Practical Faith:
How Southern Black Women and White Women Used Their Faith in Pursuit of Equality

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford, Mississippi
May 2016

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Dedication

For Stormageddon, Dark Lady of All, and Thor, my furry writing companions who supply me with unending love and contempt, respectively
ABSTRACT
HOLLY BAER
Practical Faith:
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(Under the direction of Dr. Sarah Moses)

This thesis explores how Southern black and white women used their Christian faith in the pursuit of racial and gender equality, showing how feminist theory and religious doctrine function in reality and everyday practice. The first chapter looks at upper and middle class white women’s experiences from the Antebellum period through the early twentieth century, and shows how they used their faith to gain autonomy by manipulating common religious beliefs of the time. The second chapter examines black women’s experiences, primarily during the Civil Rights Era, and shows that black women had to approach equality as vocal activists, rather than relying on subtle, subversive change.
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In this thesis, I show how Southern white and black women used their Christian faith radically differently in the pursuit of gender equality and racial justice. White women primarily used religion to manipulate their social standing, forsaking both the poor and the discriminated racial minorities that suffered alongside them. Their methods were effective and often detrimental to people outside of their race and social standing, but, ultimately, quite successful. I will then show that black women never had the same subversive options available to them, and that the pursuit of justice for black women in the South always required a broader scope with more direct action. Further, black women approached social justice movements with more deliberate manipulation of spiritual belief, while white women used others’ opinions on religion to gain rights and autonomy instead of using Christian scripture. Whereas white women used the church and religion to gain some independence, black women used religion to undermine and subvert an inherently oppressive societal system in the American South. This thesis examines the
practical consequences of pursuing equality in a male-dominated society by using male-dominated religions.

Throughout history, women have had to use religion differently than their male counterparts. Religion has been used to define women in ways that it did not necessarily define men. Men had the benefit of ordination and other formal hierarchies that gave them direct access to official church power. However, women were—and are—not less religious; in fact, on average, women are more religious than men.¹ This created a dichotomy of orthodox beliefs versus unorthodox beliefs, formal practice versus informal practice. The religion practiced in the public spheres of the church, mosque, or temple did not always resemble the private practices of women—and subsequently children—in the domestic sphere. This also led to different group dynamics for women’s religious practice compared to men’s.

Religion often has an obsession with answering the question: “What is a woman?” In her book Women and Religion, Majella Franzmann says:

Many religions concern themselves intimately with the biological and social life stages of women. Thus, in many religious groups there is an insistence on virginity for unmarried women; there are rules governing the role of menstrual or menopausal woman; there are taboos surrounding either menstruation or childbirth and its aftermath; there are psychological or physical penalties for the childless woman; there are rules concerning women’s marriage or access to divorce or their experience of widowhood.²

Religious institutions attempt to define the very fabric of womanhood, but women have not allowed themselves to be limited. No set rule or doctrine has been capable of placing a restriction on what femininity is or how women may work within that definition. Socially constructed practices of womanhood encompass more than what any religion could dictate, no matter how much religion tries to slim down the definition of womanhood.

Religious texts have done women few favors. Academics have long focused on orthodox religious practices which rely heavily on textual traditions, which almost always marginalize women’s experiences. Within the text themselves, women rarely fulfill roles beyond the immoral or problematic; if they do, these women are most often mothers, sisters, or wives to great men. Women can speak and use their voices for powerful purposes, such as actively pursuing opportunities for religious leadership and advocating for marginalized groups, but that is the exception, rather than the rule. Even when women were literate and able to read the text that excluded them, they rarely had access to education to teach and interpret the text. The most devout woman would only be capable of teaching a home-grown version of her faith. Whatever seeds of orthodoxy planted inside of her would have to grow without textual water.\(^3\)

Because women’s practices are often treated as less essential or mainstream, even the language used by religious texts and theologians to describe them limits women to being an anomaly or inherently difficult to understand and manage. When academics and religious leaders create language that describes men’s experiences as the norm, women’s experiences—however natural—become inherently other.\(^4\) Women’s versus men’s

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religion often becomes a game of authority: men’s religion has more authority, but women’s religion is practiced more frequently. In some denominations of Christianity, women now have the right to enter the clergy and preach openly, but this is removing women from traditional women’s spaces of religion and absorbing them into the hierarchical and patriarchal system of established religion. This did nothing to legitimize women’s unorthodox religious practices or remove them from the margins.\(^5\)

Despite formal limitations, religious women have effectively used their religion to manipulate their social standing. Modern feminism has often ignored the reality of practiced gender liberation within a social context. Rita Gross says, “In my view, these typical feminist diagnoses are correct but incomplete because they do not sufficiently clarify the fundamental aspiration of modern feminism, which is far more important than equality or total lack of hierarchy: freedom from gender roles.”\(^6\) I believe that this desire of modern feminism is incompatible with a significant number of women who pursue justice for women within religious communities. Gender roles are not inherently evil; if women can use their gender for good within their religious contexts they can skillfully manipulate society around them. The goal is thus not freedom from gender roles, but freedom from servitude and a push for gender equality. For religious women, acting within their faith’s gender roles creates more concrete changes in their lives than mobilization against a seemingly impenetrable social force; that said, many women devote their lives to their religion and have no desire to change the gender roles within their society and their faith.

If power of any sort within the church became inaccessible to women, women would use their domesticity to cultivate some cultural power. Women exert an incredibly influential force on the children in their care. Using religion, women can—and do—shape the next generation of religious and social leaders. Women’s power in the home has been acknowledged by various religious traditions “in which male children are taken from the home at a young age to be placed into the care of male religious professionals for training.”7 Women turn the home into a sacred space. Practically, women’s domestic work has been used to create an atmosphere of religiosity. Franzmann explains, “on April 4, 1968…sixty Israelis posing as Swiss tourists, intending to reclaim the Jewish quarter. The women immediately cleaned and prepared the hotel kitchen for the cooking of kosher Jewish food as a first step in the reclamation of the Jewish quarter. The domestic aspect of religion is the prerequisite for ordered religious institutional life.”8 Women’s use of domesticity changes children and creates the foundation on which religiosity is built. By using their domesticity and their influence over children, religious women can manipulate how they are seen and can use this perception of themselves to manipulate how they are treated within society.

White women in the South, from the Antebellum period and onward, used their domesticity to manipulate their social standings in effective but often oppressive ways. Women were idolized as icons of religious virtue and purity, and, thus, by exploiting narrow views on what this meant for womanhood, women were able to gain more rights and individual autonomy. These women were more than passive victims of oppression; they manipulated their oppression—and encouraged the oppression of black and lower

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class people—to increase their personal power. White women understood the consequences of their social power. The results were often horrifying and could be considered morally repugnant, but their pursuit of power via religiosity is nothing short of effective.

