenola. Their itinerary included stops in India on the Friendship Pilgrimage sponsored by the World Student Christian Federation. Gandhi granted the Thurmans an audience, in which the Indian leader enquired in depth about the African American predicament. Gandhi also declared that the global dissemination of non-violence would be delivered by way of the black freedom struggle.[55]

William Stuart Nelson, who succeeded Mays as dean of Howard University's School of Religion, spent nearly a year in India in 1946 and 1947 on a sabbatical fellowship sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee. His encounter with Gandhi coincided with the outbreak of interreligious violence between Hindus and Muslims vying for influence in a newly independent India. Disappointed that his erstwhile followers so easily resorted to violence, Gandhi confessed to Nelson that non-violence was an inner spiritual discipline rather than a strategy. 'It is only the strong who are capable of non-violence,' he told Nelson. Non-violence drew from 'the soldiering and discipline required by one whose only

[53] Randal M. Jelks, 'Benjamin Elijah Mays and the Creation of an Insurgent Negro Professional Clergy', *AME Church Review* 118/387 (2002), 32–8, at 32 and 35; compare also Dennis C. Dickerson, 'African American Religious Intellectuals and the Theological Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement, 1930–55', *ChH* 74 (2005), 217–35, at 224. For Mays's approach, see, for example, Benjamin E. Mays, 'Future Leadership of the Negro Church', in Holloway, ed., *Whither the Negro Church?*, 39–42, and compare the descriptions of Mays's time as dean of Howard University's School of Religion and as president of Morehouse School of Religion in Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* (New York, 1971; repr. Athens, GA, 1987 and 2003), 139–48, 234–40. References in this article are to the 1987 edition.

[54] Mays, *Born to Rebel*, 154–7, quotations at 156.

[55] Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York, 1979), 132.

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weapon is love.'[56] These black religious intellectuals, in what they gleaned from Gandhi, incubated a discursive learning environment at Howard that readied seminary graduates for insurgent activism against Jim Crow. In various vocational spheres, those inspired by Johnson or taught by Mays, Thurman and Nelson led non-violent movements to end the dehumanization of African Americans. Moreover, this intergenerational transfer from professors to their students provided intellectual and organizational leadership to a wide range of grassroots civil rights initiatives.[57]

Johnson, Mays, Thurman and Nelson fully realized that reckoning with anti-black racism in the United States paralleled resistance against colonialism in India and that country's grappling with its own caste system, which was not unlike 'the hierarchies of color among African Americans', according to Nico Slate.[58] When Mays met Gandhi, he challenged the Indian leader on whether he would crusade against 'the hard, rigid lines that had developed among various castes in India,' especially the scourge of 'untouchability.'[59] Gerald Horne contrasted the transnational issue of caste as 'the bilateral relationship between an oppressed national minority in a budding superpower and the world's largest colony' that Great Britain exploited since the nineteenth century.[60] Daniel Immerwahr examined discourse about these parallels of caste and colony as 'Indianizing race in the United States.'[61] African American religious intellectuals deepened the discourse about caste and colony through their Gandhian encounters. In doing so, they tracked the parallel involvement of Methodist Episcopal Church missionary E. Stanley Jones, whose long residence in India led to his transnational engagements with non-violence through integrated ashrams and support for the nascent black civil rights movement.[62]

[56] William Stuart Nelson, 'The Gandhi I Knew', *Friend Intelligencer* 15 (1948), 282–3.
[57] Daniel B. Cornfield et al., 'The Making of a Movement: An Intergenerational Mobilization Model of the Nonviolent Nashville Civil Rights Movement', *Social Science History* 45 (2021), 469–94.
[58] Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in the United States and India* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 2012), 79.
[59] Mays, *Born to Rebel*, 156–7.
[60] Gerald Horne, *The End of Empires: African Americans and India* (Philadelphia, PA, 2008), 15.
[61] Daniel Immerwahr, 'Caste or Colony?: Indianizing Race in the United States', *Modern Intellectual History* 4 (2007), 275–301.
[62] David R. Swartz, 'Christ of the American Road: E. Stanley Jones, India, and Civil Rights', *Journal of American Studies* 51 (2017), 1117–38.

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Concurrent with transnational discourse about caste and colonialism among African American religious intellectuals, trans-oceanic interactions between them and their counterparts abroad elicited their ecclesial and intellectual involvements. In 1948, for instance, Mays was present in Amsterdam for the launch of the World Council of Churches. During the assembly, he proposed the strengthening of a resolution about race to say that the WCC condemned racism and urged that churches should extinguish this ungodly ideology within their ranks.[63] African American Methodists, since their participation in the 1881 Oecumenical Methodist Conference in London, had engaged in discourse about race in transatlantic contexts and the racist record of white Methodists in their interactions with Wesleyan blacks. Bishop William J. Walls, of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, declared that the 1951 World Methodist Conference in Oxford (England) had 'the most segregated programme' ever, with no African Americans programmed for addresses on major topics.[64] Also during this period, the African Methodist Episcopal Church reckoned with international issues pertaining to white settler colonialism in South Africa. In fear of a potentially insurgent African American bishop presiding in the jurisdiction, the apartheid government compelled the denomination in 1956 to elect an indigenous prelate to supervise the hundreds of churches, schools and clinics among the nation's disenfranchised coloured and black populations.[65]

Civil rights activists in the United States during the 1950s and 1960s drew inspiration and instruction from this earlier generation of African American religious intellectuals.[66] Their pedagogical texts, all published in the late 1940s, generated ideas about how religion could inform the black struggle for racial equality, and how the moral methodologies that lay in non-violence could aid in achieving this objective. Benjamin E. Mays's *Seeking to be Christian in Race Relations* (1946),[67] William Stuart Nelson's *The Christian Way in*

[63] Mays, *Born to Rebel*, 256–8.
[64] William J. Walls, *The African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church: Reality of the Black Church* (Charlotte, NC, 1974), 481.
[65] Dennis C. Dickerson, *The African Methodist Episcopal Church: A History* (New York and Cambridge, 2020), 489–91.
[66] See Dickerson, 'African American Religious Intellectuals', esp. 229, 233–5.
[67] Benjamin E. Mays, *Seeking to be Christian in Race Relations* (New York, 1946; repr. 1952, 1957 and 1964).

