A Comprehensive Typological Analysis of Black Religious Activism in the Civil Rights Movement

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One cannot fully understand the Civil Rights Movement without first understanding the black church around which the movement formed and through which it gained life. Far too often the tendency is to look at the black church of the Civil Rights Movement as a unified body with one mind and one agenda. The simplification of specific black church organizations to "the black church" in popular culture is both easy and idealistic, but it ignores the huge rifts that existed between church organizations with respect to what the goals of the movement should be, and how these goals should be accomplished. In general four distinct modes of response can be seen rising out of the Civil Rights Movement, branching from what is regarded as the traditional response to racism and oppression of the pre-Civil Rights Movement black church. These modes of response, in general terms, conform around two seemingly antithetical understandings of black suffering and what is needed to elevate blacks in America to the status of whites. The conflict between these responses can be summarized as the conflict between particularity and universality. While the interplay between these two ideological entities in the arena of the Civil Rights Movement is complex and multifaceted (indeed far too complex and multifaceted for this brief analysis to fully do justice to the theological intricacies and implications that lay behind each position) certain trends can be identified, and these trends analyzed to better understand the various positions in which the "black church" found itself in the Civil Rights Movement.

This study hopes to demonstrate that there are four major modes of response that can be seen in the Civil Rights Movement with each finding its root in the traditional, pre-Civil Rights era religious makeup of black America. The end result should yield a complex and comprehensive understanding of the black church's four primary modes of response during the Civil Rights Movement, the dynamics of these responses and the possible implications of their tactics and strategies. This analysis is important to the Mid-South and to Memphis especially due to the numerous notable Civil Rights events which took place here, and the individuals instrumental in bringing those events together. Any discussion of the Civil Rights Movement without recurrent mention of Memphis and the Mid-South would be incomplete, just as any discussion of Memphis and the Mid-South would be incomplete without recurrent mention of the Civil Rights Movement and the black religious organizations which helped to shape it. The movement's history is tied to the region, just as the region is tied to the movement. They shaped each other mutually.

A difficult part of arranging this project is organizing the subjects of study in such a way that it is possible to make even the most general of statements. This is difficult for the very reason that the Civil Rights Movement was not a single movement by a single group. It was a collection of movements, both religious and secular, that happened to coalesce at a boiling point of mounting black frustration with a variety of individuals and institutions. There is little to unite the movements of the Civil Rights Movement except for the time at which it all took place and the ultimate purpose of achieving civil rights for blacks, and at times even this is questionable. Tactics ranged from gradualism to militarism. Participants ranged from nonreligious organizations to religious extremist organizations. Some organizations were conservative and others were liberal, and to

make any statement about them collectively is near impossible. For this reason it is necessary to frame this study carefully, so that it is possible, in the end, to make certain statements and certain generalizations. This study will attempt to integrate Hans Baer and Merrill Singer's typology of the black church as it exists outside of the Civil Rights Movement with the Christian concept of ecumenism to arrive at an original, comprehensive, four part typology that can be useful in locating black religious organizations during the Civil Rights Movement. Ultimately, my analysis will attempt to frame a typology around the tension between particularity and universality and between positive attitudinal orientation and negative attitudinal orientation found in various religious groups in the Civil Rights Movement. Though the concept of ecumenism in this study is based on is a Christian concept referring to the dialogical process of achieving a more universal Christian church, its use here will not be limited to the context of Christianity. Instead I will apply the term equally to Muslim religious organizations. The reason for doing this is because the distinction ecumenism finds between particularity and universality is an essential one, as will be demonstrated in my later analysis, yet not all religious organizations active during the Civil Rights Movement manifest the Christian elements of the concept. Simply for the sake of broadness and the importance of putting Christian religious groups into perspective with non-Christian religious groups during the time period, I have chosen to broaden the concept.

Before moving on to a more in-depth analysis of ecumenism and the realms of the particular and the universal, it is necessary to put the black church in perspective, as it exists outside of the Civil Rights Movement. Hans Baer and Merrill Singer provide an excellent typological framework for understanding the black church as it exists

independent of both the white church and the Civil Rights Movement. Baer and Singer emphasize this quality of their typology when they state, “Our typology concerns only those religious movements and organizations composed primarily of Black members, in keeping with our view that African American religion is largely a response to the racism and class stratification inherent in American society.”[1] This makes it a good starting point for organizing black religious responses to the Civil Rights Movement.

Baer and Singer’s typology relies on two axes: “attitudinal orientation” and “strategies of social action.”[2] A church’s attitudinal orientation is based on whether the church accepts or rejects the traditional values of greater society. Strategies of social action refers to the church’s pattern of response to social forces, be it an instrumental response (i.e. active) or an expressive response (i.e. passive). Based on these two axes the black church can be broken down into four overarching traditions: thaumaturgical sects, mainline denominations, conversionist sects, and messianic-nationalist sects.[3]

~Strategy of Social Action~

~Attitudinal Orientation~	Expressive	Instrumental
Positive	Thaumaturgical Sects	Minstream Denominations
Negative	Conversionist Sects	Messianic-Nat. Sects

[1] Hans Baer and Merrill Singer, *African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992) 58-9.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.

Figure 1. Baer and Singer's typology of the black church.

The denominational traditions this study will focus on are the mainline denominations and the messianic-nationalist denominations. The reason for focusing on these two and excluding the others is that, though thaumaturgical sects and conversionist sects were certainly impacted by the Civil Rights Movement, their categorization under "expressive" (i.e. passive) strategy of social action suggests that their role in actively engaging in any kind of Civil Rights activity was more limited. Because I wish to focus more on organizations instrumental in the Civil Rights Movement I will assume an instrumental strategy of social action and eliminate that axis so that all that is left of the typology is a two cell matrix divided between positive attitudinal orientation and negative attitudinal orientation. This is one half of the theoretical framework behind the typology I will produce.