In many ways, these white women parallel liberal feminists of the 1960s and 1970s. While the later women used legislation rather than social influence to change their personal situations, their often narrow focus mirrors that of Southern white women. In the later eras, liberal feminist groups were paired against radical feminists groups. Rosemarie Tong explains:

In contrast, most radical feminists had banded together in one or another women’s liberation groups. Much smaller and more personally focused than the liberal women’s rights groups, these radical women’s liberation groups aimed to increase women’s consciousness about women’s oppression. The groups’ spirit was that of the revolutionary new left, whose goal was not to reform what they regarded as an elitist, capitalistic, competitive, individualistic system, but to replace it with an egalitarian, socialist, cooperative, communitarian, sisterhood-is-powerful system.9 Southern white women had no intention of overthrowing a system that benefitted them in many ways. The rights of their black brothers and sisters did not concern them as much as their own rights, and any attempt to produce such radical social change and upheaval would have been met with a coy laugh and a “bless your heart.” Their goal was personal freedom in a pre-existing system. If it is only slightly broken, only fix it slightly. This desire to maintain the status quo could result in them being more accurately labeled

conservative feminists,\textsuperscript{10} as liberal feminism is “out of touch with the bulk of U.S. women who hold the institutions of marriage, motherhood, and the family in high regard.”\textsuperscript{11} However, the hyperfocus on gender equality rather than racial and class equality is a trait I subscribe to early liberal feminists.

Black women never had the opportunity to care only for gender. For them, radical reformation was the only option for justice in a broken society. Black women’s feminism found its roots in things deeper than feminism. Black women were often faced with an impossible choice: they could be women or they could be black, but society could not handle them being both. During the Civil Rights Era, simply pursuing womanhood and feminism was impossible. Their dignity and humanity as a black person had to take precedent while black lives were denied basic decency. They also used their religion to manipulate their social reality, and they used feminist and womanist ideas to pursue justice. Black women found ways to unite among themselves, such as the Combahee River Collective (CRC). They released their \textit{Black Feminist Statement} in 1977, and Brian Norman writes, “The impetus for writing the \textit{Statement} was the failure—and possibly the inability—of other movements to adequately speak to or for black women. The CRC explains, ‘Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else’s but because of our need as human persons for autonomy.’”\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{10} It is easily argued that conservative feminists are not true feminists in the fact that they do not pursue equality for all. Feminism relies on group equality, and individualism is contrary to that notion.
\textsuperscript{11} Tong. \textit{Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction}. 27.
These movements were—and are—incredibly important and influential in both black and feminist activist circles.

As later womanists, multicultural feminists, and third wave feminists would verbalize, true social justice requires more than just gender justice. It requires racial, economic, and cultural justice for everyone in a society. This message is one that liberal feminism often missed: “In their desire to prove that women are men’s full equals, they stressed women’s sameness to each other as well as women’s sameness to men.”13 Black feminists often argue that “in no uncertain terms that racism, sexism and classism are not separable in fact, even if they are separable in theory.”14 Feminists of color have always been aware that their race is as important as their gender. bell hooks writes, “They [black feminists] were already at odds with reformist feminists who wanted to project a vision of the movement as being solely about women gaining equality with men in the existing system. Even before race became a talked about issue in feminist circles it was clear to black women (and to their revolutionary allies in struggle) that they were never going to have equality within the existing white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.”15 There could be no equality in a society that remotely resembles the one maintained by oppression.

It is anachronistic to apply second wave, third wave, multicultural feminist, and womanist terms from the late 1960s to the present day to describe the pursuit of justice in the Antebellum period through the Civil Rights Era. However, the roots of modern movements began there, and understanding the past can be done by using present knowledge to inform our view. White women in the South would not have identified as

13 Tong. Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction. 204
feminists. Even if asked in broad terms, they would likely not say they were in pursuit of any gender justice; regardless, their actions show a pursuit for subversion and manipulation of the default gender hierarchy. Likewise, black women would almost certainly not identify as feminists, although—depending on the era—they may identify as a womanist. I do not intend to fully label either group as feminist or womanist, but instead apply understandable and accessible concepts to two specific groups of women.

Religion’s importance in the history of the United States cannot be ignored or understated. However, the religious lives of women in the United States has been dismissed or overshadowed by the mainstream religious lives of men or those otherwise in positions of power. Most powerful intuitions of religion during the Colonial and Civil War periods of United States history were exclusively run by men, but this does not mean women led their lives without religion. Women’s experiences were—and are—just as diverse and significant as those of men, despite the fact that their experiences were not as valued in the mainstream, traditional Protestant faith. These women’s experiences, if they defied traditional gender roles, were not met without resistance.

The cases of white women from the Antebellum period through the early 20th century and black women from the 20th century through the Civil Rights Era differ greatly, but both were valid and effective at changing their social circumstances. How did these practical applications of women’s religious faith differ from traditional theology of the time? How could religion be used to promote justice for individuals or groups? How did each group of women use religion differently to pursue their goals for equality?

To thoroughly discuss these problems, a few terms must be defined. Patriarchy is a system of heteronormativity that labels qualities a person can possess as feminine or
masculine, uses biological sex to force individuals into gender roles, and places traditionally masculine traits at the top of a hierarchy which oppresses all those who are feminine or otherwise defy norms of their gender role. Feminist theory most often begins with accepting the existence of patriarchy, and looking at the long-term social, cultural, and economic effects of this system. Patriarchal standards for men and women limit women to complementary roles, requiring them to give up their agency in favor of being a help-mate to their male partner. Likewise, men are required to lead their household and provide shelter and other necessities for their families, and are discouraged from interacting with the irrational or the emotional parts of the human mind.

Misogyny is contempt for, or ingrained prejudice against, women. Misogyny fuels patriarchy, as patriarchy promotes the image of women as dependent, needy people. Often, misogyny is unrecognized as it is performed most often through microaggressions. Marilyn Frye goes far enough to suggest that the act of opening a door for women is oppressive. She says:

The gallant gestures have no practical meaning. Their meaning is symbolic. The door-opening and similar services provided are services which really are needed by people who are for one reason or another incapacitated – unwell, burdened with parcels, etc. So the message is that women are incapable… The message of the false helpfulness of male gallantry is female dependence, the invisibility or insignificance of women, and contempt for women.

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The Church is more complicated to define, from both religious and secular points of views. The Bible defines what a church is in many ways. 1 Corinthians 1:2 says, “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.” Galatians 2:19-22 says, “you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” Nicholas M. Healy explains one nearly universal, ecclesiological definition as:

One of its aspects, the primary one, is spiritual and invisible, often described as the church’s “true nature” or its “essence.” the other aspect is the everyday, empirical reality of the church, its institutions and activities. The relation between the two aspects is often described by saying that the primary one “realizes” or “manifests” itself in the subsequent one, or that the visible church is the “expression” of its invisible aspect. Thus a genuine understanding of the expression is contingent upon a grasp of the basic, primary core.

This larger definition is incredibly useful for understanding the complexities of the church: the orthodox, doctrinal nature of the church versus the lived reality. I will be using a simplified version of the term church to mean a gathering of five or more

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individuals with a clear leader and ethical doctrine that proclaims Christianity as its chosen faith—regardless of how unorthodox that faith may be. The lived reality of the church may be the manifestation of its core, but often the image is twisted by the constraints of personal boundaries and goals. That is to say that the members often make the church in their image rather than make their image match the ideals of the church.

I specifically do not include formal church hierarchy, but that term is also essential for understanding the majority of issues related to women’s place in religious institutions. A church hierarchy can have various forms, depending on the denomination and society it is created in. I will not delve into the intricacies of Catholic hierarchy, as this paper focuses primarily on Protestantism. Protestantism has a wide range of doctrine and hierarchical structures, and thus, a universal definition is near impossible to articulate. Florin Vârlon describes it as:

Therefore, from the testimonies of the Holy Scriptures we can notice that, from its very beginning, the Church had—as a part of its hierarchic organization—three categories of servants bearing God’s sanctifying grace gift: bishops, priests and deacons…They are called hierarchs, overseers, shepherds. The holy Fathers are unanimous in their statement that without a bishop there can be no Church, because if there is no bishop there is not any hierarchic level.  

