

THE BIBLE AND THE BALLOT: REV. JOSEPH H. JACKSON AND BLACK CONSERVATISM

IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

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## Introduction

“Integrationism and nationalism represent the two broad streams of black thought in response to the problem of slavery and segregation in America. ... All black intellectuals have represented aspects of each.”<sup>1</sup> Conventional wisdom about the African-American freedom struggle, as represented here in a quotation by James H. Cone, typically sees blacks as taking one of two approaches to white racism and discrimination. On one side was Martin Luther King, Jr. and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), who led the mainstream civil rights movement in a campaign of legal challenges and nonviolent direct action to tear down the barriers of segregation and promote a colorblind society where blacks were fully integrated into American society and its institutions. King’s leadership of the African-American community was challenged by black nationalists like Malcolm X and black power advocates, who believed white American was irredeemably racist and as a result argued that black success could come only through militancy and a separation from white society.

This binary between integrationist direct action and black nationalism appears everywhere in scholarly and popular discussion of the 1950s and 1960s, but it is not adequate in describing the forces at play in the black community at this time. The binary overlooks an equally long tradition of black conservatism in African-American life, one that can trace itself to the self-help tradition of Booker T. Washington. Among black clergy, conservatism manifested itself in a belief that the proper role of the black church should be to save souls; reform of African Americans and the society at large must come from within. A focus on spreading the gospel and working towards black self-sufficiency must be seen as a third serious approach by blacks to their place in American society, and it possessed as much intellectual rigor as the other two. And perhaps no one embodied this sincere and thoughtful commitment to black conservatism more than Rev. Joseph Harrison Jackson (1900-1990), the long-time

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<sup>1</sup> James H. Cone, “Integrationism and Nationalism in African-American Intellectual History,” in *African-American Religious Thought: An Anthology*, ed. Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude Jr. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 747. Cone’s essay originally appeared as a chapter in his 1991 book *Martin and Malcolm and America*, published by Orbis Books.

president of the National Baptist Convention (NBC). As head of the organization that represented by far more African Americans than any other religious or secular body, Jackson's ideas and actions must be taken seriously.

Too often, though, historians have tended to dismiss Jackson's role in the civil rights movement by representing his disputes with King as being over power rather than principle. Jackson's refusal to turn the National Baptist Convention into an activist organization dedicated to fighting for black civil rights led to the NBC president's split with King and the formation of the Progressive National Baptist Convention in 1961. While David Levering Lewis's biography of King does acknowledge Jackson's belief that the black clergy should be in the business of saving souls, he nevertheless still sees the animosity Jackson held toward King as being motivated by personal pique. He dismisses Jackson as being an individual who "supposedly spoke for five million black Baptists" and derides the NBC President for "sift[ing] his facts to suit the accusation."<sup>2</sup> And later scholars often did not even acknowledge any fundamental differences in world view that might have led to disputes between Jackson and King. David J. Garrow's history of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference approvingly notes that "some close observers felt that an insecure and envious Jackson had lost control and lashed out at King, a younger man whose fame far exceeded Jackson's." Garrow attributes Jackson's actions to his view that King was a "personal threat,"<sup>3</sup> an interpretation essentially echoed by Taylor Branch in his history of the civil rights movement. His lengthy descriptions of the battles over control of the Convention never once identify any values that may have shaped Jackson and led to his opposition to the civil right movement, merely noting that Jackson "[grew] more autocratic and more conservative" after 1957 in response to the threat posed by King. And Branch from the beginning of his discussion of Jackson paints the dispute between him and the civil rights leader as deeply personal: "Young M.L. [King] knew and revered

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<sup>2</sup> David Levering Lewis, *King: A Biography, Second Edition* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 158.

<sup>3</sup> David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 166.

Jackson from the time he was ten years old, unaware that the famous orator was destined to crush him within the church as a blood enemy.”<sup>4</sup>

Little scholarly work has been done specifically on Joseph H. Jackson, and one historian who has studied the NBC president, Wallace Best, also does not treat Jackson’s ideas and theological principles with the weight they deserve. In his article about the rivalry between King and Jackson, Best does at least acknowledge that the dispute between the two men “was not so much rooted in personal jealousy or a lust for power.”<sup>5</sup> Best argues that it is wrong to see the two men as merely representing opposite poles on the ideological spectrum, challenging what he sees as an overly simplistic view of King as the “progressive” and Jackson as the “conservative.”<sup>6</sup> Best writes that one should understand their rivalry as merely representing a dispute over “what constituted church work among black Baptists,” as King and Jackson were “similar in their theological views.”<sup>7</sup> But the differences between Jackson and King on the role of the black church had a firm theological basis, and to even emphasize this particular point of disagreement is to ignore the ideological disagreements between Jackson and King on a whole host of religious and secular issues. These differences in principle would have led Jackson to oppose the civil rights movement even if the question of whether the church should be involved was not at issue. What historians have not sufficiently recognized is that Jackson possessed a clear set of coherent, intellectually rigorous beliefs and values that formed the core of black conservatism and that guided Jackson’s actions both before and after the *Brown* decision of 1954 catalyzed the modern civil rights movement.

Although historians often write as if Jackson’s views were clouded in mystery, he wrote throughout his life a whole series of books that present his beliefs starkly: *A Voyage to West Africa ...*

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<sup>4</sup> Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Touchstone, 1988), 228, 56.

<sup>5</sup> Wallace Best, “‘The Right Achieved and the Wrong Way Conquered’: J. H. Jackson, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Conflict over Civil Rights,” *Religion and American Culture* 16(2006): 207.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 217, 196.

