

Policing, Black Lives Matter, and the Problem of Religion: Who Do You Protect?

The heterogeneity of the U.S. means that cultures, values, and belief systems are so wide ranging that determining funding priorities is a legitimate struggle. This is especially true when it comes to manifesting abstract ideas like justice, freedom, and democracy in the center of a society. And in a world that is more connected than ever, the alarming speed of misinformation in the minds of the masses makes agreement around abstract ideas and concrete funding even harder to come by. But the stakes of these decisions are life and death, which is why the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) arose asking a simple question: who do you protect?

The M4BL began in 2013 when the rallying cry #BlackLivesMatter went viral after the acquittal of a man who killed 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. What first appeared as a mass outcry to a self-appointed neighborhood watchman stalking and murdering a child was revealed as a full-fledged movement one year later when Michael Brown Jr. was murdered by police in Ferguson, Missouri. The Ferguson Uprising was a moment when the masses learned the answer to the question of who police protect, as the officer's first call after shooting the unarmed 18-year-old was not to an ambulance for his resuscitation, but rather to his police union representative to craft his own defense narrative.

More uprisings followed in Baltimore, New York, Chicago, and beyond. Then in the summer of 2020, as the world ravaged by the COVID-19 pandemic was symbolically but not monetarily acknowledging essential workers, the video of George Floyd's murder by way of a nine-minute and twenty-nine second asphyxiation from Minneapolis, Minnesota police sparked yet another wave of mass protests across the U.S. and world.

The story of the M4BL is far from over, having revitalized movements for climate justice, anti-war, and labor – each protecting vulnerable people and ending compulsory

compliance with deadly systems, institutions, and governments. The future the M4BL imagines spans from abolition to anti-capitalism, re-funding social services and communities, governing with transparent and equitable approaches that prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable people. But understanding these potential futures requires further reflection on a factor that has at times been used to resurrect revolution and yet, at other times and even simultaneously, has been the catalyst behind a global police state. This is the problem of religion.

The Problem of Religion

For millennia, religion has been used to navigate heterogeneity through violence, including but not limited to genocidal settler-colonialism and chattel-slavery. Two of the most profitable and bloody business ventures in recorded history cemented the relationships between white supremacy, religion, and capitalism with blood.

This religious foundation in a white supremacist version of Christianity has manifest destiny for the Spanish, French, and English colonizing the world. Upon failing in multiple attempts to commodify various indigenous populations, the big shift in the Americas was when the English settlers were successful in creating a system of chattel-slavery that commodified indigenous Africans and had them imported from the continent across the Atlantic Ocean.

The wealth generated from these colonies was used to fund a revolution in the U.S. where, ironically, the first official death in the 1770 Boston Massacre was Crispus Attucks – a Black man thought to be formerly enslaved. But in addition to connections with settler-colonialism, chattel-slavery, and their offspring of mass incarceration, religion is also a weapon of the weak – a central focus of the downtrodden and oppressed to garner spiritual strength, abiding hope, and unnatural belief in their potential to overcome.

For example, the Civil Rights Movement is borne of and organized through indigenous Black religious institutions, primarily in the Black (Christian) church across the country and accompanied by the Nation of Islam in the North and Midwest. In times well before the Civil Rights era, enslaved people freed themselves and, in the Civil War era, coordinating these efforts alongside the U.S. Union Army. And the most well-known figure driving towards emancipation in those eras, Harriet Tubman, testified to her work as a function of her religious faith. Tubman told of her path being guided by God and of seeing visions that led her to and through the Underground Railroad. Then, in the 1863 Raid at Combahee Ferry, Tubman became the only Black woman to lead the U.S. military into battle – a victory echoed in the M4BL and their alignment with the Combahee River Collective, a group of Black lesbians who wrote a statement in 1977 that transformed social movements forever. More on that to come.

There are a string of rebellions in the 19th century deeply tied to religious faith. In 1859, it was John Brown who attempted a slave rebellion at Harpers Ferry, a prelude to the Civil War itself. Brown was inspired by Nat Turner, a preacher addressed as “The Prophet” by his enslaved kin who in 1831 Virginia led them in the largest known U.S. rebellion. Turner, Brown, and likely Tubman as well, were also inspired by another devout Christian named Toussaint Louverture, who changed the world in the 1804 Haitian Revolution. Arguably the most important uprising in history, Haiti became the first post-enslavement Black republic and did so by physically freeing themselves – as must we all.

As punishment for self-emancipation, Haiti is still paying their French colonizers today for their loss of “property” – both land and bodies – from two centuries ago and counting. Indeed, capitalism reveals much about who is protected. Global militarism and policing – from colonialism to neo-colonialism and enslavement to mass incarceration – are all upheld by the

funding priorities of liberal western nations adhering to these same white supremacist, capitalist, and domination oriented ideals of Christianity.

