

## **How Religious Is #BlackLivesMatter?**

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### **Introduction**

This chapter examines the complex, subtle, and varied ways that religion, and specifically Christianity, shapes the #BlackLivesMatter movement. I do this not with the aim of advancing Christianity, nor out of a desire to unmask the secular as an end in itself, but to pursue racial justice – and out of the humanist impulse that religion and its shadows can hinder that pursuit.

In many ways, the movement for racial justice that has coalesced in the United States around the hashtag BlackLivesMatter seems different from struggles for racial justice a half century ago. Most obviously, technology has changed. Where Civil Rights Movement organizing leveraged the power of television to inform the nation and the world about the struggle, today's movement has used social media, not only to inform but also to circulate ideas, feelings, and strategies. Where the target of the Civil Rights Movement began as the laws of segregation and expanded to include concern for other forms of racial domination, today's movement uses police violence as an occasion to push against an array of forms that racial injustice takes, from microaggression to economic inequality to mass incarceration. Where the most visible leadership of the Civil Rights Movement was male and invested in respectability, prominent leaders of today's racial justice organizing are female, explicitly reject respectability politics, and embrace the intersectional nature of Black identity – the ways that race inflects and is inflected by gender, sexuality, class, disability, immigration status, and other factors.

There is another, crucial difference that observers often note between the Civil Rights Movement and #BlackLivesMatter. The Civil Rights Movement was religious (specifically, Black Protestant at its core, Christian or Judeo-Christian when considered more broadly). #BlackLivesMatter is not. More precisely, conventional wisdom has it that today's movement for racial justice is not essentially religious, and religion is not at its core. There are certainly religious participants in #BlackLivesMatter, ranging from Protestants to pagans, Mormons to Muslims, but there are also those who do not identify as religious, and those who identify as atheists. Just as Charles Taylor tracked the way that Christianity shifted from being, in the middle ages, deeply woven into all aspects of life to being, in modernity, one among many choices that an individual might make, *The Atlantic* writer Emma Green suggests that Christianity began as a "common home" for the Civil Rights Movement and became "a framework that some people choose, while others shrug their shoulders," today.<sup>1</sup>

Taylor's grand narrative has attracted plenty of criticism, from many directions.<sup>2</sup> Scholars have argued that Taylor focuses too much on intellectuals, or too much on Europe, or too much on Protestantism. They have pointed to the ways that secularization stories are complicated when we turn to the global South, or to marginalized communities within the Europe, or to America, or when we use methods from anthropology and cultural studies that look beneath the level of ideology. The racial justice movement secularization narrative has attracted much less criticism, but in certain respects it is vulnerable to the same critiques as Taylor's secularization story. When we focus on religious institutions, religious beliefs, and the self-presentation of elites we miss what is really going on in an epoch, or in a movement.

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, *A Secular Age*; Emma Green, "Black Activism, Unchurched."

<sup>2</sup> There were particularly vibrant discussions on The Immanent Frame, [blogs.ssrc.org/tif/](https://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/). See also Warner, et al., *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*.

Where critiques of Taylor aim at describing the world, and specifically religion's role in the world, rightly, challenges to the racial justice secularization narrative are not only about accurate description. They are also, more importantly, about political efficacy. Those who are committed to achieving racial justice should be interested in whether something is gained or lost by claiming that #BlackLivesMatter is not religious – whether this claim is made by observers or by participants. In other words, is there a way to represent the religiosity of #BlackLivesMatter that compliments the goal of #BlackLivesMatter, namely, racial justice? Further, beyond the level of representation, might there be a particular stance toward religion that those associated with #BlackLivesMatter ought to embrace if they want to maximize their chances for success? I argue that the ostensibly humanist sensibilities of #BlackLivesMatter activists ought to be interrogated in order to discern latent religiosity that remains, and in order to follow the justice-seeking instincts behind those sensibilities without distraction or distortion.

In moving from the descriptive to the normative as we consider secularization narratives, we move from the ideas of Charles Taylor to Carl Schmitt. The latter, a German legal theorist whose most important works were written between the Wars, observed the political and economic problems of his age and turned to religion and its representation for a solution. Schmitt famously argues, in *Political Theology*, that religiosity persists in politics, it just is no longer named as such. It operates in the disguise of the secular. Sovereignty, for example, is essentially a theological concept, a concept about God's relationship to the world, but it operates in politics as if it were secular. Schmitt thinks it is politically efficacious to pull back the disguise of the secular, revealing religious commitments that might make us uncomfortable. Do political actors today who invoke the concept of sovereignty really believe in the network of theological ideas in which that concept was once – and is still implicitly – embedded? Probably not. That realization

would make it possible for political actors to change the ways of thinking and acting to which they have become accustomed. Realizing that I am using a political concept that fits with a certain religious outlook might make me change my conceptual vocabulary if I do not share that religious outlook. Indeed, the apparent secularity of political concepts, according to Schmitt, functions to entrench the interests of the status quo; it is thus in the interests of all who are interested in social transformation, atheist or Christian or anyone else, to unmask the secular. The more we notice the subterranean connections of our ostensibly secular political concepts, the more we are open to approaching politics in dramatically different ways.

What we can learn from Schmitt, when considering the religiosity of #BlackLivesMatter, is that the apparent absence of visible religiosity in the rhetoric of #BlackLivesMatter may actually run counter to the movement's aims. Showing the ways ostensibly secular ideas employed by the movement are in fact be deeply connected with a network of specifically Christian theological concepts opens up possibilities for social change that cuts deeper than those possible when we accept appearances of secularity. In what follows, I will survey the ways Christian ideas are connected with the movement in order to invite explicit reflection on how such ideas should or should not shape the contours of racial justice organizing today.

### **A Brief History of #BlackLivesMatter**

Just as the Civil Rights Movement can be traced back to a specific moment, and a specific feeling, the indignity of Rosa Parks on a Montgomery, Alabama bus, on December 1, 1955, today's movement for racial justice can be traced back to a specific moment and feeling, memorialized as a Facebook post by Alicia Garza on July 13, 2013. Of course, there was much that came before – personal stories of adversity, community organizing, histories of resistance,

and networks of grassroots education – but there were especially these singular, world-historical moments, mundane in at the time but memorialized in the days, months, and years after, with stories of these moments gathering and energizing the variously aggrieved, the indignant, from near and far.<sup>3</sup> Enough time has passed that Parks’s story is familiar to all, even those beyond the orbit of the movement; the circulation of Garza’s story is just beginning.

Neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman shot and killed a seventeen year old Black boy, Trayvon Martin, on February 26, 2012. Martin’s death, in a gated Florida community, drew national and international attention to the violence faced by Black Americans in the twenty-first century. The association of Blackness and criminality authorizes the violence supposedly necessary to control the criminal, to preserve law and order, to be unleashed on Blacks regardless of whether they obey the law. Zimmerman understood himself to be keeping his community safe, functioning as a police officer would, and the sight of a Black boy registered with him as the sight of a criminal. A national outcry followed, resulting in protests organized in Black communities and drawing diverse justice-minded individuals together across the United States. These protests were at once mournful and energizing, demonstrating that the ongoing, systemic violence inflicted on Black Americans was finally drawing the attention that it deserved. Indeed, these protests were so energizing that it seemed as though victory would be straightforward: there was so much outrage at Zimmerman that surely he would be convicted of killing Martin.

More than a year later, these hopes were shattered. On July 13, 2013, a Florida jury found Zimmerman not guilty. Garza knew a verdict was coming, and she was nervous.<sup>4</sup> The jury had deliberated for over sixteen hours. That evening, she was with friends and her husband at an

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<sup>3</sup> On indignity as a central theme in black politics, see Bromell, *The Time Is Always Now*.

<sup>4</sup> King, “#blacklivesmatter”; Cobb, “The Matter of Black Lives.”

Oakland bar. When she learned of the verdict, “It felt like a gut punch.” Though discouraged by how her acquaintances took the acquittal as just one more product of an unshakably racist system, Garza would not let her anger still. She thought of her brother, a black man living in a majority-white neighborhood, like the one where Martin was killed. She composed her thoughts and posted them on Facebook:

we GOTTA get it together y’all. stop saying we are not surprised. that’s a damn shame in itself. I continue to be surprised at how little Black lives matter. And I will continue that. stop giving up on black life. black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter.<sup>5</sup>

A California-based social justice organizer, Garza was closely connected with informal and formal networks of Black organizers and activists. Her friend Patrice Cullors noticed the Facebook post and commented “#blacklivesmatter.” The hashtag began to spread virally. Soon, a third friend, Opal Tometi, the New York-based executive director of Black Alliance for Just Immigration, joined Garza and Cullors in conversations about how to organize around the hashtag. They created an online platform for those who felt like they did, indignant at the injustice evidenced by the Zimmerman verdict, to connect with each other and to organize protests. The three women, two of whom identify as queer, all of whom were in their thirties, began promoting the effort online and in person, at rallies and marches and research collaborations.

Just over a year after Garza, Cullors, and Tometi began building a network around #blacklivesmatter, on August 9, 2014, a Black teenager, Michael Brown, was walking in his hometown of Ferguson, Missouri, just outside of St. Louis. A white police officer, Darren

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<sup>5</sup> Lowery, “*They Can’t Kill Us All*,” 87.

Wilson, confronted Brown, who was unarmed, eventually shooting him six times, resulting in his death. Primed by the death of Trayvon Martin, but disillusioned, protesters took to the streets of Ferguson, night after night. Televised and livestreamed confrontations between peaceful protesters and violent police captured the national imagination, much as televised scenes of protest had captured the national imagination a half century earlier. Some joined the protests spontaneously. Some joined after having been involved for years, even decades, in local racial justice struggles. Some joined who would not have joined a few years before, had not the visibility of anti-Black violence so increased after the death Trayvon Martin. A common denominator of the protesters was an embrace of #BlackLivesMatter – indeed, so much of an embrace that it resulted in confusion, and friction, between the emergent leadership in Missouri and the network that Garza, Tometi, and Cullors had established.<sup>6</sup> Where the latter were formed in grassroots social justice organizing, the most visible leaders emerging out of the Ferguson protests – Johnetta Elzie, Brittany Packnett, and, head and shoulders above the rest in terms of national visibility, DeRay Mckesson – achieved their fame via Twitter video, images, and commentary. They were formed in the non-profit world, two of them as administrators for Teach for America, and they identified primarily as protesters (“Protesters”) rather than organizers. Slicker and a few years younger than Garza, Tometi, and Cullors, Elzie, Packnett, and Mckesson lacked the fluency in Black political traditions and in social movement organizing of those who coined #BlackLivesMatter.

In the months after the Ferguson uprising, groups of varying political flavors and levels of militancy organized themselves under the name Black Lives Matter. They disrupted brunches, blocked highways, held rallies, and organized popular education initiatives. There were plenty of

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Cobb, “The Matter of Black Lives.”

other incidents of anti-Black violence – especially, deaths – to organize around, plenty of other names to hold up, in hearts and hashtags. After the highly publicized deaths of two young Black men, Martin and Brown, compensatory attention was paid to the deaths and travails of Black women, and to the Black trans\* community. Protests spread on college campuses, demanding increased numbers of Black students, richer community life, and deeper intellectual engagement with Black issues. Young protesters challenged the established Black leadership class: Al Sharpton found himself accused of out-of-touch reformism.<sup>7</sup> During the 2016 election cycle, activists grappled with how to engage with the presidential race – with some pushing left-wing Democrats such as Bernie Sanders to deepen their approach to racial justice, others urging pragmatism, and still others urging withdrawal. With the election of Donald Trump, anti-Black racism was no longer the issue *du jour*, and it remains to be seen what new political formations, and what new moral horrors, will take shape in the Trump years.

### **Religious Currents**

The fourth convening of Women in Secularism, sponsored by that cornerstone of the institutional landscape of secular humanism, the Center for Inquiry, in September 2016, aimed to spotlight “women who stand against the oppressive and diminishing forces of religion and superstition.”<sup>8</sup> Among the featured women was Johnetta Elzie, Twitter superstar thanks to her voluminous updates from on the ground protest in Ferguson, Missouri. It is not clear if Elzie knew that she was stepping into the world of organized secular humanism, but she does generally keep her distance from religious language and practices. Instead, Elzie embraces the ostensibly secular

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<sup>7</sup> Holley, “After Sharpton Profile, Activists Bristle on Twitter.”

