

## **Safeguarding the Prophetic Tradition: the Legacy of Harriet Tubman and the Civil Rights Movement into the Twenty-first Century**

Michael D. Royster

Prairie View A&M University, Prairie View, TX (US), [www.pvamu.edu](http://www.pvamu.edu)

### **Abstract**

The twenty-first century church requires special attention in protecting the prophetic tradition which begins with the biblical prophets while appropriating lessons that were learned from the Underground Railroad and the civil rights movement including its missed opportunities. Drawing from the scholarship of social scientists, systematic, moral, and practical theologians, there has emerged a renewed sense of urgency for the preaching and teaching community to actively engage in theological reflection put into practice. Four key lessons from the past deemed worthy of exploration include the following: (1) courageous faith is the first step towards progress, (2) progress requires a broad set of alliances, (3) remembering those who still await liberation, and (4) the importance of secrecy. The given statement makes evident that preaching and teaching within the prophetic tradition should not be regarded as an occupation, or ambitious endeavor, but rather an answer to a Divine calling.

### **Introduction**

From its origins in the ancient world, to its resurgence during the slavery abolition era, and extended throughout the civil rights movement and beyond, the prophetic tradition has functioned as a Divine warning to the masses, and a disruption to conventional society. Biblical proclamations from such a tradition remind the public that the God of grace and mercy is also the God of justice and judgment. Human creatures have a tendency of resorting to dormancy and complacency during times of perceived prosperity based on materialistic values but not necessarily biblical prosperity. Since individuals, communities, and institutions including those that are faith-based tend not to act responsively unless faced with an extreme situation. "In order for people to be attracted to and participate in collective action, they must come to define a situation as intolerable and changeable through collective action."<sup>1</sup>

The prophetic tradition does insist that one does not speak on God's behalf until one has had an encounter with God. "Harriet Tubman often 'went into the spirit' before her liberation mission and claimed her strength for liberation activity came this way of meeting God."<sup>2</sup> Harriet Tubman's legacy which became a prominent feature of the civil rights movement contains present implications which includes the need for courage in the face of fierce opposition, carefully identifying one's allies, remembering the past including those who were left behind as a reminder that personal and in-group liberation remains incomplete until the least have been

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<sup>1</sup> Aldon D. Morris. "A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement: Political and Intellectual Landmarks" *Annual Review of Sociology*. volume 25 (1999) 534.

<sup>2</sup> Delores S. Williams, Delores. "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices" in *Black Theology: A Documentary History Volume Two: 1980-1992*. Edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993, 1998) 271.

liberated. The element of secrecy strengthens the bond between those seeking liberation, but also provide room for the oppressed to effectively maneuver through an oppressive condition.

There lies a need for the prophetic tradition to remain safeguarded as the twenty-first century has its own challenges which include widespread poverty in the midst of affluence, global and domestic terrorism, an ecological crisis, widespread institutional corruption, the profaning of the sacred, and real threats to nullify legislative progress which benefitted racial minorities and the poor. Without adequate safeguards of the prophetic tradition, the true God will become replaced by the many false gods.

### **Courageous Faith**

The plight of African Americans and other marginalized groups from the Underground Railroad to the civil rights movement and beyond has produced the universal lesson that progress requires an extraordinary amount of courage in the face of extreme opposition. As a virtue ethic between the extremes of rashness and cowardice, courage frequently accompanies antagonistic violence in the form of negative sanctions ranging from shaming, exclusion, deprivation, brutality, and death. Such forms of violence function as a means to deter progress and maintain an unjust status-quo. Whether within the context of social movements or micro-level ambitious endeavors for the sake of uplifting the individual, a community, or societal transformative actions, courageous faith does not guarantee success. The Underground Railroad, the civil rights movement, and present struggles for humane intergroup relations exemplifies modern era examples of biblical faith put into action through steadfast courageous action which suspends individual egoistic pursuits while abandoning some degree of security as an expression of love for others as self.

