SWEDISH
COLLEGIUM
for ADVANCED STUDY

The Wittrock Lecture Book Series
No. III

HANS JOAS

Moral Change and the Ambiguity of Religions:

Christianity Between Racism and the Struggle Against It

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SWEDISH COLLEGIUM FOR ADVANCED STUDY (SCAS)

Contents

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Foreword

The Wittrock Lecture Series was instigated in 2019, in honour of the contributions of Professor Björn Wittrock. As Principal of the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study (SCAS) in the years 1996-2018, and the driving force ever since its creation in 1985, Björn Wittrock has contributed significantly to the institute's strong position as an internationally renowned institute for advanced study, in addition to the social sciences and the humanities in Sweden, Europe, and beyond. His research has advanced several intellectual fields that include the sociology of ancient, medieval and modern societies, global history, intellectual history, and civilizational analysis.

The Wittrock Lecture Series is arranged annually by the Collegium. At these events, internationally renowned and state-of-the-art scholars are invited to give a public lecture on a theme that resonates with the scholarly profile of SCAS. Topics may range across the humanities and social sciences, and cover a broad spectrum of issues related to global history and modernity, globalization processes and social change, intellectual history, and the plurality of knowledge cultures. The lecture series also aims to address complex challenges facing contemporary society – from the shifting nature of globalization, to crises in democracy, or the future of governance and human civilization.

Christina Garsten
Principal, SCAS

Moral Change and the Ambiguity of Religions: Christianity Between Racism and the Struggle Against It

"Racism" is currently on everyone's lips as a hot topic and as a rebuke. Just a few years ago, when an African-American football player took the knee during the pre-game national anthem, his courageous gesture posed a considerable risk to his career. Today, entire teams emulate him without fear of consequence. And they attract little attention. Monuments to slave traders and slaveholders are toppled, as are those to heroes of colonialism or the Confederate States Army, that is, the armed forces of the southern states in the American Civil War. The image of some of the greatest statesmen of the Western world, from Woodrow Wilson to Winston Churchill, is changing dramatically as their attitudes to racial segregation and colonialism are reconsidered. Even the early history of the European unification process after the Second World War appears in an unfavourable light if we view the efforts to maintain France's colonial empire in Africa as part of it.[1] Certainly, critics often overshoot the mark when, for example, they propose renaming all streets referring to historical figures considered racist today. Yet it seems fair to say that there has been a surge in sensitivity and public awareness that was long overdue. All those seized by the ethos of universal human dignity will welcome this, along with the struggle against anti-Semitism and its possible resurgence.

Yet the nascent sense of positivity about this moral shift in a universalist direction is mixed with scepticism. I will mention three of the reasons why. First, the term "racism" has expanded

well beyond its original meaning. The motives at play here are understandable. In addition to the denigration of Jews, blacks, and other groups of people anchored in a pseudo-scientific racial biology, there are attitudes that are more superficial but do not ultimately differ substantially from racial ideologies. Yet, not every interpersonal prejudice or every group-based privilege or disadvantage should be denounced as "racist." It must remain possible to advocate restrictions on immigration without being suspected of "racism." When a well-known German theologian brands even the discrimination against women in the Catholic Church, undeniable as it is, "racism", the word ceases to have any clear meaning. And the more the term plays a role in law, the more urgently we need to ask who has the power to define what constitutes "racism."

The second source of scepticism relates to the idea that the explanation for the socio-structural disadvantages of certain groups can mostly be found in personal attitudes, and that changing these attitudes is therefore the royal road to overcoming discrimination. One of the great strengths of the social sciences, however, is their capacity to go beyond and often challenge the seemingly plausible beliefs of everyday life and to uncover the true causal relationships through empirical research. To take an example: in a whole series of books published from the late 1970s on, one of the leading black sociologists in the United States, William Julius Wilson, who teaches at Harvard, has argued that the grave deterioration of black neighbourhoods in US cities since the 1960s – that is, the extent of unemployment and violence, including police brutality, drug addiction, unwanted pregnancies, and family breakdown – is not due to increased racism, but paradoxically to its decline. How can this be? Wilson's contention was that the successes of