*and Some Reflections on Modern Missions* (1936), *Stars in the Night: Report on a Visit to Germany* (1950), *Many but One: The Ecumenics of Charity* (1964), *Unholy Shadows and Freedom's Holy Light* (1967), and *A Story of Christian Activism: The History of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.* (1980).<sup>8</sup> While corresponding secretary of the Foreign Mission Board of the NBC, Jackson wrote *Voyage to West Africa* to describe his 1935-36 visit and to "summon the minds of those interested in missions to a more serious reflection on the nature and needs of the modern missionary movement."<sup>9</sup> Nearly thirteen years later, while a vice president of the NBC but serving in his capacity as official representative of the World Council of Churches, Jackson went on a good will tour of reviled and war-ravaged Germany to provide encouragement to the Christians who lived there; he wrote about his experiences in the 1950 book *Stars in the Night*.<sup>10</sup> In 1964, over a decade after he assumed the presidency of the NBC, Jackson penned *Many but One* to stress the necessity of Christian unity in a world dominated by the atomic bomb, "a power that can destroy western civilization in a few brief moments and perhaps even wipe mankind from the face of the earth."<sup>11</sup> *Unholy Shadows*, which Jackson intended as "a realistic approach to the gains and remaining problems of the civil rights struggle" as of 1967, argued that the shift then taking place from nonviolence to black power as the dominant mode of the black freedom struggle was made almost inevitable by defects in the ideology of nonviolence itself.<sup>12</sup> *Christian Activism*, Jackson's history of the NBC written towards the end of his tenure as president, made clear that Christian activism was not aimed at "direct opposition or

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<sup>8</sup> One other relevant book by Jackson was not by this time available through Interlibrary Loan and has not been included in this analysis: J. H. Jackson, *The Eternal Flame: The Story of a Preaching Mission in Russia* (Philadelphia: Christian Education Press, 1956).

<sup>9</sup> Rev. J. H. Jackson, *A Voyage to West Africa ... and Some Reflections on Modern Missions* (Philadelphia: National Baptist Convention, 1936), 2.

<sup>10</sup> J. H. Jackson, *Stars in the Night: Report on a Visit to Germany* (Philadelphia: Christian Education Press, 1950), 11. Jackson's German visit occurred in the fall of 1948.

<sup>11</sup> Dr. J. H. Jackson, *Many but One: The Ecumenics of Charity* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), vii.

<sup>12</sup> J. H. Jackson, *Unholy Shadows and Freedom's Holy Light* (Nashville: Townsend Press, 1967), vii. The title of the book derives from Jackson's observation that an NAACP freedom rally in Chicago on July 4, 1963, which was about to be interrupted by protesters practicing civil disobedience, had attracted "thousands of people" to attend who "had come in the name of freedom though burdened with a consciousness that there were many problems still to be solved before all the lingering unholy shadows would give place fully to freedom's holy light." *Ibid.*, 136, 137.

destruction of the established order” but was instead “committed to the correction of the present evils[,] and moves on the belief that protest is not the only way or the only method by which the right may be achieved and the wrong way be conquered.”<sup>13</sup>

Taken together, Jackson’s writings reveal a man with a coherent, thoughtful world view that persisted throughout his adult life. Jackson’s philosophy was vastly different from King’s on a whole host of religious and secular issues, and its overall thrust was decidedly conservative in a manner that allows one to question not only his support for the tactics of the mainstream civil rights movement but even at times his commitment to its very goals. Jackson’s strand of black conservatism, advocating economic self-sufficiency and Christian evangelism, was neither integrationist nor nationalist, nor was it the voice of an extremist preaching to no one but himself. Scholars studying the civil rights movement must take seriously the attitudes and behaviors of advocates of this third major response to the black freedom struggle.

#### Jackson’s Secular Views

In sharp contrast to King, Jackson’s primary focus for black advancement was to advocate a black self-help philosophy following in the conservative tradition commonly associated with Booker T. Washington. The backgrounds and age difference of King and Jackson may have contributed to their differing perspectives. Born the son of a preacher in 1929, King was raised in a middle-class household where feeling the sting of segregation left him a passionate advocate of black civil rights. Jackson, by contrast, was born 29 years earlier and came of age in an era when the philosophies of Washington still held sway. He grew up the son of poor Mississippi farmers and had to educate himself in between completing work on the farm.<sup>14</sup> Achieving success through his own hard work may have contributed to Jackson’s advocacy of a philosophy that stressed the importance of African Americans attaining

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<sup>13</sup> J. H. Jackson, *A Story of Christian Activism: The History of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.* (Nashville: Townsend Press, 1980), ix.

<sup>14</sup> “Religion: Joseph H. Jackson: The Meaning of the Cross,” *Time*, April 6, 1970, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/printout/0,8816,943985,00.html>.

economic self-sufficiency, concentrating on production so they are no longer depended on whites. “We must learn how to organize our capital, harness our earnings and set them to work for us,” Jackson stressed in a 1962 speech, “so that we may produce more and finally develop independent factories and companies of our own.”<sup>15</sup>

The political ramifications of this philosophy will be discussed further later in this paper, but for now it will be stressed how engrained this economically and socially conservative philosophy was in Jackson’s belief system. One of his major objections to sit-ins was in how they denied owners of businesses of their “property rights.”<sup>16</sup> Jackson’s “proposals for the education of the young” also reflected a Washingtonian emphasis on industrial education: “education must deal with practical things which will aid young people in the skilled use of the tools of production and in the art of saving, investing, and the wise use of money.”<sup>17</sup>

The NBC president’s support for a philosophy of economic self-sufficiency over civil rights activism is also suggested in the references in his books to W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington themselves. Although Jackson does not directly express an opinion about Washington himself, he approvingly excerpted a speech to the 1948 NBC convention which observed that “Negro Baptists can point with pride to the immortal Booker T. Washington who outstripped all religionists in the field of industrial education,” and NBC annual conventions “traditionally” held activities on Friday evening to

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Jackson, *Unholy Shadows*, 195. This speech to the 1962 convention of the NBC in Chicago was reprinted in Jackson, *Unholy Shadows*, 192-96 and (in slightly different form) in Jackson, *Christian Activism*, 271-74. In general, when Jackson use the same or similar wording in both books, I will quote from the 1967 book to demonstrate that such a quotation reflected his thinking and desired emphases at a time period closer to the chronological center of the civil rights movement, when King was still alive.

