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The Bible Politics of the Black Freedom Struggle

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Today, most Americans, upon hearing the term Bible politics, would associate it with the religious right, i.e., the conservative evangelical wing of the Republican Party. Yet its etymology tells of different roots, specifically, that of radical abolitionists in the 1840s and 1850s who believed that God's laws and justice lay at the very foundation of civil government and laws. Unlike Garrisonian abolitionists who disdained the Constitution and sought the immediate end to slavery through moral suasion alone, this multiracial group deployed the phrase "Bible politics" to profess the "gospel of liberty" through political discourses and institutions.¹

The radical abolitionists' goal to hasten the reconciliation of God's Law and the Law of the Land, even at the cost of armed aggression, reflected the older, distinctly Anglo-American traditions evidenced by the Patriots of the Revolutionary War and their cries for "liberty or

¹ John Stauffer writes that the black abolitionist James McCune Smith and the white abolitionist Gerrit Smith "often used the term 'Bible Politics' to characterize their belief that the government of God and earthly states should be one and the same." See John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and the Transformation of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 11. Milton Sernett emphasizes that the "fusion of religion and politics" was characteristic of the political climate in antebellum upstate New York, and he quotes Beriah Green in a letter to Gerrit Smith as early as October 1838 and prefiguring their role in the formation of the Liberty Party, stating: "I am well convinced that God, the God of the Oppressed, calls us into the field of Politics; and we must obey. I enter without any very great reluctance, as I am clear on the point of duty. And Politics is with us a Sacred concern." See, Milton C. Sernett, *North Star Country: Upstate New York and the Crusade for African American Freedom* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 105.

death.” The nation’s Founding Fathers privileged natural law/natural rights theorists such as the influential British philosopher John Locke, who inserted religion into his own writing. In Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government*, published in 1690, this seventeenth-century champion of Reason and individual rights incorporates religious ideas in his chapter on the emergence of political societies. Locke draws extensively from the books of the Old Testament in his chapter on conquest, noting, “I will not dispute now whether princes are exempt from the laws of their country; but this I am sure, they owe subjection to the laws of God and nature. No body, no power can exempt them from the obligations of that eternal law,” and he elaborates upon this point through a discussion of the Old Testament book of Second Kings. In his ruminations on legislative power, Locke makes clear the relationship between Nature and God, stating: “the rules that they [legislators] make for other men’s actions, must, as well as their own and other men’s actions, be conformable to the law of nature, i.e., to the will of God, of which that is a declaration, and the fundamental law of nature being the preservation of mankind, no human sanction can be good, or valid against it.”²

Blacks and whites alike interpreted the Declaration of Independence as complementary to God’s law. The Declaration admits to a prior existing, higher authority. First in its assertion of America as an independent nation among the powers of the earth, the Declaration of Independence refers to a “separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them.” Second, in its most quoted passage on self-evident truths, “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” God’s law functions as the Urtext, so to speak,

² John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Sections 109, 135-136, 195-196. Also see Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke, and Equality: Christian Foundations in Locke’s Political Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

for this man-made document, since governments are instituted by the consent of the governed in order to secure our inalienable, natural God-given rights.³

The term, Bible politics, despite its coinage at a specific moment in the fight against racial injustice, succinctly comprehends the fusion of religious and political discourses, thus making it a useful concept for a broader analysis over time. The mutually constitutive discourses of religion, race, law, and rights comprise the conceptual entanglement that I am calling the Bible politics of the black freedom struggle. It represents a sacred witness that structures the cultural logic and ideological motivations not only in the fight against the “sin of slavery” but also in the struggle of later generations against the “sin of segregation” and other forms of racial injustice. It rests on the distinction between obedience to natural/divine law versus civil/man-made law. However, it rejects as artificial the binary between the “religious” and “political” by emphasizing God’s law (a higher, moral law) as the basis of civil law and as the moral referent for evaluating the validity of civil laws, along with the rights associated with such laws. Although today, legal theorists debate any *necessary* correlation among religion, morality, and law, the advocates of Bible politics from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries remained faithful to this discursive intersection.

Bible politics is a distinct component of an overall black sacred witness that champions the oneness and equality of humanity.⁴ Within this larger witness and its normative universe,

³ Historian Pauline Maier identifies God-talk in the many early state and local declarations in the months prior to the approval of the final text of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. See Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1998), p. 87-94, 132-156.