But again, this is only one side of religion. Another side takes aim precisely at these three evils – capitalism, militarism, and racism – as articulated by Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. throughout the heyday of the Civil Rights Movement. And it is precisely in this extraordinary range that we find the problem with religion. These are belief systems that claim authority over the very souls in our bodies and, in the case of Black lives, has also been used to say that only white people had souls to begin with.

There is much more to be said about religion – the metaphysical and ontological, the ongoing hold on mass belief systems, the miraculous capacity to connect with people in ways social movements and governments dream. Here I focus on the problem of religion for the M4BL as evidenced by its connection to capitalism and policing.

Religion and Black Social Movements of the 20th and 21st Centuries

Religion is still used for domination and liberation today. On liberation, religious beliefs continue reinforcing M4BL efforts to transform mass belief systems and create a society that protects vulnerable people. The separation of church and state is no longer a factor, as entire congregations walk out onto the front lines. On domination, conservative Christians (particularly white evangelicals) are reinforcing mass incarceration efforts, reifying a society that protects wealth and exploits vulnerable people.

This pattern of domination is particularly evident with respect to Islam, a religion used to justify military invasions and settler-colonial occupations of select Muslim majority countries like Iraq and Afghanistan. War remains synonymous with capitalism, as these occupations netted

significant financial gains for military officers consulting fees and, in the 2022 troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, the U.S. retained control of banking assets worth over \$7 billion. These examples of domination speak clearly to connections between religion, capitalism, and policing as they appear today. But again, back to the problem of religion, the significance of Islam exists far beyond the far-reaching violence of Islamophobia.

Only a few million Muslims live in the U.S., and before the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 (also known as the Hart-Celler Act) the religious followings in the U.S. were almost entirely Christian with only few million more Jewish people. Even then, not most but many Jews came to the U.S. amidst the refugee crisis created by Nazi Germany, Hitler, and the holocaust in the World War II era. Thus, the U.S. was almost entirely Christian before 1965 and for some time after. This includes Black people, who were almost entirely born in the U.S. and living in the south – which is technically still true, although the religious, ethnic, and geographic diversity among Black communities since the Great Migration and Hart Cellar is staggering by comparison.

The early and mid-twentieth century saw Black communities enduring the Jim and Jane Crow south while others embraced the Great Migration, pulling them to the North, Midwest, and West to find new lives from the 1910s until the 1970s. Hitler rose to power in Nazi Germany amidst this migration, and debates arose – often in Christian churches as one of few places Black people were allowed to congregate in the deep south – about the hypocrisy of fighting Nazism abroad while facing fascist conditions at home. In the end, some chose to support the war effort abroad while others nurtured the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement at home.

Black men returned from war carrying scars from the same battles fought in the Civil and Revolutionary Wars before them. Physical war wounds were compounded by the harsh spiritual

and political lessons that their Black lives did not matter. They were denied full humanity during the war and further denied full citizenship after.

For some, their decision to support the war was in large part to convince Black revolutionaries that white America needed just one more good reason to change. But when they returned as victors, they were quickly made aware of their miscalculations and realized that their new duty was as soldiers for the revolutionary Civil Rights Movement.

By the 1960s, the movement was peaking. A figurehead had been identified in Dr. King, who had successfully organized a yearlong bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955. King had the support of prominent organizations including the NAACP and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, of which he was the first president. He also had the backing of prominent organizers like A. Phillip Randolph, the labor union organizer behind the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; Bayard Rustin, an openly gay organizing genius who coordinated everything from Freedom Rides in the 1940s to the March on Washington in 1963; Rosa Parks, who investigated mob violence and sexual assaults targeting Black women long before staying seated on the bus; and Ella Baker, whose organizing view that “strong people don’t need strong leaders” would echo in revolutionary movements from Civil Rights, to Black Power, Gay Rights, Women’s Rights, and the M4BL.

King’s central thesis is that capitalism, racism, and militarism are plaguing the world and that the only way to overcome these three evils is through commitments to love, justice, and the fierce urgency of now. King’s liberatory thesis continued during his few overlapping years with the Black Power Movement, but again, the problem of religion is that it is also used for domination – and beyond King, Christian leadership often rejected revolutionary movement and,

in the years to come, aligned with anti-Black personal responsibility narratives upon which mass incarceration is built.

The consequences of this slingshot in support of and then far away from revolutionary movement are still felt today, namely in the losses of hard-earned movement gains. These losses continue aligning with the three evils King warned about. Racism is evident in the return of segregation, which comes after the voting, education, and housing gains of the Civil Rights Act have been rescinded. Militarism is evident in the global U.S. empire which now includes mass incarceration. And capitalism is evident in the expansion of the prison industrial complex, the mass defunding of social services, and currency financialization that has used debt and speculation to create unprecedented wealth out of literally nothing.

