

## The Black Panther Party and the Black Church

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### **Abstract:**

Black churches have always played an integral role in black people's fight against racial injustice and oppression. Many a freedom fighter has emerged from the black church. Henry Highland Garnett, a dynamic Presbyterian pastor, is one such example. Garnett gave a spellbinding oration at the 1843 National Negro Convention in Buffalo, New York, that came to be known as the "Call to Rebellion" speech.

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### **Article:**

The Black church was born over 350 years ago, engaged in a survival program. The Black Church was born out of an effort to deal with the concrete conditions and needs of Black people. It was born in an attempt to enable and empower Black people to survive the racist and exploitative system of slavery in America. Its mission and purpose today is the same as it was 350 years ago, although at a higher level. That mission and purpose is to see to its utmost that Black people and other oppressed people's survive, with dignity and humanity, American racism and capitalism.

- Father Earl Neil  
The Black Panther

Black churches have always played an integral role in black people's fight against racial injustice and oppression. Many a freedom fighter has emerged from the black church. Henry Highland Garnett, a dynamic Presbyterian pastor, is one such example. Garnett gave a spellbinding oration at the 1843 National Negro Convention in Buffalo, New York, that came to be known as the "Call to Rebellion" speech. Garnett exclaimed:

Neither god, nor angels, or just men, command you to suffer for a single moment. Therefore, it is your solemn and imperative duty to use every means, both moral, intellectual, and physical that promises success . . . Brethren, arise, arise! Strike for your lives and liberties. Now is the day and the hour. Let every slave throughout the land do this, and the days of slavery are numbered. You cannot be more oppressed than you have been—you cannot suffer greater cruelties than you have already. Rather die freeman than live to be slaves. Remember that you are Four Millions!

Garnett's words were no less poignant 100 years later, as black churches were featured prominently during the modern Civil Rights Movement, arguably the most transformative period in twentieth-century America. In 1984, Aldon Morris wrote in *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* that, "the Black Church functioned as the institutional center of the Modern Civil Rights Movement."<sup>1</sup> Elaborating further, Morris maintains that in regard to the movement, the black church served as an organized mass base for the modern Civil Rights Movement; provided a cadre of clergymen largely economically independent of white patronage and adept at managing people and resources; institutionalized finances through which protests were financed; and provided meeting space for the masses to strategize for the hundreds of demonstrations, marches, and sit-ins that occurred during the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>2</sup> Many black preachers and their congregations were active in the fight for civil rights; and as a result, some churches were bombed. Many black preachers were threatened, beaten, jailed, exiled, and murdered because of their civil rights activities. Hence, it is not hyperbole to submit that without the black church, there may not have been a modern Civil Rights Movement.

An argument put forward in *Black Power in the Belly of the Beast* by Judson L. Jeffries is that the black church was not featured prominently in the Black Power Movement.<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that the black church did not have its place. A cursory look at several of the major, and less prominent organizations that comprised the Black Power Movement reveals a relationship that varied across organization. An examination of *Us*, the Congress of African People, Republic of New Afrika, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, the Defenders, the Black Liberators, and the Sons of Watts has uncovered little evidence that suggests these groups had strong ties with the black church. Some of these organizations may have held events and activities at a black church from time to time; and some of its members may have worshipped at black churches, including William Smith (the Defenders) and Rev. Charles Koen (the Black Liberators). But on the whole, the black church was not central to the Black Power Movement in ways comparable to its role within the midtwentieth-century Civil Rights Movement.

Of the Black Power groups, the Deacons for Defense and Justice had perhaps one of the strongest relationships with the church. Founded in 1964, the Deacons arose in response to Ku Klux Klan activity in Jonesboro, Louisiana. The group's membership was comprised mostly of churchgoing men who agreed on the name "Deacons" as a reflection of their background in the church. The name also represented their perception of themselves as servants of the community and defenders of their faith. It is no accident that some of the men who held leadership positions in the Deacons for Defense and Justice were actual deacons in the church. Another group, the Black Panther Party (BPP), perhaps the most ballyhooed of the Black Power organizations, had a mixed relationship with the black church. For reasons that are unclear, this fact has at best been underexplored, and at worst, unacknowledged altogether by students of history. In turn, this

chapter seeks to fill that gap by examining the role that black churches played in the philosophy and development of the Black Panther Party.

