

Article

#BlackBabiesMatter: Analyzing Black Religious Media in Conservative and Progressive Evangelical Communities

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Abstract: This article explores how conservative and progressive black Protestants interrogate the theological theme of the sacrality of black life through digital media. The innovations of religious media in black evangelical communities remain an understudied phenomenon in African American religion, making this an apt arena for further discovery. This current intervention into the study of African American Religion examines digital activism through examples of religious media produced by blacks for black audiences. This article begins its interrogation of the sacrality of black life by juxtaposing those who contend that Black Babies Matter as pro-birth-oriented, religiously motivated activists with those religious opponents asserting Black Lives Matter who present an intersectional pro-life approach. The comparison of views relies on womanist cultural analysis as its main methodology to analyze and interpret digital media and explore its ramifications for African American Religion.

Keywords: digital religion; digital activism; Black Lives Matter Movement; sacredness; black religious media

The Black Lives Matter hashtag was coined in July 2013 and popularized by three women of color in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's killer. While this hashtag activism increased after the murder of Mike Brown in August 2014, there has been a persistent campaign to expose structural racism and police violence, which has been met with a continuous backlash from police supporters and proponents of broader social agendas. One such Black Lives Matter retort came from Evangelist Alveda King, the niece of slain civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She circulated an image of Black Lives Matter protesters (some with their hands up, others carrying a Black Lives Matter banner) with an accompanying quote "Dear Planned Parenthood, If Black Lives Matter to you, stop aborting our babies and butchering our women!" This article investigates such religious media interaction with both #BlackLivesMatter and #AllLivesMatter tweets, particularly focused on media presented from 2014 until present.

Frederick Douglass famously stated, "I prayed for 20 years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs," and this rhetoric remains true for both conservative and progressive black evangelical actors working within virtual worlds to create social change. The innovations of religious media in these black evangelical communities remain an understudied phenomenon in African American religion making this an apt arena for further discovery. This current intervention into the study of African American Religion examines digital activism through examples of religious media produced by blacks for black audiences. This article begins its interrogation of the sacrality of black life by juxtaposing those who contend that Black Babies Matter as pro-birth-oriented, religiously motivated activists with those opponents asserting Black Lives Matter who present an intersectional pro-life

approach. The comparison of views relies on womanist cultural analysis as its main methodology to analyze and interpret digital media and explore its ramifications for African American Religion.¹

1. Digital Media and African American Religion

Christian ethicist Reggie Williams writes in a *Christian Century* special segment devoted to assessing the Black Lives Matter movement that because the “story of white supremacy is dynamic, adapting in real time to evidence that it is a lie,” this forces movements to change to address this adaptability (Williams 2016, p. 25). Social movements have typically relied on media and technology to articulate their messages to the masses, and contemporary social movements are no different, except the medium has changed to digital and religious media. For instance, in the past, a social justice message could be spread through mimeographs, flyers, faxes, magazines, and even church bulletins. Today’s movements for social change are using multivocal platforms like digital media.

For the purpose of this study, digital media refers to online offerings such as blogs, social media websites like Facebook and Twitter, as well as traditional means of communicating messages like print and ad content. While digital media encompasses various forms of virtual media, it is never value neutral as it is always imprinted with a dominant message from its producers. This is also true of religious media that shares many of the same formats as digital media, although religious media tends to be produced and viewed by persons sharing common values or beliefs about religion. Both forms of media can be constantly updated, and communications scholar Heidi Campbell considers this “digital religion,” or religion that is performed and articulated online but also reflects how digital media is shaped by religious practice.²

Digital religion should be highly influential to scholars of black religion because it engages millions, and brings in what historian Josef Sorett names as the cultural practices that “affirm black life and don’t necessarily register (or are misread) on the radars of mainstream media” (Sorett 2016, p. 22). Yet, despite its influence on black religious practitioners, scholars of black religion have been reticent to fully interrogate digital religion or new religious media’s impact on black religiosity.³ This exploration into the contemporary Black Lives Matter movement necessitates a foray into black religious media particularly new religious media.

One work delving into black religious media is the recent text *Televised Redemption: Black Religious Media and Racial Empowerment*, which makes impressive strides detailing how black religious media has provided African Americans with tools to be moral citizens. Carolyn Rouse, John Jackson, and Marla Frederick co-authored the book that defines black religious media as “not only media produced by black religious groups but also media produced by others about the black religious experience” (Rouse et al. 2016). Their work was particularly invested in religious media effecting changes in the consumer and the impact of religious media in the aftermath of the Black Lives Matter campaign.