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.centerforinquiry.net/news/experience\\_true\\_courage\\_at\\_women\\_in\\_secularism\\_4\\_in\\_september/](http://www.centerforinquiry.net/news/experience_true_courage_at_women_in_secularism_4_in_september/).



language of the movement: a language of self-empowerment, self-care, and of love. Elzie did have a conversion experience, transforming from a struggling, working class, young Black woman who had just lost her mother to a self-confident spokesperson meeting with politicians at the highest level, including Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. She describes her conversion experience as caused by the community of “brilliant, smart, and beautiful black women” that she entered as she embraced her identity as protester:

I’ve never felt so empowered before; I’ve never felt that I’ve had such a true purpose in life. Being around these super-smart black women, I’ve been wrapped in love. Like a cocoon almost. It’s just so nurturing and loving. It’s nice to have sisterhood in struggle.<sup>9</sup>

Elzie’s sentiments here are representative of a significant strand of activists. On the one hand, she keeps her distance from organized religion – in her case, more distance than most, as she flirts with organized atheism. On the other hand, Elzie uses language with strong spiritual resonance: “true purpose,” “wrapped in love,” and “sisterhood.” In presenting her commitments in this way, Elzie implicitly endorses the (secularist) presumption that spirituality is perpendicular to the atheist-theist, or religious-secular, axis.

What happens if, rather, we consider the vaguely spiritual language employed by Elzie and her comrades as a secular mask for the religious? Put another way, it is language found both among the religious and those who consider themselves irreligious – it is a common coin of contemporary American life. What if the story about the possibility of religious choice today, the secular story, is a sham; if contemporary American culture is inextricable from a certain religiosity, and that religiosity expresses itself in the language of the spiritual? If this is the case,

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<sup>9</sup> Berlatsky, “The Women of #BlackLivesMatter.”

and #BlackLivesMatter makes use of spiritual language in its political claims and its political practice, then it is worth interrogating those spiritual claims: what they are, how they are related to older religious claims (masked or not), and how they support or impede the movement for racial justice.

In some cases, the connection between the spiritual and the religious is quite explicit. Elzie's collaborator in Ferguson, Brittany Packnett, reports that she "was raised by a liberation theologian who taught me a table-flipping Jesus" – motivating her entry into racial justice activism.<sup>10</sup> Packnett made this self-disclosure while pushing back against those who were turned off by Christianity, particularly its homophobia and anti-Blackness. She was pointing to her formation in Christianity, but she also described how she moved on, beyond that early liberation theology to a more diffuse spirituality. "My faith journey is continual," she reflects. "I have faith," but "I'm not dogmatic." She identifies as "a believer." Packnett acknowledges worries about the homophobia, transphobia, and sexism of Christian communities, but she sees herself as an internal critic, pushing those who are religious, and specifically Christian, to confront these prejudices. Despite acknowledging problems, faith still motivates Packnett to fight for justice: "The God I worship loves justice." In contrast to Elzie, Packnett is significantly more open to identifying with Christianity, even as she often expresses herself in the language of the spiritual-but-not-religious.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, she concludes her public reflection on religion by noting that she has "started to do my own ... study of African faiths." She is on a faith journey, ever progressing, ever engaging with new traditions and communities, taking what works as she seeks authenticity and enlightenment – and liberation. Ultimately, this spirituality entails a focus on this-worldly,

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<sup>10</sup> <https://twitter.com/mspackyetti/status/767881917496717316> for this and the quotes that follow.

<sup>11</sup> For an ethnographic introduction to this idiom, see Bender, *The New Metaphysicals*.

human capacities against the other-worldly. Packnett toys with Martin Luther King’s famous formulation about the arc of the universe bending toward justice, claiming “that the arc of the universe does indeed bend toward justice – but it is our job to bend it.”<sup>12</sup>

Ericka Totten represents a set of activists who unequivocally embrace the spiritual, particularly as it is put into practice through a focus on healing. Totten and Elzie grabbed the microphone, and the national spotlight, from older protest leaders at a National Action Network-sponsored rally in Washington, D.C.<sup>13</sup> They asserted that protesters from Ferguson, and grassroots voices more generally, were not sufficiently represented in an event that catered to elites. Totten is a leader of the movement in the capital – and she is also a spiritual entrepreneur. Her business, *To Live Unchained*, aims at “the *Emotional Emancipation* of People of African Descent” by providing resources for “collective healing and liberation.” Such liberation can be achieved by means of “unlocking the mental, emotional, and spiritual chains that hinder us from being exactly who the Creator designed us to be.” In other words, political emancipation, mental emancipation, and spiritual emancipation are all intimately connected – and you can pay Totten to assist you with all of them. She describes her role as a “Spiritual Life Coach,” aiding her clients in achieving success not just in worldly terms but in more-than-worldly terms as well. This success will come along with emancipation, along with the breaking of chains.<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, among these “chains” Totten includes misogyny, anger, self-hatred, and abuse, but also “over-spiritualizing.” The client must not just embrace a spiritual life; she must embrace the right kind of spiritual life, the right spiritual balance – otherwise spirituality becomes just another political and mental chain holding her back. There is no sense that this

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<sup>12</sup> <http://www.wetheprotesters.org/about/>

<sup>13</sup> Hafiz, “How Women Are Leading the #BlackLivesMatter Movement.”

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.toliveunchained.com/>.

balanced spirituality would involve institutional religion; indeed, Totten does not even bother to reject institutional religion. On her account, it seems, there is lack of spiritual life, excessive spiritual life, and balanced spiritual life, which she can help you achieve – for a fee. Once liberation is achieved, though, there is not other-worldly reward. There is this-worldly reward: there is unequivocal embrace of this world. As Totten puts it, liberation entails “having the space to be. To just exist... Liberation means living.”<sup>15</sup> Like the New Age cliché, Totten seems to be saying: the journey to freedom does not take you to a special place but allows you to accept and appreciate where you already are, who you already are.