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Race Relations (1948),[68] and Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949)[69] all functioned as foundational primers for critiquing American racism and dismantling the societal structures that sustained this pernicious ideology.

Two influences, one historic and the other contemporary, shaped the works produced by these intellectuals. Mays, Nelson and Thurman, all black Baptist ministers, were heirs to a tradition of religious insurgency against slavery, segregation and other mechanisms that subordinated African Americans. From the inception of the 'peculiar institution' in the seventeenth century, until its destruction in the mid-nineteenth century, abolitionists, both white and black, invoked biblical authority to inveigh against the bondage and inhuman treatment of African Americans.[70] In the decades after the American Civil War (1861–5), especially as Jim Crow became concretized in the early decades of the twentieth century, black preachers and their allies persistently pursued various strategies to oppose oppressive racial practices and violence against African Americans, and to affirm their humanity and their right to civic equality. African American religious intellectuals of the 1930s and 1940s embraced this protest heritage and situated their texts in this tradition.

Moreover, the inspiring and impressive example of Gandhi and his anti-colonial resistance to British imperialism in India became powerfully instructive to Mays, Nelson and Thurman as they pondered activist strategies to upend Jim Crow in the American South.

Though these thinkers needed no instruction about the evil of racism and its impact, they lacked an effective praxis to bring about the demise of this hegemonic ideology. Gandhi, through the philosophy and practice of satyagraha, provided an answer. How could Gandhian non-violence, so successfully deployed against the British in India,

[68] William Stuart Nelson, ed., *The Christian Way in Race Relations* (New York, 1948).
[69] Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York, 1949).
[70] See H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, but … Racism in Southern Religion, 1780–1910* (Durham, NC, 1972); Drew Gilpin Faust, 'Evangelicalism and the Meaning of the Proslavery Argument: The Reverend Thornton Stringfellow of Virginia', *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 85 (1977), 3–17; Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, 'The Religious Ideals of Southern Slave Society', *Georgia Historical Quarterly* 70 (1986), 1–16; idem, 'The Divine Sanction of Social Order: Religious Foundations of the Southern Slaveholders' World View', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55 (1982), 211–34.

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inform their understanding of Christianity and transform this religion into a potent force against segregation, the American version of apartheid?[71]

These African American religious intellectuals, because they were morally and intellectually stimulated after meeting Gandhi, engaged in a reinterpretation of his non-violent precepts and praxis and adapted them to the normative beliefs of Christianity. As agents of Gandhian diffusion to the United States, they were challenged by Gandhi's embrace of Jesus as a moral teacher and by the unrealized possibilities that lay in Christian opposition to colonial and racial hegemony. As a result of these interactions, Mays, Nelson and Thurman enculturated Gandhian non-violence by inserting it into an African American religious context and incorporating it into crucial texts that informed the ideas and strategies of the civil rights movement in the United States. As Scalmer puts it, in the course of 'the transnational career of Gandhism', it was several times 'reshaped' to fit another venue or struggle far-away from its Indian progenitor.[72]

In the process, Gandhism was Christianized and made palatable to African Americans anxious to overthrow the Jim Crow regime reigning within American society. Mays, Nelson and Thurman, in producing three seminal texts, contributed to the intellectual foundation of the modern civil rights movement. Mays was first among his colleagues with his 1946 publication, *Seeking to be Christian in Race Relations*. Faced with racism, those who wanted to eliminate its effects should explore, Mays believed, the ways in which Christianity can form 'the basis for good relations.'[73] In God's relationship to humankind, he was convinced, lay a basis for human interaction. Because of human dependence on the Creator, who embodies justice, mercy and love, all people can realize their equality with each other in the divine

[71] Apartheid was imposed in South Africa in 1948.

[72] Sean Scalmer, *Gandhi in the West: The Mahatma and the Rise of Radical Protest* (Cambridge, 2001), 5. An example of Gandhian diffusion into the African American context can be seen in Larry W. Isaac et al., '"Movement Schools" and Dialogical Diffusion of Nonviolent Praxis: Nashville Workshops in the Southern Civil Rights Movement', in Sharon Erikson Nepstad and Lester R. Kurtz, eds, *Nonviolent Conflict and Civil Resistance*, Research in Social Movements, Conflict and Change 34 (Bingley, 2012), 155–84.

[73] Mays, *Seeking to be Christian in Race Relations*, x. References in this article are to the 1957 edition.

