Striking at the Sacred:
The Violence of Prayer, 1960-1969

Abstract: This essay explores the complex relationship between public prayer and violence during ten years of the Civil Rights Movement. During the 1960s and throughout the long civil rights era, activists who used the race-based, highly performative act of public prayer incited violence and drew the nation’s attention to the black freedom struggle. Study of the public prayers that led to violence further suggests that the introduction of prayer into public space acted as a conduit of moral judgment even when intended as a bridge of connection, a pattern that suggests the exercise of public prayer can be a catalyst for violence.1

Keywords: civil rights movement; religion; race; Catherine Bell; black church; body; ritual; white people; black people; kneeling; prayer; African-American religion; violence

Jim Zwerg knelt to pray in a Birmingham, Alabama, bus stop in 1961. A mob approached and beat him until they cracked three of his vertebrae. In 1963 in Danville, Virginia, deputized sanitation workers attacked SNCC volunteers as they prayed outside the local jail. After John Lewis knelt to pray on a bridge in Selma in 1965, state troopers beat him to the ground. Over in Crawfordville, Georgia, that same year police dragged a high school student to jail from the prayer vigil where she had been protesting school segregation.

In this essay, I will explore the complex relationship between public prayer and violence during ten years of the Civil Rights Movement. I will argue that during the 1960s and throughout the long civil rights era activists who used the race-based, highly performative act of public prayer incited violence and drew the nation’s attention to the black freedom struggle. Study of the public prayers that led to violence further suggests that the introduction of prayer into public space acted as a conduit of moral judgment even when intended as a bridge of connection, a pattern that suggests the exercise of public prayer can be a catalyst for violence.1

Religious studies scholars have failed to notice the relationship between violence and prayer during the civil rights movement. Historians examining the civil rights movement have, unlike other U.S. historians, thoroughly treated the role of religion.2 These works, however, treat religion as a social force through which participants drew emotional sustenance and arranged for logistical support. None of this scholarship focuses on public prayer as a social change resource. Even Stephen R. Hayne’s and Carolyn Renée Dupont’s exemplary monographs on the disruptions caused by integrationists conducting kneel-ins in segregated churches fail to theorize the ways in which prayer invoked violence.3

Theoretical discussions of prayer have likewise centered on the ritual as practiced in formal religious space. For example, Catherine Bell’s observation that “ritualization is a strategy for the construction of a limited and limiting power relationship” attends to the dynamics between religious elites and practitioners

1 For a related discussion of the broader relationship of performative prayer and crisis, see Shearer “Invoking Crisis.”
3 Haynes, The Last Segregated Hour; Dupont, Mississippi Praying.
internal to a religious community. As a result, she pays far more attention to “hegemony” and “indirect claims of power” than to overt power struggles. Rather than the “subtle shifts” explored by Bell and others, I here reveal how ritual directly challenges power relations.

I contend that public prayer practices during the civil rights era cluster around four intersecting categories: mediated, conversant, scripted, and performative. Although in practice the categories often overlapped, I delineate them here for heuristic purposes. The first three took place rarely. Practitioners offered mediated prayer by utilizing objects or practices such as Jewish tefillin. When activists offered adoration, concerns, and personal thoughts to an anthropomorphized deity, they engaged in the second form: conversant prayer. In a few settings, activists also prayed in a conversational manner for political victories, health, and financial windfall. Scripted prayers allowed for unison oration. Most centrally, Christians offered the Lord’s Prayer with one voice. Although less common, civil rights activists did upon occasion offer scripted prayers in times of stress and fracture but did so rarely given the predominance of liturgically adverse Baptist clergy and lay members among the civil rights corps.

This study focuses on performative prayer – my term for the type of public prayer typified by formal postures, context sensitivity, uses of stock phrases but not memorized orations, and sharp attention to audience reception. As religious studies scholar Tom Driver points out, all performers of ritual imagine an audience of some kind. Performative prayer, however, was intentionally brought before an antagonistic audience. In the context of the civil rights actions studied here, performative prayers also spoke to the immediate political concerns even as they addressed the divine. In contrast to the practice of “altar prayer” during which church members offered and received prayer for personal issues, performative prayers took place outside of the sanctuary and focused on protest action.