<sup>16</sup> Jackson, *Christian Activism*, 432.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 275. Nevertheless, like Booker T. Washington, Jackson felt his own offspring should be well educated. In 1959, as the differences between Jackson and King were becoming starker, Jackson’s daughter Kenny Jackson Williams earned a Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Pennsylvania. Chicagobookbabe, “Kenny J. Williams: A Voice for Chicago’s Literary History,” *Chicago History Journal*, January 13, 2010, <http://www.chicagohistoryjournal.com/2010/01/kenny-j-williams-voice-for-chicagos.html>; Alan Charles Kors, “In Memoriam: Dr. Kenny J. Williams,” *Foundation for Individual Rights in Education* (web site), n.d. (but after December 19, 2003), <http://thefire.org/people/3449.html>.

celebrate Booker T. Washington Night.<sup>18</sup> Jackson also expressed ambivalent feelings about Du Bois's activities at the height of the Du Bois-Washington dispute; following a passage in which Jackson praised the NAACP for being an organization in which blacks and whites worked together to fight injustice by legal means, Jackson credited Du Bois for using his eloquence to advance black rights "in his own way," but also observed regrettably that Du Bois's earlier Niagara Movement was "more hostile and antagonistic to the white community" than the NAACP would become.<sup>19</sup>

To this conservative faith in the power of economic advancement to transform individuals and society, Jackson added the traditional American conservative's reverence for the Founding Fathers and the document (the Constitution) and institutions they established to facilitate this quest for societal improvement. Writing in 1964, Jackson expressed tremendous faith in the United States: "America was largely a unique social experiment where peoples of different nations and races and beliefs were brought together in utter commitment to one thing: Freedom."<sup>20</sup> Thus, Jackson believed that "the best method [for securing black freedom] is through law and order according to the principles of the Federal Constitution and all of those ideals by which and through which a free society of free men can be built."<sup>21</sup> His conservative dedication to law and order in fact would on occasion trump his professed allegiance to American democracy. Though protest through legislation or the courts was appropriate for racial injustice, he declared beyond the pale of "freedom of speech" those "Americans [who are] bold enough to sit in judgment on the nation's policy in Vietnam." Even just expressing opposition to the Vietnam War verbally or in writing would undermine faith in American institutions and mean that protesters are "taking one's stand against the United States and with other nations and countries who are anti-American in their philosophy and attitude."<sup>22</sup> Black conservatism gave room for protest through

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Jackson, *Christian Activism*, 207; Jackson, *Christian Activism*, 407.

<sup>19</sup> Jackson, *Unholy Shadows*, 42.

<sup>20</sup> Jackson, *Many but One*, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Jackson, *Unholy Shadows*, vii.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.



legal channels of practices deemed inimical to American values, but it also left open room for accusations that Jackson was practicing the kind of accommodationism that Booker T. Washington was often reviled for.

### Jackson's Religious Views

Jackson's conservative secular outlook marked a sharp break between him and King, but the two men also held widely contrasting views on such fundamental theological issues as the nature of man, the role of the black church, the value in non-Christian religions, and the morality of nonviolence. And their deeply held theological positions had important ramifications for their approach to the civil rights movement. Ironically, though both men attended liberal seminaries (Jackson earned a master's in theology at Colgate Rochester Divinity School),<sup>23</sup> liberalism appeared to have shaped Jackson's views of the nature of man more than it did King's. Jackson did adopt the language of King and other religious thinkers like Reinhold Niebuhr and George Kelsey in endorsing the concepts (in Jackson's words) that "all have sinned" and that there are "sins in our American system."<sup>24</sup> King's resultant recognition of man's "tragic inclination for sin," tempered by the understanding that "man has cosmic companionship" in "the struggle for righteousness," led him to recognize that society will not inevitably improve but must be led in that direction by concerted, focused activism.<sup>25</sup> But although Jackson gave occasional lip service to ideas of sinful man and sinful society, such beliefs did not form the core of his theology or underlay his political philosophy. The chapter on "the nature of our democratic society" in *Unholy Shadows* observed that the necessary question to ask first was, "What is the nature of man?"<sup>26</sup> Sin did not appear anywhere in Jackson's discussion. Rather, the NBC president spoke of the higher qualities

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<sup>23</sup> "Religion: Joseph H. Jackson"; David C. Rudd, "Rev. Joseph H. Jackson, Conservative Blackleader" (obituary), *Chicago Tribune*, August 20, 1990, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1990-08-20/news/9003090687\\_1\\_rev-jackson-jackson-state-university-racial](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1990-08-20/news/9003090687_1_rev-jackson-jackson-state-university-racial).

<sup>24</sup> Jackson, *Christian Activism*, 494.

<sup>25</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence" [1960], in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), 36, 40.