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order. Moreover, 'love of God and love of man [are] inseparable.'[74] These relationships are concretized in Jesus because 'he combined in his person, life and religion the perfect relationship between himself and God, and between himself and man.'[75] Mays argued for 'a god-man-centered religion' which recognizes that 'man's good relationship to God is definitely dependent upon and conditioned by man's good relationship to man.'[76]

Additionally, two sections in Mays's book showed the congruence between Christianity and Gandhi's Hindu-derived precepts and praxis.[77] Fundamental to Gandhian non-violence is ahimsa, a Sanskrit term which forbids harm to others, even one's enemies, because such assaults are also self-destructive. Mays cited Matthew 5: 43–5, the New Testament passage in which Jesus instructed his followers to 'love your enemy', arguing that God blesses all with the sunshine and rain, whether such persons are good or bad, everybody is blessed with God's beneficence.[78] Mays's work reflected Gandhian influence in asserting that Jesus as 'our guide for Christian living' requires action.[79] Belief mandates a response to evil. Mays declared: 'if we say we believe in justice for all people, irrespective of race, and proceed to segregate, deny the ballot to, deny jobs to, and discriminate educationally against certain groups in the population on the grounds of race, we do not really believe in justice.'[80] The 'true Christian,' he said, 'will always find ways to act', either individually or through collective actions to attain justice.[81]

In 1948, Nelson published a compelling collection of essays, *The Christian Way in Race Relations*. In this volume, 'the result of a co-operative enterprise' of the Institute of Religion sponsored by Howard University, Nelson, Mays, Thurman and ten other black religious intellectuals showed 'the central role … the Christian way of life should play in the solution of these problems' of race relations

[74] Ibid. 16 (chapter title).
[75] Ibid. 25–6.
[76] Ibid. 24 (chapter title) and 26.
[77] Mays mentions Gandhi specifically: ibid. 13–14, 80.
[78] Ibid. 27.
[79] Ibid. 72.
[80] Ibid. 76.
[81] Ibid. 77.

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in American society.[82] Nelson saw urgency in efforts to demonstrate the relevance of religion to actions and strategies aimed at ending the second-class citizenship of blacks.[83] He worried that the paucity of trained black clergy signified 'the irrelevance which young Negro men [and, we would add, women – DD] feel religion bears to the major concerns of their lives.'[84] Hence, Christianity should be energized, especially in the sphere of race relations and shown to be an important force in changing the racial status quo.

Nelson and his colleagues developed a discursive atmosphere in African American ecclesial and academic circles that connected to succeeding cohorts of clergy activists. These black religious intellectuals, through their writings, lectures and sermons in innumerable church and campus settings, and through ongoing interactions with insurgents from the 1930s to the 1960s, introduced them to Gandhian non-violence and other moral methodologies through intergenerational transmissions. Because Nelson knew the power of Gandhi's religious commitments, he had mobilized colleagues to reflect on how Christianity in the black freedom struggle could harness the same moral methodologies that facilitated anti-colonial victories in India. George D. Kelsey suggested guidelines for morally based protest activities. 'When a Negro,' he noted, 'makes a needed appeal for justice or engages in action leading thereto, he ought to examine all his relationships and see if they are just from his side.'[85] Echoing Gandhi, Kelsey also said: 'the method of protest or restraint must be such as not to injure.'[86] The system that the opponent defends, and not the protector of that structure, should be the target. The protester 'must be sure that it is democracy which he seeks and not the substitution of one tyranny for another.'[87] Kelsey's latter point resonated with Mays, who affirmed in his contribution that 'Mahatma

[82] William Stuart Nelson, 'Preface', in idem, ed., *The Christian Way in Race Relations* (New York, 1948), vii–ix, at vii. Contributors included Frank T. Wilson and George Edmund Hayes, who had spoken at the 'Whither the Negro Church?' conference. One woman contributed: Marion Cuthbert, on 'The Role of the Young Women's Christian Association', in Nelson, ed., *The Christian Way in Race Relations*, 162–82.
[83] William Stuart Nelson, 'Critical Issues in America's Race Relations Today', in idem, ed., *The Christian Way in Race Relations*, 3–25, esp. 20–3.
[84] Nelson, 'Critical Issues in America's Race Relations Today', 20.
[85] George D. Kelsey, 'The Christian Way in Race Relations', in Nelson, ed., *The Christian Way in Race Relations*, 29–48, at 43.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.

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Gandhi was eminently correct when he insisted that the Hindus must get rid of untouchability and make the relationship between the various castes of India just and humane if they were to be justified in their insistence that England cease oppressing them and give them complete autonomy.'[88] He challenged 'the Negro Christian' to 'rise above hate', and 'the white Christian' to 'order his life progressively in the light of truth.'[89] Frank T. Wilson, the YMCA official who had arranged the India trip on which Howard and Sue Bailey Thurman met with Gandhi, commended the student associations for their 'work on the raw edge of racial injustice.'[90] He stressed their initiatives 'to eliminate practices of segregation and discrimination on college campuses as well as in non-academic communities.'[91] They also fought against poll taxes and lynching, and supported a permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee to end job discrimination.[92] Wilson suggested that the organization should intensify initiatives to racially integrate on all levels of its own organization and 'provide educational leadership in the eradication of racial prejudice.'[93] Though moral suasion was one method that some contributors recommended to improve race relations, Harry V. Richardson strongly endorsed church leaders who proposed that ecclesial federations should activate social action committees to work against black subordination in a world 'at war with flagrant vicious un-Christian forces'.[94]

George E. Haynes went further than Wilson and Richardson. A veteran official in the National Urban League and in the Federal Council of Churches, Haynes understood better than most the limits of the institutional initiatives of white-led organizations in spearheading transformational change for African Americans. Though convinced that religion should influence social movements, he was supportive of new vehicles through which religious ideas could

[88] Benjamin E. Mays, 'The Obligations of the Individual Christian', in Nelson, ed., *The Christian Way in Race Relations*, 209–25, at 217.
[89] Ibid. 224.
[90] Frank T. Wilson, 'The Role of the Young Men's Christian Association', in Nelson, ed., *The Christian Way in Race Relations*, 143–61, at 159.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid. 160–1.
[94] Harry V. Richardson, 'What Can the Church Do?', in Nelson, ed., *The Christian Way in Race Relations*, 111–27, at 125, 126–7.