“Self-care” is one of the central themes that circulates through #BlackLivesMatter organizing, and here we have its monetization. The pressures of the world on Black bodies and psyches are crushing. Only by intentionally addressing these pressures, creating time and deliberate practices to counteract them, are Blacks able to participate sustainably in racial justice organizing: this is how self-care becomes the prerequisite to politics.<sup>16</sup> Usually these practices are understood as something like vacation, or weekends: they can involve any activity as long as they are unrelated to politics. Totten, like other activists, associates self-care with the language of spirituality, and she sees the necessity of outside help in order to get self-care right – help she offers. In this way, self-care is at once individual and social. The self-care consultant presumably offers personalized advice to each of her clients, but there is also an unspoken sense of collectivity. Everyone, or at least each Black American, must do this practice that, in its very nature, purportedly renounces collectivity: *self-care*. Not unlike exercise in the white world, a

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<sup>15</sup> Barnett, “Erika Totten.”

<sup>16</sup> The connection between mental, political, and spiritual liberation here is rather ambiguous. Is it that mental and spiritual liberation, through processes of self-care, are the prerequisite to political liberation? Or do they all occur together?

practice at once individual and collective, and seen as a prerequisite for work and life, self-care reconstructs a form of collectivity that seems deeply invested in the false-consciousness of modern individuality.<sup>17</sup> Unlike exercise, self-care often operates cloaked in the language of spirituality, in a sense constituting religious community anew, for a secular age – religious community that disclaims normativity at the same time that it presents itself as the very grounds for normativity, the very condition of possibility for the pursuit of racial justice. Where earlier forms of religious community said what ought and ought not to be done, spiritual community in a secular age officially renounces oughts even as it gives force to unstated oughts.

The language of health and healing, with a spiritual inflection, circulates broadly in the movement – with more or less direct and explicit connections to racial justice organizing. Patrice Cullors, co-founder of #BlackLivesMatter and a religion and philosophy major, describes herself as a practitioner of Ifà, a traditional religion of Nigeria.<sup>18</sup> Her conversion to Ifà came at the end of a spiritual journey: she was raised as a Jehovah’s Witness, but through talking to her Native American great-grandparents she became attuned to the wisdom of indigenous traditions, eventually settling on Ifà. She believes it is necessary to integrate health and wellness practices into movement organizing, and the group she leads in Los Angeles, Dignity and Power Now, has a paid staff person in charge of cultivating these practices. While Cullors does not describe any distinctively Ifà commitments that motivate her racial justice organizing, or distinctively Ifà practices that she integrates into her organizing, she does use the language of “spirit” to frame her work: “I don’t believe spirit is this thing that lives outside of us dictating our lives, but [it is]

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<sup>17</sup> See Greif, “Against Exercise.”

<sup>18</sup> Farrag, “The Role of Spirit in the #BlackLivesMatter Movement.” What movement actors mean by these religious traditions is probably better understood by means of a Google search than by means of a textbook definition – the internet rather than the library functions as authority for many actors.

rather our ability to be deeply connected to something that is bigger than us.” Here we have the hallmarks of contemporary spirituality: looking within rather than to that which is beyond, affirming connection through ourselves to that which is beyond ourselves, and an imperative to mend those aspects of the world that prevent us from looking within and affirming connection – an imperative to heal. Interestingly, together with this spiritual language is the rather more conventionally Christian (or secularized Christian) language of dignity: Cullors asserts that “to live in their full dignity” is the goal of those organizing around #BlackLivesMatter. Dignity, like love, is a theme that is broadly integrated with spirit talk in the movement vocabulary.

Opal Tometi, the daughter of Nigerian immigrants and cofounder of the #BlackLivesMatter network, describes the movement’s earliest efforts as motivated by “a profound sense of black love.”<sup>19</sup> The three keywords with which she brands herself, on opaltometi.com, are justice, joy, and faith. There, after her biography and before a section on her human rights work, Tometi includes a section called “Spirit: Justice + Spirituality.” Like Totten, Tometi explicitly embraces a vocabulary conventionally associated with contemporary spirituality, though unlike Totten, she does not monetize it through a spiritual consultancy. Like Packnett, Tometi identifies with the tradition of Christianity that identifies with the oppressed, liberation theology, and she describes herself as “a believer” and “a woman of faith.” Perhaps influenced by liberation theology, Tometi describes justice as “a spiritual practice” – rather than spiritual practice as a prerequisite to the pursuit of justice.<sup>20</sup> Love may be behind this justice-seeking spiritual practice, but another distinctly religious term, dignity, is in front of it: “aspirations for dignity and self-actualization” are the referent of faith, on her view. Such

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<sup>19</sup> King, “#blacklivesmatter.”

<sup>20</sup> Tometi does describe her “spiritual life” as offering “solace” as well, this seems rather different than self-care.

language of love and dignity circulates widely among those associated with #BlackLivesMatter, particularly those with a background in (what they call) liberation theology. This language functions as a bridge between a more conventional vocabulary of institutionalized religion, particularly Christianity, and a vocabulary of New Age spirituality entirely disconnected from (or repressing) the trappings of institutional religion.

On January 18, 2015 – Martin Luther King, Jr., Day – Tometi co-authored an op-ed in the Huffington Post with her #BlackLivesMatter network cofounders, Alicia Garza and Patrice Cullors.<sup>21</sup> They embraced the “radical” insights of the later King, including his concerns with economic justice, colonialism, and militarism, and they claimed the mantle of King’s movement for #BlackLivesMatter.<sup>22</sup> Like the current movement for racial justice, on their account King was committed to human rights for all, requiring an analysis not just of racial injustice but of the ways that race, class, and other issues intersect to make lives precarious. While acknowledging their indebtedness to an earlier generation of racial justice advocates including King, Garza, Cullors, and Tometi emphasize the need for continually “innovating on its strategies, practices, and approaches” – specifically, by centering “the leadership of those existing at the margins of our economy and our society.” There is a critique here of the way that relatively privileged, heterosexual men occupied leadership roles in the civil rights movement, attracting media attention and distracting from the experiences, and abilities, of marginalized groups within the Black community. As Garza puts it elsewhere, “The model of the black preacher leading people

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<sup>21</sup> Tometi, Garza, and Cullors-Brignac, “Celebrating MLK Day.”