This definition, however, ignores—or rejects—the idea of a less formal church hierarchy. While this is the traditional Catholic and Orthodox model, it is in no way universal. For this thesis, church hierarchy will be defined as: a system of leadership organization with a person or governing body at the top, and persons or entities under their direct authority.

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This can take the form of a pastor with several deacons or as a Protestant bishop with several priests under him. Often, women are not a part of these formal hierarchies, most often working in the background; however, many women now have positions of informal authority within the church. Some denominations—such as Methodist and Episcopal churches—have allowed women to enter the formal church hierarchy as equal participants.

Social justice is inherently intertwined with discussion of women’s issues. The New Oxford American Dictionary defines social justice as: “justice in terms of the distribution of wealth, opportunities, and privileges within a society.” This means that rather than simply getting what is due, equality and distribution of opportunities and wealth is not based simply on the color of one’s skin, one’s gender, or one’s socio-economic class. Social justice pursuits in the Civil War and Civil Rights eras meant pushing boundaries related to gender roles and the subjugation of people based on their skin color. Black and white women’s pursuit of religious autonomy meant working both within the traditional roles of women and subverting these roles to truly experience a religious life beyond what traditional church doctrine prescribed.
Chapter I

Holy Southern Belles

In their 2002 *Statement of Faith*, Baptist Bible Fellowship International wrote, “We believe that men and women are spiritually equal in position before God but that God has ordained distinct and separate spiritual functions of men and women in the home and in the church.” 22 Separate, but—supposedly—equal positions for men and women has been the status quo in the South. From the Antebellum period through and beyond the Reconstruction era, Southern white women lived as a social and cultural paradox. Their faith lives were vaster and more widespread than their male counterparts, and, while they were denied the pulpit, Southern women were steadfast pillars of religion in their communities. Some women took their role in Southern society like a golden brooch and displayed it proudly, while others stealthily subverted what the religious lives of Southern women could look like while maintaining patriarchal paradigms for Southern society. White women became icons of Southern religious virtue, and, as such, helped perpetuate the very values that hurt women and people of color in the South.

In the American South, there were few things held more sacred than the white woman. Despite keeping women in strict situations with limited personal freedoms, white Southern men idealized white Southern women and fit them into paradigms of vile seductress or a beacon of virtuous piety. In his book, *Southern Civil Religions*, Arthur Remillard quotes a Pensacola editor, “What a strong power for good or evil is a woman’s influence. In all ages there have been instances where women have by their force of will or fascination of manner incited men to crimes or to the highest and holiest ambition.”

Southern men came to idealize what Barbara Welter calls “cult of true womanhood.” This required women to have certain traits: purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity.

In 1904, Sam Jones, a Methodist revivalist from Florida, said Southern white women were held up by only two things: “purity and character.”

To maintain the virtue of white women, they had to be guarded carefully and purposely. Their virtue was seemingly tied to their sexual activity, and protecting white women’s virtue was of the utmost importance. Women’s holiness depended on their purity, and this purity was to be defended at all costs. Men, as well as women, defended this virtue with their lives—or, more often, someone’s death. Their purity was more than their own; their virtue—or lack thereof—defined how her family and her community would be seen. Robert Elder explains, “Yet southerners clearly believed that women possessed a kind of honor that was nearly synonymous with a reputation for sexual purity sustained by restraint, prudence, and modesty in every area of life. While honor was undoubtedly a male-

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24 Remillard. *Southern Civil Religions Imagining the Good Society in the Post-Reconstruction Era*. 78-79.

25 Remillard. *Southern Civil Religions Imagining the Good Society in the Post-Reconstruction Era*. 81.
dominated ethical system, women were vital participants in their own as well as their male relatives' and the family's honor."^{26}

Women’s role as the spiritual guide of their families eventually became the moral compass for more nefarious activities. While the Ku Klux Klan had no formal female members, women impacted its development. Glen Feldman explains:

Women—frequently responsible in many places and times for the spiritual welfare of the family and the community—played a vitally important role in this regard, both as policers and the policed. Men, more often than not, wielded the blunt instruments that drove the morality lessons home. But it was women, in vital conjunction with and in concert with men, who decided what the religious and moral curriculum should be. In doing so, women functioned both as the coauthors and the victims of a kind of misogynistic terror that kept women tethered to the most narrow and traditional roles outlined for them by the South’s patriarchal society.^{27}

Like most people living in patriarchal societies, women purposely and subconsciously perpetuated ideas that hurt them and the community at large, but believed it was ultimately beneficial to society. The standards for white Southern womanhood centered on their virtue, and their participation in the KKK gave them an avenue to publically defend their virtue, accuse those who let their virtue slack, and punish anyone who dared to stain a white woman’s clean skin. Some Klan affiliates even embraced women’s rights


to gain female support; however, just as the Klan believed in white superiority, it also heavily believed in male superiority.\textsuperscript{28}

As race and gender intersect, some black men stepped forward to also perpetuate this idea of white women’s virtue and sexual chastity as a religious fount for all to drink of. In 1898, a black man from Alabama, William H. Councill, was lauded for arguing that ending the lynching epidemic simply required black men to police their communities. Councill said, “Let us make white women of this land, and of all lands, feel that our black arms are ever ready, backed by hearts as pure as truth, as guileless as babes, to defend their honor; that we are willing to throw our black bodies between them and their assailants, and shed our blood to the last drop in protecting them and hunting down and executing these brutes.”\textsuperscript{29} Black men were almost exclusively targeted by the violence delivered at the hands of the KKK, and this pleading by Councill exemplifies an accommodationist approach to end lynchings. That said, his plea shows that even members of the black community who suffered at the hands of their white neighbors believed that violating a white woman’s honor was something worthy of death.

White Southern women had to play a precarious balancing act of maintaining their public and private personas. Their purity and virtue had to be overwhelmingly clear so as to maintain their good names as well as their families. Their religiosity was necessary to maintain their family’s piety and religious education. Nathan Bedford Forrest, the man who would later reach international infamy as the leader of the Ku Klux Klan, married his wife specifically because of her good Christian nature:

\textsuperscript{29} Remillard, Arthur. \textit{Southern Civil Religions Imagining the Good Society in the Post-Reconstruction Era}. 81.
After a short courtship marked by plenty of persistence, Forrest convinced his intended bride that he would make a good husband. But her uncle and legal guardian, the Reverend Samuel Montgomery of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, had his doubts. “Why, Bedford, I couldn't consent,” the Reverend Montgomery said, according to one witness; "you cuss and gamble, and Mary Ann is a Christian girl.” “I know it,” Forrest replied, “and that's just why I want her.”

Good Christian wives were worth their weight in gold. The mere presence of a good white woman would make everyone else around her a better person.

Women received and maintained their virtue through their purity, and would pass on this virtue to their families and communities. During the Reconstruction, Southern men found faith primarily through their wives. A Pensacola newspaper shared this joke in 1900:

“Did you ever get religion?” asked the revivalist.

“Well, I should say so—138 pounds of it,” replied the man.

“A hundred and thirty-eight pounds of religion!” cried the revivalist. “How did you get that?”

“The only way that a good many men ever get religion,” was the reply, “I married it.”