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operate. Nelson invited his contribution and commentary about how Gandhian non-violence was influencing a nascent U.S. civil rights movement.[95] Haynes noted that alongside educational programmes and policy decisions, such as refusing to hold meetings in segregated hotels, 'public protest and agitation through mass meetings, picketing, newspapers, the radio, and other means have also been a part or all of the activities of many organizations.'[96] These methods, known as 'direct action', while influenced by the tactics of labour unions and left wing groups, also drew from the example of Gandhian non-violence in India. Similarly, Randolph's MOWM borrowed from Gandhian techniques in mass grassroots mobilization and represented a 'nonviolent direct action' organization. Farmer's CORE was commended for 'developing disciplined, nonviolent action against the color line.'[97] Haynes's contribution to Nelson's volume thus tracked the diffusion of Gandhian non-violence into the African American context.

Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*, released in 1949, had been some time in the making, having evolved out of previous intellectual encounters. The first was an article entitled 'Good News for the Underprivileged' that Thurman had originally published in 1932 and then delivered as a speech in 1935.[98] Then, while Thurman was in Ceylon, a Hindu asked him how African Americans could embrace Christianity when so many of its practitioners had been either slave traders or slave owners. Moreover, this Hindu asserted, Christian churches in the United States were racially segregated and included members who participated in the lynching of blacks.[99] Thurman, who had no immediate answer to this probing inquiry, was challenged by the question of what the teachings of Jesus have to say to 'the masses of men [and women who] live with their backs against the wall', who included 'the poor, the disinherited,

[95] George Edmund Haynes, 'The Role of Social and Civic Organizations and Agencies', in Nelson, ed., *The Christian Way in Race Relations*, 183–205.
[96] Ibid. 196–8, quotation at 198.
[97] Ibid. 199. Although Haynes does not actually mention Gandhi here, the influence is clear.
[98] Howard Thurman, 'Good News for the Underprivileged', in *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman*, ed. Walter Earl Fluker, 5 vols (Columbia, SC, 2009–19), 1: 263–70, originally published in *Religion and Life* 4 (1935), 403–9. See also Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, new edn (Boston, MA, 1996), xx, and Vincent Harding, 'Foreword', in ibid. vii–xviii, at ix–x.
[99] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 3–5.

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the dispossessed.'[100] Having already concluded that the religion of Jesus paid special attention to marginalized peoples, he began to think about how Christianity could speak to oppressed African Americans and others similarly situated despite its association with slavery, colonialism and other hegemonic systems. Thurman elaborated on this theme in a 1948 lecture at Samuel Huston College in Austin (Texas), and this presentation was published a year later as *Jesus and the Disinherited*.[101]

Thurman described Jesus in his historical context and noted characteristics that unmistakably linked him to the disadvantaged during his era and beyond. In examining him 'against the background of his own age and people,' Thurman aimed to explain that Jesus had much to say 'to those who stand … with their backs against the wall.'[102] Three attributes tied Jesus to the lower stratum of his society and to others in a similar circumstance elsewhere in time and place. Jesus's Jewishness was the first characteristic. 'It is impossible,' said Thurman, 'for Jesus to be understood outside the sense of community which Israel held with God.'[103] Christians, he added, have 'tended to overlook' Jesus's Jewish origins as 'he went about doing his Father's business', becoming the central figure within this new religion, Christianity.[104] That he was Jewish identifies him within a racial category that has often been despised and degraded, much like the African American group to which Thurman himself belonged. In this respect, Jesus was one of the disinherited.

Moreover, 'Jesus was a poor Jew.' Thurman declared: 'the economic predicament with which he was identified in birth placed him initially with the great mass of men on the earth', for 'the masses of the people are poor.'[105] Thurman suggested:

> if we dare take the position that in Jesus there was not at work some radical destiny, it would be safe to say that in his poverty he was more truly Son of man than he would have been if the incident of family or birth had made him a rich son of Israel.[106]

[100] Ibid. 3.
[101] Ibid. xx; Harding, 'Foreword', x–xi.
[102] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 11.
[103] Ibid. 5–6.
[104] Ibid. 6.
[105] Ibid. 7.
[106] Ibid.

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Born in a barn, the son of a carpenter, he became a preacher of whom it was reported in Mark's Gospel that 'the common people heard him gladly' (Mark 12: 37) [AV]. These attributes unmistakably tied Jesus to the mass of poor humanity.

Finally, 'Jesus was a member of a minority group in the midst of a larger dominant and controlling group.'[107] Rome ruled Palestine and its territorial possessions included peoples whom it colonized, exploited and even mocked for their religion and culture. Jews, among the various subject groups within the Roman Empire, nurtured their own insurgents who sought ways to end Rome's colonial hegemony. Thurman concluded: 'it is utterly fantastic to assume that Jesus grew to manhood untouched by the surging currents of the common life that made up the climate of Palestine.'[108]

