

A Study of the Black Church as Mobilization Asset for Social Activism*

Research Professor Hyung Kyu Lee
(Hankuk University of Foreign Studies)

- I. Introduction**

- II. The Social Experiences as a Starting Point of Cognitive Praxis**
 - 1. The Circumstances of the Black Civil Rights Movement
 - 2. Social Experience of Black Americans

- III. Mobilizing the Black Civil Rights Movement**
 - 1. Black Church as Resource of Social Movement
 - 2. Leaders of the Black Civil Rights Movements

- IV. Conclusion**

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21050/CSE.2023.55.12>

* This work was supported by the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF) grant funded by the Ministry of Education (No. NRF-2017S1A6A 3A03079318).

사회운동의 자원동원으로서 흑인교회 연구

이형규(한국외국어대학교 연구교수)

문화는 사회운동에 중요한 부분이다. 그러나 문화의 한 부분인 종교는 현대 사회운동론에서 중요한 요소로 간주되지 못해 왔다. 실제로 미국 흑인교회는 1960년대 시민권운동에서 중요한 역할을 하였다. 본 연구는 ‘인지적 해방’(cognitive liberation)의 개념을 흑인 교회에 적용할 것이다. 흑인 교회가 신앙적으로 보수적임에도 사회변화에 적극적으로 참여한 것은 흑인의 특별한 경험과 ‘인지적 실천’(cognitive praxis)이 주요한 원인이다. 인지적 실천은 개인으로 구성된 집단을 사회운동으로 뒤바꾼다.

다음으로 본 연구는 사회학의 자원동원론의 측면에서 흑인민권운동을 분석한다. 집합 행동의 참여자들을 감정적이며 비합리적으로 보는 기존의 집합 행위 이론들에 도전하면서 본 연구는 두가지 질문에 답을 한다: 만약 종교가 사회적 변화를 촉진한다면 어떤 조건하에서 종교가 변화의 방해자나 촉진자가 되는가? 왜 종교적 경험들이 흑인 교회의 사회운동에 중요한가?

주제어: 흑인 교회, 자원동원론, 인지적 해방, 인지적 실천, 시민권 운동

I. Introduction

Sociologist Christian Smith contends that religion has been ignored as a central element on modern social movement. Religion no longer seems to promote social change. However, modern religion is still contributing necessary resources to the mobilization of social and political movements through disruptive means.¹⁾ Aldon Morris also recognizes that culture plays a central role in generating and sustaining movements to place human agency at the center of movement analysis, for it operates at the center of collective action.²⁾ However, a more complex question arises: does religion promote social change? If so, under what conditions is religion likely to be change-inhibiting or change-promoting? Under what conditions is religion most likely to be an effective source of change for social justice? The black churches in America have been very conservative from its inception. Nevertheless, it played the important role in the struggle for racial justice in the Civil rights movement of the 1960's.³⁾

1) Christian Smith, eds., *Disruptive Religion: The Force of Faith in Social-Movement Activism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 2. Smith argues, "Religion not only can help to generate and define the grievance that breed disruptive collective activism, it can also supply the symbolic and emotional resources needed to sustain that activism over time." 5,11.

2) Aldon Morris, "Reflections on Social Movement Theory: Criticisms and Proposals," *Rethinking Social Movements, Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning, and Emotion* (Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2004), 235, 246.

3) Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984), 266. He argues that the civil rights movement had "a profound impact on American Society." Vincent Harding, *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990). Vincent Harding also thinks that the central

In this essay, the notion of ‘cognitive liberation’ introduced by Doug McAdam could be applicable to the Black Church and the Civil Rights Movement.⁴⁾ According to McAdam, cognitive liberation occurs when members of an aggrieved group come to view their situation both as unjust and as potentially changeable through collective action. People must come to see their troubles as the result of social injustice, not personal failure, identify with others in the same situation, and put combined interests ahead of personal gain. Cognitive liberation also depends on both a favorable opportunity structure, which holds out hope that change is possible, and organization, which allows movement participants to share their views. The result of all these factors is collective action. By using the term cognitive *praxis*, Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison also emphasize the creative role of consciousness and cognition in individual and collective human action. Cognitive *praxis* “transforms groups of individuals into social movements and gives social movements their particular meaning or consciousness... The cognitive *praxis* is shaped by both external and internal political processes.”⁵⁾