While it was intended to be a light hearted joke, it also displays how prominent this thinking was at the time. White, Protestant women were the greatest purveyors of

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31 Remillard. Southern Civil Religions Imagining the Good Society in the Post-Reconstruction Era. 79.
practical faith in the South without actually gaining access to the pulpit. Bill J. Leonard explains where women fit in Southern churches:

Inside the women’s sphere, church women may develop significant leadership and even power in specific congregations—teaching children and other women, funding programs, engaging in various missionary and benevolent activities, and often serving as the largest segment of the Sunday and weekday life of the church. If they step out of those boundaries, however, women may experience sanctions or even de facto expulsion from a congregation that rejects their public leadership of worship or does not allow them to provide biblical instruction to men and boys.32

Women could be leaders in closed quarters, teaching children and other women, but women’s ability to instruct men was doubted at best, condemned at worst.

While it is difficult to ascertain how happy these women were in their roles, their contemporary counterparts embraced them. Brenda Brash did a study of two evangelical Christian congregations “which explores how women can acquire power and influence by creating a female enclave in an essentially male-dominated organization.”33 Instead of fighting a male-led congregation with ideas of women’s equality in the pulpit, these modern women have carved out spaces for themselves to lead women in various areas including fitness classes, women’s help groups, and Bible studies. Desires for revolution can evolve even in patriarchal or otherwise oppressive gazes, but not all feel the need to rebel. Even without a formal pulpit, women’s faith strongly influenced the men around them.

32 Conser. Southern Crossroads Perspectives on Religion and Culture. 304.
33 Trzebiatowska, and Bruce. Why Are Women More Religious than Men? 80.
Many ministers or other men associated with the religious elite mention the women in their lives as a major influence on their faith. In 1901, Henry Partridge, a Methodist minister in Tallahassee, wrote in his diary about how his mother’s influence guided his spiritual existence. Likewise, his sister impacted his faith greatly. His sister became a teacher, and he wrote of her: “she passed through the fire of trial to come out like the gold… to be fashioned for the vessel for the Master’s use. Pure Gold.” Women’s influence in his religious life did not pertain only to his family. Partridge lived with an attorney and his family while attending Wofford College. Remillard explains Partridge’s feelings about his adopted home: “He rejoiced that the faith-filled atmosphere of his home ‘thus continued around me…My heavenly father has thus most graciously prepared me for a true and noble life, just as he had with his sister and mother, Partridge found true religion in the ‘pure’ women of his adopted family.”

Women’s faith inspired those around them. Spiritual mothers raised religious sons and daughters: sons who would choose Christian wives and possibly become ministers and daughters who became the virtuous Christian wife and mother. However, despite this spiritual power women were seen as possessing, they were strictly limited to a few roles: mother, wife, daughter, and educator. These roles created caricatures of femininity which thus labeled all women emotional, caring, and naturally nurturing. Unable or unwilling to fulfill the stereotypical vision of the cult of white womanhood, some women found ways of using these stereotypes about women to create niches of power and autonomy.

In the years before the American Civil War, women created charitable organizations called benevolent societies. While some faced criticism, most verbalized

34 Remillard. *Southern Civil Religions Imagining the Good Society in the Post-Reconstruction Era* 80.
35 Remillard. *Southern Civil Religions Imagining the Good Society in the Post-Reconstruction Era* 80.
opinions were like that of an editorial in the *Missouri Republican*: “We assert moreover that females are better qualified to disburse charities of the kind intended by these societies than the other sex.”36 This approach to aiding the destitute came from various interpretations of scripture. The creation of “female benevolent societies” could not have been formed without the support of local churches.37 In a time of deep-seated division between Christian denominations, these charitable organizations, run by women, fostered unity. The constitution of the Columbia Female Orphan Society had in its constitution: “it is ardently hoped that it will become the instrument of cementing Christian fellowship among different denominations.”38 Women formed a united front and took on issues of poverty and welfare of children and disenfranchised women. This also gave women new avenues of power.

These organizations gave women some agency in a situation that traditionally denied women an autonomous legal existence. As these societies attempted to become incorporated, women attempted to enter the public sphere of government and politics.39 Legislators, more often than not, passed acts granting incorporation to these societies. Timothy Lockley argues, “Certainly the relationship was mutually beneficial since benevolent women were able to operate beyond the normal limits of the female role in southern society, while simultaneously a social problem was being addressed systematically for the first time.”40 Incorporation gave leaders the ability to run their organization like any run by a man, and prevented their husbands from being negatively

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affected by misuse of money or any other irresponsible effect caused by these women. However, this freedom still came from men, and could not be achieved without the approval of the patriarchy.

Societies benefited from the women’s charitable organizations. Women independently raised money for these organizations, and used the money to help the poor or otherwise downtrodden. The Catholic Female Charitable Society in Mobile ran two single-sex schools that accepted tuition. Lockley explains, “In 1850 the citizens of Mobile paid $2,339 to have nuns educate their children, a sum that constituted more than a quarter of the operating income of the orphan asylum.”\textsuperscript{41} Many organized fairs to showcase and sell goods including cakes and other luxury items. Societies regularly earned thousands of dollars over these few-day events, and organizations learned from the success and failures of other organizations that sought to help the needy.\textsuperscript{42} Women gained experience in areas previously reserved for men. Even with access to great wealth and autonomy, these women pursued doing good in their society. Whether this was done to maintain their new-found autonomy or out of the goodness of their hearts is uncertain; regardless, their new place in society was met with applause, open pocket books, and open hearts.

This gave women unprecedented power, but only directed and limited power. Even as they gained power in the realms of charity, they remained oppressed in the patriarchal system of the American South. The cult of domesticity and Republican Motherhood furthered patriarchal ideals. Women, as the softer sex, had roles exclusively in the home, and their goodness prevented them from being fully capable of being in the

\textsuperscript{41} Lockley. \textit{Welfare and Charity in the Antebellum South}.91.
\textsuperscript{42} Lockley. \textit{Welfare and Charity in the Antebellum South}.87.
public sphere. Women could not pursue leadership within the church as it would be too difficult, too impure for women to pursue, or, conversely, the evil given to women from Eve’s sin tainted them too much to be able to lead successfully. These women navigated their social environment carefully. To be responsible for the unwomanly acts of handling money and running an incorporated organization required glowing femininity and nurturing that was suited for womanhood. Women’s leadership of charities opened avenues of power and compassion for these women, allowing them to defy standards while simultaneously upholding patriarchal ideas about gender, ultimately for good and for ill.

Christianity did not revolutionize oppression; it appropriated it from preexisting patriarchal models. Social critics have agreed that charity, despite its compassion, can perpetuate patriarchy. Emma Saunders-Hastings argued, “Charity has two conventional pathologies: the unjust dependency of the recipient, and the unjustified condescension of the giver.”\textsuperscript{43} John Stuart Mill, a Victorian era philosopher, argued against women’s role in charities. He argued, “[A woman’s] familiar notions of a good are of blessings descending from a superior. She forgets that she is not free, and that the poor are.”\textsuperscript{44} Mill believed that two groups of people are negatively affected by charity: women and the poor. The poor become dependent on charitable assistance, and women become further indoctrinated in the idea that social hierarchies are natural and good, rather than an injustice.