⁴ I am arguing here that Bible politics is but one aspect of the larger realm of black sacred witness. This insight is indebted to the work of legal scholar Robert Cover, who writes: “We inhabit a nomos—a normative universe. We constantly create and maintain a world of right and wrong, of lawful and unlawful, of valid and void. . . . The rules and principles of justice, the formal institutions of the law, and the conventions of a social order are, indeed, important in that world; they are, however, but a small part of the normative universe that ought to claim our attention.” See Robert M. Cover, *Narratives, Violence, and the Law: The Essays of Robert Cover*, edited by Martha Minow, Michael Ryan, and Austin Sarat (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 95.

indeed nomos, it is akin to but not synonymous with the aesthetic spiritual responses, such as the slave songs and narratives, expressive of black resilience in the face of oppression. Nor should it be equated simply with the sacred witness of black self-determination as exemplified by the emergence of separate black churches and denominations. Because Bible politics encapsulates the centrality of religious ideas in bringing about racial equality and justice through the tenets, documents, processes, and institutional bodies of the nation's governance, it is also distinct from other Christian and non-Christian efforts that affirm the human dignity of black people through the rejection of the Constitution, or through non-involvement in electoral politics, or through advocacy of a separate black sovereignty or alternatively through interracial communal living facilities. Particularly with the rise of large black populations in the urban North and West in the twentieth century, new religious beliefs and spiritual contexts emerged from such groups as the Nation of Islam, Black Judaism, the United House of Prayer for All Peoples (Daddy Grace), and the International Peace Mission Movement (Father Divine). Whether pursuing black-nationalist agendas or economic enterprises, those groups did not emphasize direct engagement in the American political process. Conversely, Bible politics invoked Judaeo-Christian teachings through organized intra-racial and interracial activism, inclusive of the formal writing and disseminating of political tracts, petitioning Congress, joining or forming political parties, challenging existing laws, and working for civil rights legislation. It represents, then, a specific sacred witness to American political discourses and systems of government.

While attention to religious language reveals the perceived linkage between the universal ideals in the Bible and the natural law ideals of the American nation as presented in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, it reveals as well the centuries-long contestation over the meaning and application of laws and rights, citizenship and justice—a

contestation in which both sides (antislavery versus proslavery advocates, or civil rights activists versus segregationists) validated their respective positions by using the same foundational texts—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bible. Indeed for much of American history, the fusion of religion and politics has undergirded white supremacy and the subordination of black people. Racial purity laws remained the most fundamental expression of the longstanding inseparability of race, religion, politics, and natural law, since they were upheld by government from the early colonial period and implanted root and branch into American jurisprudence for more than three centuries afterward.

Although the great majority of states passed, at one time or another, anti-miscegenation laws, Virginia offers an unparalleled record. In 1662 Virginia legislators sought to curb interracial sex and the colony's growing mixed-race population by increasing the punitive fine noted in its prior anti-miscegenation law, declaring that "if any Christian shall commit fornication with a black man or woman, he or she so offending shall pay double the fines imposed by the former act."⁵ Once enforced, the law especially targeted white women, since children born to white mothers inherited free status. It is also interesting that during the early decades of the colony, Christian stood as the synonym for white person, even in early cases where black and white churchgoers had violated the law.⁶ In 1878 in the case *Kinney v. Commonwealth*, a Virginia court ruled against the legality of a marriage of a black man and white woman, stating: "The purity of public morals, the moral and physical development of both races, and the highest advancement of our cherished southern civilization, under which two

⁵ A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., and Barbara Kopytoff. "Racial Purity and Interracial Sex in the Law of Colonial and Antebellum Virginia," in F. Michael Higginbotham, *Race Law: Cases, Commentary, and Questions*. 2nd edition (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 2005), 33-36.

