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Kristen Tippett Briggs

Webster’s dictionary provides this definition of religion: “the service and worship of God or the supernatural; commitment or devotion to religious faith or observance; a personal set or institutionalized system of religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices; a cause, principle, or system of beliefs held to with ardor and faith.” Religion can mean a variety of things to different people. But, what did it mean to the African American community during the late 1950s and 1960s? For many of them, religion meant relying on God, having faith, and using the church as a meeting place. It was also a place where they could be encouraged and uplifted. The roots of what many in the community believed stretch all the way back to the beginnings of slavery in the Deep South. It was from these very roots that African Americans from all over Alabama drew strength so that they could fight against segregation in order to win back their dignity and honor.

During the fall semester of last year, my classmates and I had the honor and privilege to conduct oral history interviews

1 Webster’s Dictionary, s.v. “Religion.”
with Reverend Otis Smith, Huston Cobb, Reverend B.J. Bonner and others who provided us with detailed accounts of their lives, their educational background, what it was like to live through segregation, and how religion played a major factor in their lives. Those who challenged inequality and segregation often looked above for answers and help, seeking the faith they desperately needed to help them through their many struggles.

To understand the influence of religion on the Civil Rights movement and in the lives of the African American community in northwest Alabama, we need to understand how religion aided the slave communities in the South during much of the 1800s. We all know that during the 1800s, slavery was widespread throughout this region and cotton was king. In order to reap the profits, having enough slaves to work the fields and make the planter classes’ lives as comfortable as possible was a must. In order to deal with the abuse and degradation, slaves needed a place to turn and needed someone to lean on who understood how they were feeling and to whom they could go during their distress. Religion was a way for some early slaves to cope with their position within the “peculiar institution.” By looking to God and placing their faith in him, they had hope that while they may never find peace on earth they were sure to find it in heaven as a reward for their toils on earth.

While white slave owners and ministers were explaining to their families and congregations how the
scripts upheld their livelihood, blacks were using it for an entirely different purpose. White southerners pulled scriptures from the Bible out of context in order to justify slavery. Many held firmly to the belief that while the Bible said that every soul was equal according to God, that belief was only applicable to the spiritual realm and not the social realm. Most white southerners believed churches should be in the business of saving sinners, not involving themselves with the world outside of it—meaning the institution of slavery. White southerners also took charge of teaching their slaves as well as restricting what was taught to them by outside black ministers. Many made their slaves attend church with white ministers while black ministers often had to operate underground as they were often viewed as threatening. White masters imposed these restrictions in order to ensure that their slaves were only being taught things that solidified the institution of slavery. Any teaching that contradicted this idea threatened the entire institution of slavery. In his article, “Black American Religion-From Slavery to Segregation,” Dr. Kenneth Johnson provides some insight into the religious doctrine taught to slaves by their white owners: “The religious doctrines taught the slaves and the church practices were controlled by whites; the doctrine and church practices were never anti-slavery in tone and never suggested that the slaves should be free.” To make things a bit more peculiar within this strange institution, white churches in northwest

Alabama did welcome slaves into their churches, but as Dr. Johnson makes clear, blacks had to sit in special sections away from whites. Some churches, such as the Presbyterian Church in Tuscumbia, admitted slaves into their membership as early as the 1840s.

Despite all the restrictions and the twisted way the scriptures were presented to them, slaves held firmly to their belief that their God would indeed save them and help them out of their seemingly endless torture. God was their deliverer, and just as he delivered Moses and his people out of Egypt and in turn guided them to the Promised Land, he would also lift them out of their bondage and set aside the greatest reward possible. Though they may have to toil here in despair and agony for a while longer, the reward, they believed, would be worth it in the end.