the civil rights movement facilitated the formation of a black middle class with better access to education and jobs, and above all the relocation of its members to other urban districts. Left behind in the ghettos were those who did not manage to make this leap. This means that subsequent generations lacked sound sources of pedagogical authority and role models for their own advancement, as well as jobs, especially in black-owned shops and businesses. For his first book, Wilson chose the title *The Declining Significance of Race* to highlight this paradoxical mechanism and thus point up the growing importance of economic differentiation within the black population.[2] His focus, then, was on the decline in the *relative* importance of racist attitudes in explaining poverty. However, the title was and still is perceived as a provocation. There are about 800 publications scrutinizing or seeking to refute the argument attributed to Wilson that race now plays only a minor role in social inequality. Wilson failed to shift attitudes by penning another book called *The Truly Disadvantaged*.[3] These were the very people he had always been concerned with, those who had benefited little from the successes of the civil rights movement. To this day, the fact that the black middle class often lives separately from their white counterparts is put forward as evidence of the falsity of Wilson's interpretation. Yet he had never denied the persistence of racist attitudes and had always recognized the dependence of relative black successes on the political environment. This is not the place to go into these thorny sociological issues in more detail.[4] My goal at the moment is merely to underscore the complexity of the causal relationships that prohibit any facile use of "racism" as an explanatory key.

The third reason for scepticism is the following: racism is conscious anti-universalism. I have already referred to the ethos of

universal human dignity and thus to what is often called "moral universalism" in philosophy, an ethos according to which all human beings have the same dignity, which is not something they have acquired or can ever be stripped of. In the struggle against racism as conscious anti-universalism, however, it makes a crucial difference whether this is conducted in the spirit of moral universalism or merely as a battle of one particularism against another. The oppressed are far from immune to the dream of a mere reversal of conditions, of the desire to establish their own supremacy by all means possible, including violence and the debasement of their oppressors. But this only perpetuates the eternal cycle of violence and oppression. In the Jewish and Christian religions, on the other hand – though in other traditions as well – there is an inherent potential to break this cycle, to achieve reconciliation and expand universalism, though it must be acknowledged that this potential has been lost or has dwindled time and again. In such cases, these religions betray their original impulses and become nothing more than another particularism, that is, they are oriented towards the welfare of their own members rather than that of all people. In Christianity, we can discern the early devaluation of Judaism's universalist aspirations and the rise of a self-image according to which only Christianity, in contrast to Judaism, is truly universalist. This trait played a major role in Christian anti-Judaism and later – when fused with racial theories in a narrower sense – in modern anti-Semitism in Christian circles. Religions are not self-contained doctrinal systems existing independently of culture and era. Their contribution to moral change can therefore be highly varied, even contradictory.

I am going to demonstrate this here with the help of a case study, namely the US civil rights movement after the Second World War, and in particular the struggle to eliminate racial segregation and institutionalized racial discrimination in the South in the 1950s and 1960s. This case is intended to be representative of Christianity and the Western world and to demonstrate the complexity of the relationship between Christianity and moral universalism. It is a phenomenon particularly well suited to this objective, because here Christianity played an undeniably important role *for both sides*, both in the struggle against racial segregation and racial discrimination and in their genesis, justification, and defence.

At this point, before I have even begun to set out my analysis, some could object that my approach is tendentious and unfair. Rather than seeking to properly elaborate the role of Christianity in the history of Western freedom, they could argue that I have deliberately chosen one of the darkest, but long since overcome chapters of history, one for which neither Europeans nor the inhabitants of the northern states nor the United States as a whole can be held responsible. This, they might continue, is like taking the South African apartheid state as representative of Reformed Christianity or the West as a whole.

Without wishing to deny the special characteristics of the southern states, I believe it is wrong to suggest that these are the affairs of "others" with whom "we" have nothing to do. First of all, the situation of blacks in the United States at the time was undoubtedly a consequence of the enslavement of their African ancestors, and that enslavement was a crucial component of the history of European expansion and the formation of global empires by Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, and others. It was Europeans who took advantage of the intra-African slave trade. It is true that they brought relatively few of the enslaved to

Europe and did not establish slave societies within the continent of the kind that had existed in Antiquity – societies, that is, in which slaves made up a considerable portion of the population and were of key importance to processes of production. But precisely because the geographical distance between Europe and the slaveholding societies in Brazil, the Caribbean, and southern North America makes it easy for Europeans to clear their historical conscience, it is crucial to remember that the slave trade and slave economy constituted an essentially triangular business. Slaves were deported from Africa to the Western hemisphere, where they were essential to the production of commodities such as sugar and cotton, most of which ended up in Europe. Meanwhile, worthless or dangerous goods (from glass beads to alcohol and weapons) were shipped from Europe to Africa to be exchanged for ever more "human material." The slave trade and the colonial or (following the independence of the United States and other countries) post-colonial slave economy generated enormous wealth, without which the Industrial Revolution could not have taken place or not on the same scale and at the same speed. The buildings of many European port cities from Nantes to Liverpool still bear witness to the wealth of that era. In the words of British historian Hugh Thomas, who wrote one of the most comprehensive books on the history of the slave trade, "every maritime European nation, every Atlantic-facing people (and some others) and every country of the Americas"[5] was involved in this system in one way or another.