⁶ The interchangeability of "Christian" and white was also used to resist school integration several centuries later after the *Brown* decision. Several counties in Virginia closed their public schools for years, while private "Christian" schools opened to white students only.

distinct races are to work out and accomplish the destiny to which the Almighty has assigned them on this continent—all require that they should be kept distinct and separate, and that connections and alliances so unnatural that God and nature seem to forbid them should be prohibited by positive law and be subject to no evasion.” It was not until 1967 that the Virginia ban was overturned by the United States Supreme Court in *Loving v. Virginia*. However, in 1965 at the trial court level, Judge Leon Bazile of Caroline County’s circuit court upheld Mildred and Richard Loving’s marriage as a criminal act. Each of them spent time in jail. In addition to his primary holding of states’ rights, Bazile added to his opinion the following dictum: “Almighty God created the races white, black, yellow, malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents. And but for the interference with his arrangement there would be no cause for such marriages. The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix.”⁷

That God forbade “unnatural alliances” in the form of interracial sex or miscegenation (called racial amalgamation before the Civil War) represented the primal justification for dividing the races in many other social arenas, such as education, housing, public accommodations, amusements, etc. The extreme response to the “unnaturalness” of race mixing can be seen in the lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till for flirting with a white woman in 1955, or in the Scottsboro Boys’ ordeal that began in 1931 and their subsequent stay on death row for decades, or in the massive destruction of black life and property in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921, also based on a wholly unfounded accusation of rape. Equally extreme in regard to the aforementioned examples, is the legal system’s failure to exact retributive justice.⁸

⁷ The judicial opinions from 1878 and 1865 are quoted in Peggy Paoe, *What Comes Naturally: Miscegenation Law and the Making of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 2, 275.

⁸ Devery S. Anderson, *Emmett Till: The Murder that Shocked the World and Propelled the Civil Rights Movement* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015). Buck Colbert Franklin, *My Life and an Era: The*

The Bible politics of the black freedom struggle provides the counter-narrative, i.e., a competing normative understanding, which calls to mind the insightful supposition of legal scholar Robert Cover, who wrote: “If there existed two legal orders with identical legal precepts and identical, predictable patterns of public force, they would nonetheless differ essentially in meaning if, in one of the orders, the precepts were universally venerated while in the other they were regarded by many as fundamentally unjust.”⁹ The Bible politics of the black freedom struggle inheres within a combination of principles that have also continued over the centuries, namely: (1) the biblically-validated oneness of humanity (Acts 17:26) and therefore freedom as the sacred and natural condition for all; (2) the sacred quality of the Declaration of Independence and the liberating spirit of the Constitution; (3) the recognition of just laws and unjust laws with emphasis on obedience to just laws; (4) the essentiality of a multi-racial coalition for lasting success; (5) the moral obligation on the part of African Americans to make America live up to its true ideals.

The public addresses and writings of Lemuel Haynes, a black Revolutionary War Patriot, theologian, and ordained Congregationalist minister, attest to the presence of the black voice of conscience to white America during the era of the Revolutionary War and Early Republic. His poem “The Battle of Lexington,” written in 1775 urges the bloodshed of war for the conjoined goals of national independence and the abolition of slavery. The poem’s verses advocate the necessity of armed struggle--“And Seal it with their blood”/... Into the peacefull Grave/Much better there, in Death Confin’d/Than a Surviving Slave.”¹⁰ In 1776, in the essay “Liberty Further

Autobiography of Buck Colbert Franklin, edited by John Hope Franklin and John Whittington Franklin (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1997), 192-218; Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 (2001) at <http://www.okhistory.org/research/forms/freport.pdf> .

⁹ Cover, *Narratives, Violence, and the Law*, 99.

¹⁰ John Saillant’s rich intellectual history and biography of Haynes describes the poem “Battle of Lexington” as Haynes’s “youthful effort to craft a republican hymn.” John Saillant, *Black Puritan, Black Republican: The Life and Thought of Lemuel Haynes, 1753-1833* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 51-52.

Extended,” Haynes, a soldier in the Continental Army, contended that the Revolutionary War could not usher in true American liberty until freedom was extended to black slaves. Serving in the Continental Army, Haynes based his antislavery argument on the Bible and the Declaration of Independence, when he wrote that freedom was the natural condition of mankind: “Liberty, & freedom, is an innate principle, which is unmovably placed in the human Species; and to see a man aspire after it, is not Enigmatical, seeing he acts no ways incompatible with his own Nature: . . . Liberty is a Jewel which was handed Down to man from the cabinet of Heaven, and is Coaeval with his Existance [sic]. And . . . it proceeds from the Supreme Legislature of the universe.” Building upon the rationale of white American Patriots who maintained the right to defy unfair British laws, Haynes distinguished between just and unjust laws in regard to the rights of blacks, stating: “Every privilege [right] that mankind Enjoy have their Origin from God; and whatever acts are passed in any Earthly Court, which are Derogatory to those Edicts that are passed in the Court of Heaven, the act is void. It hath pleased God to make of one Blood all nations of men, for to dwell upon the face of the Earth. Acts 17:26. And as all are one Species, so there are the same Laws, and aspiring principles placed in all nations.”¹¹ Nearly two centuries later, in the 1960s, with language that is uncanny in its similarity to Haynes, Martin Luther King’s analysis of just and unjust laws advocated the moral obligation to disobey unjust laws.¹²