The role of religion and spirituality was a nebulous part of the Black Panther Party, as the organization was born amidst sweltering racism and oppressive social, economic, and political conditions. Such forces became the foci of the Party's work. While many ministers spoke of these insufferable conditions from the pulpit, the sermons that told of the salvation of the body and spirit could only be actualized and achieved (as far as the church was concerned) by those who accepted a supreme omnipotent savior in an intangible kingdom. Such an ideology was perceived by some Panthers, especially those in leadership, as disconnected from the harsh realities that beset poor blacks in the United States. As students of Malcolm X, some Party members (especially during their Black Nationalist phase, 1966–1968) accepted Malcolm's position that blacks were living in hell, as their oppressor was enjoying the fruits of heaven. As the self-proclaimed heirs to Malcolm X, the Panthers set out to alleviate the conditions that consigned blacks to an inferior position within both the national and international community. Though many Panthers had been involved in the activities of black churches (i.e., as choir members, young deacons, Bible study groups, and in other capacities), the immediacy or relevancy of those experiences and contributions did not figure prominently in the BPP's 10 Point Program/Platform or day-to-day community work. Regardless of this fact, at times the Panthers enjoyed a positive working relationship with some black churches throughout the country.

In 1969, the organization's National Headquarters forged a relationship with St. Augustine's Episcopal Church in West Oakland. Father Earl Neil presided over the church, and developed a rapport with Party members following the death of BPP member James "Lil'" Bobby Hutton on April 8, 1968. Father Neil eulogized Hutton, the first party member killed by police, and later eulogized Alprentice "Bunchy" Carter, George Jackson, and his brother, Jonathan Jackson. As the relationship grew, Neil agreed to let the Panthers set up their Free Breakfast Program at the Church. As Father Neil said, "the free breakfast program was the first of its kind, either in the public or private sector."<sup>4</sup>

Shortly after the Free Breakfast Program got underway at St. Augustine's Episcopal Church, the Panthers started conducting weekly political education classes at the church. In addition to the Free Breakfast Program and political education classes, Panther leaders routinely gave speeches at the church to large audiences, which were comprised of Panthers and community residents. These classes not only served to raise people's consciousness, but proved to be an effective recruiting tool for the BPP. One Panther joined the Party in 1968 after hearing speeches by Bobby Seale and Eldridge Cleaver at the church. To believe that any church would have accommodated Cleaver given his penchant for delivering invective lectures, might seem incongruous with the typical tone and decorum of most churches.<sup>5</sup> However, Father Neil saw past the inflammatory diatribes of some Panthers and judged Panthers based upon their works rather than their histrionics. Moreover, Father Neil had a long history working with groups of varying ideologies and tactics, including years residing in McComb, Mississippi where he put his life on the line for the civil rights struggle, and was not put-off easily then by the Panthers' strident posture.

Reverend Cecil Williams of Glide Memorial Church in San Francisco was another Panther sympathizer who opened his doors to accommodate the Panthers' Free Breakfast Program. Chairman Bobby Seale and Chief of Staff, David Hilliard, understood that the black church was the oldest institution in the black community and that it played a major role in the day-to-day lives of African Americans. After all, churches were where many African Americans engaged in

networking, joined reading groups, and participated in clubs of various types, which made them potentially important as places where the BPP in Oakland could anchor their community survival programs. By reaching out to the black churches, the BPP demonstrated its willingness and ability to work with an established institution whose goals and mission may have, in some ways, differed widely from those of the BPP. A closer examination reveals, however, that the BPP and the church had at least one major commonality—both were concerned with enhancing people’s life chances. Although there were many potential points of divergence, the assistance of black churches enabled the BPP to demonstrate how a partnership between a grassroots organization and an established faith-based institution could provide sorely needed services to thousands of poor and working-class people—populations that were practically neglected by the U.S. government in many areas of the country.