Thus, this article traces the merging of Black Lives Matter rhetoric into media produced by/for black conservative and progressive Christians. It examines tweets, Facebook posts, digital billboards, and bodily protests with the aim of understanding both groups’ efforts to liberate black people. While this article will not trace the historical use of media in social movements, it does share the sentiment that although Black Lives Matter campaigns might be identified as “not your grandfather’s

¹ Womanist cultural analysis describes the merging of womanist methodology and cultural studies to analyze digital media from the perspective of the black producers and consumers of media. This methodology includes a close reading of the texts (in this case, Twitter, Facebook, and blog posts) while being sensitive to their articulated religious perspectives. I would like to acknowledge Toni Bond Leonard, one of the founding mothers of reproductive justice, for her assistance in preparing this article.

² (Campbell 2013, pp. 1–4). She notes that digital religion is marked by the traits of online culture and traditional religion, e.g., “interactivity, convergence, audience-generated content with beliefs and rituals as practiced in traditional religious spaces.”

³ There are significant offerings that look at various types of religious media that has impacted black religion from radio, printed sermons, to televised religiosity. For instance, consider the works of Lerone Martin, Barbara Savage, Wallace Best, Judith Weisenfeld, Jonathan Walton, Marla Frederick, Shayne Lee, and Monique Moultrie, among others. New religious media references web-based technologies.

civil-rights-movement,” the participation of religious actors merges old tactics with new media opportunities.⁴

Philosopher of religion Terrence Johnson contends that the Black Lives Matter movement emerges from an African American religious context as it “inherits its call to ‘(re)build the Black Liberation movement’ from the Black Church’s historical role in developing a theology of liberation based on social justice” (Johnson 2016). He is clear that he is not indicating any causality from the Black Church to the Black Lives Matter movement; instead, he is positing that they share vocabulary, songs, and even political ideology such that the basic building blocks for what defines justice and what it means to be human are found in black churches. This is contestable given the cognitive dissonance many black millennials have with black religiosity and especially black Christianity. Yet, when one looks at activism regarding Black Lives Matter from black persons claiming a religious identity, this is not as specious a claim.

Demographically, one can make a claim that African Americans who do not eschew Christianity are a part of the digital religion population that syncs new media with their religious lives. According to a Pew Center study, 40% of 18–29-year-old African Americans who use the Internet use Twitter (compared to 28% of younger whites) and there is a noticeable six percentage point difference among black youth using social networking sites like Facebook compared to whites (Pew Research Center 2014). Given the statistic that black Protestants have retained more millennials than any other racial demographic, it is reasonable to presume that these millennials are media oriented and invested in the cultural practices and rituals that Sorett described (Lee 2015).

This would make digital media significant for black Protestant meaning making. Scholars contend that the Black Lives Matter movement has decentered the black church as the site for meaning making and solutions to the injustice of the world. Analysis of religious media associated with the movement supports this assertion, as this is certainly not the call to return to the black church’s status quo. Instead, activists on both the left and right are expanding the church and the message of Christianity’s involvement through their activism. Women and gender studies scholar Brittney Cooper asserts that the movement has issued a clarion call to the black church to affirm a theology of resistance rather than a theology of respectability such that Jesus serves as more than a savior delivering persons from the punishment of personal sin but the sins of racism, patriarchy, homophobia, and transphobia (Cooper 2016, p. 27). While more conservative activists may not share all of Cooper’s goals, they certainly support the claim that Jesus’ salvific power extends beyond the soul to bodily concerns.

2. Conservative Religious Actors Utilizing Digital Religion

Conservative religious activists were early adapters to digital media just as conservative evangelicals were among the first to utilize radio and television mediums to proclaim their versions of Christianity. Black Christian conservatives use of social media represents a continuation of earlier campaigns targeting individual sin like gambling, drinking, prostitution, adultery, and abortion. Many opponents contend that the recent upsurge in digital activism connected to the Black Lives Matter movement represents a capitalization on the deaths of blacks. Yet, conservative users of social media respond that they are merely putting into perspective protesters’ claims that Black Lives Matter by forcing the inclusion of black fetuses as lives that should also matter to liberal activists. Similar to their forbearers in the Church of God in Christ, in order for them to align themselves with the Holy Spirit, they are called to be “in the world, and not of it.”⁵ This calling has led them to some of the same media outlets utilized by progressives, such as Twitter and Facebook.