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Saunders-Hastings. "No Better to Give than to Receive: Charity and Women's Subjection in J.S. Mill." 248.}
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Mill rejected any notion that women held a higher aptitude for charitable virtues and comments on the hypocrisy of those perpetuating this myth saying, “we are perpetually told that women are better than men, by those who are totally opposed to treating them as if they were as good; so that the saying has passed into a tiresome cant, intended to put a complementary face upon an injury.”\textsuperscript{45} The patriarchy tells women they must possess the qualities of “gentleness, modesty, humility, supportiveness, empathy, compassionateness, tenderness, nurturance, intuitiveness, sensitivity, unselfishness,” which limits them to roles like motherhood, marriage, and charity, while simultaneously making them virtuous under scriptural descriptions.\textsuperscript{46} Mill continues and criticizes gender roles, “the wife’s entire dependence on the husband, every privilege or pleasure she has being either his gift, or depending entirely on his will.”\textsuperscript{47} The patriarchy’s greatest success was convincing women their assigned role was their highest calling.

Although charity did not give women power in the formal church hierarchy, it gave women a pathway to experience agency of choice. Women’s roles in leadership showed them their first glimpse of independence within a religious context. The patriarchy argues that women must be controlled under their fathers, then their husbands, and then their sons; however, women leading charities approach the world as independent workers for change, pursuing justice for others, if not for themselves. Women’s ability to choose charity over domesticity provided a choice that had been absent for most of womanhood’s history. Rita Gross discusses this as well, saying:

\textsuperscript{47} Saunders-Hastings. "No Better to Give than to Receive: Charity and Women's Subjection in J.S. Mill." 249.
At least for middle-class women, the combination of education, free time, and a sense of their own moral superiority led many into religious organizations dedicated to charity at home and missionary activities abroad. These various societies, run by and for women, fulfilled rather than violated women’s “proper place,” but at the same time, they allowed women some activities outside the home, provided companionship, allowed women to develop organizational skills, and gave them activities in which they could experience a sense of accomplishment.  

Charitable organizations granted freedom and autonomy, even if it was ultimately limited.

The role of charity succeeded in placating women’s desire for power for years. Women, able to have some autonomy while giving back to society, felt powerful and independent. Although they remained solidly under the thumb of patriarchal structures, the illusion of freedom proved enough; in fact, this illusion of freedom and power gave women more power than the patriarchal institutions likely intended. Women learned how to rally support for their charitable organizations, and first wave feminists would use the same zeal to rally support for women’s suffrage. For Protestants, the success of women’s movements allowed women to move from the pews to the pulpit. Some women were endorsed as pastors evangelical preachers such as Charles Finney who believed “that women should preach if they felt deeply moved to do so.” Catholic nuns and other Catholic women still lack this role, but their defiance of pre-approved standards of femininity and subservience has been seen and noted by the American public and the

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48 Gross, Feminism and Religion: An Introduction. 34.
49 Gross, Feminism and Religion: An Introduction. 34.
patriarchal institutions of the Catholic Church. Women would continue to rebel and pursue ordination in both Protestant and Catholic traditions.\textsuperscript{50}

By maintaining Southern hierarchy women placed themselves at a social disadvantage. Women would continue to be fully dependent on the men in their lives. Any misstep could leave them destitute and vulnerable. Elder says:

Certainly most Southern women, evangelical or not, would have understood the cautionary poem that Maria Baker, granddaughter of Baptist divine Richard Furman, recorded in her school notes in Charleston around 1830:

A traveller, if he chance to stray.
May find again the once lost way.
Polluted streams again run pure.
And deepest wounds admit a cure.
But woman no redemption knows;
The wounds of honour never close.\textsuperscript{51}

Men were able to be forgiven for their misdeeds, but never women. Women were complicit in the very factors that kept them intertwined in the cycle of dependence. Whatever thoughts women had of true independence—socially, financially—would be impossible to achieve while maintaining the white patriarchy that dominated the Southern sphere.

The freedom and power women acquired in their own woman-centric areas were still policed by men and women alike. Their spiritual circles and Sunday schools, as well as their benevolent societies, technically required male approval, but—more often—

\textsuperscript{50} Gross, \textit{Feminism and Religion: An Introduction}. 41.
depended on male indifference to their goals. Any steps toward social change would be greatly limited by self-policing or policing by men, so their pursuits for equality had to be done in such a way that men did not suspect subversion of traditional values. Whether radical revolutionary tendencies would have developed naturally is unknown. The South has long been a place where social progress has felt a slow growth, with women being equal or nearly equal participants in perpetuating injustices against women and people of color.

White Southern women handled complicated tasks to enrich their religious lives and the lives of those around them. Their virtue and purity marked them as good, their goodness helped them spread good, Christian values, and they used their good, Christian values to open and run benevolent societies. The good they did and the honor they held in society is greatly contrasted with how each of these things ultimately hurt society as a whole. The hierarchy of white people above black people was intensified by the need for white women to remain pure. The very idea that a white woman had been sullied led to murderous rampages that women supported. Women had unprecedented power; they could condemn a man to death with an accusation. These racial markers placed black women at an even lower vantage point; where white women needed purity, black women could be sexually abused at a person’s leisure.

Women’s leadership roles in charitable organizations worked for both the benefit and detriment of women’s empowerment: it gave them visions of true independence, while keeping them safely tucked away from achieving it. While this was not done deliberately to oppress women, it developed out of the deeply entrenched beliefs of the patriarchy in American society. Without the preconceived notions of gender norms and
strict policing of this gender normativity, the patriarchy could not maintain its control of society. By allowing women to have leadership roles, the patriarchy fostered a sense of equality between the sexes. It gave women a role previously exclusive to men: the public sphere. Opening up the public sphere to women became a Pandora’s box for equality, eventually leading to greater rights for women in general. This struggle continues today: women are still minorities in religious leadership and the largest denomination, Catholicism, has strict doctrine preventing women’s ordination. The limited roles of leadership create a paradox: women gain power while maintaining societal expectations for gender roles and the place of women in caring for the world.

Women’s religious lives were centered on women being religious figures. While women are not inherently more religious than men, they are—on average—more likely to be an active participant in their faith. Their roles of nurturing others and becoming honorable mother figures placed them in the center of family life and as pillars of Southern society while denying them rights. The complex interplay between virtue, inspiration, and benefactor made them something seemingly enviable while not actually having access to power in economic or political ways. That said, no governor or senator could dictate how children learned and how women inspired religion. Even though they did not decide or design their social position as the softer sex, they embraced it and made it a position with considerable influence within the religious sphere. They did what a pastor could not. They gave their husbands strength in the middle of hard nights, they trained their children in the ways of Christianity on a daily level, and they perpetuated the image of good Christian behaviors for all to see. Whatever injustices came out of this, their small sphere of power made Southern white women a force to be reckoned with.
Chapter II

“This Little Light of Mine”

Despite a shared geographic location, black women’s religious experiences did not mirror the experiences of their white counterparts. Historically, black women have served as the antithesis to white women. Where white women have been treated as pillars of purity, black women have been fetishized and sexually abused. When a white woman’s alleged rape could end in an innocent man’s death, many men perpetuated the idea that black women could not even be raped because of their default sexual openness. Black women, like white women, have been forced into gendered tropes, almost exclusively surrounding how black women interacted with white men. These include, but are not limited to, the mammy, the jezebel, the angry black woman, and the strong black woman.

To look at race in the South requires one to look at the black community’s religious traditions. Despite the fact that critical race theory has often overlooked black

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religion, religion has been a focal point in movements of equality and justice within the black community. 53 Law professor Brandon Paradise explains:

If we take seriously the value of grounding critical scholarship in the perspectives of Black people, then the need for a greater and more cohesive engagement with African American religious sensibilities is obvious. Moreover, as a scholarly movement that aspires to bridge the divide between the legal academy and communities of color, that the African American Christian tradition has not played a more central role in CRT [Critical Race Theory] is puzzling and calls for explanation. 54

There is no understanding the Civil Rights Movement without examining how religion factors into both leadership styles and general morale and motivation.