¹¹ Haynes also wrote in this essay that a “Negro, may Justly Challenge, and has an undeniable right to his Liberty. Consequently, the practice of Slave-keeping, which so much abounds in this land is illicit.” Lemuel Haynes, “Liberty Further Extended: Or Free Thoughts on the Illegality of Slave-keeping; Wherein those arguments that Are used in its vindication Are plainly confuted,” in Ruth Bogin, “‘Liberty further Extended’: A 1776 Antislavery Manuscript by Lemuel Haynes,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 40 (January 1983):85-105. see also Saillant, *Black Puritan*, 160-161.

¹² Haynes theological background in the New Divinity may have included knowledge of the writings of the thirteenth-century philosopher and theologian Thomas Aquinas. Martin Luther King, Jr., is explicit on having read Aquinas. Importantly, Aquinas himself, in his discussion of just and unjust laws quotes from the Bible, which Haynes was sure to have read—from Proverbs 8:15 (“By me kings reign, and princes decree justice”) and from Acts 5:29 (“Then Peter and the other apostles answered and said, ‘We ought to obey God rather than men.’”)

Convinced in 1801 that the “language of our own constitution coincides with the holy oracles, Acts 17:26,” Haynes deemed the American Revolution still incomplete because the new nation’s avowal of the “natural rights of men” failed to include “the Africans among us.” In his Fourth of July address in 1801, *The Nature and Importance of True Republicanism*, Haynes exposed the limits of republicanism in a government that sanctioned slavery.¹³ His biographer John Saillant captures the rhetorical style and significance of Haynes’s message as a mirror to the republican ideology of the time:

Reminding his Vermont audience of their state constitution of 1777, the first to ban slavery, Haynes fit race relations into the republican paradigm. Oppression and slavery were “inconsistent with true liberty, and ought to meet with some kind of obstruction from civil authority.”¹⁴

Haynes continued this critique during the War of 1812 in his address *Dissimulation Illustrated*, in which he drew heavily from the Bible in his condemnation of the hypocrisy of America’s claims to both religion and republicanism. Haynes decried the inconsistency of outrage at Britain’s impressment of American sailors and at the same time lack of sympathy for blacks in bondage, asserting “Partial affection, or distress for some of our fellow-creatures, while others, even under our notice are wholly disregarded, betrays dissimulation.”¹⁵

The appeal to the moral, even liberating context of the Constitution in the face of a perceived unjust law can be seen in the December 30, 1799 petition to Congress, by Absalom Jones and other free black citizens of Philadelphia. In the “Petition of the People of Colour, Freemen, within the City and Suburbs of Philadelphia, the seventy signatories focused on the Fugitive Slave Act of 1793. Conscious of exercising their rights as citizens, the black petitioners

¹³ Haynes’s *The Nature and Importance of True Republicanism, with a Few Suggestions Favorable to Independence: A Discourse Delivered at Rutland (Vermont) the Fourth of July 1801, It Being the 25th Anniversary of American Independence* (Rutland 1801), quoted in Saillant, *Black Puritan*, 60-66.

¹⁴ Saillant, “Lemuel Haynes's Black Republicanism and the American Republican Tradition, 1775-1820,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 14 (Autumn., 1994), pp. 293-324.