<sup>26</sup> Jackson, *Unholy Shadows*, 4.

and quest for improvement that motivated man. “Man possesses certain mental and moral faculties that render him a sacred being worthy of all respect,” Jackson observed, and “within the mind and spirit of normal human beings [exist] an awareness that they should not take from others what they did not desire others to take from them.” According to Jackson, Jesus defined the nature of man in even stronger terms, as Jesus stressed that “man had been endowed with a hunger for righteousness, with a thirst for ever living water, and with a soul that was immeasurable in value and far more precious than embellished stones.” The NBC president believed in inevitable societal progress, nothing that through forces such as religion and science, “there has been developed improved thinking and planning for the well-being of all citizens.”<sup>27</sup>

It is important to recognize the logical consequence of Jackson’s combination of a liberal belief that man is striving towards perfection with his conservative faith in American institutions. Americans believed in law and order, and the U.S. system of government was strong enough (and the individuals operating it were noble enough) that if injustice was present, normal constitutional processes such as legislation or the courts were enough to protect it. Thus, there was no need to resort to extra-legal strategies like civil disobedience to protect black civil rights, and in fact such disruptive strategies would only threaten the stability and sanctity of the American institutions on which true justice depended.<sup>28</sup>

If Jackson’s acceptance of the liberal position on the nature of man allowed him a mechanism for seeing how society could be improved, his deeply held conservative convictions on almost every other theological position of importance to the civil rights movement assured that a break with King was virtually inevitable. Best is correct that King and Jackson had fundamental disagreements on the role of the black church,<sup>29</sup> but the views of both men had solid intellectual roots and went to the very heart of the role of religion in the black freedom struggle. To King, the main purpose of the black church was

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 4, 6, 9, 19.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 12-19, 22-23.

<sup>29</sup> Best, “Right Achieved,” 217.

undoubtedly to fight for social justice in this life, thereby fulfilling “its great historic mission ... to speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace.”<sup>30</sup> Jackson, in contrast, felt that whatever roles the black church would play should be directed to a clear higher end. At times he endorsed the National Baptist Convention preaching the “social gospel,”<sup>31</sup> and elsewhere he argued that the church should encourage the “transformation of society” through either “persuasion”<sup>32</sup> or lobbying the public to advocate for appropriate legislation.<sup>33</sup> He commended the African-American church for its historic role in giving hope to the black race in the days of slavery and following emancipation.<sup>34</sup> In the present day, Jackson felt that the black church had an opportunity to expand its mission into one of rescuing contemporary Christianity from its spiritual stagnation, by “seek[ing] a kingdom of values that would inspire in all men a sense of brotherhood and will bring to the hearts and minds of the peoples and nations of the world the way of justice, righteousness, and peace.”<sup>35</sup>

But all these formulations of the role of the black church were merely means to a higher end, as he agreed with black Pentecostals that the major purpose for the church was to save souls. The National Baptist Convention’s founding mission was “to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ in America, in Africa, as well as in any community where the door of opportunity was open to them.”<sup>36</sup> Jackson in 1936 expressed the purpose of the NBC’s mission work in Africa as “working for the victory of the eternal

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<sup>30</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Strength to Love” [1963], in *Testament of Hope*, 501.

<sup>31</sup> Jackson, *Christian Activism*, x. Although his support for the “social gospel” in his 1980 appears in keeping more with the mainstream understanding of the term, Jackson certainly would use the term at times to advocate something far different. In his 1936 book describing his trip to West Africa, he describes the real meaning of the social gospel not as reflecting social justice but as promoting productive, spiritually exalted labor. “There is no better place to put into operation the implications of the social Gospel than on the mission fields,” Jackson wrote, “by teaching the people how to get the goods of life from God’s rich earth and to so use them that they will serve as an eternal basis for education, government, and religion.” Jackson, *Voyage to West Africa*, 54.

<sup>32</sup> Jackson, *Unholy Shadows*, 181.

<sup>33</sup> Jackson, *Christian Activism*, 324-25.

<sup>34</sup> Jackson, *Unholy Shadows*, 201-07.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 208. Jackson acknowledged learning about this possible new global role for the African-American church through the writing of British historian Arnold Toynbee. *Ibid.*, 207.

<sup>36</sup> Jackson, *Christian Activism*, x.

Christ,”<sup>37</sup> and he lamented how pagans he observed participating in a funeral “needed the hope, cheer, and the strength that are promised to us through the message and life of the Christ Child.”<sup>38</sup> To Jackson, the black church was a “revolutionary group” not because it was committed to overthrow of the existing economic order but because of its undying commitment to winning souls for Christ. His 1961 speech to the NBC cast the black church as a “revolutionary group” because it “seeks to re-make the old order and to build the Kingdom of God by re-making old men into new creatures; by redeeming the unsaved through the grace of God, and by giving to men new minds, new hearts, new spirits and new purposes” and thereby becoming united in a “fellowship” that ignores all superficial barriers of race or “economic and cultural [background].”<sup>39</sup> Even more strikingly, Jackson believed that the social ills of society could best be solved by converting people to Christianity, which in transforming people’s interior lives would remake the world at large. He visited the League of Nations in Geneva in 1935 before heading to Africa, and he concluded that League deliberations, while constructive, were “lacking the dynamic and the supreme motivating power which will enable it to render and deliver a creative decision which would guarantee the peace that all apparently so much desired.” This motivating power was “the message of Jesus,” which needed to be preached “not only among the people of heathendom, but among all of the nations of the civilized world.”<sup>40</sup> This conviction of the transformative power of Christianity also underlay the ecumenist argument of his 1964 book *Many but One*, which maintained that the threat of the atomic bomb could best be averted through Christian unity, since “the Judeo-Christian tradition at its best has the dynamism to achieve the end desired and to save mankind from itself.”<sup>41</sup> Just like noted conservative white preachers Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell, Jackson believed that the way to better

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<sup>37</sup> Jackson, *Voyage to West Africa*, 70.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Jackson, *Christian Activism*, 464.

<sup>40</sup> Jackson, *Voyage to West Africa*, 11.

<sup>41</sup> Jackson, *Many but One*, vii.

society was through the transformation in people's lives that resulted from winning them for Christianity.