The concept of ecumenism will provide the other half of my theoretical framework. Ecumenism, according to Theo Witvliet, is the arena in which particularity and universality manifest their tension.[4] The terms particular and universal refer to how these organizations see and organize the world, and where they place themselves in that worldview. The essential part of an outlook of particularity is the particularizing of a group's situation so that it does not seem to reflect the situations of others. Part of an outlook of universality, on the other hand, is seeing a group's situation, be it a situation of domination or oppression, as applicable to other people in a similar situation. A main question for determining a group's ecumenical character is "Where do these people find solidarity?" If they find solidarity only within their group, then they most likely have an

[4] Theo Witvliet, *The Way of the Black Messiah* (Oak Park: Meyer Stone Books, 1987), 82.

outlook of particularity, but if they are able to find solidarity outside of their own group and with people who are in a similar situation, then they demonstrate an outlook of universality. Of course whether a group has a particularistic or universal ecumenical character will affect how the group engages in social action, and understanding how this works with the various denominations the typology finds will be the primary objective of the following analyses.

~Ecumenical Character~

~Attitudinal Orientation~	Particular	Universal
Positive	Conservative Mainline	Progressive Mainline
Negative	Messianic-Nationalist Sects	Black Liberation Theology

Figure 2. Typology of black religious organizations during the Civil Rights Movement.

The types that my typology identifies are the conservative mainline which has a positive attitudinal orientation and a particularistic ecumenical character, the progressive mainline church which has a universal ecumenical character and a positive attitudinal orientation, black liberation theology which has a universal ecumenical character and a negative attitudinal orientation, and messianic-nationalist sects which have a particularistic ecumenical character and a negative attitudinal orientation. For each of these I will provide a general analysis of the groups' various worldviews, organizational structures, and rhetoric among a few other things, and use these to attempt to understand

how these groups fit into their respective types. It should be clarified at this point that my analysis will be almost exclusively on understanding the dynamic between the universal and the particularistic. While attitudinal orientation remains an essential difference, discussion of the dynamic relationship between a positive and negative attitudinal orientation in the groups will be limited. Instead I will rely on Baer and Singer's original distinction which needs little further explanation:

> A particular religious body may incorporate a positive orientation; that is, it may accept the overall values and behavioral patterns of the larger society. Or it may adopt a negative orientation in that it rejects or is repulsed by them, at least conditionally.[5]

In the case of the Civil Rights Movement, attitudinal orientation largely refers to whether groups attempted to work within the system to achieve reform, or believed that the system was the source of the problem and must be fundamentally reordered to alleviate inequality.

Conservative Mainline Church

In commencing the discussion of the four types that this typology identifies, analyzing first the two groups under the heading "particular" and then moving on to those under "universal," I will begin by looking at what I characterize as the "conservative mainline church." The conservative mainline church as identified in this study within the context of the Civil Rights Movement is little more or less than the mainline church identified in Baer's typology of black churches outside of the movement. This type is by far the largest in population of the four types and is made up of seven denominations:

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[5] Baer and Singer, 57.

(1) the National Baptist Convention, USA; (2) the National Baptist Convention of America; (3) the Progressive National Baptist Convention; (4) the African Methodist Episcopal Church; (5) the African Methodist Episcopal Zion church; (6) the Christian Methodist Episcopal church; and (7) the Second Cumberland Presbyterian Church.[6] The purpose of this portion of the paper is to give a detailed and historical examination of the function of the black mainline church and to analyze its internal structure for a deeper understanding of its position and role in the Civil Rights Movement.

While the conservative mainline church falls under the category of "particular" with respect to its ecumenical character, an analysis of the historic roots of ecumenism and particularity in the black church will be extremely helpful in understanding its specific inclinations and aversions towards the subject. Traditionally, black mainline Christianity has been inherently divided between the realms of the universal and the particular and the relationship between the two in black theological and worship tendencies is complex and paradoxical. Throughout its history the black mainline church has manifested a sort of duality as it has demonstrated qualities of both the universal and the particular simultaneously. On one hand, black Christian churches have always tended to establish their biblical focus around Old Testament stories of liberation. This is, without question, predominantly a response to the physical and mental oppression of slavery and subsequent economic and social marginalization following the Civil War. On the one hand, Theo Witvliet, theologian and historian of religions, states, "Precisely the deep involvement in its own history impels black theology beyond itself to a commitment which is directed to the whole of human history…"[7] Black theology, and not just the

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[6] Baer and Singer, 65.
[7] Witvliet, 81.

black theology of James Cone which will be outlined in detail later, but the general theological disposition of black people in light of their experiences in America, pushes its adherents to worldly consciousness. If by nothing else, this is evidenced by the persistence of black alignment with historically and biblically oppressed people such as the Israelites, especially in the story of Exodus. Witvliet, having found possibly the most gleaming example of this worldly commitment, includes in his analysis of the black church an excerpt from the song “Didn’t My Lord Deliver Daniel” to prove this fact:

> Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel,
> D’liver Daniel, d’liver Daniel,
> Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel,
> And why not-a every man?
> He delivered Daniel from the lion’s den,
> Jonah from the belly of the whale,
> And the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace,
> And why not every man?[8]

Traditionally, for the black mainline church, God’s function is almost exclusively that of liberator. And why not for every man? God was a liberator for Daniel, for Jonah, for the Israelites, and why not for everyone? If blacks wish to include themselves in this history of divine liberation, then they cannot but feel some degree of contextual connection between themselves and all people living within a context of oppression. From this perspective ecumenism is an inherent trait of black theology as it aims to achieve, in some capacity, a better way of life for its adherents, and at the same time expresses, usually indirectly, solidarity with oppressed people throughout the world.