¹⁵ Quoted passages from Haynes’s *Dissimulation Illustrated* (1813) appear in Saillant, *Black Puritan*, 68-69.

acknowledged both their own enjoyment of the “natural right to Liberty” and their sense of duty to speak for the slaves--“our afflicted Brethren, suffering under various circumstances in different parts of these States, but deeply sympathizing with them.” The fugitive slave law endangered their own lives and wellbeing, they added, since slavecatchers made a practice of kidnapping northern free blacks and transporting them to the southern states. While not demanding the immediate end to slavery, they detailed the horrid conditions of slave trafficking, the pain of family separation, and the denial of dignity from being “inhumanly exposed to sale.” They registered their desire that the government might “exert every means in your power to undo the heavy burdens, and prepare the way for the oppressed to go free, that every yoke may be broken.” The Philadelphia petitioners, like Lemuel Haynes in Vermont, considered the trade in humanity to be a violation of the “solemn compact” of the preamble to the Constitution, with its stated purpose to “form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty.” They believed *that spirit* to be ultimately at odds with slavery. However, their petition is particularly interesting for its explicit attention to the omission of the actual words “slave” or “slavery” in the Constitution. The petitioners interpreted the omission as beneficial to the antislavery cause and implored the Congress to give validity to this meaning, thus presaging the same argument used by radical abolitionists in the 1840s and 1850s. The 1799 petition affirmed: “In the Constitution, and the Fugitive bill, no mention is made of Black people or Slaves— therefore if the Bill of Rights, or the declaration of Congress are of any validity, we beseech that as we are men we may be admitted to partake of the Liberties and unalienable rights therein held forth—firmly believing that the extending of Justice and equity to all Classes, would be a means of drawing down the blessings of Heaven upon this Land. . . .”¹⁶

¹⁶ Petition of Absalom Jones and others, December 30, 1799 4~HR6A-F4.2. Jan.2, 1800, Records of the U.S. House

Scholarship in the last decade or so on abolitionists in third-party politics, particularly those in the Liberty Party and its successors the National Liberty Party and the Radical Abolition Party, has brought to light the very term “Bible politics,” as can be seen in the excellent work of scholars Milton Sernett, John Stauffer, James Brewer Stewart, and Manisha Sinha.¹⁷ Although overwhelmingly white in membership, the Liberty Party and Radical Abolition Party welcomed blacks as members and delegates to their meetings. For example, the 1844 platform made explicit its invitation for “our colored fellow citizens to fraternity with us in the Liberty Party.” Both parties nominated black persons for office on their national tickets. More recently, Manisha Sinha’s comprehensive study of abolitionism identifies a number of leading black abolitionists affiliated with the Liberty Party, particularly, Henry Highland Garnet, Samuel Ringgold Ward, and James McCune Smith and to a lesser extent Charles Ray, James W.C. Pennington, and brothers Charles Langston and John Mercer Langston. She describes the Liberty Party as follows: “In the burned-over districts of upstate New York, political abolitionists reaped the benefits of a potent combination of evangelical abolitionism with third-party politics. Their popular slogan ‘Vote as you pray’ was designed to wean anti-slavery evangelical voters out of the Whig Party. The party press often carried news from abolitionist churches as much as political matters.”¹⁸ In 1847 the Liberty Party began to take an irreversible downward turn.

of Representatives, Record Group 233, National Archives. The preamble of the Constitution reads: —thus desacralizing its words, “We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defenses, and to secure the blessings of Liberty to ourselves and posterity.”

¹⁷ James Brewer Stewart discusses the concept “Bible Politics,” by primarily contrasting the message of the abolitionists with that of the religious right in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. James Brewer Stewart, “Reconsidering the Abolitionists in an Age of Fundamentalist Politics,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 26 (Spring, 2006), pp. 1-23; Lawrence J. Friedman, *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism, 1830-1870* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 115-119; Stauffer, *Black Hearts*, 11-12, 134-181; Sernett, *North Star Country*, 104-128; Manisha Sinha, *The Slave’s Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 466.

¹⁸ Sinha, *Slave’s Cause*, 466

Blacks' minority status in the larger population and also in progressive white organizations signal the reasons for their forming all-black conventions at the state and national levels while also participating in political parties like the Liberty Party and the Radical Abolition Party. Black leaders like Henry Highland Garnet, Samuel Ringgold Ward, and the fugitive slave Henry Bibb campaigned for the Liberty Party presidential nominee James G. Birney in 1844. However, it is interesting that at the same time that Henry Highland Garnet proudly identified with the Liberty Party he also presented his famous address at the National Negro Convention meeting in Buffalo in 1843, where he urged the slaves to rise up against their masters in the manner of Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner. Garnet's speech was long remembered, even revered by many African Americans for his call to arms "Resistance, Resistance, Resistance!" which disgusted Frederick Douglas, then a non-violent follower of Garrison. Yet, Garnet's speech also used the familiar rhetoric of the Bible politics of the black freedom struggle. "The Declaration [of Independence] was a glorious document," Garnet proclaimed. "Sages admired it, and the patriotic of every nation revered the God-like sentiments which it contained." He then proceeded to condemn the Founding Fathers for their limited embrace of universal rights. "When the power of Government returned to their hands, did they emancipate the slaves? No; they rather added new links to our chains....In every man's mind the good seeds of liberty are planted, and he who brings his fellow down so low, as to make him contented with a condition of slavery, commits the highest crime against God and man."¹⁹