⁴ Cobb (2016). See Chapter 1 of *Televised Redemption* for a more thorough discussion of religious media in social movements.

⁵ (Butler 2007, p. 66). For the last forty years, there has been a sustained black religious media response to abortion access in black communities sphere headed by typically black male clergy. New media has in some ways democratized the ability to advocate for pro-life causes within black religion as it gives access to persons like Ryan Bomberger who lack clerical credentialing but has become a major force in the pro-life movement.

For example, Rev. Clenard Childress, a New Jersey Pastor and founder of BlackGenocide.org calls the Black Lives Matter movement the best thing that happened to the “anemic black pro-life movement.”⁶ Childress has regularly supplied protesters from his two hundred-member New Jersey congregation as they see Black Lives Matter protests ripe for the anti-abortion message. He specifically recruits other black pastors for this type of activism, as he believes Christians have a moral duty to inform the community of systematic targeting of black communities through eugenics and population control. Childress primarily utilizes digital media like the All Black Lives Matter project circulating through Historically Black Colleges and Universities’ campuses to advance his cause. His website, BlackGenocide.org, is his gift to the anti-abortion movement, as it is a multi-media mural presentation of his views comparing black abortion to genocide.

Childress argues that the Black Lives Matter movement has given his cause a way of beginning a conversation with younger blacks, and this is also true of Rev. Alveda King’s outreach through the Priests for Life organization. While both Childress and King used imagery and tactics connecting their cause with the Civil Rights movement, both see in the Black Lives Matter movement an opportunity to make an impact on a cause that they feel religiously called to pursue. In Alveda King’s 23 March 2015 blog post “Why All Lives Matter,” she opens with an image of a fetus with the caption “Black Lives Do Matter! Hands Up-Don’t Abort,” which she attributes to the www.AfricanAmericanOutreach.org website, which is an arm of her organization, Civil Rights for the Unborn. The blog makes comparisons between the Ferguson police department scheme to disproportionately issue tickets against blacks to Planned Parenthood’s “systematic” targeting of minorities.⁷ King began connecting her anti-abortion cause to the Black Lives Matter campaign as early as the Darren Wilson acquittal in 2014. She and others argue that the disregard for black life starts much younger than teenage years and that nonviolence should begin with nonviolence to black children in the womb. In addition to using her blog, King also has an impressive media-oriented website with videos, recordings, and memes meant for wide distribution. She capitalizes on the vast network of Catholics and civil rights organizations providing a warehouse for those seeking resources on black (and religious) anti-abortion views.

Perhaps the most successful and notable digital activist utilizing religious media to offer alternatives to the Black Lives Matter movement is Ryan Bomberger, the founder of the Radiance Foundation, an organization devoted to “creatively affirm(ing) that every human life has purpose”.⁸ He is the creative force behind the 2010 billboard campaigns from TooManyAborted.com that sought to expose the disproportionate impact of abortion on the black community by naming black children an endangered species and calling the womb the most dangerous place for black children. He has gained greater contemporary notoriety because of his SomeBlackLivesMatter media posts and intervention into the Black Lives Matter campaign to juxtapose the number of blacks killed by police with the numbers of black abortions performed yearly. He considers himself a factivist whose God-given purpose is to help people understand they have intrinsic value. Ryan’s graphic design background means he utilizes digital media masterfully with his main goal being to promote a single issue—being pro-life.⁹ In fact, he proudly proclaims that he is pro-birth and not “whole life” because he doesn’t want to “dilute what it means to be pro-life,” especially since everyone should be pro-birth, which he

⁶ (Cunningham 2015). Childress figures prominently in the anti-abortion documentary *Maafa 21: Black Genocide in 21st Century America* that argues that the maafa did not end in slavery but continues in the current plot to exterminate the black population through abortion.

⁷ (King 2015). Rev. Alveda King garners a lot of traction with her statements because of her use of statements from her uncle, the civil rights icon Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Yet, she is also notable from her funded position as an African American outreach activist with the largely white organization Priests for Life.

⁸ The Radiance Foundation states that its mission is to be an “educational, faith-based, life-affirming organization” utilizing “creative ad campaigns, powerful multi-media presentations, fearless journalism, and compassionate community outreaches” <http://www.theradiancefoundation.org/about/>.