Just as some Europeans tend to look back and imagine that the colonial rulers and settlers were not Europeans and thus shift responsibility for the slave economy onto others, even Northerners in the United States have sought to remove themselves from this history, time and again. Yet the very founding of the United States was based on a constitutional compromise that guaranteed the continuation of the slave economy in the southern states. It is true that the emancipation of slaves in 1863 occurred in the context of the Civil War, but it is a myth that it was waged by the northern states with this intention from the outset. The reason for the war was in fact the question of how new territories joining the United States ought to proceed with regard to the slave economy. Even more important in the present context, however, is that after the emancipation of slaves and a brief phase of "Reconstruction" after the Civil War in the former slave states, as soon as the Union Army had fully withdrawn, conditions were re-established that have been described as a "second slavery" or "slavery by another name"[6] – a partial reversal of emancipation, for example, through lengthy forced labour sentences for the most minor of offences, the leasing out of convicts to employers, the de facto exclusion of blacks from the electorate through tests of literacy and knowledge or an electoral tax, and the terrorist regime of violence known as lynch law, the often public and ritual killing of blacks by groups of white perpetrators – as recently as 1940 in Alabama, for example, when Jesse Thornton committed the cardinal sin of failing to address a white policeman as "mister."

It is true that such conditions existed almost exclusively in the South, but it would be quite wrong to suggest that they inspired indignation in the North that was translated into action. Newspapers in the northern states barely reported on lynchings; although the NAACP regularly publicised such cases on a banner displayed on its headquarters in New York, the outrage was mostly confined to blacks. Because the social reforms of the New Deal under President Roosevelt in the 1930s depended on

the Democratic Party's power base in the southern states, virtually no specific action was taken during this period to improve conditions. While federal economic modernization strategies brought economic progress in the South, they also showed that it was unrealistic to hope that such modernization in and of itself would overcome the problem of racial discrimination. During the First World War and after, many blacks from the southern states migrated to the industrial metropolises of the North, which did not feature the more blatant forms of racial segregation. Even today, however, we find settlement patterns there that, while they reflect local political priorities or are engendered by the real estate market and are not legally enforced, could easily be taken for planned segregation.

So I feel it is not only justified but imperative to view the civil rights movement in the United States as a significant part of the history of the West – and as a significant part of the history of Christianity. Again, it should be remembered that while there have always been Christian criticisms of slavery, there has never been any lack of Christian justifications for it, and the latter have been more central to the world of power politics. In my short book (in German) *Are Human Rights Western?*[7] I tried to show that these were not simply abstract justifications of a distant practice, but concrete contributions that shaped the institution of slavery. By analysing the sermons of Protestant pastors in the southern states during slavery, for example, one could demonstrate how difficult it was to relate without contradiction the typical Protestant pathos of freedom to the conditions of the slave economy.[8] One possibility, which was also seized upon by a number of colonial legislators, was to flatly deny slaves the ability to be Christians because of their "barbarity" and "rudeness" or the "weakness and shallowness of

their minds." This, however, was evidently contradicted by Jesus' Great Commission instructing Christians to preach the Gospel to all the peoples of the world, to baptize and teach them. Some even suggested introducing a special new ritual that would precede baptism. This required black baptizands to take an oath in the presence of their master stating that they would not seek to derive from baptism any claim to manumission or any limitations on their absolute duty of obedience. Now, a Christian is truly obliged *not* to carry out an order that contradicts a divine command; but the slave owners and pastors had no wish to grant baptized slaves the kind of freedom of conscience that would have enabled them to examine such matters. Pastors also played an important role in shaping the precise legal form taken by the institution of slavery. This partial juridification, however, did not furnish slaves with any scope for freedom, but instead made the punishment of rebellious or fleeing slaves a legal duty of slaveholders. In the time of the Civil War, a variety of theological justifications for slavery were still put forward, arguing that it rested on biblical foundations and was morally superior to the system of wage labour in the North. Even after the Second World War, when the civil rights movement valiantly challenged racial segregation and discrimination, its opponents were mostly devout Christians.

It would be tempting at this point to present an epic history of the civil rights movement and the biography of its key charismatic leaders such as Martin Luther King. But I am going to take a different approach. The question has to be how it was possible to unleash the moral universalism always inherent in Christianity in such a way that it could shake the foundations of – and indeed defeat – a racist regime that saw itself as Christian, a regime that appears to us in retrospect as an inconceiv-

able betrayal of this Christian moral universalism. How did this movement get off the ground, what role did Christianity play in it, and what facilitated its success?