The statistics on performative prayer reveal a recurring pattern of crisis and violence. Out of a larger set of 235 civil rights public prayer events that took place between 1942 and 1977, I have documented 181 of those events occurring between 1960 and 1969. Of those 181 public prayer events, 77 (43%) resulted in crisis of some kind. Of these 77 crisis prayer events, 56 (73%) led to violence, categorized as instances of bodily harm, verbal abuse, or arrest (see Table 1). Of these 56 public prayer events involving violence: 40 (71%) occurred near a public edifice – such as a court house, library, or city hall; 25 (45%) involved a stylized pious pose like kneeling; 19 (34%) arose during a march; 49 (88%) took place between 1961 and 1965; and 44 (79%) transpired in Alabama, Georgia, or Mississippi (see Table 2) – all deep South states with histories of violent racial oppression.

Table 1: Documented Instances of Violence-related Public Prayers, 1960-1969

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Table 2: Geographic Distribution of Violence-related Public Prayers, 1960-1969

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4 Bell, Ritual Theory, 8.
5 Ibid., 116.
6 Ibid., 104.
Across the nation the press paid special attention to prayer-centered protests. The vast majority of the documented prayer events entered the historical record through high-profile press accounts that appeared in papers like the *Atlanta Daily News*, *Kansas Sentinel*, *Los Angeles Tribune*, *New York Times*, *Oakland Tribune*, *San Francisco Examiner*, and the *Washington Post*. Many of those accounts featured photos of activists arranged in the posture of prayer. For example, newspaper editors featured photographs of praying civil rights activists in 21 of the 56 violence-related prayer events identified here. Several of the photos had even broader reach. SNCC workers sold ten thousand copies of a dramatic photo of John Lewis kneeling to pray on the sidewalk during a civil rights demonstration in Cairo, Illinois. Likewise, a photo of SCLC activist C. T. Vivian praying on the Dallas County courthouse in Selma, Alabama, appeared in papers in Illinois, Iowa, Maryland, Nevada, Tennessee, Virginia, and the District of Columbia. Civil rights leaders looked for every opportunity to draw the attention of the press to their cause. Prayer in public – especially when segregationists responded with violence – proved particularly effective at garnering publicity.

These statistics and press accounts offer one way to analyze the phenomenon of violence-related public prayer. Of particular importance are the violence-related prayers that took place near a public edifice. Religious studies scholars Roger Friedland and Richard Hecht emphasize the volatility of contestations arising at or near “contested sacred centers.” Civil rights activists in the South during the 1960s chose city halls, court houses, libraries, and other public buildings such as churches as protest sites precisely because they held such sacred power as symbols of white power, purity, and dominance. Bringing sacred prayer to a sacred site in an act intended to use the moral authority of the former to disrupt the social and political power of the latter frequently erupted into violence.

The case from Danville, Virginia, makes the point. In the midst of a desegregation campaign supported by activists from the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), leaders from the Danville Christian Progressive Association focused their efforts on City Hall. In the southwest Virginia town groups repeatedly marched downtown and knelt to pray in front of the central symbol of white authority. For two months – May and June 1963 – the demonstrators kept praying at Danville’s City Hall only to be met with fire hoses, nightsticks, jailing, and physical abuse. In the aftermath of the violence at city hall, demonstrators lay on stretchers in nearby churches waiting for medical attention to lacerations, broken bones, and swollen eyes.

Analysis of the body reveals a similar correlation. Following religious studies scholar Anthony B. Pinn’s call to integrate the body into studies of African-American religion, I place the bodies of those prayed at the center of my essay. Note again that 45% of the violence-related performative prayers involved a stylized pious pose like kneeling or bowing of the head. Building on the work of literature scholar Elaine Scarry, scholars have noted that the body serves to destabilize social phenomena. Especially in those instances when pain increased vulnerability, the act of public prayer operated in a socially subversive manner when brought out of the sanctuary into the public arena. Civil rights opponents reacted violently to black – and sometimes white - bodies that knelt, bowed, and trembled in performative prayer. The police and elected officials who were antagonistic to the civil rights agenda found it easier to ignore words offered in support of integration than they did bodies praying before them. Few other actions by civil rights supports drew as much attention as did the volatile mix of an integrationist agenda and bodies bent in prayer.