⁹ Bomberger bemoans Christian gatherings that focus on crafting a pro-life ethic that focus on food desserts, lead and mercury in water, global warming, animal rights, etc. His Christian work is committed to one goal—preventing abortions.

likens to being pro-breathing.¹⁰ Bomberger contends that his activism is science/fact based but also centered on his Christian faith.

3. Theological Framings for Black Babies Matter Campaigns

These conservative Christian activists share similar Biblical and theological framings that condition their responses to contemporary social issues like abortion or even civil rights protests. Common ground is typically found in the sacredness of human life, which for conservatives begins at conception. This article does not offer a thorough juxtaposition between the theological justifications for and against abortion.¹¹ Instead, it looks more narrowly at the specific rationales for sacrality of human life debated from religious media activists on each side.

Evangelical ethicist David Gushee wrote a substantive treatise on the sacredness of human life, and his argument is instructive for exploring how these black conservative activists understand abortion or even the taking of black lives by the police. Gushee begins with evangelical definitions for sanctity of human life that parallels some of the digital media statements by black conservative Black Babies Matter activists. He summarizes the literature by stating that human life is sacred because it is precious to God (based on Psalms 116:15), because humans are created in God's image (based on Genesis 1: 26–27), and because God also took human nature in the form of Jesus (based on John 1:1, 14).¹² Gushee admits that debates on the sacredness of human life are often waged over abortion and that the theology of creation depends heavily on biblical rationale. His text provides similar logic to what is espoused by activist groups. Unlike activists, Gushee acknowledges that the biblical base for being pro-life is disputable because there is no "explicit condemnation of abortion" in the Bible, but this acknowledgement comes with significant biblical support for the pro-life position found in biblical affirmations that God is creator of every human, that fertility is a part of God's plan, children are thus gifts from God, and finally that even in the development process, God is present and providential.¹³

These views on the sacredness of human life are shared by most of the religious activists on the conservative and progressive side. Yet, conservatives often go a step further to insist that this sacredness begins at the moment of conception, whereas progressives attribute sacredness and human life to a live birth. Particularly popular among conservatives is the proof they find in Psalm 139:13–16, which states, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made . . . My frame was not hidden from you, when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed body." Activists like Rev. Alveda King argue that this scripture speaks of the unborn child as a person with whom God is interacting, and activist Ryan Bomberger states that this scripture shows just how purposeful every life is to God, with no child being unplanned. In media presentations like "The Beauty of Possibility," they promote God imbuing each embryo with purposeful life, and they contend that they are the true advocates for the full thriving of black life.

Prominent in their rhetoric is that Black Lives Matter proponents must care about black life from the "womb to the tomb," as Rev. Alveda King reminds her audiences that "everybody's civil rights count" (Heretik 2017). The rationale behind this logic is that every person carries the image of God, and this begins in the womb. Thus, every black zygote, embryo, or fetus is already a part of God's plan and deserving of respect expected of all persons. This mentality is then distributed through multi-media presentations like videos, TV show appearances (Rev. Alveda King is a regular on Fox

¹⁰ Whole life refers to the comprehensive view of the intrinsic dignity of all humans that includes issues like poverty, environmentalism, euthanasia, etc. and is ultimately concerned with more than abortion (Herreid 2016).

¹¹ This would require a vast comparison and even if just narrowing down perspectives from the Protestant black Christian perspective, this still leaves hundreds of years of debates. For a more thorough analysis of Catholic and Protestant views on abortion, see (Castuera 2017).

¹² (Gushee 2013, p. 30). Gushee's definitions of the sacredness of human life are taken from evangelicals and Catholic Christians before he provides his own historically and theologically researched definition that is useful for this discussion.

¹³ Ibid, p. 357.

News), documentaries like *Maafa 21*, billboards, and social media like Instagram and Facebook posts. For instance, The Radiance Foundation cross-posted on May 6, 2017 #ThingsJesusNeverSaid: Some Lives Matter, which reiterated for their followers their message that all babies matter to God and thus should matter to society. These organizations feel that they are tackling this particular social issue out of a God-given purpose to defend the lives that God created. Ultimately, through their rhetorical choices, only those caring about life at conception can stake a claim in defending life throughout its development.