While rhetoric of biblical liberation is prevalent in the black mainline church and seems to suggest that universal ecumenical elements are present, in reality the

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[8] Witvliet, 77.

particularity of the black experience is highly valued as part of the black religious cultural identity. As I mentioned earlier, the emphasis on liberation stories of the Old Testament in the black church is largely a way of coping psychologically with the dehumanization, humiliation, and misery suffered under slavery. Referring to the black mainline church's method of biblical alignment, Gayraud Wilmore, a well-known contributor to the development of black liberation theology writes:

> General Theological propositions that cannot be rooted and grounded in the particular experiences of a particular people may have the value of broadness and universality… but they have no power to save a people for whom a sense of special identity, vocation, and destiny is the minimal threshold for survival.[9]

More than being simply a theological disposition, emphasis on liberation stories stemmed from a need for an identity, a place in the Christian world, and hope for the future. It is for this reason, Witvliet writes, that black theology is suspect of "Any tendency to dissolve the particularity of the black experience…"[10]

This makes the dynamic between universality and particularity in the mainline church complex and difficult to completely understand. On the one hand there is an ecumenism inherent in the theology on which blacks choose to focus which links them with oppressed groups in different times and places. At the same time however, the characters and stories themselves help to establish a unique and particular religious identity for a people without. Ultimately the distinction that separates these two is that the universal character inherent in stories of liberation is, more than anything, idealistic. The stories are in the Bible and of course taken to be true, but the people of the stories themselves are not present to actually share feelings of solidarity. On the other hand, the

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[9] Witvliet, 81.
[10] Ibid.

particular is not idealistic, but actual and concrete. The experiences of black people were very much reality and an important way of dealing with this reality was the polarization and particularization of the black religious identity. My understanding of this is that before one can branch out and find solidarity outside of one's particular situation one must first establish an identity within it. A possible reason that the black church only really began to engage and find solidarity with those outside of its specific context of oppression with the progressive mainline and black liberation theology in the Civil Rights Movement is that while the black identity was established, it was primarily rejected ,and often violently, by greater white society and thus it found security by constantly turning inward. Because of the constant rejection from mainline culture that black people experienced, black solidarity was highly valued as were the particularities which isolate this solidarity. To deemphasize the particularity of the black experience would be to rob it of the "sense of special identity, vocation, and destiny" which is for it an important part of dealing with the racial, social, political, and economic oppression suffered in America.

Thus the conservative mainline church of the Civil Rights Movement does not stray far from its inherently particularistic disposition and this has certain implications for its social action. While the idealistic tendency is to view the black mainline church as the foundation of the Civil Rights Movement, in many ways it was quite instrumental in limiting social activism. To understand how this works, it is necessary to explore the dynamics of social action in the black church. The first thing one must realize about black mainline churches in the context of social action is that, as Baer and Singer state, "By and large, civil and political activities are considered personal matters that a minister can

choose to engage in."[11] In black mainline churches then there have traditionally tended not to be organizations within the church whose role is to engage in social action, rather, most action undertaken by the church is initiated by the pastor. The pastor, however, is of course limited by his concerns as well as the congregation's for the church's safety and wellbeing. Baer and Singer quote DuBois as saying that the black preacher is "A shrewd manager, a respectable man, a good talker, a pleasant companion who ultimately must abide by the moral standards established by his congregation."[12] Thus the pastor, while hypothetically the leader of his flock, is, in the end, largely limited in the extent his social action can challenge white society by his congregation. He cannot lead them where they will not go, and they will not go anywhere without him leading them. As a result the general disposition of conservative mainline churches towards initiating social action is negative, and where social action is visible it is carried out usually on a very local scale, as with aiding individuals in need. Again, one probable reason for this disposition is the congregants' fears of retaliation from whites. In a time when most black churches and their congregants quietly and meekly accepted the social realities of America, often dealing with them by projecting them inward towards church politics, to engage in social action would be to single oneself out and to jeopardize one's entire church community.

Instead of focusing social and political activism outwards into the community, most pastors and their congregations tend to focus on local church politics. As a result, discontent with social realities is not usually directed outwardly towards social improvement, but is instead manifested within an organization or denomination. Because of this tendency, fission is much more a reality in mainline denominations than is

[11] Baer and Singer, 94-5.
[12] Ibid., 94.

fusion.[13] Divisions within black mainline denominations serve not only to limit the potential for social action by projecting external problems inwards on church affairs, but also have the potential to create outward hostility which, ultimately, serves the same limiting purpose. This sentiment is echoed in a letter from Reverend Herbert Eaton to Reverend V.L. Booth in the midst of the 1961 schism of the Progressive National Baptist Convention from the National Baptist Convention, USA, when Eaton states:

> How can we as a Negro Baptist Group ever hope to participate in the world ecumenical movement if we cannot unite among ourselves? We certainly cannot hope to effect the type of unity desired by splitting off and forming another convention, but we must stay within the organization and effect the desired changes from within instead of without.[14]

The fission that occurs within denominations as a result of internal disagreements, as Reverend Eaton rightly notes, serves the opposite function of the ecumenical universal. Rather than bringing people together under one message of salvation, it divides and alienates potential allies for cooperative and constructive social action. Because of the personal hostilities and resentments that can result from internal disputes, divisions also serve to limit potential productive dialogue between church leaders with disparate views and potentially disparate strategies for approaching the problems of institutional racism and unequal civil rights. Instead, church groups particularize their denomination's contextual determination as being in opposition to and incompatible with those from whom they split and denominational identities are established and maintained in opposition to each other. The obvious problem with this is that, in reality, the social situations faced by blacks are generally identical regardless of denominational affiliation

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[13] Baer and Singer, 97.
[14] William Booth, *The Progressive Story: New Baptist Roots* (St. Paul: Braun Press, 1981), 66.

and in relation to the social problems faced by blacks and the alleviation of these problems, denominational fissions are largely arbitrary and counter-productive.