Themes of oppression and violence against the “other” that appear frequently in the Bible resonate with the African-American Christian community in ways that they cannot with white Christians. 55 Black women’s theology focused on subversion, even if not intentionally. Southern society naturally rejected and oppressed black women. Black women’s theology became one of empowerment and the potential that women contained with themselves. The story of Hagar, which would be a cornerstone in womanist theology, shows the subversion of traditional white Christian ideals. Hagar, the handmaiden of Abraham’s wife Sarah, 56 gave birth to Abraham’s first child, Ishmael. Hagar made few decisions in this matter. She was a slave, she was given to Abraham

56 At this point, they were still Abram and Sarai, as they had yet to be renamed by God.
without her consent “to be his wife,”\textsuperscript{57} and she was raped and impregnated. She eventually runs away from Sarah, and the Lord commands her to return to her home and obey Sarah. God promises that her descendants will be “too numerous to count.”

Hagar’s story is a story of bittersweet redemption. Despite her oppression, both physical and sexual, she eventually becomes the mother of a powerful line which will go on to its own greatness.\textsuperscript{58} Womanism found its roots in stories like these. Delores Williams refers to Hagar’s ability to thrive and survive as a “wilderness-experience.”\textsuperscript{59} Rosetta Ross explains: “Like Hagar, many Black women served as sexual and labor surrogates for others. This included coerced surrogacy during slavery and voluntary (though pressured) surrogacy during the postbellum period.”\textsuperscript{60} Hagar’s experience mirrors that of slave women and can be recognized in the attitudes of black women in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century and beyond. Like slave women, they were oppressed and abused, physically and sexually, and were held to the whims of their owners and their mistresses. They were often raped and impregnated, but held on to the hope that their children would go on to be a numerous and great people.

Black women’s leanings toward womanism were a logical step. Black theology often neglected their womanhood, choosing to focus on the community’s blackness. Early religious feminist movements often neglected to look at racism, classism, and homophobia, but for black women, their blackness and their gender were inescapable.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{58} This is even more evident in the Islamic texts, where the prophet Mohammed is considered a descendant of Ishmael.
\textsuperscript{61} Gross. Feminism and Religion: An Introduction.53
Despite both white feminists’ and black activists’ desire for them to give up a part of themselves to benefit the larger movement, womanists refused to bend. They would not be victims for white feminists to save from black men, nor would they be black people with no recognition for the discrimination toward their gender.

Where white women benefitted from maintaining the status quo in Southern society, black women were fundamentally oppressed and abused by the status quo. Ultimately, black women had to protest and actively work toward justice. There could be no passive path to equality in the South or elsewhere. Black women in the South fought on the front lines of sexual and racial oppression wars. Where white men and women used religion to justify their unjust actions, the black community used religion to subvert common ideas on how people should be treated in relation to race and gender.

As discussed in the introduction, women attend church in profoundly higher numbers than their male counterparts. Likewise, black Protestants attend church in higher numbers than white Protestants. The community aspects of religion often provided a safe haven and spiritual succor to endure tribulations forced on them by their oppressors. Church is the first part of socialization for black women. Daphne C. Wiggins surveyed Protestant black women about their various experiences in church. All the women currently went to church—either Baptist or Church of God—and had before the survey began; the women varied in ages, occupations and marital statuses. When asked about prior church experience, Wiggins heard the following responses: “Theresa summed up her church attendance in a few words. I asked when she started attending church. She responded, ‘I guess since I was born, I mean, I’ve been going since I’ve known myself.’

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62 Pew Research Center, Washington, D.C.
Joyce also frequented church since childhood. As a preacher’s child, she found that her early years revolved around church services." Church was not an optional growth experience; it has been almost inseparably interwoven in black life in the South. This laid the foundation for all social and cultural developments that grew out of the church.

Black men’s involvement in church was different from women’s experience. Whereas women’s attendance was mandatory, many women in Wiggins’s study remarked that the boys and men in their life did not attend as frequently. Most women had no issue reconciling this issue:

How did they explain male recalcitrance or account for the leniency shown to the men in the household? Some pointed to concessions to male rebellion and to the time demands of part-time jobs and extracurricular school activities. It was the way things were. Other women attributed the leniency toward boys to a larger pattern of latitude given to men in general, as evidence by their later curfews and greater independence in selecting friends. Overall, the women accepted the difference and were minimally troubled by it.65

This made the church an even safer place for women to express feminist theology and practice their culturally derived versions of womanhood. If nothing else, women had a role and a domain they could claim as holy and feminized. Men may preach and be deacons, but these roles were not exclusively male. A mostly female congregation lent itself to gender equality.

Community is an integral foundation for social change in the black community. Women’s role in the church—and by extension their homes—created a safe space for

64 Wiggins, Righteous Content: Black Women’s Perspectives of Church and Faith, 18.
65 Wiggins, Righteous Content: Black Women’s Perspectives of Church and Faith, 25.
ideas that led to the large spread organization of the Civil Rights Movement. Even when women did not lead the marches and chants, they were an inseparable part of the movement. The socialization aspects of the church worked to create a tight-knit community. Women found a deeper sense of sisterhood and emotional support for trying times. This socialization paired with Christian narratives of deliverance and redemption with the civil disobedience in the 1950s and beyond. Mutual experiences with poverty and class oppression—beyond racial oppression—also united the black religious community into a tighter group.

Black women became holy social mobilizers for justice movements in the South. Women like Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer fought for rights while using their faith as a foundation for guidance and to maintain morale in darker times. While there are thousands of unnamed black women who fought for equality, I will look at these two specific women and how their faith encouraged them and their fight for equality.

Ella Baker made her mark on history as a mother of the Civil Rights Movement while promoting radical justice with powerful language. She always had a heart opposed to injustice. As historian Kimberly Hayes Taylor wrote, “Although the world was filled with racial hatred, she did not feel inferior to white people. At age six, she slapped a white boy for calling her a ‘nigger.’” Her story begins in the church, like so many other leaders in the Civil Rights Movement. She engaged in “missionary work” from a young age. Baker’s mother had a compassionate heart, and directed her from a young age to pursue compassion and justice. Among other things, Baker helped her mother feed the

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poor, take care of the sick, and help families that had a parent pass away. All of these things came out of a desire to live a Christian lifestyle.

Baker eventually moved to Harlem, but her Southern roots never left her. She led a food cooperative during the Great Depression, and led other social aid projects. Baker engaged in grass-roots activism for black equality:

Baker's role as a social activist began in 1938 when she joined the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) as an assistant field secretary. The organization sent her to other NAACP branches throughout the South. She was on the road about half the time, trying to persuade people to join in the battle for civil rights. NAACP members had usually been black professionals, doctors, business owners, teachers, and lawyers, but now the organization was working to get ordinary people involved in the NAACE [sic]. She wanted janitors, street cleaners, construction workers, gardeners, and housekeepers to join the organization. She felt they were the people who needed the NAACP the most.

Her plan was successful to say the least, and she quickly rose through the ranks to become the NAACP’s director of branches.