Even more specifically, those who knelt in prayer encountered violence. The largest portion of kneeling public prayers documented in this study led to harassment of some kind or overt violence. The examples are striking. In Cambridge, Maryland, on July 8, 1963, white restaurant owner Robert Fehsenfeld approached kneeling demonstrators outside his segregated Dizzyland Restaurant and smashed an egg on the head of Edward Dickerson. On May 7, 1965, the marchers who knelt in prayer on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma,
Alabama, soon saw state trooper charging toward them in a violent rage that ended in beatings and gassing. In that same town that same year, SCLC minister C.T. Vivian knelt in prayer only to be struck twice by a counter protestor. Throughout the 1960s, the pattern remained. When protestors knelt in performative prayer, the rate and intensity of violent response increased.

An analysis of the body helps explain the violent reaction. As the statistics make evident, regional location and site choice also set the stage for a violent response. Yet embodied prayers proved especially provocative. The majority of segregationists, like their integrationist opponents, claimed a Christian identity. As Christians themselves, the segregationists who initiated violence in response to kneeling prayers knew the signs: knees bent, hands outstretched, heads bowed. Given that they knew what prayer looked like, understood that kneeling prayer indicated a claim of divine authority, and recognized the powerful message sent by the embodiment of a sacred act in secular space, the protectors of the status quo responded to a palpable threat to their integrity and faith practice. When faced with the respectably dressed, piously arranged, vulnerably positioned bodies before them, segregationists became enraged.

Consider also the events that unfolded in Bogalusa, Louisiana, in July 1965. Marchers from the southeastern Louisiana town had set out, intent on travelling en masse to city hall. Moving as they did through Ku Klux Klan territory, the marchers faced the possibility of violence with every step. Notably, they did not encounter violence until they stopped to pray. The group – some four hundred in number – knelt to the pavement. When they did so, even as a minister from the group led them in prayer, the crowd of white onlookers shouted out taunts and spat on the group. So incensed was the crowd by the display of piety that, as the group rose from their prayer, the surrounding crowd began to throw rocks at the group, injuring at least one marcher in the head.14

In this instance Catherine Bell offers important insight into the moral contrasts set up in the act of kneeling. Bell argues that, in the act of ritual “ordinary physical movements generate homologies and hierarchies among diverse levels and areas of experience, setting up relationships among symbols, values, and social categories.”15 Or, as one of her interpreters has articulated, the act of ritual “orders the ambiguities and indeterminacies of experience into distinctions between good and evil, light and dark, spirit and flesh, above and below, inside and outside.”16 In performative prayer, the contrast set up by activists kneeling in prayer and protectors of the status quo standing above them created a moral dichotomy. By kneeling, the activists claimed a moral high ground that their antagonists could not claim as their own except by joining in the prayer as well. I have yet to encounter any segregationists who prayed along with the activists.

Segregationists’ choice to refrain from joining in prayer with the integrationist activists underlines the theological contest at the heart of the struggle over civil rights. As historian of religion Jane Dailey makes evident, proponents on both sides of the issue labored mightily “to harness the immense power of the divine to their cause.”17 To join in prayer would be to cede sacred ground to the adversary. Segregationists used theological arguments and sermonizing to bolster their support for racial separation but early on lost the ability to use prayer in public space as a means of garnering sacred support. By praying in public before the co-religionists aligned against them, civil rights activists denied segregationists a powerful strategy for demonstrating their piety.

One activist offers insight into the intentions behind the choice to bring prayer into public space. As I noted earlier, my primary argument is that the introduction of prayer into public space acted as a conduit of moral judgment even when ostensibly serving as a bridge of connection, a pattern that suggests the exercise of public prayer is a catalyst for violence. Hollis Watkins, a civil rights activist who worked with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in McComb, Mississippi, and elsewhere, described the intention behind the use of prayer at one public prayer event.

In October 1961, a group of more than one hundred students from Burglund High School in McComb walked out of an assembly to protest the expulsion of their fellow student Brenda Travis. They also objected

14 Ogbar, Black Power, 50; “Permitted to Pray”.
15 Bell, Ritual Theory, 104.
16 Faber, “Saint Orlan,” 110.
to the failure of local authorities to prosecute white supremacist and Mississippi state legislator E.H. Hurst for murdering local African-American activist Herbert Lee. After stopping by SNCC’s headquarters at the local Masonic Temple to pick up their protest signs, they ended up at McComb’s city hall. While an angry crowd of white residents and police watched the young people carry their hastily made placards, the young people – first singly and then in small groups – walked up the steps and knelt to pray. Hollis Watkins was the first to kneel down on the court house steps; Isaac Lewis also fell to his knees and began to recite the Lord’s Prayer.18 At that point, a local police officer told him that “such prayers were not authorized on the steps.”19 When he continued to pray, the police then arrested him and 115 others who followed. While the drama unfolded, the crowd attacked African-American SNCC workers Bob Moses and Chuck McDew as well as their white co-worker Bob Zellner.