Ultimately, no matter what personal animosities may have existed between King and Jackson, the NBC president's decision to distance himself from the mainstream civil rights movement would likely have happened anyway because his theological beliefs simply did not allow him to endorse the major nonviolent tactics of the movement. Jackson seriously doubted the legitimacy of drawing spiritual inspiration from sources outside of Christianity and disputed the Christian moral principles on which King and other advocates of nonviolent direct action claimed the approach rested. It would be fair to call King a mystic, someone who is willing to look widely for ideas that could shape one's own views. In his own writings, he acknowledged receiving important insights from the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, the Hindu activist Mahatma Gandhi, and secular thinkers such as the existentialists and Hegel.<sup>42</sup> In sharp distinction to King, Jackson saw little value in looking to other religious traditions or secular sources for advice on how to live one's life. In *Unholy Shadows*, he professed intense admiration for Gandhi personally, identifying him as a great man and acknowledging that Gandhi's crusade of civil disobedience was appropriate and successful in the Indian context.<sup>43</sup> But even aside from the question of whether Gandhi's approach was applicable to the United States, Jackson professed strong opposition to any Christian drawing inspiration from sources outside the Bible. According to the NBC president, the philosophy of nonviolent civil disobedience brought together "the world view of Hinduism ... the godless materialism of Karl Marx and .... the anti-government philosophy of Henry David Thoreau," along with "an attempt ... to bring in the prophets' quest for social justice and the Jesus-idea of the Kingdom of God motivated by love and unselfish devotion to all men."<sup>44</sup> But this effort to unite such "contrasted and conflicting philosophies of life" was doomed to failure, and even worse would inevitably result in "an

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<sup>42</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham City Jail" [1963], in *Testament of Hope*, 293; King, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," 36-38. Of course, many of King's mentors like Howard Thurman were also mystics.

<sup>43</sup> Jackson, *Unholy Shadows*, 101-05. Jackson had visited India himself in 1962. *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 176, 175.

eclecticism that breaks the known canons of reason, violates every law of human logic, and sins against the human desire for harmony and understanding.”<sup>45</sup> In distancing nonviolence from Christianity, Jackson ignored the fact that Gandhi’s views were strongly shaped by his studies of the life and teachings of Jesus; rather, the NBC president emphasized how secular thinker Henry David Thoreau influenced the Hindu leader.<sup>46</sup> But one key to understanding the attraction nonviolence held to King comes in realizing how compatible he felt it was to the ideals of Christian love.

Jackson opposed nonviolence for a host of practical and religious reasons, not least of which was a conviction that nonviolence was ineffective and unnecessary in a context (unlike that of India) where the method was being practiced by a minority who aimed not to overthrow a system, but to reform it in ways Jackson felt could be accomplished much easier through the ballot box and the courts.<sup>47</sup> But underlying his hostility was also a lack of awareness of King’s religious justifications for nonviolence or a refusal to take them seriously. In *Unholy Shadows*, Jackson seriously misstated the intended consequences of nonviolent direct action. Writing that “this method relies on the emotion of fear and seeks through harassment, threats, and intimidations to force an official or an unwilling person to surrender to the demands made by the group upon him,” Jackson professed that the goal of nonviolence was to “punish those whom they consider to be responsible for the continuation of their oppression.”<sup>48</sup> But to King, the whole point of nonviolence was the exact opposite; exercising Christian love, proponents of nonviolence direct their opposition not to the people caught up in the system but to the evil social structures themselves. By continuing to love one’s enemies, nonviolent activists would

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 174.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 107-08.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 106, 107.

appeal to their oppressors' consciences and make them see the moral justice of the civil rights demonstrators' cause.<sup>49</sup>

Even when one begins to find theological common ground between King and Jackson, any attempt at unity would fall part upon digging deeper into their religious views. Jackson called for those who fight injustice to continue "to think, to live, and to be our best in spite of the evils of our environment."<sup>50</sup> One can find in this belief some echoes of the call by King and other religious intellectuals that nonviolent activists must purify themselves and try to correct their own sin as they work to redress the sins of society. But Jackson would call these attempts at self-purification doomed from the start, because by the very act of breaking the law in civil disobedience, these nonviolent activists were committing further sin. Jackson also unduly trivialized the higher calling to which civil rights demonstrators felt their activities were directed. In his "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," King spoke eloquently about the difference between just and unjust laws, and how it is the Christian's duty not to observe "man-made" laws that violate "the moral law or the law of God."<sup>51</sup> Jackson acknowledged the existence of unjust laws, but to him the only way to recognize such laws is through the dictates of the "individual conscience."<sup>52</sup> Without a higher moral order that could direct nonviolent action, and thus with people choosing on their own what laws to obey, civil disobedience can only lead to chaos and violence.

Jackson held a conservative reverence for law and order,<sup>53</sup> and thus the possibility for violence was actually one of Jackson's most important concerns about nonviolent direct action. Ironically, whereas Jackson was likely too naïve about human nature concerning his faith in the democratic progress by itself in fixing entrenched evils, King was overly naïve in his conviction that nonviolence

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<sup>49</sup> King's religious justification for nonviolence is summed up nicely in Martin Luther King, Jr., "Nonviolence and Racial Justice" [1957], in *Testament of Hope*, 5-9.

<sup>50</sup> Jackson, *Unholy Shadows*, 115.

<sup>51</sup> King, "Letter from Birmingham," 293.

<sup>52</sup> Jackson, *Unholy Shadows*, 111.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

would work by winning the hearts and minds of the perpetrators of the segregationist system. As King better came to understand later in his career, nonviolence worked not by reforming Southern racists but by winning the sympathies of Northerners who were appalled by the violent Southern reaction and lobbied their members of Congress for effective civil rights legislation.<sup>54</sup> Such an analysis of the important factors behind the success of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 has been convincingly demonstrated by Michael J. Klarman and others; the assertion in Denton L. Watson's brief article that "non-violent demonstrations had limited impact on the legislative struggle in Congress" suffers from lack of support.<sup>55</sup> In fairness to Jackson, he appeared to not fall prey as did the white Birmingham ministers to the temptation to blame civil rights protesters for the violence that Southern racists perpetrated on them. But he felt that nonviolent direct action tactics were only increasing the hatred of blacks held by white Southerners.<sup>56</sup> But he doubted that a nonviolent strategy was sustainable. In astutely observing that Christian love "is still kind" even "after suffering long," Jackson observed that reliance on Christian love as a tactic to avoid retaliation is "difficult and almost impossible to imagine and unthinkable as a procedural method in a complicated and evil society."<sup>57</sup> Calling nonviolence a "powder keg philosophy" and a form of "brinkmanship," the NBC president felt that the turn of the

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<sup>54</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Playboy Interview: Martin Luther King, Jr." [1965], in *Testament of Hope*, 348-49.