It was this belief that brought African American slaves together for worship and was also the reason they held so tightly to scripture. What I have always found intriguing and inspiring was how the cruel institution of slavery managed to bring a group of people closer together instead of ripping them apart. Religion was a common thread shared by all. Despite their terrible circumstances, many in slave communities had a seemingly unwavering faith in God and the scriptures. They carried the hopes founded upon religion into the fields, into the big house, and after emancipation into schools. Several of the oral history interviews conducted by

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3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
the University of North Alabama’s Public History program mention how churches in the area had schools in or near the church building so that black children denied adequate schooling due to segregation could go to school and get a proper education. After the Civil War and emancipation, creating churches and schools became more and more common. Dr. Johnson credits the Civil War and emancipation with laying “the foundation for a new order.” He states that in this new order “blacks continued to accept the Christian doctrine and continued affiliation with the same churches or organized new churches similar to those they had known as slaves. Blacks did reject white control of their religious life.”

By creating their own churches after emancipation as well as their own schools and belief system, African Americans pulled themselves together and created their own world—one that no one could compete with. The churches they formed after the war would come to serve as the very foundation for the movement that would occur almost one hundred years later—a movement that changed the lives of African Americans forever.

Their faith and devotion to God was one of the most important lessons that former slaves passed down to their children and grandchildren. Religion and the concept of church was a lasting legacy. This legacy trickled down to the generation living during the 1950s and 1960s when the Civil Rights Movement and the push for desegregation began.

5 Ibid., 51.
6 Ibid., 54.
As in the years before, a common strife brought the African American community together where yet again religion was found to be right in the middle of it all. Wayne Flynt gives a splendid explanation about why African Americans clung to religion so tightly in his book *Alabama in the Twentieth Century*. Religion, he says, “preserved the dignity of countless Alabama blacks and allowed them to make sense of their cosmic predicament during the reign of Jim Crow. And such religion would ultimately become a powerful weapon for physical as well as for spiritual liberation.” Religion was something trustworthy, unchanging, and reliable thus making it a crucial element that was at the very core of their fight for freedom and human rights.

I believe Dr. Flynt does the best job describing the importance of the church to the African American community during their struggle with segregation: “Religion represented another critical aspect of black identity. Despite class differences between individual congregations, the black church was a central community institution, providing affirmation of blackness, alternative forms of worship, leadership opportunities for women, political and economic leadership for the black community, and essentially defining life for most African Americans.” This statement was proven time and time again in most of our oral history interviews. Those of us who interviewed African Americans

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8 Ibid., 331.
or religion in some shape, form, or fashion. Religion and the church in particular, did define their lives. Religion was a part of their childhood and was a concept their parents had instilled in them. One of my classmates had the opportunity to interview a gentleman by the name of Huston Cobb. During the interview, Mr. Cobb was asked to tell when he first learned about Pearl Harbor: “Well it was a Sunday. We had a radio but we didn’t have it on Sunday because we had to go to church. That’s a must, you had to go to church.”

His answer gives us insight into how religion was a central part of his childhood and what Sunday mornings were generally like in his childhood home. I had the honor of interviewing Reverend Otis Smith who preaches at the First Baptist Church in Tuscumbia, Alabama. Throughout the interview, Reverend Smith described his childhood, his years in military service, how he was called into the ministry, and the road to becoming a preacher. When he described his childhood education, he explained to me that his parents always knew his teachers. They socialized with them and went to church with them. Everyone knew everyone and church was the common meeting ground. Coming together and worshiping God in church was one way to, as Reverend Smith stated early on in the interview, bond with one another and face the challenges that lay ahead.