Echoes of Gandhi in India, as well as of Jesus in Palestine, resonated through Thurman's provocative prose. Thurman also tried to explain what moral methodology should be chosen to challenge colonial hegemony, while preserving the moral integrity of insurgents. Armed resistance was unacceptable because it was 'a tragic last resort.'[109] In the earlier article that preceded the book, 'Good News for the Underprivileged', Thurman recognized that acquiescing to the violence of oppressors through 'the exercise of love' allowed 'the exploiters of the weak to keep them submissive and subservient.'[110] Jesus proposed instead that 'The Kingdom of Heaven is in us.'[111] Alternative citizenship in a divine sphere protected the oppressed from 'the three hounds of hell that track the trail of the disinherited', namely 'fear, hypocrisy, and hatred.'[112] As a part of God's kingdom, the haunting spectres of these predators 'need have no dominion' in the lives of the disadvantaged.[113] The inner being of the disinherited would be safeguarded from the physical and spiritual violence that colonizers imposed upon their subjects. Thurman highlighted in both Jesus and Gandhi the sacredness of their spiritual selves and their determined efforts to shield the core attributes of their humanity from the assaults of Roman and British hegemony. To follow their

[107] Ibid. 8.
[108] Ibid.
[109] Ibid. 15.
[110] Thurman, 'Good News for the Underprivileged', 268–9.
[111] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 17.
[112] Ibid. 19.
[113] Ibid.

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path, Thurman said, was 'to be simply, directly truthful, whatever may be the cost in life, limb or security'.[114]

The ideas in these works by Mays, Nelson and Thurman diffused into the strategies and rhetoric of civil rights activists throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and converted their efforts into a non-violent movement in America. Non-violent precepts and praxis drew from interfaith sources and inserted religion into the core of the black freedom struggle. In a 1956 address immediately after the successful bus boycott in Montgomery (Alabama), for example, Martin Luther King, Jr, said that non-violent practitioners attempt 'never to defeat or to humiliate the opponent.'[115] Instead, the objective is 'to win (their) friendship and (their) understanding' and thus to achieve 'reconciliation'.[116] King also emphasized that non-violence 'does not seek merely to avoid external physical violence, but it seeks to avoid internal violence of spirit.'[117] The writings of George Kelsey and Thurman especially resonated in these King passages about love for the defenders of racial subjugation and the necessity of protecting the moral integrity of the activists' inner being while they opposed hegemonic forces. James M. Lawson, Jr, conducted non-violent workshops in Nashville (Tennessee) in 1958 and 1959, in which he instructed students from Fisk University, Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial University, American Baptist College, and Meharry Medical College, all local black institutions, in the techniques of non-violence. Lawson introduced these students to Thurman's *The Growing Edge* (1956) as part of his workshop curriculum.[118] Both King and Lawson believed that Thurman's works helped in training the students of non-violence and imbuing them with spiritual and

[114] For Gandhi, see ibid. 59–60, quotation at 60.

[115] Martin Luther King, Jr, 'Non-Aggression Procedures to Interracial Harmony. Address Delivered at the American Baptist Assembly and American Home Mission Agencies Conference, 23 July 1956', in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr*, 3: *Birth of a New Age, December 1955–December 1956*, ed. Clayborne Carson (Berkeley, CA, 1997), 321–8, at 326.

[116] Ibid.

[117] Ibid.

[118] See the bibliography in James M. Lawson, Jr, 'Nonviolence: A Relevant Power for Constructive Social Change', in Nashville, TN, Vanderbilt University, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Special Collections, Fisk Institute (of) Race Folder, James M. Lawson, Jr, Papers, Box 38, FOR III, NV Workshops, 1958; compare also Peter Eisenstadt, *Against the Hounds of Hell: A Life of Howard Thurman* (Charlottesville, VA, 2021), 272.

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strategic sensibilities to upend American apartheid. Indeed, King kept a copy of Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* in his briefcase.[119] These works by Mays, Nelson and Thurman drew from Gandhi's philosophy and praxis of non-violence and provided an intellectual foundation for the United States civil rights movement. By integrating Gandhian satyagraha into their reading of Christianity, these African American religious intellectuals helped to develop 'a force more powerful' – or, as Martin Luther King, Jr, put it, 'a love that can change individuals. It can change nations. It can change conditions' – to destroy structures that supported Jim Crow in American society.[120] Gandhi's moral methodology, through a process of diffusion and intergenerational transfer, informed discourse among advocates of pacifism and non-violence. Interlocutors who engaged these tenets and tactics, in varying timetables, became settled adherents to these beliefs.[121]

African American religious intellectuals in this way provided a religious scaffolding for grassroots activists, who, through bus boycotts, sit-ins and other techniques of direct-action resistance, advanced the non-violent movement in the United States. Bus boycotts in Baton Rouge, Montgomery and Tallahassee spurred black Southern insurgency in the 1950s. The resistance to segregated public transportation became foundational to a wider militancy against Jim Crow.[122] The onslaught of bus boycotts against the transit structure of segregation owed their grounding to black churches. Though newly established organizations coordinated the bus boycotts, they relied on black congregations as venues for rallies and sources of funding.[123] Moreover, black clergy, protected by their status from financial and vocational intimidation by segregationist whites, provided independent leadership to their now mobilized communities.[124]

[119] Harding, 'Foreword', xii.
[120] King, 'Non-Aggression Procedures to Interracial Harmony', 327. For the (perhaps apocryphal) Gandhian phrase 'a force more powerful', see Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall, *A Force More Powerful: A Century of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York, 2000), and David Cortright, *Peace: A History of Movements and Ideas* (Cambridge, 2008), 211–32 (ch. 10, 'A force more powerful').
[121] Isaac et al., 'Movement Schools', 156–8, 164–72.
[122] Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York, 1984), 17–25.
[123] Ibid. 21–5, 40–76.
[124] Ibid. 19–20, 73–6.