With the establishment of the initial Free Breakfast Program in 1969 at St. Augustine Episcopal Church, Party members throughout the country began approaching churches in their respective cities. Many of those outposts developed their first breakfast programs and other community survival programs in neighborhood churches. In Seattle, Chicago, and Philadelphia, political education classes and liberation schools for children were also held in black churches. Quite naturally, the level of cooperation between the branches and chapters of the BPP and black churches varied from city to city.

In Philadelphia, BPP member Sultan Ahmed remembers that Father John Gracy of Miller Memorial Church in the Germantown area was supportive of the breakfast program as early as 1969, allowing the Panthers to use its facilities for a time.<sup>6</sup> Father Paul Washington of the Church of the Advocate in North Philadelphia also supported the Panthers’ Breakfast Program by opening its doors to it and the BPP’s political education classes. Additionally, the Church of the Advocate served as a site for the BPP-led Plenary Session for the Revolutionary People’s Constitutional Convention on September 4–6, 1970. This meeting, held in Philadelphia nearly two centuries after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, provided a space for activist groups and individuals from all walks of life to unite and rewrite what originally had been written by the country’s “founding” fathers in 1787—a new constitution “providing authentic liberty and justice for all.”<sup>7</sup>

When the Party decided on Philadelphia as the host city, it recognized it would need the assistance of all who had any sympathies for its objectives. Finding a venue was the first order of business, and the Panthers wasted no time in asking the well-known and highly regarded Father Washington for the use of his church—a request to which he agreed. This church alone would not suffice, however, because a much larger public space was needed to accommodate the thousands expected to attend the convention. Consequently, the Panthers decided to approach Temple University and request that it make its large new gymnasium available. Father Washington joined a group of citizens that included Philadelphia Bar Association President Robert Landis in meeting with Temple officials to win their cooperation. Temple agreed, and the site was set.<sup>8</sup>

Aside from using the Church of the Advocate as a venue for the People’s Revolutionary Constitutional Convention, the church also permitted the Panthers to hold workshops on gang violence prevention. Because the proliferation of gangs was eroding the inner fabric of Black Philadelphia, the Panthers and Father Washington teamed up to mitigate the problem. In August 1970, the Panthers summoned rival gangs to the church to broker a truce. The combined efforts of the Panthers and Father Washington provided residents with a sense of security and an added assurance that gang violence would not be tolerated.<sup>9</sup> It is also important to note that Father Washington felt a special kinship with the Panthers. His fondness for the young militants was

exemplified when he joined with the Panthers and held a memorial service for Mark Clark and Fred Hampton—two Panthers who were slain by police officers attached to the State Attorney’s office in Chicago on December 4, 1969.<sup>10</sup>

Ahmed points out that although the Philadelphia branch worked very closely with the Church of the Advocate, Father Washington was not their spiritual advisor.<sup>11</sup> Oakland’s Father Neil was viewed as spiritual advisor for the entire Panther organization—BPP’s unofficial Minister of Religion—although there were no formal arrangements between clergy and Party branches and chapters elsewhere in the country.

Despite the absence of formal partnerships across the country between black churches and local BPP branches, Bobby Seale readily acknowledges that most of the Panthers’ Free Breakfast Programs were held in neighborhood churches. In Houston, Texas Charles “Boko” Freeman a member of the local branch, recalls soliciting the cooperation of black churches as a site for its breakfast program. Mt. Horeb Baptist Church was chosen because of Reverend Samuel Smith, its progressive pastor. Smith was receptive to the Panthers’ Breakfast Program from the outset; and believed that the breakfast program was an activity that would surely benefit the community.<sup>12</sup>

In Sacramento, former BPP member James Mott explains that “black churches there were more than willing to support BPP programs, [which lent] to increased interaction between the BPP and members of the various churches in that city.”<sup>13</sup> One church in Sacramento’s Oakpark area, the First Baptist Tabernacle Church, supported Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., during one of his visits to the city in 1967. Also, Mott remembers that BPP member and early Defense Captain, Charles Bronson, was a choir member at the Shiloh Baptist Church and used his position to muster support for the branch’s early community survival programs. In 1969, the Church of Christ, under Reverend Childers, also welcomed the branch’s breakfast program—which was the first breakfast program created outside of the Oakland-Bay area. Mott adds that churches “welcomed BPP-sponsored literacy classes and other programs too.”<sup>14</sup> During that same period in June, 1969, when the BPP came under attack from local police departments and from government agencies nationwide, black clergy in Sacramento spoke out, condemning police raids and the vilification of party members and their programs. Mott maintains that not only did black churches offer to host and support BPP programs, these churches actively proclaimed their solidarity with the BPP.