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10  Reverend Otis Smith, interview by author, Tuscumbia, AL., November 1, 2012.
11  Ibid.
12  Ibid.
13  Ibid.
abreast with the latest news concerning the Civil Rights Movement. Some rural congregations had no access to newspapers or black radio stations. As Dr. Flynt points out “churches became strategic communication networks and the key to organizing a mass movement.”$^{14}$ It was in the churches that black preachers could reach the African American community and fill them in on what was happening in the world around them. It was here in one location that the word could be spread concerning marches or sit-ins that would be taking place within the days to come while also encouraging their members to not give up even if the present times seemed unbearable. Ministers more than likely taught their parishioners to meet discrimination with love, to always be peaceable, and imitate Jesus in all that they did. It is also likely that ministers and preachers asked their members to be patient just as Moses and his people were. There is no doubt that leaders of the movement saw how united they were on this particular front and in turn utilized that strength to their advantage. Churches were indeed the best places to coordinate. Ministers like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Fred Shuttlesworth, and those whose names we do not know were imperative to the movement and kept it going. These were the very men who helped mobilize the people and encouraged them, assuring them that no matter what kind of horrible treatment they may be face in their day to day walks of life, they had a place to turn and that God was indeed on their side. $^{14}$ Flynt, 349.
If I asked you to describe in one word what helped black churches and their members most during their struggle to win their rights and freedoms during the 1960s, what do you think you would say? Think about it for a moment. Some of you might say that they had hope, drive, passion, or courage. I propose that not only did they have those things but that they also had zeal. Their zeal for their faith, for Christ, for eventual liberation helped them to overcome so many of the obstacles and roadblocks that were set before them. What else beside a zeal for their cause could help them endure police brutality, dog attacks, fire hoses, and verbal abuse? The very roots of that zeal were religion-based. Churches were attacked and bombed by the Ku Klux Klan and other radical members of the white race because they knew that at the heart of so many African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement was the concept of religion. How else can one explain the deliberate attack on churches and the horrific tragedies like that experienced on September 15, 1963 at the 16th Street Baptist Church? Imagine being the parent of one of those four young girls killed inside a church because of racial hatred. The only way to explain how a community made it through tragedies such as this is that they had faith and conviction; things taught to them since their childhood that helped ease the pain and allowed them to move forward no matter what difficulties they faced.

Today, many people of that particular generation recall what it was like to live in a time marked with tension and
hatred. The oral history interviews my classmates and I did only scratch the surface. It was wonderful to see how some of the people who lived through that time remained faithful and are continuing to pass on their faith to their children and grandchildren. Some, like Reverend Smith and Reverend B.J. Bonner, heeded the call to become ministers and are sharing their zeal for God with others. In an interview with Mr. Arthur Graves, one of my classmates was privileged to hear him tell how when he first enlisted in the service his mother gave him a small copy of the Bible or Testament.\textsuperscript{15} He states that “in that Testament she marked the 91st number of Songs”.\textsuperscript{16} Part of that Psalm reads as follows: “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust!’ For it is He who delivers you from the snare of the trapper and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you may seek refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and bulwark.”\textsuperscript{17} In Mr. Graves’ case, religion came in the form of this Testament from his mother as a way of saying keep the faith, stay strong in God, come what may. She had no doubt already learned that lesson.

Religion lived at the very heart of the African American community during slavery, during the Civil Rights Movement, and it still lives on today. Religion, for them, was a daily walk with God. During the Civil Rights Movement

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\textsuperscript{15} Arthur Graves, interview by Tess Evans, November 7, 2012.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ps. 91 (New American Standard Version).
it meant carrying God wherever they went and taking it one day at a time. Religion meant giving it all over to God who was their Savior and deliverer. The zeal many of their ancestors had in the 1800s lives on today though such figures as Reverend Smith, Arthur Graves, and Reverend Bonner. In so many black congregations there is still a strong, powerful zeal for God and for their belief system. They will not soon forget how religion played such a critical role in helping them overcome. God did indeed deliver the grandmothers and grandfathers and the mothers and fathers of today’s generation. I leave you with this quote from one of our interviews with Reverend Bonner who I believe does a better job than I ever could describing God’s role in the African American community both past and present. When asked what the word Missionary Baptist meant, he responded: “Well the word missionary pretty much defines us, because we are a body who believes in going, not just going for the sake of mission but also carrying the message of Jesus Christ. You see that’s our core belief.”

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18 Reverend B.J. Bonner, interview by Kevin Bailey, Russellville, AL, November 5, 2012.