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Though blacks in Baton Rouge (Louisiana) persuaded the city council in 1953 to permit seating on a first come first serve basis, white bus drivers resisted Ordinance 222 and staged a strike aimed at the company's overwhelmingly African American patrons. After the drivers gained support from the Louisiana attorney general in opposing the relaxing of segregation, the Rev. T. J. Jemison, the pastor of Mt Zion Baptist Church, called for a strike of patrons. With solid support exercised through the United Defense League, the six-day boycott achieved an agreement of no reserved seats for whites. That Jemison's congregation mobilized the financing of the boycott to pay protective personnel and to fund alternative transportation for bus riders showed that this non-violent initiative enjoyed the blessing of organized black Christianity.[125]

Similarly, in Montgomery (Alabama), starting in December 1955, a bus boycott ignited by segregationist policies against a black passenger, Rosa Parks, stirred black non-violent resistance. The Montgomery Improvement Association, just like Baton Rouge's United Defense League, mobilized a united African American population to withdraw patronage from the local bus company. The city's black churches were crucial as organizational and funding sites for the 381-day boycott which lasted into late 1956. Religious influence, both clerical and lay, spread a canopy of sacralization over this anti-racist movement. Martin Luther King, Jr, the newly arrived pastor at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, became the spokesman for the year-long non-violent protest. His numerous addresses included clear articulations of Gandhian principles of love, non-retaliation and a fortified spiritual discipline that yielded courage and persistence. This Gandhian language reflected his reading about the Indian leader; he had also heard a lecture about Gandhi, who had inspired Mordecai W. Johnson. Mentorship from his Morehouse president, Benjamin E. Mays, and the writings of Howard Thurman, especially *Jesus and the Disinherited*, refined King's education in non-violence.[126]

Equally significant was the dignified defiance of Rosa Parks, whose refusal to move from the arbitrarily declared white section of the bus spurred the boycott. Her determined resistance, a product of dangerous activism in defending black women victimized by racialized

[125] Ibid. 17–25.
[126] For the Montgomery bus boycott, see ibid. 51–63; compare also Harvard Sitkoff, *King: Pilgrimage to the Mountaintop* (New York, 2008), 45–8.

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sexual violence and pressing for black voting rights, also drew on deep religious convictions. Parks, a stewardess at Montgomery's St Paul AME Church, regularly assisted in preparing the monthly eucharist at this Wesleyan congregation. The scriptural holiness enacted through personal renewal at the communion table spilled over into a resulting impulse for social holiness that aimed at societal renewal, similar to the aims that the AME founder Richard Allen had pursued through African Methodism. Parks's activism derived from these religious tenets and converted her bus protest into a sacred onslaught against societal sin and hypocrisy.[127]

The bus boycott in Tallahassee (Florida) started in May 1956, when two female students from Florida Agricultural and Mechanical College defied segregation and refused to give up their seats to whites. Fellow students mobilized and refused to ride on the buses. Thereafter, the wider black community joined them in the boycott and two black clergy assumed leadership through the Inter-Civic Council (ICC). A Transportation Committee was formed which developed alternatives to patronizing the buses. As in Baton Rouge and Montgomery, black churches generated funding for expenses incurred by avoiding public transit. C. K. Steele, the president of the local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and pastor of Bethel Missionary Baptist Church, served as the head of the ICC and led the effort that bankrupted the bus company. During the boycott, James Hudson, chaplain at Florida A&M University and president of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, conducted sessions on non-violence.[128] According to Larry O. Rivers, one of Hudson's biographers, 'a "new social awakening"' revealed by the boycott showed the potential for religiously inspired non-violence 'to overcome racism, violence, and fear that perpetuated Jim Crow segregation in Florida's capital city.'[129]

Martin Luther King, Jr, moulded these black church-based local movements into a regional organization to penetrate the wall of segregation in the system's vulnerable venues. In 1957, the Southern

[127] Dennis C. Dickerson, *African Methodism and its Wesleyan Heritage: Reflections on AME Church History* (Nashville, TN, 2009), 176–84.
[128] For the Tallahassee bus boycott, see Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 63–8.
[129] Larry O. Rivers, '"A New Social Awakening": James Hudson, Florida A. & M. University's Religious Life Program, and the 1956 Tallahassee Bus Boycott', *Florida Historical Quarterly* 95 (2017), 325–55, at 355.

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Leadership Conference (SLC) on Transportation and Nonviolent Integration was formed in Atlanta. King, the president of the SLC, was joined by Jemison and Steele, the respective leaders of bus boycotts in Baton Rouge and Tallahassee, as officers in what then became the forerunner group to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The SCLC, in affirming the humanity of African Americans and in defiance of segregationist hypocrisy, put the black church front and centre in the African American freedom struggle. Alden Morris has called the SCLC 'the decentralized political arm of the black church.'[130]

Though the SCLC was closely linked to African American churches, the newly formed group also reached into a sphere in which the NAACP was already engaged. That organization's legal program and legislative lobbying, its officials believed, required the endorsement and financial support of the black religious community. In 1946, the NAACP's church committee had become a fully-fledged Church Affairs Department under the leadership of Walter P. Offutt, Jr, a Baptist minister who had been involved in the desegregation of public libraries in Louisville (Kentucky). He thought that 'if the social justice program of the NAACP can be combined with the religious ideals of our churches … we shall have a power for freedom that cannot be ignored' and the black freedom struggle would have greater success.[131] At a time when Mays, Thurman and Nelson were publishing major works that buttressed what Offutt was articulating, this meant that the NAACP was in step with these African American religious intellectuals. Another inflection point for the department occurred in 1957, just as SCLC was being launched. Roy Wilkins, the NAACP executive secretary, recruited Edward J. Odom, Jr, an AME minister who was active in the NAACP, to head the Church Affairs Department.[132] Wilkins and Bishop Stephen Gill Spottswood of the AME Zion Church and newly elected to the