Baker would eventually go on to lead various missions for the Civil Rights Movement, working with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Her partnership—and leadership—with the Southern Christian Leaders Conference further promoted equality and peaceful activism, and she particularly focused on encouraging the average black citizen to

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69 Taylor, "Ella Baker The "Othermother" of Civil Rights."
70 #.+Taylor.  “Ella Baker The "Othermother" of Civil Rights."
71 Taylor. "4: Ella Baker The "Othermother" of Civil Rights."
attempt to register to vote.\textsuperscript{72} She organized freedom rides, and coordinated with the Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee. Her list of accomplishments is too great to list here, but all of her success was built on a foundation of faith:

The influence of religion in Ella Baker’s activism is most apparent in the influence of her early religious context on her concept of human dignity (which included her concern that everyone have opportunities for realization of human potential) and egalitarianism in community (which developed into her concern for radical democracy). Among two religious influences that continued throughout Baker’s life were her belief in God’s expectation that people do good works and her use of Christian scripture to support her views of human community.\textsuperscript{73}

To Baker, religion and justice were inherently intertwined. To be just was to do God’s will. Her use of Christian conviction made her into a pioneer of justice. While she would likely have had a compassionate and giving heart anyway, her activism was inseparable from her faith.

Like Baker, Fannie Lou Hamer’s strength was rooted in her grassroots activism and her faith. Hamer’s forays into justice began tragically, as many did. Charles Reagan Wilson summarizes her early tragedies:

She was a grassroots activist whose seemingly hopeless and isolated life nonetheless gave her vital resources to challenge the harshly enforced racial degradation of the Mississippi Delta…Her parents worked hard and just as they gained some independence and the hope of some modest social mobility through owning their own livestock, a jealous white neighbor poisoned their cows and

\textsuperscript{72} Taylor, "4: Ella Baker The "Othermother" of Civil Rights."
\textsuperscript{73} Ross. \textit{Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights.} 47.
mules, a blow from which the family never recovered. Hamer herself was tricked into picking cotton when she was only six years old, and the plantation owner then forced her to continue, having shown she could do it even if so young. Her story is filled with such episodes of sheer white meanness and exploitation. But she never gave into bitterness and, indeed, gained the trust and respect of whites and blacks in her Ruleville, Mississippi, community.\textsuperscript{74}

She didn’t allow negativity to keep her down, and she regularly stood on tables and sang, “This little light of mine,”\textsuperscript{75} a song which would become her calling card during her years working in the civil rights community. Hamer used gospel music and prayer as activism—but this was not a soft or gentle endeavor. Her hymns were a sword. Like Baker, Hamer believed justice was God’s work.\textsuperscript{76}

Despite being a major player in the Civil Rights Movement, sexism played into how Hamer’s rhetoric and message was perceived. Maegan Parker Brooks, an expert in Hamer’s rhetoric says:

In many ways, the interrelated battles of sexism, racism, and classism endure in the public memory of, and even the rhetorical scholarship about, Fannie Lou Hamer. Her public speeches were less often recorded and less carefully preserved than the words of the black preachers and Black Panthers with whom she shared platforms. As Young’s tribute to Hamer indicates, however, her message was no less important.\textsuperscript{77}

\textsuperscript{75} Ross. \textit{Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights}. 94.
\textsuperscript{77} Brooks, Maegan Parker. "Oppositional Ethos: Fannie Lou Hamer and the Vernacular Persona." \textit{Rhetoric And Public Affairs} 14, no. 3 (Fall 2011): 511-548. MLA International Bibliography, EBSCOhost. 512.
Hamer made great stands and had a powerful voice, but her gender left her marginalized in a movement centered on equality. Regardless of how her legacy was ultimately preserved, her influence can be felt years after. At her funeral, Ambassador Andrew Young said of Hamer, “Before there was an exertion of the human spirit, nobody paid any attention to Fannie Lou Hamer. Nobody would have given her the time of day as they walked down the streets of Ruleville. Little did we realize that here among us was one of God’s chosen, who could change the lives of us all.” Hamer was a powerful orator, and her mission was God-centered.

For the black community, and specifically black women, religion and morality required a movement toward justice. Civil rights activists used religion to change the world because, in their opinion, God demanded it. Their image of God was a figure of perfect love and justice which could be interpreted as being inherently interwoven with justice movements in the United States. Religion has always had power in the South. Those who opposed justice used God as a weapon, so black women used the same God as moral fuel for a non-stop push towards equality.

Religion and justice went hand-in-hand for each of these women—named or unnamed. There was a keen awareness that there was, and is, no passive path to justice and equality. Their God did not support the systematic erosion and destruction of black lives. Their God did not demand they sacrifice their lives for someone else’s comfort. The Civil Rights Movement always walked together with religion. Its leadership, its language, and its powerhouses depended on religious fortitude to persevere. Black women used their religion as a weapon against oppression, where it had previously been used as a weapon to keep them caged.

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Despite centuries of being told their identity came from their subservience to people falsely placed as their superiors, black women successfully carved out their own identity free from the constraints of bondage. Black women’s lives were—and are—wrought with the aftershocks of slavery and decades upon decades of oppression, much of which is ongoing. That said, black women have remained a powerful force for rallying black people and promoting equality. Feminists and black rights activists gain powerful momentum from the black women within the movements.

Being a black activist does not require religion, but, historically, there are few movements for equality within the black community that do not involve religion either at a leadership level or as personal motivations for participating. God has been the fuel these women used to attempt to overthrow a culture that has told them for centuries that they are lesser and they are unimportant. Instead of using religion for modest gains in small areas of society, black women used their religion as armor to plunge through seas of swords demanding that they stay back quietly in their place. Black women have refused to stay silent, and their chants for equality have been their hymns.
Conclusion

The academic study of women and religion has made great strides in including practical applications of faith, but all too often the academy focuses on texts and formal doctrine for descriptions of women’s religious lives. This thesis looks outside formal religious doctrine and religious institutions to show how women used Protestant Christian beliefs and values to fight for social equality in the South. Black and white Southern women both wanted equality, but pursued this desire very differently. Where white Southern women manipulated benevolent sexism for their own personal gain, black women were not stereotyped in the same way and therefore had less social resources. White women’s pursuit of equality often depended on the assumption that whiteness and purity were inseparably paired. Likewise, white women benefited socially from black women’s inequality. The two groups did share some common tools and rhetoric in meeting their goals. The political and cultural pursuits of black and white women are marked by both foundational similarities and practical differences, but they shared a common goal: justice and equality.
To understand how women practice religion in white dominated patriarchal societies, it is critical to understand historical applications of feminist theory. I acknowledge that much of this theory is applied anachronistically; womanism and liberal feminism had not been fully developed or articulated yet. The roots had begun to flourish, and early strides had been made for white women in the United States. I believe these ideas can be applied to white women’s subversion of traditional Southern values as well as black women’s struggle to break down cultural traditions, but I recognize that the women living in these situations would not have considered themselves feminists, if they had even heard of the term.

Before delving into the differences between the two groups, it is important to understand their common ground. Black or white, women were marginalized by virtue of their sex. This blanket oppression was largely inescapable. Their attempts—successful or not—to break free from limitations were admirable and daring. Neither group fully and truly supported the other; white women had no concern with the plight of black women, and black women had little incentive to work with their white oppressors. Both groups pursued their goals with emotional vigor and valiant attempts to make active change in society. Ultimately, the two groups mirror each other with their mutual Southern roots, Christian faith, domesticity and female bonding, and cultural pursuits.