In the view of former Panther, Jimmy Slater, it was the Cleveland Panthers that “had the best relationship with the churches of any Panthers that I have been around, anyplace.”<sup>15</sup> Attempting to mobilize churches to assist in their various programs, the Panthers contacted Father Gene Wilson, pastor of the St. Adalbert Church, only a few blocks west of the Panther office. From the start, Father Wilson supported the Free Breakfast Program and assisted in the development of the Panthers’ programs by providing space and support. In addition, the Panthers utilized the Church to distribute clothes and shoes to those who requested them.<sup>16</sup> Panther member Tommie Carr often did the “church circuit,” speaking at various locations to garner support for the branch. For example, teenage members of the Woodland Hills Community Presbyterian Church organized a Youth Sunday service that featured Carr and several other Panthers. Carr took the opportunity to elaborate on the local branch’s offerings and stressed the need for black churches to open their facilities “to respond to the needs of the poor.”<sup>17</sup>

Frank Stitts, a member of St. Adalbert, reaffirmed the necessity of the Panthers’ program: “When I looked around our community where [the Panthers] were feeding kids . . . there was a great need, and they met the need.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, they encouraged and recruited members of the community to become involved in the maintenance and development of their alternative institutions. These interactions between community residents and the “super-militants,” as Stitts

called the Panthers, helped counter the demonic image of Panthers as portrayed by the media and agents of the social order. The sharing of resources between the Panthers and institutions such as the church, not only ensured the success of the Party's community survival programs, but provided poor residents with services they may not have received otherwise.

In Harlem, Henry Mitchell recalls that there were a plethora of black churches that were willing to host the breakfast program and its Liberation School for children. The BPP worked with black churches of various denominations.<sup>19</sup> In some cities, branches and chapters held programs and activities at Baptist, Methodist, and Episcopalian churches simultaneously. The denomination of the church did not seem to matter, as the BPP did not consider religious denomination in its efforts to forge community ties and build and expand its community survival programs. By the end of 1969, many churches in major cities were flooded with requests from Panthers to collaborate. The Panthers realized that the church afforded them the type of anchor needed to become a stabilizing force within black communities across the country.

In Los Angeles, the Panthers intended to make inroads into every major black community in the city. Consequently, they set out to establish breakfast programs throughout L.A., realizing that to be successful they needed to allay concerns that congregations might have about allowing them to use their churches. After much deliberation, a small group of Panthers led by Gwen Goodloe went before the Los Angeles Conference of Baptist Ministers with a presentation of the goals and objectives of their community survival programs. Impressed, the ministers voted unanimously to give the Panthers their endorsement and commendation. This vote of confidence gave the Panthers a sense of legitimacy in the eyes of the black bourgeoisie.