[130] Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 77–99, quotation at 77 (in the chapter title: 'The SCLC: The Decentralized Political Arm of the Black Church').
[131] Quoted in Tuck, 'The Doubts of Their Fathers', 676.
[132] Roy Wilkins to Edward J. Odom, Jr, 2 April 1957, as cited in: Washington, DC, Library of Congress, NAACP Administrative File, 1956–65, Group III, Box A312, General Office File, Folder 5, Staff Adm, Odom, Edward J., 1957–65, 'Biographical Sketch – Reverend Edward J. Odom, Jr.'; Library of Congress, MSS, Group II, Bd. of Directors, Spottswood, Box A32, Adm. File, 'New Chief of the NAACP'; Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Records of the NAACP.

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NAACP national board of directors, were sceptical of King's call for black churches to affiliate with SCLC, saying that it was a federal court case, Browder vs Gayle (1956), which the NAACP had sponsored, that brought victory to the Montgomery bus boycott.[133] Despite intergroup tensions, Odom addressed the 1962 convention of King's organization in Birmingham (Alabama), saying that: 'the NAACP shares with SCLC a high regard for the role that organized religious groups play in the quest for Justice, Freedom, and equality of opportunity.'[134]

Wilkins, the son of an AME pastor, and Spottswood, who in 1961 would become chair of the National Board of the NAACP, were surely pleased that Odom's first order of business was a Churches for Freedom initiative aimed at generating religious support for the organization. In the late 1950s, the SCLC and the NAACP's Church Affairs Department embedded black religion into the effort to establish black citizenship and thus affirm blacks' humanity. In contrast, the white ecclesia, in some venues supportive, but in other spheres either indifferent or hostile, became marginal or irrelevant to movements to affirm the personhood of blacks and to abandon all hypocrisy about a fundamental Pauline tenet: God 'hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth' (Acts 17: 26) [AV].[135]

While the NAACP focused its Church Affairs Department on fundraising for black rights projects, the SCLC replicated its success in supporting other religiously based local movements elsewhere in the American South. Two black clergy from Nashville (Tennessee) attended the SCLC's founding meeting and returned home to establish the Nashville Christian Leadership Conference (NCLC). Kelly

[133] 'Rev. Walter Offutt Jr., 63, Dies: Human Rights Aide for State', *New York Times*, 8 October 1974; Roy Wilkins with Tom Mathews, *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins* (New York, 1982), 226–8, 269; Yvonne Ryan, *Roy Wilkins: The Quiet Revolutionary and the NAACP* (Lexington, KY, 2014), 58; Stephen Gill Spottswood, 'Freedom: The New Frontier', *AME Church Review* 78/209 (1961), 42–9, at 43, 46.

[134] Rev. Edward J. Odom, Jr, NAACP Church Secretary, 'Meeting [of the] Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Wednesday, September 26, 1962, Birmingham, Alabama': see Library of Congress, Records of the NAACP, Edward J. Odom, Jr, Group III, Box A 293.

[135] Richard R. Wright, Jr, *Encyclopaedia of African Methodism* (Philadelphia, PA, 1947), 297–8; 'Bishop Spottswood of NAACP Dies', *New York Times*, 3 December 1974; 'Along the N.A.A.C.P. Battlefront: 49th Annual Meeting', *The Crisis* 65/2 (1958), 106–13, at 113.

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Miller Smith, pastor of First Baptist Church (Capitol Hill) and Andrew N. White, the executive secretary of the Department of Christian Education of the AME Church, were graduates of the School of Religion at Howard University. They had matriculated at different times in the early 1940s when the presence and pedagogy of Mays, Thurman and Nelson permeated the school's educational environment. In launching the NCLC in 1958, Smith and White joined with the newly arrived Vanderbilt University divinity student, James M. Lawson, Jr, in spearheading the Nashville movement.[136]

Lawson, a 'Jesus Follower' and a member of the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), had been reared in an AME Zion congregation served by his father James M. Lawson, Sr, in Massillon (Ohio), and then in the Methodist Church's segregated Central Jurisdiction. Lawson's opposition to the Korean War (1950–3) and his refusal to submit to the United States military draft landed him in a federal prison. An early release permitted the Methodist Church to dispatch him to Nagpur (India) to teach and coach at Hislop College. He immersed himself in Gandhi's writings and was stirred by the news of the successful Montgomery bus boycott. After his return to the United States and matriculation at the School of Theology at Oberlin College, he met King in 1957 who was giving a lecture at the seminary. King urged Lawson to come South immediately to deploy his Gandhian expertise in the southern civil rights movement. As FOR's southern secretary, a position that he interspersed with his Vanderbilt studies, Lawson decided with Smith, White and the NCLC that students from Nashville's four institutions of higher education – American Baptist College, Fisk University, Meharry Medical College, and Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial University – should form the vanguard of a local non-violent movement. Lawson's NCLC non-violent workshops became the training venue for the planned action.[137]

Lawson, as serious a Gandhian non-violence theoretician and practitioner as King, probed even more deeply into this moral methodology as a religious tenet. In defining non-violence, Lawson declared:

[136] Dickerson, *African Methodism and its Wesleyan Heritage*, 185–8; Leila Meier, '"A Different Kind of Prophet": The Role of Kelly Miller Smith in the Nashville Civil Rights Movement, 1955–1960' (MA thesis, Vanderbilt University, 1991).