Reflecting on their use of prayer more than fifty years later, Watkins – who along with Curtis Hayes had organized the students – first noted that he had led the group in singing freedom songs “all the way to city hall.”20 The singing of songs by activists I contend also served as a form of prayer in this and countless other settings during the southern black freedom struggle and could also trigger crisis and, in fewer cases, violence. Although outside the scope of this paper, by comparison to sung prayers, spoken prayers and knelt prayers led to far more violence.

Watkins went on to describe the reason that the activists chose to pray on the steps of city hall rather than make speeches, chant slogans, or enter into conversation with the crowd. Watkins said, we “thought if we offered a prayer it would give a gesture that might reach the heart of so many Mississippians who said they were Christians.” He added, “It was the thing to do.” Describing the group’s intentions further by noting their hope that the police or the crowd around them might reconsider their actions due to their shared faith experience, Watkins concluded, “if they have any religious about them, [the act of praying] should give them a step ahead; but it didn’t happen.”21 Joan C. Browning, another veteran SNCC activist, added that prayer was “a common language of what we were doing” at the time.22

So, in at least this instance, the civil rights activists intended prayer to engage their antagonists. The texts of prayers recorded during protest actions suggest that many other organizers and activists used prayer with the same intention. At the same time, at least a few activists used prayer to deliberately antagonize their opponents as minister and SCLC activist C.T. Vivian did in Selma, Alabama, in 1965 when he intoned on the Dallas County courthouse steps that mercurial sheriff Jim Clark was a man “of tyranny.”23 More commonly, however, activists like Watkins used prayer because they hoped it would unsettle and convict their antagonists. During the ten-year period under examination here, the majority of the activists likewise engaged in a familiar religious practice that they frequently employed in times of crisis. A major difference here is that the prayers – when brought into public protest space – were not only used in response to crisis but brought about violence.

In addition to the causal factors of specific place and moral contrast, public prayers initiated violence due to the power struggles into which activists inserted the ritual. Multiple theorists of ritual remind us that ritual revolves around the procurement and maintenance of power, often gained and kept in the hands of men.24 The public prayers assessed in this study, however, twist the power dynamic typically associated with the introduction of ritual into public space. Men gave the vast majority of the performative prayers studied here, a function of the prevalence of ordained ministers in the SCLC corps. Male dominance is typical. The twist comes not from women taking the place of men as the primary prayer givers; it comes instead because activists used prayer to subvert the status quo. As theorist Francisco Diez de Velasco argues, “Religion has been a key in the legitimization of power: in the acceptance of inequalities, in how leadership was established and endured, and in maintaining a social consensus in spite of the unequal

18 Ray, “Brave Times”.
19 Branch, Parting, 512.
20 Browning, “Oral History”.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 “Against the Wall”.
distribution of privileges.”\(^{25}\) In this instance, civil rights activists employed prayer in the act of subverting the prevailing power structures. As they did so, they chose an act of religion – ritual – that, as Tom Driver points out “contains within itself a propensity toward violence.”\(^{26}\) In the midst of an intense power struggle over resources perceived to be scarce – i.e. access to civil rights in general and voting rights in particular – activists inserted a highly volatile religious ritual for the purpose of overturning rather than maintaining the established racial order. No wonder, then, that violence resulted when activists wore the mantle of prayer during public protest.

More specifically the bodies arrayed in performative prayer represented the sought-after freedom better than any other civil rights strategy. Scholars have credibly established the body as a site where gender, race, power, and other social boundaries are contested, where identities are created, and where religious adornment serves as to foster subjectivity. As white and black bodies came into conflict in the 1960s U.S. South, the sacred positioning of black bodies in the act of undermining a system intent upon denying the efficacy and agency of the African-American community realized the sought after goals. The act of kneeling, bowing the head, or even closing eyes while in direct communication with the divine made a public space typified by white racial power into black church space, the one arena that had been from Reconstruction forward free of white oversight. As they prayed in public, black activists created the future for which struggled in the act of the struggle itself. Only through assault could segregations disrupt that black church space. Through the subsequent acts of violent reprisal against the black bodies arrayed in prayer, the white segregationists only served to underscore that freedom had already been made manifest.