This is not simply a matter of explaining a social movement like many others, but one that sought, in its aims and methods, to uphold high moral standards far beyond the representation of its own interests, and – I am tempted to say: despite this, but perhaps because of it – was successful. In US history, it has a precursor in the anti-slavery movement of the nineteenth century. In my book *The Sacredness of the Person,*[9] I developed an explanatory model for the emergence and success of this movement that I now wish to apply to the civil rights movement while simultaneously reassessing its validity. This model of successful moral mobilization has three components. I will deal with the first of these in depth in this presentation; the other two will then come into play only briefly.

1. The first component I call "the intensification of the motivation for the practical implementation of a universalist morality that already exists in principle." Less awkwardly, we might also call this the prophetic character of the civil rights movement. Prophets are able to refer to an existing morality that has become canonical; but they assail current grievances as being blatantly at variance with this morality and proclaim them grounds for radical change. If a prophet is listened to – which is by no means certain – then great collective processes of moral reorientation may be set in motion that cannot be traced back to the interests of those involved. This is because interests are not simply givens, but have to be defined and may in fact be completely redefined through such moral processes. Since the anti-slavery movement of the nineteenth century was neither primarily interest-driven nor chiefly state-oriented, it clashes with the assumptions of those social movement researchers for whom the representation of interests vis-à-vis the state constitutes the essence of social movements. The conventional notion that social movements not dominated by material goals only emerge under "post-industrial" conditions – which is why reference has been made to "new social movements" since the 1970s – is also unsettled if this moral mobilization in the nineteenth century is taken more seriously.[10]

Was the civil rights movement a "prophetic" movement? For a long time, no one would have doubted it. As early as the 1960s, and even more so after Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968, an image of this movement emerged in which King was virtually idealized as a prophet and martyr, and the movement was traced back largely to inspiration emanating from him and his leadership. Historical research soon corrected this notion. Today we know so much more about the role of supporters and co-authors, even with respect to King's most important initiatives and texts, about the complex prehistory and ambivalent posthistory of the civil rights movement, that it has become far more difficult to sustain such an excessively personalized view. Great benefits have undeniably flowed from the countless local and regional studies that have brought to light the relative autonomy of grassroots activities, in particular those of black women in the South.[11] More than these studies, however, investigation of the long-term antecedents of the civil rights movement caused the pendulum to swing in the opposite direction. Under the heading "long civil rights movement," various authors have asserted that "the true origins of the civil rights movement are to be found in the cross-racial, Communist-led labor movement of the New Deal era." In this view, it

was not "black men of the middle class in tie and collar"[12] who brought about the great changes, but radical socialists before the Second World War, presumably devoid of tie and collar.

Clearly, profound social inequality persists in the United States, in which racial characteristics play their part, particularly in the case of the black urban underclass, which is often largely decoupled from legal economic channels. In retrospect, then, it makes sense to probe the possible limitations of a struggle that focused on achieving equal civil rights. Still, in my opinion "the thesis of the civil rights movement as a cross-racial radical labour movement"[13] is empirically unconvincing. What we have to do is grasp the prophetic character of this movement without false personalization.

From the wealth of available material, here I single out just four elements of relevance to its prophetic nature: a) the role of pastors, b) a theology of the prophetic, c) a structure of prophetically initiated revivalist practices within the movement, and d) the absence of a prophetic counter-movement in defence of racial segregation among whites.

a) I contend that we cannot understand the civil rights movement without considering the role of pastors, especially Baptist ones. In making this argument, I do *not* mean to lend support to the myth of a specific black prophetic tradition in the United States. This notion is a myth in the bad sense, first because the various black congregations were often not led in a prophetic spirit at all but were oriented towards tamely reconciling oneself to one's fate and salvation in the hereafter or in a distant future; second, because there were white prophetic figures in the US revival movements; and third, because there seems to me to be something paradoxical about the term "prophetic tradition" itself. Although prophets do refer to a tradition, this reference is always critical of the present and therefore risky. A prophet who encounters no resistance at all is probably not a prophet. Prophetic speech may be mere rhetoric, that is, cost-free, posturing courageousness and opportunism vis-à-vis the powerful. Here, then, tradition can only authentically consist in a risky orientation towards scattered role models from the past.