Also in 1845, the black physician James McCune Smith, in "The destiny of the people of color : a lecture, delivered before the Philomathean Society and Hamilton Lyceum, in January, 1841, emphasized a common humanity and the "equality of the human species," while criticizing

¹⁹ Henry Highland Garnet, "Call to Rebellion: Address to the Slaves of the United States of America," Speech given at the National Negro Convention, Buffalo, NY, August 21, 1843, in *Crossing the Danger Water: Three Hundred Years of African-American Writing*, edited by Deirdre Mullane (Anchor Book, Doubleday, 1993), 117.

scientists who had begun to classify blacks as a different, inferior species of humanity from whites. Since African American constituted a “minority held in servitude” within the larger American population, so Smith argued, they must remain in America despite the attractions of emigration. By leaving America, they could not fight slavery and thus fulfill their destiny of “purifying” the nation and its laws.²⁰

The Liberty Party and its offshoots the National Liberty Party and the Radical Abolition Party, which was the most militant of the successors to the failed Liberty Party, continued to proclaim “the gospel of liberty”—the phrase of black abolitionist James McCune Smith in his address to the inaugural convention of the Radical Abolition Party in Syracuse in 1855. White abolitionist Gerrit Smith, a cofounder of the Liberty Party, the National Liberty Party, and the Radical Abolition Party, shared in the mutual friendship of James McCune Smith, Frederick Douglass, and white abolitionist John Brown. John Stauffer eloquently describes the four men’s relationship as an alliance and friendship. The party’s “Jubilee doctrine” of bringing God’s government on earth, gestures to a mix of scholarly and religious commitments. Stauffer describes the radical abolitionists as follows: “Not that they ignored science. McCune Smith published numerous articles that drew on his knowledge of medicine and physiology to attack racist doctrines, and Douglass and Gerrit Smith relied on McCune Smith’s evidence to formulate their attacks against antiblack prejudice. But Bible politics was their main weapon against these evils.”²¹

²⁰ Smith’s lecture was published in 1843 as *The Destiny of the People of Color* and reprinted in John Stauffer, ed., *The Works of James McCune Smith: Black Intellectual and Abolitionist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 48-59.

²¹ McCune Smith chaired the inaugural meeting of the Radical Abolition Party, which advocated, in addition to the immediate end to slavery, women’s rights, the right to vote “irrespective of sex or color or character, and although preferring peaceful solutions, if necessary violent resistance to end slavery. Stauffer, *Black Hearts*, 24-75.

Stauffer also highlights the radical abolitionists' commitment to violence, if necessary to end slavery. Thus Douglass, who had by then fully abandoned William Lloyd Garrison's moral suasion and anti-Constitution philosophies, made strong calls for the Radical Abolition Party in his newspaper, declaring: "We want men at this crisis who cannot be frightened from the advocacy of our 'radical' doctrines, because of their unpopularity... Let us not, then grow weary, but believing that 'whatever is RIGHT, IS PRACTICABLE,' go forth with renewed determination to conquer, though we die in the conflict." At the party's inaugural meeting, John Brown quoted Hebrews 9:22 ["without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin"]. The delegates gave Brown money, with some members even supplying him with weapons later. Brown would soon depart for proslavery Pottawatomie, Kansas, and in 1859 he, along with a band of white and black men, would launch the ill-fated raid at Harper's Ferry for the liberation of the slaves.²²

From the founding of America to the civil rights activism of the 1960s, the Bible politics of the black freedom struggle has continuously maintained the theme of purifying America—of making America live up to its ideals, or as Martin Luther King, Jr, stated in regard to the Constitution on April 3, 1968, the day before he was assassinated, "All we say to America is to be true to what you said on paper."²³ Bible politics has been pursued through overwhelmingly black organizations and through alliances on a multi-racial basis. The black Southern Christian Leadership Conference, under Martin Luther King, adopted the slogan "To Save the Soul of America" as it promoted non-violent disobedience to unjust laws in the 1950s and 1960s; but SCLC, along with other civil rights organizations, also believed that effective gains toward racial

²² Stauffer, *Black Hearts*, 13, 25-27. Also see on Douglass's shift toward a positive reading of the Constitution, Sinha, *Slaves' Cause*, 492-495.