The Underground Railroad in its entirety required enormous courage as its participants risked physical torture, floggings, and mutilations if caught in its attempt. The fugitive migrants travelled great distances by foot further intensifies the risk involved in such an escape.

The public display of courage in the face of danger which also included children playing a prominent role in the civil rights movement helped provide the needed inspiration for other marginal groups to engage in collective action for social progress. On many occasions a child's body functioned as a living sacrifice for the greater cause. "It was the civil rights movement that provided the model and impetus for social movements that exploded on the American scene."<sup>3</sup> Such movements include the second wave of the women's movement and the migrant farm workers mobilization among other movements.

Songs, liturgy, and especially preaching about faith places a tremendous gulf between the ideal and reality if such practices gloss over courage as one of faith's key elements. "Preachers need to play a role within the life of their congregation and their community similar to the role that such people as Amos, Jeremiah, and Micah played within the life of the nations of Israel and Judah."<sup>4</sup>

### **Alliance Formation**

Alliance formation entails finding common interests beyond the confines of race, gender, and sectarian dissent. Interfaith alliance can allow room for disagreement about the

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<sup>3</sup> Morris. "A Retrospective on the Civil Rights Movement." 527

<sup>4</sup> Marvin A. McMickle. *Where Have All the Prophets Gone? Reclaiming Prophetic Preaching in America*. (Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, OH, 2006) 1.

theological understanding of the salvation and care of souls, but can find common ground on the issue of saving lives. Within the same religious tradition there lies factions and ideological contrasts which potentially poses challenges which in some cases do not exist in ecumenical and interfaith dialogues. Organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) are examples of how groups can diverge in purpose and approach yet support a common cause.

Organizations like the SCLC worked hard in churches to make political activism an expression of practical Christianity, but the fact that many ministries refused to become involved in supporting nonviolent protests for the cause of civil rights demonstrates that the translation of black Christianity through black churches into a nonviolent political movement was by no means automatic.<sup>5</sup>

The Underground Railroad became possible through the formation of a carefully selected multiracial and multi-gender alliance system. Advocates for liberation cannot assume that common external characteristics automatically equates to partnership. Women were collectively excluded from the ranks of formal leaders in the civil rights movement, but nevertheless can be regarded as the most significant contributors to the movement. While even the more liberal male leaders of the given setting at best believed that women were capable but were “more naturally suited as support to her husband and as a mother to her children.”<sup>6</sup> However, women as “bridge leaders” lacked the platform of the male formal leaders, but were able to mobilize the constituents with great efficiency.

The civil rights movement contained alliance challenges over the agenda and the role of women. According to Ronald L. Johnstone (1969), the struggle for alliance formation among African American clergy was based on their identity as either passive traditionalist, the gradualist moderate, or the aggressive militant. Although the three differed in their objectives and approaches toward liberation, all three have a relatively similar sense of dissatisfaction with the cumulative effects of oppressive conditions. Adherents to the prophetic tradition have historical been regarded as militants based on conventional standards who have been “inclined to display greater theological liberalism than their traditionalists or moderate counterparts.”<sup>7</sup> Contrary to revisionism accounts of Martin Luther King Jr, at one time he was considered at least on the edge of radicalism prior to the advent of the black power movement. The civil rights movement produced some degree of success by building a bridge between ideological purist who embraced pacifism without exceptions and those who were willing to use weapons as a means of self-defense. Because arm defense was used to protect nonviolent participants, “nonviolence and armed resistance are part of the same cloth; both are thoroughly woven into the fabric of black life and struggle.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Allison Calhoun-Brown. “Upon This Rock: The Black Church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement” *PS; Political Science and Politics*. volume 33, issue 2 (2000) 171-172.

<sup>6</sup> Belinda Robnett. “African-American Women in the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965: Gender, Leadership, and Micromobilization” *American Journal of Sociology*. volume 101, issue 6 (1996) 1672.