While black conservative mainline denominations are inherently restricted in their ability to initiate action within individual churches, their support of larger, pre-established movements can be quite essential to those movements' levels of success. It is really only in this way that conservative mainline denominations demonstrate a universal ecumenical character and are agents of social change, and it is this that qualifies them to be Baer and Singer's category of "instrumental." While movements for social action rarely rose out of the church, the practical reasons for this do not completely diminish the church's ability to mobilize resources, both material and human, for movements begun elsewhere. Aldon Morris writes:

> In the case of the civil rights struggle, the preexisting black church provided the early movement with the social resources that made it a dynamic force… But a new political dimension was needed to mobilize resources on a wide scale and commit them to social change.[15]

With respect to movements begun outside of the church, church members can decide for themselves to what extent they wish to be instruments for social action rather than having the feeling of being restricted from or dragged into engaging in social action by their pastor. It is, at this point, appropriate to note also that while the Church of God in Christ was generally excluded from this study for the reason that it is Pentecostal and falls under Baer and Singer's category of "expressive" with respect to social action, it began, in the Civil Rights Movement, to move towards the type of the conservative mainline church. Though, like the conservative mainline church, they were rarely instrumental in initiating

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[15] Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Social Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 77-8.

action, they could be very active in the support of pre-established movements. Baer and Singer quote Shopshire, speaking on the Church of God in Christ in 1975, as saying, "Although there is no strong social or political platform from which this Pentecostal [conversionist] organization currently acts, a great deal of deference is afforded its presence and potential in the city of Memphis and other larger urban areas."[16] Concrete evidence of this can be seen as the Church of God in Christ provided the progressive mainline church of Martin Luther King and the SCLC a meeting place for the sanitation workers' strike in Memphis. Therefore it would be improper to exclude them entirely from this study.

Messianic-Nationalist Sects

The next type to be examined is that of "messianic-nationalist sects." Like the conservative mainline, messianic-nationalist sects that this typology identifies do not stray far from those identified in Baer and Singer's original typology. The two on which this study will focus most closely are the Nation of Islam and Albert Cleage's Shrine of the Black Madonna, both drawing heavily from earlier messianic and nationalistic influences such as Marcus Garvey's Pan-African movement and Nobel Drew Ali's Moorish Science Temple. These messianic-nationalist sects fall under the categories of particular, with respect to ecumenical character, and negative, with respect to attitudinal orientation. This section of the study will analyze the various ways in which these groups understand and organize the world, the resultant rhetorical tendencies, and how these relate to the organizations' particularistic tendencies and negative attitudes towards American society.

[16] Baer and Singer, 175.

In opening their discussion of messianic-nationalist sects as they exist outside of the Civil Rights Movement, Baer and Singer state:

> …A distinctive characteristic of messianic-nationalist sects is their committed separatist and overtly militant stance… Central to the vitalizing core of these groups is a fundamental critique of the place and treatment of people of African heritage in American society.[17]

Located in this broad assessment are the two primary particularistic features found in messianic-nationalist sects which culminate in their "committed separatist and overtly militant stance:" vitalization in critique (always presented as harsh and polarizing rhetoric) and the uniqueness of the African experience in the United States. The most appropriate place to begin this discussion, it seems, is with this "vitalizing core" to which Baer and Singer refer.

What is perhaps important to realize about messianic-nationalist sects when analyzing their ecumenical characteristics is that their relationship to the outside world and those in it is enormously polarized. Mattias Gardell, historian of the Nation of Islam, writes, "Black nationalism was based on an organic view of races, derived from contemporary Western theories about races as different 'personalities.'"[18] Originally this view of the races stemmed rather indirectly from the actual process of colonial acquisition in which a white European state would invade and conquer a less technologically developed nation and then establish within it an fixed administrative system of racial oppression. Colonialist literature which romanticized the European colonial crusade as an act of ultimate humanity and sacrifice served to establish within

[17] Baer and Singer, 111.
[18] Mattias Gardell, *In The Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 11.

the minds of Europeans an extreme Manichean binary of racial opposition in which the white was idealized as benevolent, humane, intelligent, and civilized, and the other was idealized as savage, dangerous, untrustworthy, and ignorant. Within the colonial context this “mythic portrait,” as Albert Memmi calls it, serves indirectly to remove any feelings of guilt that might be felt by European colonialists instrumental in an illegitimate and oppressive system of exploitation. If Europeans recognized those they colonized as human beings the guilt might be too much, but by dehumanizing them the guilt becomes bearable.

Black messianic-nationalist traditions essentially took this legacy of colonial domination and turned it on its head. To do so, the sects reordered the ideological connotations so that while in some ways the same general essences applied to describe the races, white came to be seen as inherently evil and black came to be seen as inherently beautiful. Despite reordering the system, however, the fixed *a priori* nature of the system was retained and the system remained entirely oppositional. The two racial entities were seen as ideological opposites, precluding any constructive cooperation between them. This not only establishes the sects’ immutable particularity in relation to whites, but to all people of differing races. While the binary between white and black is most pronounced in speech and action, messianic-nationalist sects’ adherence to this general understanding of races as having different personalities implies that every race has a set of characteristics that can be organized in a formulation of binary opposition, ultimately resulting in the underlying belief that inter-racial cooperation and compatibility is naturally limited.