<sup>55</sup> Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford, 2004), 344-442; Denton L. Watson, "Scholar's Focus on Martin Luther King Has Skewed Our Understanding of the Civil-Rights Struggle," *A.M.E. Church Review* 106(1991): 49. Without denying the ingenuity required to pass these bills in Congress, it strains credulity to think that such far-reaching and strong civil rights legislation would have been seriously considered, much less adopted, without the massive, black-led mobilization of civil rights activists that galvanized a nation's attention and support. To question two specific premises Watson makes in his article: Watson makes much of the fact that the decisive event that led President Kennedy to introduce a civil rights bill in 1963 was not Bull Connor's violence in Birmingham but the assassination of Medgar Evers. But even if this is true, Evers as the NAACP's Mississippi field secretary was likely not directing his efforts at advocating legislative action but in coordinating direct action activities in the state, thus being engaged in the same type of activities King was. Also, Denton focuses considerable attention on the need to win non-Southern conservative support for civil rights legislation. But conservatives would likely have been influenced as much as liberals were by media coverage, constituent entreaties, and the effect on their conscience of watching such repression, and to these motivating factors conservatives might have had an additional reason of being upset or angry that Southern white extremists were violating the principles of law and order that many conservatives held so dearly. *Ibid.*, 48, 49.

<sup>56</sup> Jackson, *Unholy Shadows*, 109-10.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.



African-American freedom struggle towards rioting and violence in the mid- and late-1960s was a natural consequence of nonviolence's tendency to tempt human nature, just as India was rocked by Hindu-Muslim violence despite its Gandhian heritage just as independence was being declared.<sup>58</sup> In part, Jackson overstated the possibility of nonviolence turning violence by devoting disproportionate space to the more aggressive civil disobedience strategies such as blocking traffic and disrupting events<sup>59</sup>; even if those demonstrations may have encouraged aggression that could have led into violence, the presumably more typical nonviolent direct action activities like restaurant sit-ins and freedom rides were far more likely to result in black activists suffering from harassment and bloodshed than vice versa. Still, the very act of suffering through attacks without retaliation may have built pent-up rage in some demonstrators. In the short term, at least, King and other nonviolent activists appeared to have been successful in keeping nonviolent protests peaceful. Whether the use of such methods by the majority of activists, for whom nonviolence remained a tactic rather than a way of life, led eventually to violent protest is less clear.

At this point, it may appear that Jackson's conservatism consisted of two distinct strands: black self-help and Christian evangelism. But can the two be reconciled? Did Jackson see a focus on economic self-sufficiency as a means to promote the saving of souls? Although he does not tackle this issue directly in his writings on the civil rights movement, his discussion of the NBC's mission work makes it clear that Jackson saw a direct connection between evangelism and self-help in at least two ways. Practically, he felt that successfully bringing people to Christ depended on raising the standard of living of would-be converts, since efforts at evangelism would not succeed if native people perceived themselves as being exploited by the missionaries. "It is indeed hard to convey to your convert the spirit

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 110, 178.

<sup>59</sup> See, e.g., *ibid.*, 117-43, 176-77. The Baptist "sit-in" and "march-in" described in *ibid.*, 117-36 are discussed in far more detail in Jackson, *Christian Activism*, 406-95.

of Jesus,” Jackson observed, “so long as he must see you riding on the backs of his countrymen.”<sup>60</sup> This line of reasoning also could explain why Jackson endorsed limited civil rights activism through the legislature and the courts, since a religion not seen as helping to improve the lot of its practitioners might be seen by some people as one not worthy of being accepted.

More fundamentally, the future NBC president felt that maintenance of Christian faith required living an upright life that exemplifies the values of piety and hard work. In wording that would be just as applicable to the American context, Jackson observed that “to teach a generation of men that they can earn their daily bread by working for another for wages, and the chances are they will become so satisfied with being hirelings that they will not learn to take the responsibility of developing their own resources themselves.”<sup>61</sup> Lack of economic independence would “enslave the people by developing in them a love for the ease that foreign wealth creates,” cause them to lose “urge and initiative,” make them likely to sink into an “awful poverty,” and be such “a curse to [their] souls and bodies.”<sup>62</sup> Jackson would then make the connection between religious faith and economic self-sufficiency explicit: “The soil, as the source of much of the economic life of any people, is the foundation of that Kingdom of God in which men may have the necessities of body and mind.”<sup>63</sup> Jackson was a well-educated and thoughtful man, and his ideas of black civil rights and economic self-help melded into a coherent and intellectually rigorous philosophy in which working for the salvation of mankind was paramount.