<sup>22</sup> For a criticism of the distinction between a religious, Black King and the later, more secular, more multi-cultural King, see Chapter 4 of Vincent Lloyd, *Black Natural Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

to the promised land isn't working right now" – that Jesse Jackson was booed when he tried to speak in Ferguson provides dramatic evidence to this effect.<sup>23</sup>

The embrace of and advance beyond King's legacy that we find here should also be read in terms of King's religiosity. It is the King who is perceived to have transcended his provincial Christianity to embrace a spirituality transcending national borders who the #BlackLivesMatter leaders embrace – the late, "radical" King. God, Jesus, church, and sin are all set aside; all that remains from that Christian idiom that King once so thickly spoke are love and dignity, spirit and heart.<sup>24</sup> Garza would describe her original Facebook post, that coined the hashtag and movement, as "a love note" to Black Americans.<sup>25</sup> Energy gathered around the hashtag, Garza and her colleagues assert, because it "touched our hearts" as well as the hearts of those who saw it online and heard it at rallies. Tometi and her colleague Gerald Lenoir describe the goal of the movement as "the human rights and dignity of black people in the U.S.," and they quote the civil rights era organizer Ella Baker, "We are not fighting for the Negro alone, but for the freedom of the human spirit, a larger freedom that encompasses all mankind."<sup>26</sup> Here is the civil rights movement's religiosity reinterpreted – but not quite secularized. Spirit, dignity, and love remain central, presented as closely aligned with human rights and racial justice, but the thicker Christian idiom that King and those around him once spoke is absent. Indeed, secularized Christian concepts fit harmoniously with humanist language in movement statements.

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<sup>23</sup> Cobb, "The Matter of Black Lives."

<sup>24</sup> Another way this shift is articulated is as a turn from King to Ella Baker, perceived as representing grassroots leadership and an embrace of intersectionality – as well as humanism, perhaps religious humanism, in contrast to King's church-centric Christianity. Note, for example, the role of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in Oakland in the movement, and see more generally Cobb, "The Matter of Black Lives." On the academic support for this view, see Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*.

<sup>25</sup> Cobb, "The Matter of Black Lives."

<sup>26</sup> Tometi and Lenoir, "Black Lives Matter is Not a Civil Rights Movement."



The #BlackLivesMatter network guiding principles, which must be affirmed by each chapter that desires an official affiliation, include “Loving Engagement,” defined as a commitment “to embodying and practicing justice, liberation, and peace in our engagement with one another.”<sup>27</sup> The meaning of love, the claim seems to be, is exhausted by “justice, liberation, and peace” – in a sense, the religious reduced to, or equated with, the secular. The platform of the Movement for Black Lives, a broader coalition of grassroots racial justice organizations inspired by #BlackLivesMatter, begins, “Black humanity and dignity requires Black political will and power.”<sup>28</sup> Once again, the particularly Christian language of dignity, once embraced by the civil rights movement as part of a broader Christian worldview, is now affirmed together with “humanity,” presented as effectively self-evident, requiring no background to recognize, just common sense. Similar language is used in Garza’s history – “herstory” – of the movement, where she defines what the originators intended the hashtag to mean: “we are talking about the ways in which Black people are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity.”<sup>29</sup> There is a burgeoning literature on the Christian origins of human rights and dignity in the context of international law and the public discourse.<sup>30</sup> What would happen if we considered this Christian background in the context of racial justice organizing? Might there be distinctively Black religious inflections given to such language?

While some associated with #BlackLivesMatter embrace a diluted Christian, or post-Christian, vocabulary, others call Christians to join in the movement. DeRay Mckesson told an audience at Yale Divinity School, “I’ve been trying to get the church to step up, hoping the

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<sup>27</sup> <http://blacklivesmatter.com/guiding-principles/>.

<sup>28</sup> <https://policy.m4bl.org/platform/>.

<sup>29</sup> <http://blacklivesmatter.com/herstory/>.

<sup>30</sup> Moyn, *Christian Human Rights*; Moyn, *The Last Utopia*.

theology of protest will catch up.” He adds, “The church [has been] more cautious than Christ would have been.”<sup>31</sup> While Mckesson makes these criticisms from a perspective distanced from Christianity – he does not identify as a Christian and he seems uncomfortably in overtly religious spaces – Rev. Osagyefu Sekou makes similar observations from inside the church. Sekou grew up in the St. Louis area, and he returned during the Ferguson uprising, offering trainings in non-violent civil disobedience and supporting activists. He achieved national visibility when he led a group of clergy in prayer one evening in front of the Ferguson police station. They persisted when they were threatened with arrest, and Sekou was handcuffed and taken away. Sekou calls for Christians to learn from protesters, who might shake up their sense of propriety. “I’m not terribly hopeful for the church. I think queer, black, poor women are the church’s salvation. They don’t need to get saved. The church needs to get saved.”<sup>32</sup> Sekou also reminds us that even during the heyday of the civil rights movement, the majority of churches, even Black churches, were on the sidelines – so it is not surprising that the majority of churches remain on the sidelines of #BlackLivesMatter. In line with the spiritual sensibility of the movement, Sekou looks for the spirit of the faith rather than the institutions of the faith. That spirit is aligned with grassroots justice advocates, even if they do not look respectable by the standards of the official, institutional church. Indeed, he argues that the affirmation Black Lives Matter is at the very heart of Christianity, and the goal of achieving “black dignity and self-determination” is essentially affirmed by the Bible.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> <http://divinity.yale.edu/news/blacklivesmatter-leader-deray-mckesson-brings-race-justice-conversation-yds>.

<sup>32</sup> van Gelder, “Rev. Sekou on Today’s Civil Rights Leaders.”

<sup>33</sup> Dockter, “Gospel Is Not a Neutral Term.” Theologians in dialogue with the movement have made similar points: see Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter* and Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*.