[137] Isaac et al., 'Movement Schools', 164–8; Dennis C. Dickerson, 'James M. Lawson, Jr.: Methodism, Nonviolence and the Civil Rights Movement', *Methodist History* 52 (2014), 168–86.

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> Nonviolence is the aggressive, forgiving, patient, long-suffering Christ-like and Christ-commanded love or good-will for all human kind even in the face of tension, fear, hatred, or demonic evil. It is the readiness to absorb suffering. With forgiveness and courage rather than to inflict suffering on others. It is the desire to resist evil not by imitating the evil, but with good-will, with an effort to convert the evil-doer.[138]

While he viewed non-violence as biblically-based, Lawson, by now an ordained Methodist minister, acknowledged that it also reflected tenets from other world religions. He therefore considered non-violence to embody scriptural attributes authenticated through interfaith sources. 'Non-violence', he asserted, 'is first a way of life, a religious faith, steeped in the religious tradition of the world.'[139] Moreover, 'one can discover it explicitly in the doctrine of ahimsa (Hinduism), non-retaliation (Buddhism), [and the] doctrine of the Cross (Christianity). The spiritual giants of all ages concur in this concept.'[140] Lawson, like the previous and still-living generation of African American religious intellectuals who had encountered Gandhi, was foundationally Christian, but open to interfaith resources that reinforced his commitment to non-violence.

Students from Nashville's four black institutions of higher education were inspired and enthused by Lawson's workshops on non-violence. From 13 February until 10 May 1960, they sought to achieve the desegregation of downtown Nashville lunch counters. King described the Nashville movement as 'the best organized and the most disciplined in the Southland.'[141] Alumni and alumnae from the Lawson workshops seeded other Southern movements from the Freedom rides in 1961 to the Birmingham marches in 1963. Increasingly, Lawson insisted, as did his workshop student, John

[138] James M. Lawson, Jr, 'Non-Violence: A Relevant Power for Constructive Social Change', in Vanderbilt University, Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Special Collections, Fisk Institute [of] Race Folder, James M. Lawson, Jr, Papers, Box 38, FOR III, NV Workshops, 1958.
[139] Ibid.
[140] Ibid. See also Dennis C. Dickerson, 'William Stuart Nelson and the Interfaith Origins of the Civil Rights Movement', in R. Drew Smith, William Ackah and Antony G. Reddie, eds, *Churches, Blackness and Multiculturalism: Europe, Africa, and North America* (New York, 2014), 57–72.
[141] Martin Luther King, Address at Fisk University, 20 April 1960, as reported in *The Nashville Banner*, 21 April 1960, online at: <https://teva.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15138coll18/id/973>, accessed 26 February 2024.

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Lewis from American Baptist College, that their efforts should be understood as the non-violent movement in America. They could have added that their espousal of non-violence sacralized their initiatives in Nashville and elsewhere in the American South.[142]

The theologian and ethicist George D. Kelsey recognized and explored how legalized segregation in the American South and racial discrimination throughout American society derived from a counterfeit Christianity that posited that blacks were inferior to whites and that, as God's marred creation, they deserved neither rights nor recognition as full human beings. 'Since racism assumes some segments of humanity to be defective in essential being', Kelsey observed, 'and since for Christians all being is from the hand of God, racism alone among idolatries calls into question the divine creative action.'[143] Kelsey, who had been King's undergraduate professor at Morehouse College, also objected that 'racism is complete self-deification', which results in 'the worship of the creature instead of the Creator.'[144] This perverted and hypocritical religious system had corrupted Christianity; however, it was now encountering the alternative voices of black religious intellectuals and on-the-ground activists who challenged racist hypocrisy and affirmed the full humanity of African Americans. Mays, for example, asserted that 'no belief in God is adequate unless it is a belief in universal God, who is a God of justice, mercy and love. He cannot be a racial or national God. He cannot be a class God. He must be a God for all peoples.'[145] These declarations validated the humanity of all African Americans and exposed the hypocrisy of anti-black racism. Their engagement with Gandhian non-violence and their role in diffusing this moral methodology to the United States and grafting it to African American religious sensibilities enhanced and sacralized the black freedom struggle.

Mordecai W. Johnson had long been denouncing Caucasian Christian complicity with white racism in the United States in general and in the American South in particular. He noted that 'we have to distinguish between being a Christian and being religious. We don't have any experience with that distinction, because Christianity is of a

[142] Isaac et al., 'Movement Schools', 169–78; Dennis C. Dickerson, Telephone interview with James M. Lawson, Jr, 19 July 2020.
[143] George D. Kelsey, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man* (New York, 1965), 25.
[144] Ibid. 73.
[145] Mays, *Seeking to be Christian in Race Relations*, 7.

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radical, universal ethic. It is founded upon the conviction of the sacred and inviolable worth of every human individual.'[146] Hence Johnson, at the 1957 Howard University commencement, in conferring an honorary degree upon Martin Luther King, Jr, commended his fellow Baptist minister, declaring: 'You have revitalized religion in America; you have given a weak and conforming Christian church a vision of a rising and going forth to become an instrument of redemptive social power.'[147] Johnson could have added to that roster other thinkers and activists whose religious convictions energized the nonviolent movement in America and sacralized the civil rights struggle in the United States.

[146] *Education For Freedom: The Leadership of Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, Howard University, 1926–1960* (Washington, DC, 1976), 37.
[147] Richard I. McKinney, *Mordecai: The Man and his Message. The Story of Mordecai Wyatt Johnson* (Washington, DC, 1997), 318.

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