While the BPP enjoyed a degree of support from the faith community, sometimes church officials and their congregations were split over whether to work with the Panthers. For example, in one Los Angeles case, the initial breakfast program (called the John Huggins Breakfast Program for Children in honor of the slain deputy chairman) was established in early 1969 at the University Seventh Day Adventist Church to the chagrin of the congregation. Despite the parishioners' uneasiness about the Panthers, Associate Pastor Reverend Lorenzo Payte gave the Panthers permission to use the church's facilities with one stipulation: that meat not be served. Despite the fact that between forty and fifty children, aged three to fourteen, were served daily, some church members were opposed to having any association with the Panthers. The Panthers claimed that once the congregation saw how successful the program was, support grew exponentially.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, shortly after the program began, Reverend Payte was informed that he was being transferred to another church, casting doubt on the claim about the congregation's change of heart. If Payte's transfer was related to his work with the Panthers, it would not have been the first time a man of the cloth was reassigned after he appeared receptive to the Panthers' message. Weeks earlier, in October 1969, the bishop of the San Diego Catholic diocese abruptly transferred Father Frank Curran to New Mexico after it was discovered that he allowed the Panthers to use a local church to feed indigent children in the San Diego area. The reception on the part of some black churches was equally inhospitable in Houston, Texas. Charles E. Jones says "due to a lack of support from area churches, the Houston Panthers sponsored their first Free Breakfast program at the Dew Drop Inn," a local watering hole.<sup>21</sup> Houston Panthers were unable to make any inroads into the black ecclesiastical community as they were shunned by nearly every black minister to whom they reached out. Reverend Samuel Smith of Mt. Horeb Baptist Church came to their rescue in Spring 1973, but his benevolence did not go unpunished. John "Bunchy" Crear of the Houston branch of the BPP incredulously remarked that the "other ministers accused Reverend Smith of working with the devil for allowing us to use his church for the free breakfast program."<sup>22</sup> Leon

Valentine Hobbs says that the Seattle chapter had similar encounters with black churches. “We had to hold our free breakfast programs in locations like the Atlantic Street Youth Community Center and the Highpoint housing project, because we received zero support from the black church.”<sup>23</sup> Conversations with Panthers in other parts of the country such as Baltimore, Indianapolis, and Detroit reveal a similar theme. Says Gwen Robinson of Detroit: “I don’t remember any black church being receptive to us [the Panthers].”<sup>24</sup>

Despite such setbacks, the Panther brass encouraged local branches to utilize churches as a venue for their breakfast program. Its decision was based on the following reasons: 1) churches could accommodate large groups of people; 2) holding the breakfast program in a house of God would make it less likely that the police would barge in and harass its occupants, or so the Panthers thought; 3) association with churches gave the Panthers a degree of legitimacy among those who may have been leery about allowing their children to frequent a program put together by black militants; 4) most church facilities were of sufficient standards as to free Panthers from concerns about their program locations conforming to building codes; and 5) churches did not require Panthers to pay rent, which allowed them to expand existing survival programs or create new ones.

There were several reasons various black churches were neither interested in working with the Panthers nor receptive to their message. First, some churches were fearful that any association with the Panthers would bring unwanted attention and/or harassment from law enforcement agencies. History had shown that churches and other places of worship were not entirely off limits when it came to the repression of black groups, radical or otherwise. Nation of Islam’s Temple #27 had been fired upon by members of the Los Angeles Police Department in the early 1960s. In the late 1960s, New Bethel Baptist Church in Detroit was riddled with bullets when police officers and members of the Republic of New Africa clashed.

Second, some believed that the Panthers were impractical, if not completely unrealistic in their belief that a revolution could take place in the United States. Third, churches received misinformation about the Panthers from media, local police, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which hindered any healthy relationship between the Panthers and many black churches.<sup>25</sup> Fourth, some black church leaders had tired of the constant criticism and ridicule they received from Panthers. For example when David Hilliard spoke before the National Committee of Black Churchmen that met in Berkeley in the early 1970s, he called the preachers “a bunch of bootlicking pimps” and “motherfuckers”—comments that by any reasonable standard were disrespectful, unwarranted, and divisive. During the same meeting Hilliard inexplicably threatened that if the preachers did not align more closely with the Black Power movement, the Panthers would “off ” (i.e., kill) some of them. <sup>26</sup>Such comments only served to alienate the Party from churches and by extension a large sector of the black community. Little wonder then that when Huey Newton demanded in the summer of 1971 that CAL-PAK (an organization consisting of twenty-two black businesses) provide the Party with a weekly cash donation or face a boycott, the Reverend Charles Belcher, president of Oakland’s Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance charged the Panthers with extortion. Said Belcher, “Let us emphatically state that under no circumstances does Huey P. Newton, the Black Panther Party . . . have the support . . . of our congregations.”<sup>27</sup>

Incidents like these strained relations between the Panthers and black churches and haunted the Panthers in a number of ways, including during Bobby Seale’s run for mayor in 1973. According to Newton “the black preachers did not support us in the mayoral election, but the members of their congregations did.”<sup>28</sup> It is true that many black ministers were not supportive of Seale’s campaign for mayor, but the idea that their congregations were supportive deserves closer

scrutiny. For example, Newton spoke of the Party's alienation from the Church in a 1971 address at the Center for Urban Black Studies at UC–Berkeley in which he admitted that the Party's public criticism of the church did irreparable damage to the BPP's relationship with the church and drove a wedge between the BPP and the black community in general. Partly as a result of this, the Panthers found it necessary at times to reach out to white churches, simply because they had worn out their welcome with black churches in some communities.