As I see it, then, there is no black prophetic tradition underpinning the civil rights movement, but black pastors did play a hugely important role in it. The classic of black sociological self-exploration in the United States, W. E. B. Du Bois' 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*,[14] already identifies three things as characteristic of slaves' religion: "the Preacher, the Music and the Frenzy" – the latter referring to a state of ecstasy or rapture. Here the role of the preacher was claimed to be the most characteristic feature developed by the "Negro on American soil": "a leader, a politician, an orator, a 'boss', an intriguer, an idealist, – all these he is, and ever, too, the centre of a group of men, now twenty, now a thousand in number." We will only fully grasp this when we understand that the position of preacher or pastor among the radical heirs to the Reformation, such as the Baptists, was bestowed by the congregations themselves and not (as in the Catholic Church) by a hierarchical institution, that it required no formal academic qualifications (as it did among the Lutherans), and that this office was, therefore, practically the only one open to talented young black men beyond unskilled manual labour or domestic tasks during the era of slavery and beyond. There was, after all, even a general prohibition against teaching blacks to read and write or

employing them in jobs that required these skills. "Religious oratory became the only safe marketable skill, and a reputation for oratory substituted for diplomas and all other credentials."[15]

The situation after the Second World War was of course already different in that the twentieth century saw the slow spread of school education for blacks in the southern states and the establishment of institutions of higher learning for blacks, such as seminaries, in the southern states as elsewhere. Black congregations became further differentiated along social lines, as an emerging black middle class often wanted nothing to do with the forms of worship characteristic of illiterate agricultural workers (Du Bois' "frenzy"). If we look more closely at Martin Luther King's background and educational career, we find that he came from a long line of pastors extending over generations and that he was greatly influenced by his pastor father, who had even made a trip to Europe and, in Germany, the land of Martin Luther's Reformation, made the decision to change his son Michael's first name – to "Martin Luther," a far from obvious choice for a Baptist. King attended segregated academic institutions in the South, but then also non-segregated ones in the North before ultimately graduating with a doctorate in Theology from Boston University. When he returned to the South, from the outset he did not limit his activities to the particular congregation that took him on as preacher, but carried them out within the extensive networks spanning multiple congregations and their pastors. These congregations, meanwhile, meant much more to their black members than we might imagine. We need only think of the fact that, as a rule, poor blacks could not get loans from banks for lack of collateral and therefore depended on reciprocal lending within the congregation. The congregations and pastoral networks formed a superb organizational infrastructure for the civil rights movement, once it had managed to overcome the sense of resignation vis-à-vis a system perceived as overpowering. On a path full of initial setbacks, the foundation of new bodies such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957 (in the wake of the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama) also helped flesh out this infrastructure.

b) Martin Luther King, who was more successful than anyone else in mobilizing the aforementioned networks' organizational resources, quite consciously geared his theological thinking towards the idea that the prophetic dimension might offer a route out of the polarizations of theological debates. The "liberal" Protestantism of the period before the First World War, with its positive understanding of modernity and faith in progress, had lost much of its prestige as a result of that conflict, especially in Europe, but subsequently in the United States, as well. The anti-liberal and "anti-historicist" revolt of the so-called dialectical theologians, however, seemed to many an unsatisfactory alternative, a return to a religious orthodoxy not embedded intellectually and politically in the new historical situation. In his development as a doctoral student, King was quite obviously looking for a third way, as represented, for example, by the theology of Paul Tillich. But more enduring and formative for King than Tillich, whom the former accused of diluting the personality of God to the point of rendering it a mere abstraction such as the "ground of our being," was the influence of the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, the best-known Protestant theologian in the United States in the twentieth century. Without adducing the evidence for this and discussing it in detail here, I believe that King adopted more theoretical elements from Niebuhr than from any other twentieth-century

theologian. Certainly, there were black religious intellectuals who influenced him as well.[16] Yet, it was mostly Niebuhr who emphasized the prophetic in opposition to all liberal optimism about progress, without becoming apolitical. We might say that at the level of anthropology and the philosophy of history, the theologian Niebuhr vigorously opposed the liberal tendency to think of human beings as permanently perfectible and to expect constant, albeit sometimes slow, progress from history. If human beings are always going to be sinful and prone to evil, and the world will never become an earthly paradise, then there may be grounds for concentrating solely on individual morality and embracing an apolitical quietism. However, and this is the prophetic dimension, we might also call for a radical renunciation of evil and thus for a collective change of heart, a spiritual transformation or conversion, and an immediate one, not one located in some distant future. This change of heart would be guided by the awareness that those who seek to bring it about are not simply good, and those who resist it are not fundamentally bad. This entails a tremendous amount of humility with regard to the moral qualities of one's own side and scepticism towards the glorification of all new social realities – as well as a valiant readiness to always see one's opponents as human beings worthy of love. This explains why, even in situations in which white racists used gross violence against unarmed black men, women, and children, their pastors urged them to pray for their oppressors: "for they know not what they do." When members of his own movement occasionally used violence, King demanded a day of reflection and repentance.