Even in the heart of one of the most violent southern cities, African-American marchers opened up a moment of freedom by praying in public. During the 1966 March Against Fear from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi, a contingent of twenty marchers took a detour to Philadelphia, Mississippi, in order to commemorate the second anniversary of the murders of SNCC workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Mickey Schwerner. Joined by two hundred local marchers, the group gathered at the county jail after police refused to allow them to gather at the courthouse. At the jail, hundreds of whites surrounded the group as Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price – a defendant in the federal case brought forward in the aftermath of the murder of the three SNCC workers – stood nearby. Once again, the group turned to prayer, this time led by Southern Christian Leadership Conference leader Ralph Abernathy. As he prayed, the crowd began to utter taunts. Even as the verbal harassment continued, Abernathy’s prayer emboldened Martin Luther King, Jr., to such an extent that he declared, “I believe in my heart that the murderers are somewhere around me at this moment.” In response, a member of the surrounding crowd called out, “They’re right behind you!”\(^{27}\) Such intimidation could not erase King’s declaration. In the best of the black church tradition – even while surrounded by a white mob – he had testified. Through prayer, the black church had been made manifest.

One more factor – perhaps already more than evident in the discussion thus far – contributed to the sustained connection between public prayer and violence during this period. In the main it was black people that prayed in front of antagonistic white audiences. An event in Cairo, Illinois, in July 1962 provides one example. SNCC chairman John Lewis led a small group of African-American demonstrators, many of them youth, in a spontaneous act of kneeling prayer as they waited for access to the town’s public swimming pool. While they yet stayed kneeling, a white segregationist drove his pickup toward the line of demonstrators. All escaped save one young African-American girl who held her ground in the midst of prayer until the pickup truck slammed her onto the pavement. In Cairo and throughout the United States in 1962, pickup drivers did not deliberately knock down young white girls, regardless of whether they knelt in a prayer protest or pious reflection. They did, however, knock down young black girls. As historian Rachel Bernstein has so capably demonstrated, popular culture sources in advertising and entertainment long presented the black body as impervious to pain.\(^{28}\) That the white driver did not stop when faced with a black girl kneeling in the street is no accident. Of course, some white demonstrators also received a beating in the

\(^{25}\) Velasco, “Theoretical Reflections,” 97.


\(^{27}\) Branch, At Canaan’s Edge, 487-488; Dittmer, Local People, 398.

\(^{28}\) Bernstein, Racial Innocence, 20, 62.
midst of prayer — especially if someone like white SNCC activist Bob Zellner was perceived as a traitor to his people — but in the main violence would more likely erupt if it was black people who prayed while white people watched.

Public prayer during the 1960s may have often been intended to bridge the very racial gap that increased the likelihood of violence in situations such as those like Cairo in 1962, but more consistently public prayer served as a conduit of moral judgment on the part of the disenfranchised and, through that process, as a catalyst for violence. As such, performative prayer offered far more resources for disrupting the status quo than for maintaining it. Through this examination, prayer emerges as an embodied sacred ritual that fosters challenges to the established order through violence. Much more than a pious act limited to the provision of spiritual comfort, performative prayer triggered unrest and disorder by increasing the chances that violence would erupt.

In the end, analysis of the violence of prayer opens several new research questions. How should scholars of the black freedom struggle, for example, evaluate the claims of civil rights movement veterans who insist that they prayed in public to deescalate tension when their actions so often did the opposite. Likewise, given the wide practice of prayer in many religious communities — not just the Southern Baptists that populate this study — how do we re-asses the role of religion in creating social disorder? And, what do we make of the relationship of race and religion when black bodies and white bodies came into such intimate if violent contact over a practice that members of both groups understood and shared in common? These and other questions await further study as we continue to assess those who struck at the sacred by kneeling in the street.

References

“Permitted to Pray.” Los Angeles Sentinel, Tuesday, July 29 1965, A10.