This results in a pro-birth doctrine that many conservative activists like Ryan Bomberger are happy to accept, while opponents contend that this is a myopic view that limits these justice-oriented organizations' full capacity to work on behalf of the black community. The debate around the Black Lives Matter movement has amplified this tension as lines are drawn with antagonists within the conservative movement questioning the Black Lives Matter movement's commitment to black life in light of its perceived silence on the disproportionate number of black abortions performed annually.¹⁴ Bomberger has been perhaps most adamant in this charge, stating,

it's more than abundantly clear that so-called #BlackLivesMatter activists and the multi-million dollar organizations funding the movement aren't really concerned about the racial justice and the brutality that ends the majority of black lives. These passionate, but confused, advocates seem incapable of realizing that their voice was only made possible by being born . . . by the strength and courage of their own mothers who did not allow violence to take away yet another unarmed black life. (Radiance Foundation 2016).

He reasons that abortion is the number one killer in the black community and he is fulfilling his faith and social justice commitments by being pro-life.

One of the issues prevalent when black conservatives attempt to enter conversation with progressives supporting the Black Lives Matter campaign is that they are lambasted as being too far outside their faith. Michelle Higgins, a young black woman serving as director of Faith for Justice, a Christian advocacy group in St. Louis, was asked to speak at an InterVarsity Christian Fellowship mission conference in December 2015, and she dared present Black Lives Matter as a movement on a mission for God. Since only 1 in 4 evangelicals (23%) surveyed stated they did not support the message of the Black Lives Matter movement, Higgins statement may not have earned her pushback, but then she stated that evangelicals are "too busy withholding mercy from the living, so that we might display a big spectacle of how much we want mercy to be shown to the unborn," and InterVarsity felt it had to intervene to reiterate its pro-life stance.¹⁵ Higgins tapped into the pro-birth consensus that amplifies God's mysterious work in creating human life but then seemingly abdicates religious authority for working on behalf of the living.

4. Progressive Religious Actors Utilizing Digital Religion

Progressive black religious activists are eager to point out this seeming discrepancy and have responded to the #AllLivesMatter and #BlackBabiesMatter hashtags with their own theological justifications for their participation in the Black Lives Matter movement shown through digital religion. Contrary to conservatives who utilized religious media as a mean of converting others to their cause; progressive religious activists seemed to use their religious media to communicate and organize acts of resistance in alignment with the Black Lives Matter protests going on in various cities. Black Lives Matter activists were adamant that the "model of the black preacher leading people

¹⁴ Although white women currently make up the majority of abortion patients at 39%, black women are disproportionately represented in the abortions received, with black women representing 28% of abortions performed while constituting only roughly 13% of the total population. See (Jerman et al. 2016).

¹⁵ InterVarsity's interim president responding that "scripture is clear about the sanctity of life: that is why I'm pro-life and committed to the dignity of my black brothers and sisters," while simultaneously stating that they did not endorse everything attributed to the BlackLivesMatter movement (Oppenheimer 2016).

to the promised land isn't working right now," so many clergy are following the lead of the young activists on the ground.¹⁶ Secular activists have made clear that they will not be silenced in favor of more seasoned religious activists as shown in Johnetta Elzie and members of the Ferguson "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" movement rushing the stage to take the microphone away from Rev. Al Sharpton during his December 2014 "Justice for All" march. Thus, unlike conservative religious actors who are the primary producers of their activist rhetoric and social justice activism; progressive religious actors often are re-circulating the actions planned by secular Black Lives Matter organizers to their religious networks.

This is not to indicate that progressive religious actors do not utilize their own forms of religious media to be more persuasive to their audiences. For instance, Rev. Dr. Pamela Lightsey, an ordained Methodist elder, livestream broadcasted her visits to Ferguson because she felt there was a void coming from the faith community and she wanted to showcase the "rich theology present in the black community" that was being articulated on the ground but not recorded by the national secular media.¹⁷ As a seminary associate dean, she went down to Ferguson as a representative of the Boston University School of Theology and the Reconciling Ministries Network's (a United Methodist social justice group) communication staff, and she recorded hours of footage of day-to-day interactions between the protesters and militarized Ferguson police. Her interviews with activists and citizens of Ferguson illuminated how police brutality, public policies like ticketing schemes that unfairly penalized poor blacks, and how denial of proper health care and quality education were all conditions that the Black Lives Matter movement was seeking to alleviate.