Fortunately for the Panthers, the justness of their cause made their entry into white religious communities less difficult than might have been imagined and yielded numerous examples of support from white churches. In Baltimore for example, the Panthers received \$8,000 from the Catholic Archdiocese earmarked specifically for the breakfast program.<sup>29</sup> Also, in 1970 when scores of Panthers were swept up in a slew of dragnet-like raids by the Baltimore Police Department, the Interdenominational Ministers Alliance issued statements condemning the city's police commissioner.<sup>30</sup> In 1973, the National Episcopal Church gave the Winston-Salem branch of the BPP \$37,000 to support their emergency ambulance service. Pennsylvania Quakers also assisted the Panthers during times of need. First, local Quakers in tandem with doctors in the community donated a facility and medical equipment to institute the Mark Clark People's Free Medical Clinic.<sup>31</sup> "By opening a Clinic, the Panthers were able to address healthcare."<sup>32</sup> Second, after a planned incursion by police officers on three Panther offices on August 31, 1970, a total of fourteen people (two non-Panthers) were arrested with bail set at \$100,000 each. In response, the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) expressed outrage and posted bail for Defense Captain Reggie Schell after Common Pleas Judge Thomas M. Reed reduced the initial amount to \$2,500. The Quakers raised the bail by putting up the deed to the building that housed the Mark Clark Memorial Clinic.<sup>33</sup>

In Milwaukee, Panthers held rallies in May and June of 1969 at St. Boniface Church and at Cross Lutheran Church's Youth Center (aka the "Soul Hole") to advertise their Free Breakfast Program. After the June rally at Cross Lutheran Church, Panthers inquired whether they could operate their breakfast program at the church—which had 400 members, 40 percent of which were black. Rev. Joseph Ellwanger hesitantly approved, and stated that he would consult with the church's council. Prematurely, however, the Panthers took Ellwanger's approval and ran with it. When the council received word on the proposal, they disapproved stating they "would not allow this controversial black militant group to use its facilities, regardless of their good intentions."<sup>34</sup> Incredibly, Paul Crayton, lieutenant of religion of the Milwaukee Panthers and former intern pastor at Cross Lutheran, decided he would therefore host the breakfast program at his home.<sup>35</sup>

Although the Panthers suffered a degree of humiliation from this public mishap, their breakfast program figured prominently in discussions regarding the state of childhood hunger in the city of Milwaukee. With the efforts of Rev. Ellwanger, among others, the Citizens for Central City School Breakfast (CCCSBP) was created on July 21, 1969 with the express purpose of implementing breakfast programs in Milwaukee's public schools. Although the battle was rocky, by 1972 the organization was instrumental in establishing programs in numerous schools and facilities and fed more than 2,000 children.<sup>36</sup> Again, the combined efforts of the Panthers and church officials led to much-needed resources for inner-city youth.

Oddly, active religious involvements or pursuits were not openly encouraged by the BPP. If members chose to pray or worship in some way, they did so of their own accord. One possible reason for this may be found in the teachings of Malcolm X, the Panthers' ideological mentor. In his Ballot or Bullet speech, Malcolm X articulated that religion functioned as a medium to reinforce differences, and essentially, disallows any opportunity for people to come together



against a common enemy. His solution was to keep religion at home, in the closet. Carter G. Woodson echoed a similar sentiment decades earlier. He wrote:

While serving as the avenue of the oppressor's propaganda, the Negro church, although doing some good, has prevented the union of diverse elements and has kept the race too weak to overcome foes who have purposely taught Negroes how to quarrel and fight about trifles until their enemies can overcome them. This is the keynote to the control of the so-called inferior races by the self-styled superior. The one thinks and plans while the other in excited fashion seizes upon and destroys his brother with whom he should cooperate.<sup>37</sup>

The BPP did not disavow religion, but as dialectical materialists, some found it difficult to relate to matters of the world that could not put be under scientific examination. The Panthers were interested in testable hypotheses related to the physical world and its tangible conditions and in examining and seeking remedies to matters plaguing the oppressed here on earth. Religion, as far as many Panthers were concerned, was a realm that did not lend itself to rigorous empirical study. And, because Karl Marx was required reading for members of the BPP, it is likely that many Panthers, including Huey P. Newton, the BPP's chief theorist, believed religion was an ideology that served as an opiate for the People rather than as a stimulant for independent thinking and action. In the minds of many Panthers, Christianity (as projected by many black churches) was synonymous with whiteness since a caucasian "god" was the pervasive image of the deity within this realm.<sup>38</sup> These religious representations, prevalent throughout history, limited the consciousness of people and consciously or unconsciously reinforced the system of white supremacy and black inferiority.<sup>39</sup> Christianity, as an imposed religion on African people, ran counter to the BPP's goal of self-determination, self-reclamation, and self-governance (i.e., Black Nationalism). Hence, to be a Panther and a Christian was an oxymoron of sorts.

After his release from prison in 1970, Huey P. Newton began rethinking some of his previous statements and positions regarding the black community and its institutions. In May 1971, Newton spoke at the Black Odyssey Festival at the University of California in Berkeley where he explained the BPP's position on black churches and on the philosophical interconnectedness of religion and the BPP. Newton stated:

We say [religion] is only a ritual; it's irrelevant, and therefore we have nothing to do with it . . . that is one way of defecting from the community, and that is exactly what we did. Once we stepped outside of the church with that criticism we stepped outside of the thing that the community was involved in and we said, "You follow our example; your reality is not true and you don't need it."<sup>40</sup>

Newton argued that both the BPP and the church were in a stage of development. The BPP was in search of concrete and practical answers and solutions to matters related to oppression, poverty, healthcare, among others, while the church attempted to look for answers through a belief in God. Although Newton was concerned about the fact that in churches such as the Antioch Baptist Church that he and his family attended, persons were "encouraged to see prayer as the only way to salvation,"<sup>41</sup> Newton also recognized a positive benefit of church attendance on people's mental well-being. He wrote:

Everybody in the church prayed with you, sharing a common purpose that relieved tension and had a cathartic effect. No other outlet provided such an outlet . . . for me the church offered a countermeasure against the fear and humiliation I experienced in school. Even though I did not want to spend my life there, I enjoyed a good sermon and shouting session. I even experienced sensations of holiness, of security, and of deliverance. They were strange feelings, hard to describe, but involving a tremendous emotional release. Though I never shouted, the emotion of others was contagious. One person stimulated another, and together we shared an ecstasy that can fill a church during the service. There is no music, like that music, no drama like that drama of the saints rejoicing, the sinners moaning, the tambourines racing, and all those voices coming together crying holy unto the Lord . . . Their pain and their joy were mine, and mine were theirs—they surrendered their pain and joy to me, I surrendered mine to them. Once you experience this feeling, it never leaves you.<sup>42</sup>

For a short time Newton even wanted to become a minister like his father, but over time he began to question the concept of religion and the very existence of God. In fact, at one point Newton felt no need for religion and downplayed the importance of culture, which for many are inextricably linked. As C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya asserted, religion was perhaps the best prism to cultural understanding, that culture was a form of religion, and religion was the heart of culture.<sup>43</sup> Newton understood and acknowledged that churches were a necessary part of life, but he admits eventually finding it necessary to question and examine every idea that touched his life and, as a result, he reached an impasse with the church. Newton states the following conclusion:

I think that [the church] is a thing that man needs at this time, and he needs it because of what? Because we [social] scientists cannot answer all of the questions. . . . In the Black community we have the church as an institution that we created . . . You cannot fight an organized machine [i.e., the white power structure] individually, so we would work with the church in order to establish a community which will satisfy most of our needs so that we can live and operate as a group.<sup>44</sup>