This binary structure is the most prominent mode of critique found in messianic-nationalist sects. The important part of this however, is Baer and Singer's assessment that this feature is a "vitalizing core." It is not merely a peripheral feature that was arrived at by coincidence or convenience. It is a central and essential feature of these groups that their polarity and particularity are instrumental in drawing and retaining active members. Mattias Gardell shows the centrality of this binary in the Nation of Islam when he says that "As a symbol for white Christian order, a lynched Blackman dangling from a tree would be standard decoration in the NOI temples Elijah [Muhammad] would head as an adult."[19] Hate, anger, and frustration with American society, generally and conveniently classified as "white people," certainly plays a large part in this, but while these emotions can be great tools for recruiting and retaining membership, they can hardly, if ever, be used to arrive at constructive dialogue and a more universally accommodative society. So long as the *a priori* understanding of the races as socially incompatible remains a vitalizing core of messianic-nationalist sects, it will be hard to ever call them truly ecumenical.

The second particularistic feature found in Baer and Singer's opening assessment of messianic-nationalist sects is the emphasis on "…people of African heritage in American society." While a shared pan-African identity is assumed to exist and is emphasized heavily in messianic-nationalist sects, this is not based on contextual determination, *a posteriori*, but on an understood human nature that exists *a priori*. Thus the shared pan-African identity as it is understood *a priori* does not necessarily translate into a shared identity of oppression *a posteriori*. While the existence of a pan-African personality exists and is cherished, within it there is a separate experience and identity

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[19] Gardell, 48.

unique to people of African descent within America. They have a sense of special identity and group solidarity apart from though also in addition to that of the natural black personality. The particularization of the American situation (fundamentally akin to systems of colonial oppression throughout the globe through its establishment of the inverse relation of colonizer to colonized) not just within the African context, but within the context of global colonization is a strong indicator of particularistic disposition. And perhaps in some cases it was not a willful particularization within the context of greater colonization, but an inadvertent particularization based on a general neglect or lack of recognition of the universality of colonialism that these sects manifested. In any case the end result is particularization. This sort of thing can be seen demonstrated especially in Albert Cleage's sect "The Shrine of the Black Madonna." In a sermon on the need for revolution against oppression Cleage reveals his particularistic tendencies when he prays,

> Heavenly Father, we seek thy blessing upon black men, women and children in their struggle for freedom everywhere. Not only in our own community, but in Harlem, in Newark, in Birmingham, in Chicago, everywhere throughout this nation… That they have a sense of the tremendous magnitude of that for which they struggle, that they seek to build on earth thy kingdom, that they seek thy guidance.[20]

While Cleage's rhetoric initially seems to indicate his universal support of "black men, women and children in their struggle for freedom everywhere," his inclusion of his idea of "everywhere" betrays his understanding of both the "struggle for freedom" and "thy kingdom." For Cleage and his followers, lack of freedom is not a product of the colonial reality of capitalism or the oppressive European system of racial understanding described above, but is a uniquely American product of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. As a result

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[20] Albert Cleage, *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), 129.

solidarity is found, again, located in the belief in a pan-African identity, but this is often emphasized to a lesser extent than black solidarity within America. It should be noted at this point that this feature is not a criterion for inclusion in the messianic-nationalist type of my typology, but that it is more of a tendency of those groups which do meet other criterion. Certain leaders in messianic-nationalist sects, as the Civil Rights Movement progressed especially, began to take on a slightly more ecumenical posture towards a pan-African colonial solidarity and even a universal colonial solidarity. Signs of this became more pronounced as the Civil Rights Movement developed and more ecumenical movements began to emphasize solidarity among all people living in situations of oppression.

Despite some very limited underlying universalistic tendencies such as the belief in a shared African personality, ultimately messianic-nationalist sects are always forces of particularization. Behind any apparently universal rhetoric is the fact that messianic-nationalist sects rely ultimately on a system of opposition as their vitalizing core. While this opposition can create solidarity within disparate poles, due to its nature it cannot create solidarity between them. The messianic-nationists' existence then is reliant on a polar opposite. Without a portion of society actively oppressing its people, the militant critique of white American society as evil loses its relevance, ceases to recruit new blood, and eventually falls to the wayside. Even in cases where the purported objective is self-strengthening before integrating, the focus on a unique and immutable African identity that is largely in opposition not only to the white, European identity, but also other racial identities, almost absolutely restricts its membership from universal dispositions. Both

poles are understood to be fixed and in opposition, and thus a universal synthesis is impossible.

Progressive Mainline Church

The next type that this typology identifies is the “progressive mainline church.” This type emerged during the Civil Rights Movement as a response to the lack of unity of purpose and direction in the conservative mainline church and is comprised not of individual churches, but of religious organizations. The primary individuals and organizations of the progressive mainline church are Martin Luther King, Jr., T.J. Jemison, Fred Shuttlesworth, Ralph Abernathy, their organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and its numerous affiliate organizations such as local church organizations, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), the Inter Civil Council (ICC) and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR). Aldon Morris’s assessment of the makeup of the initial leadership of SCLC, indicative of the leadership of the progressive mainline church movement as a whole, is, “They were all educated, having completed their undergraduate training in black institutions. They were all males. Except for Reverends Williams and Davis, they were all young averaging approximately thirty years of age.”[21] Rather than being a collective movement of the whole black mainline church this seemed to be a coming together of the younger and more educated generation of black church leaders whose collective concern for civil rights trumped their respective denominations’ traditional reluctance to engage in social action. The progressive shift served to reorder the mainline church’s way of thinking about and engaging in social action so that the traditional obstacles to action faced by individual preachers in individual congregations were minimized. This analysis intends to

[21] Morris, 87.

discover how exactly this process worked, what its implications were for ecumenical character, and to examine progressive mainline rhetoric for ecumenical content.