It was not Niebuhr's own stance on the struggle against racial segregation nor his sharp distinction between individual morality and collective amorality that King found persuasive,

but rather his elaboration of the structure of the prophetic awakening. This seems to me to be why, from 1963 onwards, a Jewish theologian was able to become another major influence on King and indeed one of his closest comrades-in-arms and personal friends: Abraham Heschel. Heschel, originally from Poland, had submitted a doctoral thesis titled "The Prophetic Consciousness" to Berlin University in 1932 and was even able to defend it after Hitler's seizure of power in February 1933. However, it had become impossible to publish it in Germany, and it was finally printed, after years of delay, in Kraków. While his book could no longer make an impact in Germany, Heschel was deeply influenced by the great German thinkers of the time such as Max Scheler and Ernst Cassirer, though he sought to go beyond them in the direction of an "enlightened and modern Hasidism."[17] This brought him close to, but also clearly into competition with, Martin Buber. King and Heschel met in 1963 at the "Race and Religion" conference in Chicago. For Heschel, the exodus of the enslaved did not end with Israel's liberation from the Pharaonic yoke. "In fact" – as he put it in his still stirring address to this conference – "it was easier for the children of Israel to cross the Red Sea than for a Negro to cross certain university campuses." Here he described racism as "Satanism," as "unmitigated evil." God, he contended, is the father of all human beings or none, while the image of God is in every person or none.[18] For Heschel and for King, the prophetic transcended all attachment to a specific religion or denomination; it went beyond the Jewish or Christian faith and allowed for collaboration with all who shared moral-universalist goals, including communists and atheist existentialists. For them, racial segregation was the sin that could no longer be tolerated and that must be overcome, even if this meant risking one's own life, and overcome without violence. Heschel also organized

the resistance of clergy to the Vietnam War and did much to prompt King to speak out and campaign against it ever more passionately.

c) Organizational infrastructure and theological orientation came together in the prophetic orientation, but making a reality of it required a particular configuration of church services and political action. Here, activists could draw on both the tradition of evangelical revivalist movements and older forms of relatively timid black political protest. I have already mentioned "music" and "frenzy" in the context of religious worship. But of course, the revival movements aimed far beyond the circle of regular churchgoers at all sinners, at all human beings as sinners. In his 1902 masterpiece on the psychology of religion, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James attributed the strength of such revival movements in Protestant-influenced cultures to the absence of the sacrament of confession.[19] His idea here is that, rather than feeling cleansed of one's sins after repentance and penance, as Catholics typically do, in the case of Protestants, individual feelings of guilt could become concentrated through the identification of a grievance entailing collective culpability; such sentiments could then be transformed into a powerful force for collective moral mobilization. How aware Martin Luther King seems to have been of this nexus is evident in the fact (uncovered by his biographer Taylor Branch)[20] that he directly sought the advice of the most famous revivalist preacher of the post-war era, Billy Graham; Graham, meanwhile, himself a Southerner, refused to accept segregation at his revival meetings from 1954 onwards and managed to sustain this despite the prevailing legal situation.

Many of those involved experienced and described the activism of the civil rights movement as religious. Miraculous healings were reported and sudden conversions occurred. Confrontations with police and racist opponents were interpreted in analogy to biblical events. King was interpreted as the Messiah. It is said that in the state of Mississippi, for example, a picture of King hung next to a picture of Jesus in every black home in the 1950s and 1960s. Church attendance increased significantly; it is therefore inadequate to view the civil rights movement merely as a political expression of a religious orientation, because the political also had an effect on the religious. Public prayers and political marches merged into one another – people prayed with their legs (to quote Abraham Heschel). What had previously been timid protest – such as refusing to patronize shops run by owners particularly given to acts of racist humiliation – became large-scale, visible collective action inherently calling for emulation, as blacks deliberately crossed segregation lines on buses and sustained a weeks-long boycott of Montgomery's entire bus system in 1955–56. Putting up with the disadvantages – walking to work and back home again in the evening – required considerable sacrifice. Only through the discipline of those involved, born of enthusiasm, was success possible. Collective prayer and song were major sources of such discipline and self-sacrifice.

d) But it is conceivable that this movement might have had to face a passionate segregationist counter-movement, one that could also have conceived of itself as a revivalist movement. Yet for all the massive opposition to the civil rights movement, which was so great that the latter long seemed quite unlikely to succeed, this did not happen. Why was there no prophetic white counter-movement?