Bree Newsome offers a notable exception to the distance that most of the movement keeps from Christianity. Not insignificantly, she is from the South and continues to organize in the South, outside of the coastal networks that produced and nurtured many activists organizing around #BlackLivesMatter. Another difference is her elite, and Christian, pedigree: Newsome's father was the dean of Howard University Divinity School and later the president of the historically Black Shaw University.<sup>34</sup> Newsome achieved fame in the wake of Dylann Roof's murder of nine men and women at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. This crime, and Roof's embrace of the symbols of the Confederacy, led to soul-searching in the South about the significance of using the Confederate flag, for example, as part of the South Carolina state flag. Momentum was gathering to send the state flag to a historical museum, but before that could happen, Newsome took matters into her own hands. She climbed the flagpole in front of the state capitol and brought the flag down herself – and was quickly arrested.

Newsome's Twitter profile offers this description: "artist – free black woman – we are more than conquerors through Christ who loves us."<sup>35</sup> She is a Christian, and she sees her Christian commitments as motivating her activism and art. Profiled in *Christian Century*, she reports preparing for the flag removal "by rereading the biblical story of David and Goliath."<sup>36</sup> It is her faith that allows her to reject the aspiration to conquer and that allows her to have faith in the triumph of the meek. Newsome reports feeling that, as she was climbing the flag pole, a greater-than-human power was making it possible. As she climbed, she declared to those below,

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<sup>34</sup> Blumberg, "Activist Bree Newsome Reveals Staggering Faith During Confederate Flag Action."

<sup>35</sup> Newsome's Twitter profile picture features Deuteronomy 33:25, "As they days, so shall they strength be." <https://twitter.com/breenewsome>.

<sup>36</sup> DeConto, "Activist Who Took Down Confederate Flag from Statehouse Drew on Faith."

“You come against me with hatred and oppression and violence. I come against you in the name of God.” She continued, quoting from the twenty-seventh Psalm, “The Lord is my light and my salvation – whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid?”<sup>37</sup> After she was released from jail, Newsome issued a statement making clear that she saw her protest as flowing from religious convictions: “My prayers are with the poor, the afflicted, and the oppressed everywhere in the world, as Christ instructs... I see no greater moral cause than liberation, equality, and justice for all God’s people.”<sup>38</sup>

In contrast to almost all of the other nationally-visible leaders of #BlackLivesMatter activism, Newsome has a sense of a personal God who has normative force and who takes the side of the marginalized. Her journey into the movement is distinctive as well – once again, perhaps reflective of a regional divide. The Moral Mondays movement, led by the charismatic preacher and North Carolina NAACP leader, Rev. Dr. William J. Barber, II, provided Newsome’s point of entry into racial justice advocacy. After her fifteen minutes of fame, she returned to organizing in North Carolina. Newsome is careful to acknowledge that her fellow activists are motivated by a variety of reasons, many of them not specific to Christians, but in her view this is no reason to dilute or translate the Christian idiom in which she speaks about activism.<sup>39</sup>

## **Love Politics**

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<sup>37</sup> Blumberg, “Activist Bree Newsome Reveals Staggering Faith During Confederate Flag Action.”

<sup>38</sup> <http://archives.blunationreview.com/exclusive-bree-newsome-speaks-for-the-first-time-after-courageous-act-of-civil-disobedience>.

<sup>39</sup> [https://www.democracynow.org/2015/7/2/exclusive\\_extended\\_interview\\_with\\_bree\\_newsome](https://www.democracynow.org/2015/7/2/exclusive_extended_interview_with_bree_newsome).

Of the robust quasi-religious vocabulary that circulates around #BlackLivesMatter organizing, one word occurs more than any other: love. By exploring, in this section, the specifically Christian history of that term's deployment in US racial justice struggles, I model the sorts of stories that could be told about other aspects of that quasi-religious vocabulary. Such histories are not unequivocal – there are specifically Christian elements involved but there are also others – but it is in grappling with complexities rather than repressing it them that we can exercise our agency, understanding the traditions that form us and using the resources we have to push toward the ends we desire.

One of the more vibrant offshoots of #BlackLivesMatter, Black Youth Project 100, based in Chicago, describes itself as “driven with love” and embracing “holistic energy.”<sup>40</sup> Of the racial justice activists profiled by the *Chicago Reader*, none of them described a journey to activism that began in religious community. They described witnessing injustices and a growing racial consciousness, and sometimes they used a language humanism or spirituality. According to one, winning a victory on health care issues “made me feel human.” According to another, the goal of the movement is “people living in their full dignity,” and activists are motivated in their work “because we care for each other, we love each other.”<sup>41</sup>

Dante Barry, executive director of another robust offshoot of #BlackLivesMatter, Million Hoodies Movement for Justice based in New York City, identifies as a “Free Black man living in purpose and in my power.”<sup>42</sup> Barry embraces the language of love in a way that is characteristic of the broader movement. There is something about love, and specifically Black love, that enables social transformation in the direction of justice. “The ability to love each other is our

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<sup>40</sup> <http://byp100.org>.

<sup>41</sup> Clifton, “Queer Women are Shaping Chicago’s Black Lives Matter Movement.”

<sup>42</sup> <https://twitter.com/dantbarry>.

body's secret weapon in this war against the Black body, and that is revolutionary," he writes.<sup>43</sup> "Revolutionary love is the ability to risk it all for the love of our people, without ever expecting to see the fruits of that love." This formulation makes clear how love, as it circulates in #BlackLivesMatter, mixes the generically spiritual and the specifically Christian. In a world continually doing violence to Black people, and particularly to Black bodies, Blacks are left with the misconception that they are without agency. Only through affirming Blackness, through love, can that awareness of agency be restored. Once it is restored, Blacks will be capable of directly participating in politics and challenging the power of white supremacy. This sort of love, it seems, is open-ended affirmation – love without judgment. In contrast, Barry's exposition of "revolutionary love" as a risk without expectation of return deeply resonates with love identified with self-sacrifice in the Christian tradition. The lover knows that she may lose everything, and she does not expect any worldly reward, yet she persists in her love. Only faith, directed beyond the world, could motivate such love. Yet Barry classes the love of Black bodies as "revolutionary" as well, even though it is not clear how it would entail such risk. Rather than developing a theory to reconcile this apparent tension, let us allow the tension to remain: it represents a tension in the way religious ideas and images circulates in the movement itself, sometimes in specifically Christian ways, other times with Christian words, like love, voided of Christian content.