In beginning an analysis of the progressive mainline's ecumenical characteristics one must first understand in what ways the progressive mainline manifested the conservative mainline church's inherent ambivalence towards universality and particularity. As was stated earlier, the conservative mainline demonstrated both universal and particular tendencies in its focus on liberation stories of the Old Testament, but focused on the particular because of its concreteness and functionality in establishing an identity for an oppressed group without. Out of necessity for an identity apart from that of their oppressors and the inferior portrait painted of them by their oppressors, the black mainline focused on the particularization of its situation and tended to view itself, instead of as a people in a situation of oppression, as a people chosen by God for liberation. This was, for the mainline church, a sort of vitalizing core. The problem, however, was that this was a very passive approach to actually alleviating the sources of black plight which necessitated such a feeling of special identity. It addressed the psychological needs of its people, but the church did not address the social problems which were at the root of the needs. A large reason for this, again, was fear and discomfort. One of the progressive mainline's most important contributions to the Civil Rights Movement was diminishing the reason for this fear (i.e. singling oneself out by protest) by establishing a source of collective protest outside of individual churches. It revolutionized church social action so that the church was not directed exclusively inward to perpetuate the creation of denominational fissions and further particularize black religious denominations, but outward towards society in such a way that the church could

play a part in the creation of a network of churches without having the feeling of singling itself out for white disdain. In other words, the progressive mainline facilitated fusion. Aldon Morris conveys roughly this reality when he quotes Ralph Abernathy, a founder of the SCLC, as saying that early protestors were, "The ones who traveled 'out there on that lonely road.'"[22] What he meant was that there was no organization of support for protest movements, not even in the church. Morris, following Abernathy's implication, goes on to say, "The formation of the SCLC made a great contribution to the local struggles by creating deep social bonds among these 'lonely protestors.'"[23] While this statement is not exclusive to black church protest organizations, it certainly applies to them. In responding to the question, "What did it mean to be affiliated with the SCLC?" Reverend C.T. Vivian of Nashville replied:

> If you ask it that way, it meant Martin Luther King. It also meant a central focus. It meant that there was something outside of ourselves which gave one a certain sense of security. Though you didn't know what it was… it meant that you had a national symbol. It meant you had a spokesman. That you had forces outside yourself working…[24]

Essentially, the SCLC and the progressive mainline as a whole provided black churches with a very real and secure sense of collective identity and purpose which meant that they could begin to explore broader and broader ecumenical connections both within the black church and, eventually, outside of it. It was the progressive church coming to realize the question posed in the aforementioned spiritual, "And why not-a every man?" It was not just the question "And why not rights for blacks across America?" but the actual interaction of blacks across America and the opening of actual dialogues which were

[22] Morris, 94.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., 95.

sources of both solidarity and a productive interaction that eventually escaped the confines of the black church and made their way to more worldly application.

One aspect of the SCLC which allowed it to take on a more ecumenical character was that, as Morris states,

> The SCLC was not an individual-membership organization. Only other organizations such as churches and civil leagues could become its affiliates. Here we see the impact of the MIA [Montgomery Improvement Association] and the other local "organizations of organizations" which had demonstrated that community resources could be mobilized by uniting the various community organizations.[25]

Implicit in this assessment is the idea that the SCLC and such progressive "organizations of organizations" are inherently organizations of fusion rather than fission. As was stated before, because the traditional black church experienced fission far more than fusion, its potential for branching out outside of its particular situation and generating dialogue with those outside of its particular confines was more limited. Fissions often alienated church groups and can be seen, ultimately, to establish potential agents of collective action in relationships of opposition where cooperation is scarcely even considered. This relationship of opposition, as with messianic-nationalist sects seeks not a worldlier, ecumenical synthesis of all struggles towards the greater good, but instead, at least temporarily precludes productive dialogue and agreeable synthesis. Instead of being directed inwards towards church politics, organizations like the SCLC had the vast majority of their goals directed outside of the church. It was well understood that a broad base of support from as many different organizations as were willing to join the struggle was indeed necessary to achieving success against the monolithic oppressor.

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[25] Morris, 90.

While the SCLC can at once be seen as a central and unifying force to the Civil Rights Movement, Morris contends:

> The SCLC's leaders did not attempt to centralize the activities of its affiliates, because it was felt that centralization would stifle local protest. Rather, the role of the SCLC's affiliates was to organize local movements and address grievances salient in local communities… The role of the SCLC was to coordinate and strengthen these efforts by linking the various leaders so that they could share resources and experiences.[26]

The organization worked on a multitude of levels. For individuals who were members of member organizations such as churches, the SCLC provided an element of protection and security that their local organization alone could not. Thus individuals were more prone to join in because, for one, they felt safer than if they were undertaking the task alone, and secondly, there was the idea of being part of something larger. T.J. Jemison, a leader of the Baton Rouge movement stated, "People would feel that you [the local SCLC leader] were tied to the whole thing so they didn't mind following their leadership locally because you were one of the ones that was leading it all over the South."[27] For leaders however, the SCLC and other such organizations of organizations were forums for more effective Civil Rights leadership. They were places of sharing dialogues of tactics, goals, fears, frustrations, and successes. The leaders then took what they gained from these dialogues and returned to their own communities and to their own movements to implement what they learned. Demonstrating such accommodation and consideration for the particularity of local situations while maintaining an ultimately centralizing and unifying objective is essentially and fundamentally ecumenical.

[26] Morris, 91.
[27] Ibid., 95.