This question was raised above all by David Chappell in his important 2004 book *A Stone of Hope* and has been the subject of heated debates ever since.[21] Chappell was able to show that the white defenders of racial segregation found little support in the *leadership* of the mainline southern churches. To be sure, traditional biblical clichés continued to circulate, such as Noah's curse upon his son Ham, who had failed to cover Noah's nakedness and whose descendants, spread across the world, were now condemned to be servants of his brothers' descendants (Gen. 9:18–29). But this passage, directed against the Canaanites in the Bible, had always been more than dubious when applied to blacks. It acquired its modern meaning when Christians sought to reconcile their belief in the one creation of man with their total dominion over blacks.[22] In the nineteenth-century United States, this was the most common way of justifying slavery. Yet it was poorly suited to justifying a racial segregation that was supposed to embody the precept "separate but equal." There were also new theological attempts to justify racial segregation. These at least conceded that the Bible did not make such segregation *obligatory* but claimed that the Bible did declare it *permissible*. The analysis of sermons has brought to light texts such as that of a pastor in Dallas, which bore the title "God the Original Segregationist" and whose subtitles read "Moses the Segregationist," "Jesus the Segregationist," "Paul the Segregationist," and "Nimrod the Original Desegregationist" (Nimrod was a descendant of Ham, the mythical founder of the Babylonian and Assyrian empires, the king responsible for the Tower of Babel, who "began to be a mighty one in the earth" [Gen. 10:8]).[23] Warnings about sexual relations between members of different races and "racial intermarriage" also seem to have occupied a great deal of space in those sermons. According to Bill Leonard,[24] other religious groups, particularly Southern fundamentalists, appear to have championed the upholding of segregation more resolutely than the mainline churches. However, the gap between church leaders and the grassroots was considerable even in the latter, and white pastors who showed sympathy for the civil rights movement risked being removed from office by their congregations. The churches did not split over this issue, but due to their internal differences they could not function as a forceful actor for either side.

The educated elite of the southern states, such as lawyers and journalists, tried to prevent the abolition of racial segregation by legal means, chiefly through the constitutional argument that the federal government was exceeding its competence vis-à-vis the states if it tried to force them to end the racial divide. The majority of the white population in the South sympathized with the rapidly growing White Citizens Councils, which had up to 60,000 members and organized resistance to the civil rights movement. The members of these organizations increasingly turned their back on their churches, disappointed by their lack of support. Some Council leaders, enraged by individual pastors, went so far as to reject churches and Christianity altogether – and an anti-Christian form of racism began to emerge. This ideology has been a source of inspiration for present-day "white supremacists," a group that has garnered international attention since the far-right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in the summer of 2017. Otherwise, since the end of racial segregation in the 1960s, the political right and the Protestant churches in the southern states have once again entered into a tighter embrace and a radical white Christian nationalism is now burgeoning in the United States.[25]

2. My model explains the success of a movement centred on moral mobilization with reference to three key elements. So far, I have gone into detail about the first of these, namely its status as a prophetic movement. I will now speak far more briefly about the other two components. The second I call a "socio-structurally induced extension of the cognitive attribution of moral responsibility."[26] What I have in mind here is the connection between intense moral motivation and our empirical assumptions about responsibility and the potential for intervention. If we suppose that a good we consume was obtained or produced under conditions of slavery or forced labour, we experience this differently than if we only hear about the existence of such conditions in distant lands. But such empirical suppositions about our involvement and responsibility and our notion of potential interventions are not fixed. They can be changed through education and exemplary action. The famous sugar boycott launched by the anti-slavery movement is a vivid example.

The second component, then, entails changes in ideas about causality and moral responsibility. I can be brief at this point because the aspects of the civil rights movement to be considered here are essentially the same ones we have already contemplated as physical practices of the revival movements. In this case, after all, we are not dealing with the sudden uncovering of connections that were previously unknown, but with the shifting of boundaries through direct "action" in an attempt to make responsibilities and causalities tangible and to break with the habitual practices of segregation. I have already mentioned bus and shopping boycotts. But every action, such as those of black pupils in 1960 who staged a sit-in at a segregated Woolworth's lunch counter in a North Carolina town, every confrontation with its staff and every intervention by the police helped place a question mark over the seeming self-evidence of the use of space and exclusionary practices. This is even truer of the appearance of black university applicants on a campus. Many protest practices within the civil rights movement seem to me to have been ingeniously designed to lay bare the violence inherent in the prevailing conditions without becoming violent themselves.[27]

3. The third component, meanwhile, requires a few more words. Decisive not so much to the genesis of moral mobilization as to its success, I have identified this as "the practical transnational organization of moral universalism." In the words of historian Jürgen Osterhammel, the British campaigners against slavery, for example, saw themselves "from the outset as activists engaged in a worldwide project [...]. The suppression of the slave trade and slavery took the form of a transatlantic chain reaction in which every local action was endowed with additional meaning by a larger context."[28] Transnational networks helped every branch of the movement. There is a fundamental difference between such transnational networking from below and the imposition of an international regime on individual states, with the substantial involvement of other states and guided by their interests.