Lightsey's use of Livestream is a ready example of how progressive religious media associated with Black Lives Matter tended to rely on the instantaneous nature of social media to organize. They were following or re-posting millennial activism, which was particularly dependent on social media for gathering and spreading information. Black Lives Matter activists were often suspicious of the media produced outside of their networks, instead flocking to social media and their own means of reporting.¹⁸ Perhaps this is also shared logic by progressive religious activists like Rev. Traci Blackmon and Rev. Starsky Wilson, who both have a significant social media presence via Facebook and Twitter, and who are deeply ingrained in the physical location of Ferguson. Progressive religious activists' digital religion also motivates them to use resistance tactics in the non-virtual world.

Rev. Traci Blackmon, pastor of the Christ the King United Church of Christ (a church outside of Ferguson), described how she first learned of Mike Brown's murder via Facebook, and while watching it gain more attention (trending on Facebook), she asked others who wanted to pray about it if they could at least pray at the police station (Francis 2015, p. 24). This simple action launched a protest in front of the police station, one of the first on-the-ground actions. She has continued her activism both in and outside of Ferguson through the social media hashtag #prayingwithourfeet as she has journeyed to Washington, D.C. to protest the repeal of the Affordable Healthcare Act. Blackmon in part utilizes social media because she recognizes that alternative "modes of storytelling—like Livestreaming, social media, activist reporting" all shape the narrative, and people of faith who are called to be storytellers must take responsibility of the "narratives of the scriptures we hold sacred" (Moujaes 2016).

¹⁶ Rev. Shaun Jones, Assistant Pastor of the Mt. Zion Baptist Church in St. Louis, was interviewed in *Ferguson & Faith: Sparking Leadership & Awakening Community*. He noted that when he and other clergy went to the activists in the streets willing to learn from their commitment and sacrifice and to have their back without trying to stand out front, then they were accepted as part of the movement. See (Francis 2015; Cobb 2016).

¹⁷ (Lightsey 2014). This was her mechanism of supporting the protest for justice by moving outside of mainstream media as she claims her amateur shot videos were viewed by close to 2 million people. Livestream's mission is to "enable organizations to share experiences through live video, unlocking a world where every event is available live online." <https://livestream.com/about>.

¹⁸ This is not to indicate that those using #Ferguson or #BlackLivesMatter were all insiders, as clearly the conservatives religious actors previously discussed indicates. Twitter recorded these two hashtags as the #1 and #3 most used hashtags with the responding #AllLivesMatter tweet used only about 1/8 as much, with about 11% of these tweets being used by someone opposing abortion. See (Pew Research Center 2016).

Likewise, Rev. Starsky Wilson, pastor of St. John's United Church of Christ (a church in north St. Louis) described finding out about Mike Brown's murder via Twitter and mobilized with other clergy via e-mail to go to the police station to get the thirteen youths who had been arrested during a protest released on their own recognizance. He was considered a trusted source of civilian reporting during the Ferguson unrest, and his presence on the ground earned him trust with youth activists, so much so that his church was chosen as the headquarters for the Black Lives Matter freedom ride and the Ferguson October teach-ins. He has certainly proven that "hashtag activism is activism" as persons might be tweeting from the comforts of home, but they are also "getting up and doing the work that needs to be done" (Vega 2014).

5. Theological Framings for Progressive Participation in Black Lives Matter Campaigns

The progressive religious activists that were discussed also share similar biblical and theological framings that motivate their actions in the digital and physical world. They also share a common belief in the sacredness of human life, but for progressive religious activists, this sacrality does not end after conception but mandates working on the behalf of the sacred nature of black life throughout its stages of development. They share David Gushee's consensus on the sacred nature of human life, but they mediate his perspective through the lenses of black liberation theologies. Black and womanist theologies often link the sacredness of human life to a consideration of the full humanity of blacks that are lived out in a belief that God cares about the full thriving of black life.

Rev. Willis Johnson, a pastor of Wellspring United Methodist church in Ferguson, offers one of the most succinct depictions of Black Lives Matter and theology of creation:

Yes, black lives do matter, and yes, they matter because there's a God who believes that all life is sacred. While this has racial implications and tension an economic reverberation, there's a historical record of a system and a culture that are violent toward black people at any given time . . . So there is a God who is a God of all the oppressed. There's a God who cares, and there's a sacredness of person because we're all created in the image of God. (Francis 2015, p. 23).

Belief that God's image is imprinted on all life meant that as religious activists they needed to be concerned with the racial and economic realities of black people.

Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas contends that according to an African worldview, all is sacred because it is connected to the creator God who is sacred. She remarks that God intends for black bodies to be cherished and respected because biblical scripture teaches that God looked out at creation and it was good. Beyond this basic building block for sacredness of human life in womanist theology, she states that this good creation requires that black bodies be free from human constraints that prevent them from being who God created or threatens their life. Thus, "black life has meaning beyond the images constructed by the narratives of a stand-your-ground culture" (Douglas 2015, pp. 150–51). Thus, as laborers for justice, progressive religious activists are encouraged to resist anything or anyone that threatens the fullness of black life.

In essence, to be fully black is to be fully human and the "quest for black people to be seen as *fully* human is a significant component of this movement for racial justice" (Francis 2015, p. 56). The daily dehumanization that occurs with inadequate education, health care, policing, disproportionate imprisonment, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, etc. threaten the capacity to be fully human and fully created as God intended. Thus, Black Lives Matter religious activists push back against stereotypes and discrimination and shows God's love and God intentions in the world. This action is imbued with their liberation theological determination that full humanity involves a more just notion of humanity that desires God's freedom to be manifest in the lives of all. Progressive religious activists are making plain a womanist ethic of incarnation that envisions black bodies as made from the same substance of God; thus, black humanity cannot be divorced from the God incarnate (Turman 2014, p. 161).

Digital religion is the newest mechanism utilized by progressive religious actors within the long history of affirming the sacredness of black humanity. Perhaps part of the promise of digital religion is its mixture of old and new techniques to match contemporary times. For example, black churches have long held Seven Last Words services to celebrate Good Friday, a significant liturgical marker in black Christianity. In the Seven Last Words: Strange Fruit Speaks worship services, progressive religious activists merged the standard Good Friday preaching with a Black Lives Matter emphasis and media capabilities. Nyle Fort, a young seminarian activist, organized a commemoration of the “conversations and words of black people who have been murdered by vigilantes or police officers” at Riverside Church; despite its physical locale, the service was live-streamed, tweeted, and catalogued on YouTube for a much wider audience (Wright 2017, p. 167; Blackmon 2015). Rev. Traci Blackmon preaches the first word commemorating Amadou Diallo. She reminds the audience that they are all gathered because of the failure to acknowledge the holy in one another, and she refused to just focus on the interruption of Diallo’s life but instead will concentrate on his incarnation.

This echoing of his sacredness and humanity is also represented in Fort’s closing sermon commemorating Sean Bell who was murdered on his wedding day. Fort’s sermon close represents the intersectional approach to black life that has been at the forefront on the Black Lives Matter movement and ultimately has been a part of the black church’s historical identity as an all-comprehending institution addressing all facets of black life. Fort concludes with an invitation for all listeners to marry the movement for justice. He vows to “love black people unapologetically; unlearn systems of oppression of patriarchy, homophobia, capitalism, militarism, and white supremacist theologies; stand alongside my transgender brothers and sisters against trans-antagonism and violence; organize within my community; take care of my elders and to inspire a generation . . . and to not simply preach love with my lips, but to practice love with my life” (Fort 2015). These commitments have been demanded since the enslavement of Africans on American soil and have been a part of secular and religious black liberation efforts. Yet, progressive religious activists’ focus on the combined sacredness of creation and the full humanity of blacks presents an opportunity to “pray with our feet until there is no more blood in our streets” (Francis 2015, p. 128).

6. Conclusions

Philosopher of religion Eddie Glaude describes America’s main problem as a value gap, e.g., the belief that white people matter more than others (or at its core, that some bodies matter more than others), and I contend that is at the heart of the divide between black conservatives and progressives in the freedom struggle—varying hierarchies of who matters. This value gap is present in almost every aspect of society from housing, health care, state-sanctioned violence, education, poverty, etc. Yet, both conservative and progressive religious activists have solutions for this value gap that stem from their theological beliefs.

This article has described the ways that black conservative and progressive religious activists have used new technology to go about the divine work of changing the world. Both groups are motivated by deeply held theological principals that are receiving a much wider audience due to the influence of digital media. If the personal is political, then the virtual is also political. While much of this article has focused on various social media offerings, this is not to indicate that digital activism stops in the virtual realm. There are real life ramifications for each group’s efforts like the recent Missouri “All Lives Matter Act,” which tried to define a fertilized egg as a person with rights, and the Ferguson Commission Report, which offered concrete paths toward change in Ferguson. Contemporary scholars of black religion must investigate these connections and causes to better understand how black religion is changing and where it is going next.

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