Indeed, this tension has circulated in Black political movements for much longer than the hashtag BlackLivesMatter. Martin Luther King, Jr., that famous proponent of love as a political force, of justice as "love correcting that which revolts against love," developed his understanding of love through his formation in the Black Christian tradition. For King, love was never

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<sup>43</sup> Barry, "We Love, We Fight."

unequivocal affirmation. Love needed to be rightly ordered, in accordance with God rather than in accordance with the whims of the world. James Baldwin picked up on King's emphasis on love, making it the centerpiece of his most famous piece of writing, *The Fire Next Time*.<sup>44</sup> Like King, Baldwin was formed in the Black Christian tradition, though Baldwin was formed in the Holiness tradition, where he was a child preacher, while King was formed in Black Baptist and later white liberal Protestant traditions. Baldwin also renounced his Christian formation, turning from preaching to writing, a process of individual secularization in which the same key concepts remained, like love, but the Christian scaffolding, like Jesus, fell away. As that scaffolding fell away, and perhaps in part because of the experiential orientation of Baldwin's earlier, Christian formation, love becomes unequivocal in his writings. The more loving, the better. Love is to be directed to all, and love will heal the world. The sense that love can be rightly ordered or disordered largely falls away – but not completely. For Baldwin, whites tend to be confused about love; Blacks, at their best, have clarity on love. This does not mean that Black love is rightly ordered in the sense that it lines up with the divine; rather, it just means that white love is often motivated by deception, or fear, or hatred, so is not really love at all.

In the moment of Black political radicalization that followed the civil rights movement, love remained part of the political vocabulary, but the emphasis shifted away from Christian-inflected love-of-neighbor to love-of-Blackness, love of Black people. Even those political leaders who spoke against the religiosity of King and his colleagues in the Southern Christian Leadership Council redeployed the concept of love. Stokely Carmichael asserted that Blacks must “have an undying love for our people.”<sup>45</sup> Malcolm X, who generally had little patience for

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<sup>44</sup> I develop these thoughts on Baldwin's account of love more fully in Lloyd, *Religion of the Field Negro*, Chapter 2.

<sup>45</sup> Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks*, 148.

Christianity and its trappings, occasionally sought to put the concept to work for his own ends. While he belittles those who say, “I’m going to love these folks no matter how much they hate me,” asserting that revolution is a better response to such hatred, Malcolm later in the same speech calls his audience to “love revolution.”<sup>46</sup> The Black Panthers, whose ideology is commonly represented as mixing Marxism and Black nationalism, used the language of love extensively, usually in the form of calls for love to be directed at Black people or at the revolution. The two most widely circulated Panther literary texts, Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* and George Jackson’s *Soledad Brother*, both consisted of love letters, with the love of an individual woven into the story of a love of Black people and a love of revolution.

As Jennifer Nash has thoroughly documented, the 1970s and 1980s saw a proliferation of love language among Black feminists, who claimed love of the spiritual, New Age variety as a political tool.<sup>47</sup> The Combahee River Collective produced a seminal statement on Black feminism in 1977 that asserted, “Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters, and our community which allows us to continue our struggle.” Audre Lorde’s widely circulated essay, “Uses of the Erotic,” was published in 1978. Lorde developed Baldwin’s point that love is often distorted by forces of racism and misogyny, and she extolled the power of the genuine love that results when those distortions are set aside. Five years later, Alice Walker introduced a new term for Black feminists, “Womanist,” with a definition that culminates in a staccato invocation of love and identifies the quintessence of Black feminism as loving love.

In the 1990s, with the rise of the figure of the Black public intellectual, Cornel West and especially bell hooks focused renewed public attention on Black love and its political import.

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<sup>46</sup> Malcolm X, “Message to the Grassroots” in *Malcolm X Speaks*.

<sup>47</sup> Nash, “Practicing Love.”



hooks argued that Black communities suffer from melancholia.<sup>48</sup> They cling to the memory of murdered leaders – King, Malcolm X – and unrealized dreams. Because these losses could not be processed, they cast a shadow over Black life in the present, incapacitating the Black community as it is faced with pressing challenges in the present (drugs, joblessness, persistent racism, and so on). hooks offers an antidote: the affirmation of Black love, understood as the best of the civil rights movement (love-of-neighbor) and the best of the Black power era (Black self-assertion). Yet both of these movements, according to hooks, focused love outward. What is needed today, to overcome the melancholia of the Black community and so to make Blacks capable of political intervention, is focusing Black love inward, first and foremost on the self, on one’s own Black body. In this trajectory of thought, love becomes closely aligned with New Age spirituality. It is affirmed unequivocally, always a good thing, at least when it is directly by and to the self – rather than by and to God.

Assata Shakur, the exiled Black feminist and radical icon, is very much part of this trajectory of Black love politics. Words from her 1987 autobiography, *Assata*, are often recited at the close of #BlackLivesMatter gatherings: “It is our duty to fight for our freedom. It is our duty to win. We must love each other and support each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains.” In this ritual affirmation, activists invoke a language of normativity, “duty,” juxtaposed with a language of love. Yet it is unclear what normative framework might bind these together, might give force and order to both the duty and the love. It is certainly not a Christian framework, but it also does not seem to be a Marxist framework (Marxist being suspicious of the political efficacy of love). The love seems risky, because it is followed by “nothing to lose but

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<sup>48</sup> hooks and West, *Breaking Bread*; hooks, *Salvation*.

our chains,” yet it is not clear how loving one another might be risky, or how it might have a political impact.

These sorts of formulations, taking love as obviously political and obviously central to racial justice struggles, are found widely among #BlackLivesMatter activists, from the movement’s founding. Not only does Garza describe her founding document as a “love note,” she suggests that connections forged of Black love animate the movement as a whole: “For us as women who are organizers, there’s a way in which our hearts connect to each other and to a real deep love for our people. And a real deep love for those mamas who are just trying to make it work.”<sup>49</sup> Garza embraces the Black feminist love-politics tradition explicated by Nash that sees love in spiritual terms, circulating between intimates, wholly positive, mysterious (“real deep”), and powerful. There is no sense, here, that love is accountable to anything beyond the world – or even, in this case, to the self; love seems a brute fact, so obviously good and true and beautiful that nothing more need be said.