<sup>7</sup> Ronald L. Johnstone. “Negro Preachers Take Sides” *Review of Religious Research*. volume 11, issue 3 (1969) 83.

<sup>8</sup> Charles E. Cobb. *This Nonviolent Stuff'll Get You Killed: How Guns Made the Civil Rights Movement Possible*. (New York, NY: Basic, 2014) 240.

The account of Judas Iscariot represents how one among the ranks of allies can not only waver, but resort to betrayal through persuasion. Through rational choice human creatures have historically yielded to alliance switching through economic rewards or social incentives. Furthermore, social pressure has a way to provoke people to act contrary to their beliefs.

### **Remembering the Least**

The Underground Railroad consisted of a network based on more than escaping from bondage to freedom, but also included remembering those who were left behind. Through memory, the individual becomes enabled to empathize with those of lesser fortune and pave the way for others to flee slavery. Harriet Tubman's legacy rests in the idea that she refused to settle with her own freedom and returned on countless occasions to slave sanctioned territory to assist others towards a path freedom. "The great strength of King was his ability to adapt old ideals to changing situations."<sup>9</sup> In a similar manner preachers have been called to proclaim a biblical message from an ancient world to a present audience with the intent to transform some aspect of the given context. Remembering the least has been a continuous part of the prophetic tradition since the biblical prophets.

As early as Harriet Tubman, black people celebrated the work of those whom they interpreted as Moses figures. They vigilantly awaited the next as each one receded from the public scene. They claimed that God particularly endowed each for such a time in history.<sup>10</sup>

Policy changes ranging from desegregation laws to the implementation of Affirmative Action provides evidence to the success of the Civil Rights Movement. "It culminated in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which substantially ended the codification of racism in the United States."<sup>11</sup> Such rights remain can become easily lost through complacent tendencies which fail to sustain the inspiration which initiating the collective behavior which led to the passage of such laws. Prophetic preaching has the potential to shape the cultural character towards collective values at least on a local level. A significant portion of the preaching ministry in the Evangelical and Mainline congregations focus on personal piety and individual wellness which in problematic only because "they lack the broader interest to change the historical circumstances of poverty, oppression, marginalization, and fear that grips the live of millions throughout this country, and the lives of billions around the world."<sup>12</sup>

### **Secrecy**

Secrecy has the ability to function as a powerful nonviolent means for achieving liberation because it allows the subjects to have knowledge that the enemy or oppressor cannot access. Secret knowledge combined with collective critical thinking within the context of self-determination and solidarity has empowered social movements to carry out change despite

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<sup>9</sup> Steven F. Lawson. "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement" *The American Historical Review*. volume 96, issue 2 (1991) 462.

<sup>10</sup> Herbert Robinson Marbury. *Pillars of Cloud and Fire: The Politics of Exodus in African American Biblical Interpretation*. (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2015) 124.

<sup>11</sup> Calhoun-Brown. "Upon This Rock." 169.

<sup>12</sup> McMickle. *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?* 121.

resistance. The Underground Railroad and the safe houses along the way became possible due to the element of secrecy. One of the greatest lessons learned from the civil rights movement entails understanding the degree of difficulty in detecting outside infiltration within the secret network.

As an iconic figure of the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King Jr. acquired inspiration rooted in “the biblical Jesus and the black church.”<sup>13</sup> The biblical Jesus used the element of secrecy as part of his earthly mission and as a part of his self-disclosure through parables and instructions to others he had encountered. Furthermore, the black church in the U.S. emerged as a product for the need of secrecy. During the years of chattel slavery in the U.S., “the invisible institution” existed in response to the slave codes which forbade its subjects from unsupervised worship, therefore participants worshiped in secret to meet such spiritual needs.