Moreover, there are many social circumstances brought out by the 1954-1968 Civil Rights Movement in the United States. In view of resource mobilization theory, this discussion also leads to the role of the liberative church movement as *praxis* and the black church’s social

idea of twentieth century black liberation movement is not only freedom and justice for blacks but also “the integrity and future of American democracy.”

4) See Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

5) Ron Eyerman and Andrew Jamison, *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), 3.

vision. This calls to question whether and how churches can be a key to social and political transformation.

II. The Social Experiences as a Starting Point of Cognitive Praxis

1. The Circumstances of the Black Civil Rights Movement

The French writer Alexis de Tocqueville emphasized the role of culture in revolution and social movements. People's actual conditions may not get very much worse (indeed, they may improve), but new cultural beliefs and ideas may cause them to view their situation as intolerable. "Evil which are patiently endured when they seem inevitable," wrote Tocqueville, "becomes intolerable once the idea of escape from them is suggested."⁶⁾ Sociologists call this gap between people's expectations and their actual conditions relative deprivation.⁷⁾ Relative deprivation occurs under a variety of circumstances.

Some sociologists understand that the economic prosperity of the 1950s and the early gains of the civil rights movement led African American citizens to believe that their circumstances would soon improve substantially. The new civil rights legislation included with President Lyndon B. Johnson's "War on Poverty" program, however, delivered little. The Johnson administration's promise of a Great Society

6) Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, J. Boner, Trans. (New York: Harper & Row, 1856), 214.

7) See Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970).

faded as the United States became increasingly preoccupied with the war in Vietnam. To raise people's expectations of a feast and then deliver crumbs is to create a socially explosive situation. In this case, the explosion included ghetto riots and the Black Power movement of the late 1960s.

Next, in two World Wars, black and white soldiers fought on the same side to defeat a common enemy. In particular, they fought and ended the fascist regime of Nazi Germany, whose racist, genocidal policies were universally condemned. Amidst the camaraderie in Europe, they had felt like citizens taking up arms for a noble goal. Yet many black veterans returned to Southern communities where they were forbidden to vote, or even to drink water from a public fountain. Laws and customs that had once seemed inevitable or routine became intolerable.⁸⁾

Thirdly, in its 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the U.S. Supreme Court had rejected the separate-but-equal doctrine, declaring segregated schools "inherently unequal." By implication, any form of segregation was unconstitutional. But black people's hopes for integration soon crashed against organized, sometimes violent, white opposition. Southern governors declared that they would ignore the

8) Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 1-4. Vincent Harding recognizes that in spite of the ambivalence of NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), its journal *The Crisis's* influence was effective. In particular, the war debate made blacks to go to fight overseas for "democracy" to show to whites their worthiness to possess the full citizenship. Like Du Bois, Harding also recognizes that the Afro-Americans have two characters in their mind as African and American.

Court's order; white citizen's councils were formed to keep blacks "in their place" by any means necessary; and neither Republican President Eisenhower nor the Democratic Congress were offering wholehearted support.⁹⁾

Lastly, there was a structural opportunity.¹⁰⁾ The mechanization of agriculture in the 1950s had pushed sharecroppers off farms into Southern cities as well as to the North. No longer so dispersed, black communities had achieved the "critical mass" necessary for effective collective action.

2. Social Experience of Black Americans

In the United States, the black churches have developed from the experience of black Americans. James H. Cone wrote about the relationship between experience and Black American Theology as follows:

There is no truth for an about black people that does not emerge out of the context of their experience. Truth in this sense is black truth, a truth disclosed in the history and culture of black people. This means that there can be no Black Theology, which does not take black experience as a source for its starting point. Black Theology is a theology of and for black people, an examination of their stories, tales, and sayings.¹¹⁾

These experiences of black American people include not only their

9) Ibid., 25-29.

10) Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (MA: Addison Wesley, 1978), 100.

11) James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1975), 17-18.

historical experiences but also their cultural ones. Black Americans have been exploited by and suffered from the white dominant social structure. They were forced to accept religious beliefs prescribed by the ruling powers. Then why are experiences so important for the formation of the black church? James Cone noted:

I do not believe that we can experience the deeper level of our theological identity until we have immersed ourselves in the social matrix in which our identity must be actualized. For this reason, social analysis of the churches must precede a doctrine of the church. We should never allow a theological interpretation of the church's transcendent origin to obscure the empirical behavior of churches that deny what church people affirm in their ecclesiological confessions.¹²⁾

This statement means that without social analysis of the churches, the Black Church cannot be formulated.

III. Mobilizing the Black Civil Rights Movement

Most contemporary sociologists see deprivation alone as an insufficient explanation for the rise of a social movement.¹³⁾ Without suf-

12) James H. Cone, *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 114.

13) See McAdam Doug, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, "Social Movements," *Handbook of Sociology*, N.J. Smelser, eds. (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1988), 695-738 and Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*. They claim that discontent is always widespread; yet social movements are relatively infrequent. The reason, they argue, is that discontent must be coupled with the ability to mobilize resources on behalf of a group's collective interests.

ficient resources and the organization to use those resources effectively, even the most aggrieved people cannot launch a social movement. The resources that can be mobilized in support of a social movement consist of tangible assets and human skills.¹⁴⁾ Human skills include leadership, organizational talent, personal prestige, which is helpful in attracting followers and in gaining social acceptance, and intimate knowledge of the people or institutions the movement hopes to change.

1. Black Churches as Resources of Social Movements

Aldon Morris recognizes the black American church in the Civil Rights Movement as the institutional center with a relatively autonomous force in white dominant society. As a transcendent belief system, it is an agency-laden institution, which is a configuration of cultural beliefs and practices that permeate and shape social networks. Morris emphasizes that the black church was a relatively autonomous force in the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁵⁾ The black church also produced a lot of charismatic leaders who would play an important role in the Civil Rights movement; that is, the preexisting black churches offered the social resources for the movement. Without the church base, the Civil Rights Movement

14) See John Freeman, "Resource Mobilization and Strategy," M. N. Zald and J. D. McCarthy, eds., *The Dynamics of Social Movements* (Cambridge, MA: Winthrop, 1979), 167-189 and John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial theory," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 82(1977), 1212-1214.

15) Aldon Morris, "The Black Church in the Civil Rights Movement: the SCLC as the Decentralized, Radical Arm of the Black Church," *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning, and Emotion*, 41.

leader Martin Luther King Jr. could not have been a great organizer and symbol of an effective mass movement. Historian Vincent Harding also recognizes that post-Reconstruction black movements had been created by ‘independent and semi-dependent black institutions,’ which were churches, newspapers, other black clubs and businesses, etc. The most important way local people were mobilized was through black churches.¹⁶⁾

Religion was the one institution in which white Southerners permitted blacks any organizational freedom during the Jim Crow years. The black churches were what sociologists call free spaces, where people can think, talk, and socialize amongst themselves and can discover their true identities and aspirations, away from the scrutiny and control of those who hold power over aspects of their lives. Churches provided Southern blacks with experience in owning and directing an organization of their own; with leaders – ministers and pastors - who were largely independent of white society; with communications networks; and with cultural traditions of gospel music and oratory for expressing shared hopes and fears.