In addition to generating fusion within its ranks, the ultimate aim of the SCLC was to generate an atmosphere of racial peace, cooperation, and equality. It was not superiority for blacks that they were looking for, nor, certainly, for whites, but a complete lack of superiority for any one group. This is the sentiment Martin Luther King expresses when he speaks on "the dream of our American democracy," stating that the dream is, "A dream of equality and opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed… the dream of a country where every man will respect the dignity and worth of all human personality, and men will dare to live together as brothers—that is the dream."[28] This is the kind of rhetoric that was the unifying and vitalizing core of the progressive mainline. It can be seen in direct opposition to the messianic-nationalist message of *a priori* incompatibility which is visible in the messianic-nationalist idea of a nation apart. This rhetoric is demonstrated by Albert Cleage, messianic leader of the Shrine of the Black Madonna, when Cleage states, "But you have to find a black nation to be baptized into. You cannot be baptized into the white man's nation, because you know what that means… You cannot be baptized into the white man's nation because we are enemies."[29] The progressive mainline, while certainly accommodating for particularities in the struggle, sought not a nation apart to rival that of whites, but a union between white and black in America, and, ultimately, freedom for oppressed people throughout the globe.

Black Liberation Theology

The final type that needs examining is the type aptly called "black liberation theology." This is the strain of black theology which arose as a synthesis of the ecumenical focus of progressive mainline religious organizations and the black power

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[28] James Washington, ed. *Martin Luther King Jr.: I Have A Dream* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992), 71-2.
[29] Cleage, 95.

message of messianic-nationalist sects. This type falls under the categories of "universal" with respect to ecumenical character and "negative" with respect to attitudinal orientation. In defining himself and his theological position in relation to Albert Cleage, a prominent leader within the messianic-nationalist type, James Cone, a chief contributor to the development of black liberation theology states, "On one hand I was unlike Cleage in that I remained in dialogue with other perspectives on the Christian faith; on the other hand, I was like Cleage in that I interpreted the themes of justice, love, suffering, and hope according to the political liberation of black people."[30] These two elements serve as the foundation for black liberation theology and are its main points of differentiation not only from Cleage's and King's theological positions, but also from the theological positions of the white church throughout America and Europe. This analysis will be dedicated to understanding how Cone and other pioneers of black liberation theology dealt with the realms of the universal and the particular within the black church community, within the broader context of oppression, and in relation to normative white theology generally accepted by the church.

To understand the role ecumenism played in black liberation theology, one must first understand the basic biblical interpretations of Christianity and of the church accepted by black liberation theologians. The main contention on which all else rests is that God is God of the oppressed, and that he reveals himself to all people ultimately through the redemption of the oppressed. In an essay entitled "Christian Theology and Scripture as the Expression of God's Liberating Activity for the Poor," Cone states, "It seems clear to me that whatever else we may say about Scripture, it is first and foremost a

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[30] James Cone, *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 106.

story of the Israelite people who believed that Yahweh was involved in their history."[31]

He goes on to say,

> My contention that Scripture is the story of God's liberation of the poor also applies to the New Testament, where the story is carried to universal dimensions… The meaning of Jesus Christ is found in God's will to make liberation not simply the property of one people, but for all humankind. God became a poor Jew in Jesus and thus identified with the helpless in Israel. The cross of Jesus is nothing but God's will to be with and like the poor… This is not only for the "house of Israel," but for all the wretched of the earth.[32]

Thus before all else the Scripture is a source of liberation for all people, and theology, the interpretation and application of the scripture, should reflect little else but this. The de-emphasis of God's role as a liberator of the suffering is the dilution of the true and redeeming message of all Scriptural history, especially the gospel. This understanding of God and of the Scripture is the most basic and foundational principle preached by black liberation theology and is the starting point of their entire theological disposition. In addition to this, it is the position they believe should be assumed universally and most of all by normative Western Christian theology which has strayed over time from emphasis on the social nature of God and Jesus to emphasis on their purely spiritual and transcendent nature.

This straying of normative theology is what necessitates the development of a black theology of liberation. The straying is, in reality, little more than the polarization and particularization of Christianity to the dominant West so that it no longer speaks prophetically and meaningfully to the church universal. This particularization was actually a process that occurred as Christianity began to move temporally,

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[31] Cone, 5.
[32] Cone, 5-6.

geographically, socially, and politically from its contextual determination (i.e., the social and religious plight suffered under the Roman Empire) towards being the religious norm of a burgeoning Western controlled world. As Christianity developed from being a religion of the oppressed to being a religion of kings and conquerors, the emphasis on God's role as liberator of the oppressed began to lose relevance. A short time later, the rediscovered works of Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle began making their way into Europe and the social message of Christianity was further diluted as theology began to take on a distinctly European philosophical tone. As theologians became increasingly mired in scholastic philosophical debates on the most miniscule and irrelevant of theological points, the social message of Christianity seemed more and more to lose its importance and its place in Christian dialogue. Speaking on this development, Theo Witvliet writes,

> It discerns a totalizing tendency behind the claim to universal validity which comes close to a contempt for and marginalization of the experiences of others. Theology which is not aware of its contextual determination seems not to take account of experiences of faith from outside its own context, and to this degree does not arrive at real dialogue.[33]

This is the tradition which black liberation theology engages through polemic. Polemic can be defined as criticism towards the greater end of universality. It is bringing to light the inconsistencies of normative church practices which exclude and marginalize those which adhere to them. To again borrow a quote from Witvliet, "Where the church is constantly the grave of biblical truth, polemical solidarity with it is the only way."[34]

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[33] Witvliet, 82.
[34] Ibid., 85.