Hence, the third component entails the embedding of a movement in transnational networks of power. The anti-slavery movement of the nineteenth century would not have been successful in the United States if it had not been supported by the pressure brought to bear by its British sister movement on the government in London. Some even believe that it succeeded only because the northern states won the Civil War.

The firmly established racial segregation in the twentieth century did come under pressure through economic modernization and politically induced developments such as President Truman's desegregation of the US armed forces in 1948 (by Executive Order, that is, not by an act of Congress), which also applied to bases in the southern states. But the political balance of power was such that the southern states, left to their own devices, would probably have developed into something akin to the apartheid state in South Africa had they not been part of the United States. We now know that Nazi German administrators responsible for anti-Semitic segregation studied practices in the South in the 1930s.

It was not so much *trans*national embedding that was decisive for the success of the civil rights movement, but the specific situation of the southern states within a federal state, separation from which was quite out of the question after the traumatic defeat of 1865. In the early stages of the movement, it was a 1954 Supreme Court ruling (Brown v. Board of Education) that had a tremendous galvanizing effect by declaring racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. As the movement progressed, it was increasingly successful in prompting liberal media and activists in the North to sympathize, provide material support, and participate directly in campaigns. This has been emphasized, albeit one-sidedly, in *The Civil Sphere* by Jeffrey Alexander.[29] The votes of northern blacks already played a major role in Kennedy's narrow victory in the 1960 presidential election. But foreign policy motives were also of great importance to the federal government's change of course, which began hesitantly and ambivalently under President Kennedy and was carried out consistently only after his assassination, under his successor Lyndon B. Johnson. In their missionary work in Africa, US churches experienced news of the brutal repression of blacks in the southern states as a huge obstacle to their credibility. Thus, the US government saw ever more clearly that this situation was bound to be grist to the mill of Soviet anti-US propaganda and would inevitably have a highly unfavourable impact on the country's image in those African colonies that were gaining independence at the time. Nascent forms of cooperation between the civil rights movement in the United States and anti-colonial movements in Africa intensified this pressure. The role model of Gandhi had had an early impact on King, who clearly recognized the international dimension of his own struggle.[30] Here again we can see a connection between the victory of a moral-universalist social movement and its environment shaped by imperial interests.

I hope I have at least sketched out a reasonably vivid picture of the civil rights movement and a sociological explanation for its emergence and success. Taking this movement seriously, I find, shifts the parameters of contemporary public debates on religion and politics in many ways. Martin Luther King's Christianity was certainly no opium of the people; the public role of religion in the civil rights movement was not a danger to political freedom, but constitutive of it. Those who echo Max Weber's diagnosis of the "age alien to God and bereft of prophets"[31] in which we supposedly live should ask themselves how this analysis stands up to such a prophetic movement and its fusion of "love" and "justice" in the second half of the twentieth century. These considerations within the framework of a historical sociology of social movements also have a moral philosophical dimension, as I want to emphasize in conclusion. In contemplating cases in which a universalist morality wins through, we cannot simply attribute this to the power

of rational motivation or reason-based insights. We have to ask where strong motivations and the capacity for sustained and effective action might come from, which traditions and experiences nourish them, and in which circumstances they come to prevail. As we have seen, the US civil rights movement was not driven by liberal, emotionally moderate intellectuals trusting in the unconstrained power of the better argument, but by a deeply religious, life-transformingly passionate, non-violently compelling movement in which deeply Christian black men, women, and children, most of whom had had a minimum of formal education, played a decisive role. Yet Christianity cannot claim superiority with respect to moral universalism on this basis, because Christianity was also used to justify slavery and racial segregation. The relationship between religion and moral change is more complex than imagined by those who either declare a particular religion the source of universalist morality or, conversely, believe liberation from religion to be a prerequisite for moral progress. Religions are influenced by moral developments in their self-understanding and influence them in turn. Moral universalism is an ongoing challenge for all of us and will never be the possession of a particular tradition, whether religious or secular.

Endnotes

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