Generally, in sociology, collective action usually involves large numbers of people who may not even know one another and differs, often strikingly, from the habitual patterns of everyday life. On the contrary, social movement is “a conscious, collective, organized attempt to bring about or resist large-scale change in the social order by non-in-

16) See Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 4-16.

stitutionalized means.”¹⁷⁾ In his book *The Crowds*, Gustave Le Bon argued that involvement in a crowd puts individuals “in possession of a collective mind” that makes them think, feel, and act quite differently than they would if each person were alone. Individuals in crowds become highly suggestible; they “will undertake ... acts with irresistible impetuosity.” Waves of emotion sweep through crowds, “infecting” one person after another. This phenomenon is known as social contagion.¹⁸⁾ Challenging the collective behavior theorists,¹⁹⁾ Morris argues,

Emotions in the civil rights movements were closely linked to the rational pursuits of the movement. ... (Furthermore) Crucial cultural task for leaders was frame lifting (in Montgomery movement). ... Human agency operated indirectly in collective behavior theories because participants were viewed as reacting to external forces beyond their control. ... Agency was as a weak reactive force... played a minor role in the causation of movement.”²⁰⁾

In addition, the black church has carried out several important movements since the fifties and sixties. “The black church freedom movement”²¹⁾ and “The Black Consciousness Movement”²²⁾ are good examples.

17) John Wilson, *Introduction to Social Movements* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

18) Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowds* (Kitchener, Ont.: Batoche, 2001).

19) See G. B. Rose, *Outbreaks* (New York: Free Press, 1982). In the 1950s, the sociologist Herbert Blumer in his book, *Symbolic Interactionism*, refined Le Bon’s ideas. *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986),113.

20) Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change*, 239, 234. Morris also emphasizes that the Montgomery protest emerged from preexisting protest traditions rooted in the black churches.

Peter Paris also provides a comprehensive interpretation of the moral and social dimensions of the black church movement.²³⁾ Those movements revealed the situation of the black consciousness and brought significance along with them.

2. Leaders of the Black Civil Rights Movements

Usually, a social movement owes much of its success to effective leadership. Sociologists have identified “prophets,” whose skills of articulation demand and compel public attention, to the “administrator,” who puts together the ‘nuts and bolts’ of an organized campaign.²⁴⁾ James Cone recognizes that King has “optimistic belief that justice could be achieved through love, which he identified with non-violence.”²⁵⁾ While King believed in integration, Malcolm X sees that whites use integration for infiltration: “Whites do not have to worry about a revengeful response to their brutality.”²⁶⁾ In spite of such difference, at the end of their lives, King and Malcolm X recognize the issue of econo-

21) For detailed account about this movement, see, Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1972).

22) Peter Paris provides a comprehensive interpretation of moral and social dimensions of the black church movement. See, Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985). For the relation between the black consciousness movement and black church, see C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1990), 164-195.

23) Ibid.

24) See Wilson, *Introduction to Social Movement*.

25) James Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), 61.

26) Ibid., 54.

my and race cannot be separated. The next generation of the movement would also struggle with poverty, which is a byproduct of the American economic system.²⁷⁾

The leaders of black churches, in particular, have greater influence in the black community than is characteristic in most white communities. Just as the black church has been often the primary institution in the community, the preacher has played the role as the leader of the community.²⁸⁾ The black clergy activists of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement used their influence as religious leaders, and their style of leadership and exhortation was characteristic of the preacher.²⁹⁾ Although their role has declined in recent years, many blacks still look to their preachers for leadership on social and political issues.³⁰⁾ The black church was the “single most important institution” in the period of the Civil Rights Movement

27) Ibid., 223.

28) Charles Hamilton, *The Black Preachers in America* (New York: William Morrow, 1972).

29) Martin Luther King, Jr. did not distinguish between his roles as pastor and movement activist. Studies have shown that Black Americans are more likely than White Americans to approve of social activism from their pastors and of using the church to talk social issues. See C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya's *The Black Church in the African American Experience* and Hart M. Nelsen and Anne Kusner Harris, *The Black Church in the Sixties* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1975). Also see Frederick C. Harris, *Something Within: Religion in African American Political Activism* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University, 1999).

30) See, Hortense Sillers, “Martin Luther King and the Style of the Black Sermon.” *Black Scholar* 3/1(1971), 14-27. Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1982* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1984).