While polemical engagement may at first appear divisive and particularistic in the fact that it relies on criticism and the bringing to light of particularistic inconsitencies, especially when the polemic is harsh and direct, its purpose is not to objectify the recipient of the polemic, but to initiate a dialogue in which the recipient is forced to either respond with further dialogue or silently assent defeat and live with being "the grave of biblical truth." This is the differentiation Cone makes between Cleage and himself when he says, "On one hand I was unlike Cleage in that I remained in dialogue with other perspectives on the Christian faith…"[35] It is an essential aspect of black liberation theology's universal character. Whereas Cleage and most messianic-nationalist spokesmen established themselves in fixed opposition to normative white theology and white people in general, essentially objectifying and encysting both positions, black liberation theology acknowledged that an opposition existed but maintained that it was *a posteriori*, i.e., a result of historical forces, and thus did not immutably objectify those whom they addressed polemically. Witvliet speaks on this polemic distinction when he states:

> Real polemic is always concrete and specific. The criterion for its ecumenical content is whether it is essentially dialogical and gives its target room for maneuver; it disqualifies itself as soon as it shows a tendency to take its opponent's breath away, to force him out, to reduce him to an object.[36]

This is an area where black liberation theology is sure to differentiate itself from messianic-nationalist theology. To reiterate an earlier point, it is this false polemic, visible, for example, when Cleage refers to blacks and whites as enemies, which makes messianic-nationalist sects ultimately particularistic. Black liberation theology, instead

[35] Cone, 106.
[36] Witvliet, 86.

works with its opposition in dialogue towards a universal synthesis of ideas. It is returning to the church the socially concerned God—the God of the oppressed.

Black liberation theology's ecumenism, however, is not limited to dialogue with the oppressor. Black liberation theology is concerned also with generating dialogue between people in various situations of oppression. It connects with other theologies of liberation from other parts of the globe, most notably those in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. In many ways this broad liberation theology can be seen, like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, as an organization of organizations. The overarching element common to all theologies of liberation is the belief that God is God of the oppressed. To them, however, this is not so much a belief as a self-evident reality presented in the Bible. In addition, there was generally the common understanding that modern oppression is the product of colonization and capitalism. Under this organizational umbrella which, like the SCLC, "…meant a central focus," and acted as a constant reminder of normative theology's neglect of the oppressed, a variety of ecumenical organizations arose across the globe. The common understanding of the scripture and of the fact that their situation is like that of most who have shouldered the yoke of colonization, allowed each to develop individually and to focus on its own particular situation of oppression, while at the same time sharing a feeling of solidarity with oppressed Christians across the globe. James Cone expresses this sentiment in an essay entitled "Black Ecumenism and the Liberation Struggle" when he writes,

> The ecumenical perspective that connects the unity of human-kind with the liberation of the world's poor does not diminish our focus on *black* liberation. Rather, it enhances it, not only because the vast majority of the world's poor are colored but also because economic exploitation is a disease that requires the cooperation of all victims if the world is to be transformed… Their struggle to

> transform the world according to the Christian vision as disclosed in the cross and resurrection of Jesus makes known to them that "unity only becomes a reality to the extent that we partake of Christ (who) is hidden in those who suffer."[37]

In constructing a productive dialogue, not only between people who share or have shared a situation of colonial oppression, but also with those who oppress them, black liberation theology takes on an almost absolute ecumenical character. It is able to focus on developing polemic in the particular while sharing a unity of purpose and solidarity with other theologies of liberation across the globe, ultimately directed at redirecting normative theology to take on a more universal relevance by focusing on the social nature of Jesus and God in the gospel, and not only that, but to act on it.

What this typology and analysis hopefully provide is a useful theoretical framework for organizing black religious organizations during the Civil Rights Movement. While creating this organizational structure was not my original intention, but rather was arrived at as I attempted, with constant frustration, to isolate elements of comparison between groups within Baer and Singer's original typology during the Civil Rights Movement, it is nevertheless, in my understanding, an essential way of organizing the black church during the Civil Rights Movement. As I attempted to examine and make generalizations within Baer and Singers types it became clear to me that as the Civil Rights Movement progressed certain black religious groups remained polarized in opposition to white society and limited their dialogue with the outside, while others, usually younger, better educated, and more sophisticated in their conceptualization of the Civil Rights struggle, branched out to actively engage in dialogue with others from different and particular situations of oppression to hopefully arrive at a more efficient,

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[37] Cone, 154.

effective, and universal end to the struggle. This was an element that Baer and Singer's typology did not take into account, making it difficult to talk about the messianic-nationalist type when one must make room for generalizations about the views of both Louis Farrakhan and James Cone at the same time and then relate them to generalizations about Martin Luther King Jr. and conservative mainline pastors and their congregants. Needless to say, making generalizations within the two realms was extremely difficult and theoretically inconsistent, and comparing the resultant, often piecemeal generalizations was an impossible task.

As a result, I maintain, it was necessary to draw a further division. The outcome is the original theoretical framework presented here and supported by the preceding analysis. The way that the Civil Rights Movement is taught far too often fails to emphasize its immense complexity. The result is a simple and idealistic understanding of the movement, such as when one says "the Civil Rights Movement was a singing movement," that is essentially false. I contend that while one may isolate the progressive mainline church and suggest that singing was an integral part of motivating and uniting people, or isolate the conservative mainline and say that singing was important in the establishment of an identity, one can not possibly make the single assessment apply for all groups active in the Civil Rights Movement. This can be said of many of the claims and generalizations people tend to make about the Civil Rights Movement. How groups viewed themselves and the outside world played an important part in how they addressed their grievances in the movement, and this diversity of views cannot be overlooked. At the same time, however, it is difficult to arrange these disparate views in such a way that they relate to each other meaningfully, and this is very possibly the reason simplicity and

generality are preferred. While certainly much more can be added to what I have devised, it is my hope that this theoretical framework can be used as a starting point for exploring and understanding the complexity of the movement in a more disciplined and theoretical way.

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