These are the consequences of failing to protect vulnerable people. And where King was a central figure in the gaining of these rights, it was the leadership of California Governor and President Ronald Reagan that lead the charge in changing the direction of the U.S. government and the fate of its people.

Reagan's Retribution

In eight years as governor, Reagan used police and prisons to disempower revolutionary movement. In the 1970s, that meant targeting the Black Panther Political Party (BPPP) – a spiritually aligned group aimed at addressing the local concerns of their communities with the pro-Black politics of the original Black Panther Party. Reagan's tactics included the use of capital punishment, an already politically charged tactic in its racially biased practices, as a political weapon. Most famously, Reagan targeted Angela Davis for death. And despite Davis' triumphant exoneration ringing freedom across the world from her international "Free Angela"

campaign, Reagan still successfully incarcerated many political prisoners from the Black Panther era who remain incarcerated today. Police also killed many of the BPP's members. And it is upon this model of domination that Reagan transitioned from California Governor to the White House in 1980.

Continuing these policing programs and expanding nationally required a shift in the political and economic landscape. This was the crucial moment when neoliberal politics – a socioeconomic political approach moving away from explicit bias towards systemic gatekeeping – went national and global. Among the economic shifts touted not as a way to maintain white wealth, but instead to make “America” great again, was defunding social welfare programs and lowering corporate tax rates from upwards of 70% to global corporations today paying \$0.

Reagan's administration and the Republican Party worked to make their compatriots rich. And alongside these newfound sources of wealth was another successful effort, changing expectations that U.S. government is responsible for protecting vulnerable people. This shift was made possible by the U.S. government collaborating with police and clergy, combined their moral authorities to promote ideas personal responsibility against revolutionary movement promoting communalism. The idea was that so long as the government was not explicitly biased, then people can be held responsible for the conditions of intentionally inequitable and underfunded systems.

Conclusion

Who do they protect? First, old wealth and the newly rich. Then, others who would prove their commitment to U.S. values – Christianity, capitalism, and cops – by standing against revolutionary change. Vulnerable Black communities – those most benefitted by revolutionary

movement and what James Cone called Black liberation theology – were the easiest targets to sacrifice at the altar of Reagan’s rallying cry to make America great again.

Women’s rights efforts to protect against male violence were bombarded by Reagan’s “welfare queen” narratives. Using what Kimberlé Crenshaw calls representational intersectionality, Reagan was portraying black women as criminal and sexual deviants. Eventually, the 1994 Violence Against Women Act – the most comprehensive legislation to protect women in the history of the U.S. – would indelibly tie protecting women’s rights to mass incarceration, a move that has complicated consequences for Black communities. And Gay rights efforts to protect against the epidemic of HIV/AIDS were bombarded by Reagan’s moral authorities promoting America’s white supremacist version of Christianity. Using what Cathy Cohen calls secondary marginalization, Reagan was portraying Black gay men as criminal and sexual deviants (i.e. personal responsibility) with support from Black churches and masses.

By the early 1990s, Reagan’s neoliberal approach was a bipartisan effort to silence revolutionary social movements and keep the masses disconnected – precisely what Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels warned about in their 1848 “Communist Manifesto”. Organizers in gay and women’s rights continued fighting for the lives they deserved while their longstanding accomplices in the Black church were siding with the Reagan’s hate-the-sin, love-the-sinner narratives and the Clinton’s faux Black-on-Black crime push before the 1994 crime bill.

At the very least, the benefits of restructured tax codes benefitted Christian churches and quieted much government pushback as the U.S. centered ideologically around conservatism. Alongside the rights of survivors of sexual violence in the U.S., vulnerable people have been left unprotected by a conservative capitalist church with outsized influence over the masses. These riches have not trickled down, but the messaging did: revolution is irresponsible, liberation is

unnecessary, social movement is ungodly, and Black lives do not matter. This message persisted until Barack Obama's second term, when organizers committed to justice finally caught the attention of the masses and funneled this into an emerging movement – the M4BL.

Upon the election of the first Black president, Black communities were awoken to their need of revolutionary social movements in the limitations and failures of descriptive representation, personal responsibility, moral authority, and more. Ongoing movement organizers stayed the course knowing that dominated people have always liberated their selves.

A simple message circulating through the networks of Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi, and Alicia Garza became powerful enough to break through police barricades and commitments to God and country. The message emerged from long abandoned radical queer politics like the Combahee River Collective, who taught them that when the least of us is free, then all of us are free. The message emerged from an era when government was a collective tool for protecting vulnerable people. And the message emerged from abolitionists and rebels who refused to diminish people with a price tag. The message is that #BlackLivesMatter.

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