IV. Conclusion

The significant contribution of the black church to the wider Christian church is that they have provided analytical tools to combat the perspective of racism. As Eyerman and Jamison point out, “The Black Civil Rights movement carved out a new path to self-knowledge, and recognized American society as fundamentally unjust, combining religious and legal consciousness into an integrated social gospel.”³¹⁾ It teaches and constantly reminds us about the seriousness of problems which are caused by racial distortion.

Next, the black church is a very important social location where social justice can be practiced. For this reason, the black church has played a crucial role in defining modern religion and giving it its distinctive role in American culture. Religion cannot be so neatly packaged. The Church’s own identity can be challenged, diluted, or clarified through its engagement in the world. Continual theological reflection on the church is critical.

31) Eyerman and Jamison, *Social Movements*, 165.

Bibliography

- Blumer, Herbert. *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986
- Cone, James H. *God of the Oppressed*. Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1975.
- _____. *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991.
- Eyerman, Ron and Andrew Jamison. *Social Movements: A Cognitive Approach*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991.
- Freeman, John. "Resource Mobilization and Strategy." In M. N. Zald and J. D. McCarthy, eds. *The Dynamics of Social Movements*. Cambridge, MA: Winthrop, 1979.
- Gurr, Ted Robert. *Why Men Rebel*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970.
- Hamilton, Charles. *The Black Preachers in America*. New York: William Morrow, 1972.
- Harding, Vincent. *Hope and History: Why We Must Share the Story of the Movement*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990.
- Harris, Frederick C. *Something Within: Religion in African American Political Activism*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University, 1999.
- Le Bon, Gustave. *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. Kitchener, Ont.: Batoche, 2001.
- Lincoln, C. Eric and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. Durham; London: Duke University Press, 1990.
- Marble, Manning. *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1982*. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1984.
- McAdam, Doug, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald. "Social movements." In *Handbook of Sociology*. N.J. Smelser, eds. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1988.

- McAdam, Doug. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Morris, Aldon. *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities, Organizing for Change*. New York: Free Press, 1984.
- _____. "Reflections on Social Movement Theory: Criticisms and Proposals." In *Rethinking Social Movements: Structure, Meaning, and Emotion*. Boulder: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2004.
- Nelsen, Hart M., and Anne Kusner Nelsen. *The Black Church in the Sixties*, Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1975
- Paris, Peter J. *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985.
- Rose, G. B. *Outbreaks*. New York: Free Press, 1982.
- Sillers, Hortense. "Martin Luther King and the Style of the Black Sermon." *Black Scholar* 3/1(1971), 14-27.
- Smith, Christian, eds. *Disruptive Religion: The Force of Faith in Social-Movement Activism*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Tocqueville, Alexis de. *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, J. Boner. Trans. New York: Harper & Row, 1856.
- Wilmore, Gayraud. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, Garden City: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1972.
- Wilson, John. *Introduction to Social Movements*, New York: Basic Books, 1973.

논문투고일: 2022년 11월 15일

심사개시일: 2023년 03월 16일

게재확정일: 2023년 04월 11일

• **ABSTRACT** •

A Study of the Black Church as Mobilization Asset for Social Activism

Research Professor Hyung Kyu Lee(Hankuk University of Foreign Studies)

Culture is central to social movements. However, religion - a significant part of culture - has been ignored as a central element in modern social movements. The black churches in America played an important role in the struggle for racial justice in the Civil rights movement of the 1960's. In this essay, the notion of cognitive liberation will be applied to the black church. Cognitive praxis transforms groups of individuals into social activists and gives social movements their own meaning or consciousness.

Next, this essay examines the Civil Rights Movement by using resource mobilization theory. Challenging the classical approaches on collective behavior which regard the participants in social movements as an emotional and irrational crowd, this study considers two questions: Firstly, if religion promotes political change, under what conditions is religion likely to be change-inhibiting or change-promoting? Secondly, why are religious experiences vital to the formation of the black church?

Key words: the Black church, resource mobilization, cognitive liberation, cognitive praxis, the Civil Rights movement