### **Limitations and Possibilities**

As these varied stories of religion in racial justice organizing today demonstrate, the movement does, indeed, differ significantly in its relationship to religion from the Civil Rights Movement a half century earlier. But a “subtraction story” – simply taking away the religion element of racial justice organizing – does not properly account for this difference.<sup>50</sup> In the civil rights movement era, most Christian communities kept their distance from the struggle, and within the struggle there was not only the church-centric Southern Christian Leadership Conference but also the

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<sup>49</sup> Garza, “A Love Note to Our Folks.”

<sup>50</sup> For a criticism of subtraction stories of secularization, see Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

much more secular Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, as well as other, even more secular networks of grassroots activists that had existed in the South for generations.<sup>51</sup> In one sense, then, there was a complex relationship between religion and racial justice struggles a half century ago, and there is a complex relationship today.

Yet there have been important changes. While many commentators have pointed out the changing face of protest leadership, from ecclesial males to young, often unchurched, often queer women, an even more significant change is in the set of ideas circulating in the movement, motivating struggle. Those ideas are now detached from Christian traditions, and that Christian history is disclaimed. Love, dignity, spirit, and healing all present themselves as detached from religion. Sometimes they present themselves as connected with spirituality. Either way, the specifically Christian background of these concepts is concealed. At times, this becomes starkly evident. Michelle Alexander, the prison scholar who took an appointment at the bastion of American liberal Protestant theology, Union Theological Seminary, offered a keynote address at the American Academy of Religion's annual conference connecting "revolutionary love" with responses to mass incarceration. Jewish Studies scholar Laura Levitt observes just how exclusionary this language and framing feels to non-Christians – heard as "a call to crusade, a sacred revolution in the name of Jesus Christ," even if Alexander uttered no such words.<sup>52</sup> Love has only been partially absorbed into the American post-Christian (ostensibly secular) vernacular; dignity, healing, and spirit been more fully absorbed, yet their implicit exclusions should not be forgotten. Using these concepts constitutes and affirms a certain sort of

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<sup>51</sup> See especially Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*.

<sup>52</sup> Levitt, "Revolutionary Love."

community, marking some as insiders and others as outsiders, even as it is language weaponized in the struggle for justice.

Or is it? Religious language was certainly weaponized for struggle a half century ago. The Christian idiom of the civil rights movement was a cultural lingua franca, but the specific accent in which it was spoken in Black Protestantism at once resonated with and challenged white elites.<sup>53</sup> But what was at issue, then, was more than just a familiar language with new, titillating inflections – like the interest of white youths in hip hop in the 1990s. Rather, the Christian idiom referred to a Christian tradition that had normative force, shaping the lives of those who spoke it and pulling them in certain directions while pushing them away from others. Encountering the prophetic speech of King and his colleagues that drew on Black Protestantism was a challenge not just to words but to lives because of the way that religion shaped lives, determining what is visible and what options are available, and pushing and pulling.

In contrast, the post-Christian or spiritual language that circulates around #BlackLivesMatter and is ostensibly weaponized for racial justice struggle does not refer to normative religious traditions. The point here is not about institutions – church membership has indeed declined, but institutions have limited roles in shaping lives. Rather, it is about the normative texture of our worlds: what is visible, what seems possible, what we feel ought to be done. If injustice, specifically anti-Blackness in all its venomous forms, really does pervade our worlds, then figuring out how to contest and reshape the texture of our worlds is essential. But the worry here is that post-Christian or spiritual language only seems to refer to our world; in reality, it mystifies. Where once, when it gave form to lives, such language was necessarily

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<sup>53</sup> David Chappell, *A Stone of Hope*.

responsive to the complexities of the world, today, when it is held at a distance, chosen from a menu, it becomes dead abstraction.

Language that mystifies seems to refer to the world, but actually does not. Instead, its use secures the status quo, entrenching the interests of the wealthy and the powerful – and, in the case of the contemporary United States, the white. Schmitt’s argument was that political concepts mystify because they conceal the normative (theological) commitments on which they depend. For a certain political conception of sovereignty to be plausible, a certain theological conception of sovereignty must already be held, but the political conception disclaims any relationship to that theological conception. By pointing to history, Schmitt demonstrates that there is, indeed, a connection, making the status quo vulnerable because the political concepts that secure it no longer seem natural and unquestionable. The suggestion here is that it would be possible to show that the language of love, dignity, spirit, and healing, the political vocabulary of #BlackLivesMatter, depends on normative, theological commitments related to Christianity – as the discussion of love’s secularization in Black politics gestured toward. Even in a post-Christian nation, there are still a set of Christian ideas that deeply shape the texture of our worlds. By disclaiming rather than engaging with those ideas, the hold that the powers that be have on us strengthens.

Put another way, the post-Christian and spiritual language around #BlackLivesMatter sounds suspiciously similar to the post-Christian and spiritual language of bourgeois American culture. The motto “All You Need Is Love,” introduced by the Beatles in 1967, defines pop music, and conventional wisdom, to this day. A thousand New Age retreat centers, aimed at the upper middle class, trumpet new techniques for healing and for accessing spirit. Every non-profit and foundation under the sun, from both ends of the political spectrum, affirms human dignity. It

might be objected that the religious ideas circulating in the civil rights movement were also circulating in elite, Protestant spaces, just in different forms – in forms that affirmed rather than challenged the status quo. Certainly this is the case, but the friction between affirming and challenging was possible in that case because of the normative traditions in which these ideas were embedded. When love (or dignity, or healing, or spirit) is reduced to a general affirmation of life, stripped of normativity, of a sense that there are oughts and ought nots irreducible to the desires of the self, as love often is both in #BlackLivesMatter circles and in the broader culture today, there are no grounds for contest, no leverage to use to upend the status quo. Gaining that sort of leverage could happen in one of two ways. Either racial justice organizers more deeply engage with the continuing, subterranean import of religious ideas in the United States today; or organizers purge secularized religious and spiritual language from their vocabularies, searching instead for other concepts that capture what shapes our lives today, and what has the capacity to pull us toward justice. Put another way, the humanist impulses of racial justice activists ought to motivate reckoning with, rather than ignoring, the aspects of religion circulating in the movement today.

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