#### The Effects of Jackson’s Beliefs on his Actions in the Civil Rights Movement

We have seen that Jackson’s generally conservative theological stances and strongly conservative endorsements of economic self-help and law and order put him sharply at odds with many of the views expressed by King. But what effect did Jackson’s attitudes have on his actions during the civil rights movement? It is perhaps revealing that the actions Jackson chose to emphasize as being most

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<sup>60</sup> Jackson, *Voyage to West Africa*, 55.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-53.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 52, 53.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

representative of the National Baptist Convention's response to the black freedom struggle were all symbolic: seeking to have the date of the *Brown* decision be declared a national holiday, organizing a religious celebration of *Brown's* second anniversary, and making civil rights the focus of the NBC's 1956 convention.<sup>64</sup> True, the NBC (and Jackson's own church) did provide some verbal and monetary support for the Montgomery bus boycott, but Jackson's need in his history of the Convention to present a letter signed by nine ministers (mostly Baptists) defending the NBC's role in the boycott suggests that the Convention may not have backed the boycott as strongly as the NBC could have.<sup>65</sup> The Convention did appear to play a major role in launching an "Urge Congress Movement" supporting passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, but still Jackson may have exaggerated the NBC's role by remarking that the Convention "did so much to arouse the minds and capture the interest of the members of the United State Congress." Even more starkly, the NBC president largely ignored the consensus of how weak the 1957 act was in celebrating how "the National Baptist Convention helped the Congress of the United States of America write a new high mark in the venture of first-class citizenship in the United States of America."<sup>66</sup> But one wonders if active intervention by Jackson and the NBC in the civil rights struggle largely ended after 1957, as the much more powerful Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act of 1964 and 1965 go almost unmentioned in Jackson's history of the Convention. Where they do get referenced is not from any efforts by the NBC to support passage of the bills themselves, but from a rather fanciful claim that the NBC should receive intellectual credit for the contents of the 1964 Civil Rights Act because a speech that Jackson gave to the NBC's 1956 civil rights-themed convention mentioned "many of the

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<sup>64</sup> Jackson, *Christian Activism*, 286. Jackson proceeds to cover these symbolic events in great detail, covering p. 286-320 of his history of the NBC.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 281-85, with the text of the letter on p. 282-85. Jackson explained the NBC's support for this act of civil disobedience by stressing how the protesters obeyed the law while observing the boycott. Jackson, *Unholy Shadows*, 118.

<sup>66</sup> Jackson, *Christian Activism*, 330, 329. Full discussion of the NBC's role in the "Urge Congress Movement" can be found at *ibid.*, 320-30.

ideals and safeguards designed to protect the voters at all polling place” that were eventually included in the 1964 act!<sup>67</sup>

The high water mark for Jackson’s activism in the civil rights struggle appeared to have occurred in 1957. On religious and practical grounds, Jackson rejected nonviolent direct action as a proper means to effect change in the United States. His balancing of a liberal faith in human progress with a conservative faith in the American system and its founding document led him to argue that the most effective means to secure black civil rights was through the courts or legislatures, but there is little evidence from his books that he worked to improve society by these means after 1957. Jackson believed that even more than legal victories, black improvement depended on economic advancement for African Americans. What Jackson called the “National Baptist Philosophy of Civil Rights” was encapsulated in the slogan “Protest has its place in our racial struggle, but we must go from protest to production.”<sup>68</sup> Jackson adopted a Washingtonian rationale for the importance of black self-sufficiency: “Freed men are not really free until they learn to exercise their new acquired opportunities to gain for themselves the economic, intellectual, political, moral and spiritual independence and self-reliance.”<sup>69</sup> The 1962 speech from which this line was drawn paid lip service to the value of protest through legal means. Suggesting that the black church, and African Americans themselves, shift their emphasis from securing legal equality to promoting economic progress may have made sense in 1966 or 1967, following the hard-fought legislative victories of the past years. But to indicate in 1962 that protest no longer should take priority, well before the Civil Rights and Voting Acts were passed, is to naively dismiss Du Bois’s trenchant observation that economic self-advancement is impossible without full legal protections (including voting rights) in place. And Jackson’s dismissal even of protest through the courts

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 317. *Unholy Shadows* does mention that the full convention and NBC leaders in “several” states wrote Congress urging passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, but still Convention efforts to secure passage of the 1964 bill seemed to pale in comparison to the advocacy undertaken for the 1957 bill. Jackson, *Unholy Shadows*, 80-81.

<sup>68</sup> Jackson, *Christian Activism*, 270, 275.

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in Jackson, *Unholy Shadows*, 195.

or Congress as an important weapon in 1962 also renders almost inescapable the conclusion that Jackson really was as conservative and uninterested in black civil rights as his opponents had claimed.

#### The Long-Standing Nature of Jackson's Fundamental Convictions

Now, the question can be raised as to whether the conservative views expressed by Jackson in 1962 and later represent his long-standing, core beliefs, or whether intense personal animosity to King led the NBC president to automatically oppose anything his rival supported.<sup>70</sup> We can begin to answer this question by looking for echoes of this conservative ideology from speeches and letters from before 1961 that appear in Jackson's books. In so doing, one finds that support for "a due regard for law and respect for order" appears in a Jackson speech from 1956,<sup>71</sup> and the NBC president's 1954 "Negro's Declaration of Intention" called for "utter devotion to the federal Constitution."<sup>72</sup> Being said at a time between *Brown* and when the majority of direct action activism started, however, it is possible Jackson's expression of these ideas reflected more a concern with the threat of extremist violence perpetrated by Southern racists. However, as early as 1936, love of country and faith in law and order appeared firmly entrenched in Jackson's mind. In describing his mission trip to West Africa, Jackson expressed that "the right type of missionary work ... aims at teaching the people how to appreciate their own [country] and to develop and honor it as a gift from God."<sup>73</sup> And one anecdote from Jackson's trip describes a "dignified-looking man" who appeared to be a "Mohammedan" who was unable to pay the full boat fare and instead pleaded, "I don't have money for full fare! Please, sir, I beg of you, let me go for this! Please, man, you have mercy on me!"<sup>74</sup> Jackson had elsewhere in his book expressed a heartfelt understanding of the poverty and miserable living conditions he witnessed among many Africans,<sup>75</sup> but in this case he

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<sup>70</sup> Thank you to Prof. Dickerson for raising this question in class.