The biggest connection these two groups of women have is their Southern roots. Being Southern is complex and it is impossible to fully define; it is more than common history, geography, or culture. The South is a social panopticon where sex, religion, and race come together to complicate a simple question: what does it mean to be decent?79

79 In “History of religion in the South” offered at the University of Mississippi, Dr. Ryan Fletcher asked the class to define the South. This was my contribution, and, because I find it quite fitting, I have included it
Much of what it means to be Southern surrounds perceptions of what decency is and how it is performed. Some aspects of decency are humorous: it is not decent to be Northern, not if it can be helped. Some have more long-lasting and negative consequences: decent white women were domestic and polite and decent black people did not mix with white people and kept to themselves, lest their animalistic instincts take hold and destroy society. Rebecca Bridges Watts points out, “But who are Southerners? In common parlance, Southerners often refers to white Southerners—specifically, those white Southerners who proudly identify themselves as such.” White women and black women responded to the concept of being Southern differently because of how they were perceived as Southerners. Cultural default said being Southern required being white. Black women’s experiences as Southerners revolved around how they interacted with white people. Women of all races were expected to be domestic and well-behaved; however, good behavior was determined by the white men who held social power. Even this definition is a gross oversimplification of what being Southern is, especially when defining Southern womanhood, but these roots in the South bond both groups’ stories.

Beyond Southern roots, black and white women in the South find commonality in their Christian faith. While these two groups of women manipulated Christianity and Christian understandings of women and justice differently, they both centered their

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80 Remillard. *Southern Civil Religions Imagining the Good Society in the Post-Reconstruction Era*. 79-80.
campaigns for justice on Christianity. Christianity makes up the heart of their causes. The South has been saturated with Christian morality. The religion became a pillar for both black and white women in Southern society. This commonality functions as the root of their identities; white women’s identity centered on their purity, as dictated by the faith, and black women’s identity as survivalists derived from tales of Hagar and wandering Jewish slaves in the wilderness. Being decent in Southern society required Christianity, and it was a source of strength. Equality of any sort could not have happened in the South without religion, but Protestant Christianity was especially powerful because of its long-held position as the dominant religion in the South.

To some degree, black and white women shared common goals when pursuing cultural and legal equality. Both wanted to be recognized as autonomous human beings with agency. For white women, this involved more economic and social autonomy. For black women, this was an explicit fight against racism, classism, and sexism. Despite different ways of pursuing this idea of equality, these two groups of women wanted something more for themselves. Black women and white women did not pursue these desires similarly, but their desires are what pushed them over the edge from passive victims of oppression to women with agency.

While these groups’ roots have similar names, the reality of their background made them strangers in the same land. Reasonably, the practice of pursuing equality looked very different by race. Their lives were defined as much by their commonality as by their differences. Despite Christian and Southern roots, white women would never have to deal with the social repercussions of brown skin. When pursuing equality, both groups of women used religion in relation to their private lives and society as a whole.
They did this with a few key differences. While white women used stealthy subversion of societal norms by using benevolent sexism to their benefit, black women were denied that option and had to march for justice, using religion as a battering ram against preconceived notions of race.

Most white women would not ever understand the levels of mass poverty their black sisters had to live through, although many did endure poverty. These differences gave white women an opportunity to “work the system” and use preconceived notions to validate their attempts for autonomy. Because white women were considered pure and virtuous, any autonomy gained under female-run benevolent societies was trusted as safe for society as a whole. Black women never had this option; from the very beginning, black women did not have access to sexist stereotypes about “purity” that they could use to benefit their cause. They could not manipulate the pre-existing social structure to benefit themselves when the society they lived in deemed them as socially repugnant and inherently inferior. White supremacy in both Southern society and Southern religious beliefs gave them few resources to draw on; whiteness’s inherent cultural superiority over blackness even made God’s love segregated. White women could use their “holy” pigment to change their circumstances while not changing hearts or minds. Black women’s circumstances depended on legal intervention or cultural change; there could be no half measures for justice. White women could smile, nod, and change their path, but black women had to use righteous persistence for basic recognition of their human dignity.

White women built their empire of equality on the backs of stereotypes such as: women are gentle creatures with a heart for charity; and women, as the softer sex, have
more compassion and willingness to give. White women found their niche in society by using these stereotypes against the people creating and disseminating them—namely, rich, powerful white men. As stated before, white men did not exclusively define these stereotypes, but they benefited greatly from them staying in place. White women realized this and used men’s own desires against them. Every stereotype of black women used their marginalized status against them; no amount of twisted imagery can turn the Mammy into a figure deserving actual equality. The Mammy functioned under white control as a form of social justification. Joseph Boskin writes:

The objective of whites was to create a super black woman who legitimized her own enslavement and provided a model for all black women…the image provided for the black female in this regard was that of worker and nurturer. Both images provided Southerners what they craved most in their slaves: obedience, energy, docility as hard workers and affection and entertainment as psychic providers.  

Black stereotypes worked solely to benefit white Southerners, as positive forces that benefit white people or negative characters that justify oppression.

Traditional theology of the time demanded women to accept their lot in life; to be a woman was to know one’s place. Black and white women’s practical application of faith differed from what was expected at the time. In a time when women were expected to be silent and black people were expected to carefully shelter themselves away from proper white society, these two groups of women defied the norm. Christian theology had been shaped around pre-existing prejudices, against both women and black people. To

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pursue equality, both black and white women forsook common theology for their practical faith.

To casually subvert societal expectations—often designed with theological background—defied religious doctrine at the time. White women could not hold power in Southern society because men considered them to be weaker and designed to be subservient. Their ability to gain some modicum of power through charity broke traditional religious values and doctrine, but they did it in such a way that spiritual leaders welcomed it and called it holy. White women used the practical effects of their faith pursuits to defy common theology and gain autonomy for their charitable pursuits.

Likewise, black women defied common theological teachings for both women and black people. The white majority used their sphere of influence to dictate women’s and black people’s rights, and black people rose to the pulpit and the front of the marching crowd in proud defiance. They used hymns to promote justice; at every step they defied popular Southern theology. Black women refused to stay silent, and, rather than bow down to the majority interpretation of faith that proclaimed races must not mix and segregation was justice, these women spoke proudly about a God who valued them as much as their white neighbors. Their God was a God who wanted justice, regardless of what traditional, popular theology of the time dictated.

White women used religion to adjust an individual’s equality and agency. Many individual women came together for their charitable organizations, but they did not move and organize mass social change for all women’s equality. In many ways, white women’s pursuits for equality helped deny equality for other women of different races or social classes. Black women sought for justice as a group; they were only as strong as their
weakest members, and they drew strength from their numbers. Black women used hymns to bind themselves together; white women used careful words and interpretation of scripture to build themselves up.

Black and white women in the South lived very different lives, but their common roots wove their stories together. Their faith and Southern roots bound black and white women together, where their class and manipulation of faith and family made the threads distinct. White women and black women had to use their faith differently; if black women had used white women’s approach to equality, they would have accomplished nothing and vice versa. Each group did the best they could under limited circumstances.

For future research, I am curious about the modern implications of women’s usage of faith in pursuing equality and how women justify limiting their own rights. Today, many women attempt to use the Bible or their own personal version of Christianity to argue in favor of equality for women and other marginalized groups. Progressive Christian women—and men—use their understanding of God to pursue equality on many fronts. On the other hand, many women voluntarily give up rights because of what they deem is holy. This includes abortion rights, as well as many fundamentalist women who give up their right for financial and social autonomy and independence. Mormon women have long given up some rights to maintain what they believe to be holy gender norms.  

I believe the foremothers to these modern women lie along both black and white Southern women’s experiences.

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Bibliography