²³ King, "I See the Promised Land," (3 April 1968) in King, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James Melvin Washington (p. 282.

justice must come through laws, executive orders, and judicial opinions. This would entail not only intraracial, i.e., black efforts, but also alliances across the races, despite the tensions and setbacks occurring in each context

In her discussion of religion and black women's political activism between 1920 and 1950, Bettye Collier-Thomas discusses numerous black churchwomen, who led local campaigns against lynching, segregation, and disfranchisement from their own base in black denominational organizations or in black congregations within larger white denominations, in black women's clubs, in networks of largely white religious and secular women, and in political party organizations. She states: "Most church women who entered politics did not abandon their churches. They used their church-based leadership to achieve their political purposes."²⁴

One such example is Florence Spearing Randolph, an ordained minister in the AME Zion denomination and longtime pastor of the Wallace Chapel AME Zion Church in Summit, New Jersey. Randolph epitomized the fusion of religion and politics, given that she was an active member and officer in the National League of Colored Republican Women, the New Jersey Colored Republican Women, the National Association of Colored Women, Federal Council of Churches' Department of Race Relations, the New Jersey Federation of Churches, and the New Jersey Women's Republican Club. Randolph's activism in the anti-lynching crusade in the 1920s and in other causes for racial equality in the 1930s and 1940s reflected her understanding of the importance of a variety of political networks for ushering in change. In her speech to several hundred white women at a Republican Women's luncheon in 1920, she reminded the women of the role that black soldiers had played in the World War, and the role of black and white women who served their country in "hospitals, in suffering homes, munitions plants, factories, stores, as

²⁴ Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus, Jobs, and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 291-303

farmers, conductors, street cleaners....” Then focusing on the status of black women, she asked her white audience, “Are these same women, most of whom are wage earners and bread winners, qualified to exercise the right of franchise? Are they worthy to be called American citizens? To have any voice at all in the government by which they and their children are governed and for which they fought? Those rhetorical questions were followed by Randolph’s admonition to her white “more fortunate sisters,” that they must be a voice against “mob violence, lynch laws, and race riots.” In 1943 in an editorial in the local Summit newspaper, Randolph rejected the idea that the problem of race in America was simply a social question, not a religious one, by stating that race posed a religious question to the nation, since “every conceivable relation between individuals is involved in religion.”

There is much to explore in regard to the Bible politics of the black freedom struggle beyond the all-too-familiar names of civil rights personalities and organizations. There is much to learn, especially in the 1960s, about the strategic efforts used by religious organizations, such as the interracial Commission of Religion and Race and its strategic efforts to lobby Congress for the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.²⁵ Jennifer Scanlon’s biography of Anna Arnold Hedgeman and her decades-long black activism takes seriously the religious, racial, and gender-consciousness that led her to work with the March on Washington Movement in 1941, the March on Washington in 1963, and her work with interracial, but largely white religious organizations such as Church Women United, the National Conference on Religion and Race, and the National Council of Churches. She was a founding member of the National Organization of Women (NOW), and the only woman in the black-power oriented National Committee of Negro Churchmen, having been elected the secretary for the group. Scanlon depicts Hedgeman’s

²⁵ James Findlay, “Religion and Politics in the Sixties: The Churches and the Civil Rights Act of 1964,” *Journal of American History* 77 (June 1999):66-92

complex life as striving to “know and act out a Christian practice of social justice.”²⁶ Her experiences offer a window onto the complicated role-- the promise and limitations--of Bible politics in the twentieth-century fight for equal rights and justice in America. As this essay has argued, the Bible politics of the black freedom struggle constitutes an important intervention in African American religious, political, and intellectual history.

²⁶ Jennifer Scanlon, *Until There is Justice: The Life of Anna Arnold Hedgeman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 25, 93-94, 144-145, 151-162, 231-232.