<sup>71</sup> Jackson, *Christian Activism*, 317.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>73</sup> Jackson, *Voyage to West Africa*, 52.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 13, 25, 46, 47.

expressed no sympathy for this man just trying to survive. Instead, he observed that this “shrewd” passenger “represented a class of native people who knew how to break laws and get by.”<sup>76</sup>

Instead of forcefully confronting injustice, Jackson believed--as did the eight Birmingham ministers King addressed in his “Letter from Birmingham City Jail”--that civil rights could be won through cooperation between the races. His concern that nonviolent direct action would only lead to hatred demonstrates this, as does a 1955 speech in which the NBC president maintained that “the battle for freedom .. must be won in a spirit of goodwill.”<sup>77</sup> But the roots of this philosophy also well predate his confrontation with King. As early as 1936, Jackson called for “a greater spirit of interdenominational cooperation” in mission work.<sup>78</sup> By 1950, he was praising the effectiveness of the “democratic process of discussing” in previously totalitarian Germany.<sup>79</sup> Jackson hated civil disobedience so much because he feared it was a way to take revenge on the South for its many sins. Rather, he felt, the South should not be condemned for its misdeeds but rather gently brought back into an acceptance of mainstream values, as he urged for Germany well before the *Brown* decision. Fearing Germany’s destruction by the Allies, Jackson observed “how tragic it will be for the world to know that the spiritual resources of the victorious powers were so low that it was impossible to find grounds to forgive and trust these noble people.”<sup>80</sup> King too stressed reconciliation and denied that that the people of the South were his enemy, so his disagreement with Jackson rested in part on differing understandings of what the practical results of nonviolent direct action would be. But given Jackson’s belief that such tactics would engender hatred among Southerners, his forceful opposition to civil disobedience rested on profound theological convictions.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>77</sup> Jackson, *Unholy Shadows*, 87.

<sup>78</sup> Jackson, *Voyage to West Africa*, 66.

<sup>79</sup> Jackson, *Stars in the Night*, 40.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 63.

As noted above, Jackson's advocacy of production also had deep roots. His introduction to the 1962 "Protest to Production" speech in his 1967 book noted that Jackson had "long been convinced" of the necessity for this shift in the direction of the civil rights movement.<sup>81</sup> In 1960, the year before King broke from the Convention, Jackson began looking to buy land in Tennessee for what became the National Baptist Freedom Farm, an effort to provide land to black farmers displaced for trying to exercise their right to vote. The production-oriented impetus behind this farm is made vividly clear in a 1961 letter, approvingly quoted by Jackson, from the white farmer who ultimately agreed to sell the Convention land for the Freedom Farm: "It is my belief that this act of purchasing a farm and encouraging self-help and self-reliance is one of the greatest forward steps among the people of your race since BOOKER T. WASHINGTON LAUNCHED HIS PROGRAM AT TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE."<sup>82</sup> But his faith in the dignity of labor and the life-changing potential of black self-help went back much farther than that. Jackson devoted a paragraph in his 1935 description of his West African trip to praising the rowers who piloted his through choppy waters to the African shores. "The work was hard," Jackson remarked, but "these black men" succeeded through "their strong muscles and skilled, united strokes" which he described as "rhythmic and artistic."<sup>83</sup> He consistently expressed interest in the economic potential of the regions he visited, from praising the industriousness of the English countryside to being especially interested to check out the "business life" of the Liberian capital.<sup>84</sup> It should not be overlooked that the schools the NBC established in West Africa were all industrial schools, and the concern for black self-sufficiency he expressed in 1936 could just have easily have been recited in 1962: "The powers that finance the educational, political, and even the religious organizations of the people can break and destroy them at will by simply removing the foundation on which the things stand."<sup>85</sup> But this was no

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<sup>81</sup> Jackson, *Unholy Shadows*, 192.

<sup>82</sup> Jackson, *Christian Activism*, 570. Full discussion of the Freedom Farm appears in *ibid.*, 556-70.

<sup>83</sup> Jackson, *Voyage to West Africa*, 15.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 19.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

appeal to black nationalism, since as noted above, Jackson tied Africans' economic independence directly to missionaries' ability to save souls and maintain converted people in Christian living. And Jackson was far too attached to the values of the American founding to ever advocate black separatism in the United States. Like Booker T. Washington, but with arguably an even stronger religious dimension, he advocated black self-improvement as a means to make life for blacks in the United States manageable while they directed their life to higher, more spiritual callings of Christian living and support for evangelism here and abroad. In all of these facets, Jackson's conservative views and hostility to the tenets that undergirded the mainstream civil rights movement appear to have been sincerely held for a long time, not a reflection of a personal vendetta against King.

#### Conclusion

Writing his history of the National Baptist Convention in 1980, Jackson observed that "the correction of social evils is better through goodwill and persuasion than by force and bitterness."<sup>86</sup> But by not being able to justify theologically and practically the very techniques of nonviolent direct action that made all the gains of the civil rights movement possible, Jackson found himself outside the tide of history that swept the African American people to new heights of freedom. At best, he could be considered like the six more liberal Birmingham ministers that King addresses in his famous letter, who meant well but whose overemphasis on cooperation and inability to condone nonviolence prevented them from being part of solution. At worse, Jackson's all-too-frequent retreat to a position that the main goal of the black church is to save souls renders him an obstructionist to the cause of black freedom with not much higher standing than Billy Graham or Jerry Falwell. Jackson's black conservative principles were deeply held for a long time, and resulted from serious intellectual engagement with theological and secular issues. His overarching faith in the transformative power of evangelism to remake society, and to black self-help and American constitutionalism as means to those ends, deserves

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<sup>86</sup> Jackson, *Christian Activism*, 433.



to be seen as an important third approach by many African Americans to the challenges of the 1950s and 1960s. But despite the thoughtfulness and passion with which Jackson presented his ideas, the failure of black conservatism to lead to meaningful advancement in civil rights must cause the judgment of history to render a harsh verdict on Jackson's world view.