## Conclusion

The twenty-first century preacher does have the Civil Rights Movement as a model to embrace or refute, and draw from the lessons learned. The biblical Jesus exemplified courageous faith, alliance formation, and the wisdom to determine that which should be kept secret while remembering a broken humanity in dire need. Second, the biblical Jesus was a political figure who devoted his earthly life in pursuit of social and economic justice for society’s most fringed message. Likewise, the heart of the civil rights movement entailed an economic agenda with respect to employment, wages, housing policies, and political participatory rights as a means to preserve and protect individual, communal, and institutional resources. In order for the biblical Jesus to fulfill his Divine purpose as a human he had to persevere through torture while sentenced to death row through a public crucifixion as a spectacle event.

Safeguarding the prophetic tradition requires the prophetic preacher to play a role in redirecting the ecclesial and political dialogue to matters of justice by providing an interpretive frame. For example, during the civil rights movement “the black church was able to mobilize people for nonviolent action because church membership provided individuals a frame for receiving the message and meaning of nonviolence.”<sup>14</sup> Prominent figures of the civil rights movement sought to broaden its coalition by framing the cause as moral rather than political, which was crucial in such a politically polarized context. The sit-ins with the goal of desegregation were framed as a struggle against a system rather than a group of people. “The fight was not against white people as such, but against injustice, oppression, and the absence of freedom and democracy.”<sup>15</sup>

Second, counter-frames have a way of altering public discourse. “According to Manning Marable, Hugh Murray and Gerald Horne, McCarthyism suppressed a nascent civil rights movement by destroying organizations like the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, the Southern Negro Youth Congress, the Progressive Party, and the Civil Rights Congress.”<sup>16</sup> As an emerging institution that has undergone democratic leveling, the mass media has become

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<sup>13</sup> Lawson. “Freedom Then, Freedom Now.” 460.

<sup>14</sup> Calhoun-Brown. “Upon This Rock.” 172.

<sup>15</sup> Rufus Burrow. *A Child Shall Lead Them: Martin Luther King Jr., Young People and the Movement*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014) 81.

<sup>16</sup> Adam Fairclough. “Historians and the Civil Rights Movement” *Journal of American Studies*. volume 24, issue 3 (1990) 389.

empowered to deconstruct messages and movements. Prophetic preaching requires mindfulness of the potential for public scrutiny and the use of recorded sound-bites to alter the meaning as a means of broad emotional manipulation. Progressive leaning movements require clear and concrete objectives.

Third, the preacher who fully immerses oneself in the prophet tradition can expect the inevitability of resentment and backlash. Conservative criticism entails the use of colorblind rhetoric that ignores the lingering effects past injustices, or make an appeal to personal responsibility while regarding institutional racism no longer exists due to the legal changes that made in the 1960s and early 1970s. Since the civil rights movement, racism has become increasingly broad and subtle through highway construction programs, regressive tax codes, and an emphasis on civil liberties at the expense of civil rights.<sup>17</sup>

Fourth, there lies the potential for competing progressive groups to construct a wedge between potential allies with similar social, political, and economic interests. The end result of such division hinders group progress.

Fifth and finally, in order for the preaching to be truly prophetic “equal attention must be given to the obvious, but overlooked, evils and injustices that occur within the preacher’s own racial and/or ethnic community.”<sup>18</sup> The prophetic preacher does not function as a politician on a campaign trail who aims to maximize their appeal to constituents for votes, supports, endorsements, and contributions. Biblical prophets frequently engaged in the difficult task of addressing internal problems of idolatry and other forms of unrighteousness that has become deeply embedded into the fabric of their given society. The message of nonviolence and forgiveness did not resonate among a significant portion of the masses. Nevertheless, prophetic preaching comes with the willingness to stand alone if necessary and become part of the remnant with the responsibility to “stand up and speak out.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall. “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past” *The Journal of American History*. volume 91, issue 4 (2005) 1242.

<sup>18</sup> McMickle. *Where Have All the Prophets Gone?* 18.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 124.

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