Newton's statement reflected the new, yet original ideology of the BPP relative to the church and other community organizations, and in the process sought to mitigate damage done to the BPP-black church relationship by some Panthers who castigated black churches for their various failings. Newton's respect for churches stemmed from the fact that religion was "one of the most long-lasting influences" on his life<sup>45</sup> and that both of his parents were God-fearing people. His father's ministry encompassed serving as pastor of Bethel Baptist Church in Monroe, Louisiana, and after moving to Oakland, ministering in several churches there. Newton's entire family was involved in church life, holding offices, singing in the choir, and serving on the usher board and on other committees. During his youth, Newton himself regularly attended Sunday school, attended worship services weekly, and served as a junior Deacon. The Church was integral to Newton's life as he makes clear in a 1973 *Christian Century* magazine interview wherein the interviewer points out Newton "quoted liberally from Ecclesiastes, his favorite book of the Bible."<sup>46</sup>

It is not surprising that in the early 1970s the BPP gained a foothold among persons who, like Newton, were favorably disposed at some level to black churches based upon their upbringing.

After the BPP relocated its Central (National) Headquarters from West Oakland to East Oakland in 1973, the BPP created a nondenominational Sunday service called the Son of Man Temple. “Originally housed in one of the Panthers small campaign district offices, the Party soon acquired a 500-seat church sanctuary that gave the services more of a church feel to it.”<sup>47</sup> Through a combination of sermons, stories, and political education, Bobby Seale, the brain-trust behind Son of Man Temple, provided some members with the spiritual nourishment they were seeking. The Son of Man Temple was initially limited to Party members and community workers but soon after opened its doors to the general public. Six months after Seale created the Son of Man Temple he turned the reigns over to James Mott. From 4:00 to 5:00 p.m. attendees were treated to the spell-binding oratory of Mott and the sweet sounds of the Son of Man Temple Singers, the temple’s choir. According to Steve McCutchen, the Sunday events grew into quite a large enterprise that included a number of activities, especially after it transitioned into the Oakland Community Learning Center in 1974/75.<sup>48</sup>

The program began with a presentation by a Panther spokesperson, usually James Mott, and focused on community issues and the relationship of Black and poor people to the social, economic, political, and human conflicts of the world and in Black communities everywhere. The discussions were intended to inform, to prod people to think, and then to search for concrete ways to address their day-to-day lives, their dreams, and their hopes. The Son of Man Temple choir added to the church-like feeling, yet the music was drawn from popular songs that had been revised by members of “The Lumpen,” the BPP song group, with additional songs from BPP leading member Elaine Brown, a polished vocalist in her own right. Again, the Son of Man Temple program presented a church atmosphere that many people could identify with.<sup>49</sup>

With the departure of Bobby Seale from the BPP in 1974, the Son of Man Temple (which was renamed the Oakland Community Learning Center), lost some of its religious character.<sup>50</sup>

The Black Panther Party was rooted in the black community, and as the organization attempted to address issues such as police brutality, poverty, inadequate healthcare, crime, and miseducation of black youth, the BPP placed greater focus on its community survival programs. And although the church was a logical venue for some of the Panthers’ programs, the church’s impact on the BPP was not an integral part of the organization’s quest to liberate black and oppressed people throughout the world. Black churches were part of a larger front the BPP hoped would help lead oppressed people to higher levels of revolutionary ideas and action.

In sum, the Black Panther Party’s affiliations with black churches appear to have been based largely on pragmatism and political expediency rather than deep spiritual kinship or connection (with a few notable exceptions, as stated above). Nonetheless, the BPP reached out to black churches in a way that enabled the Panthers to make significant inroads into black communities across America. Moreover, while the relationship the Panthers cultivated with black churches may have been politically motivated, there was a common commitment to liberation between the Panthers and many churches. Despite broader ideological and strategic differences between the BPP and black churches, the Panthers appear to have a more meaningful relationship with black churches than any of the other groups that comprised the Black Power Movement, with the possible exception of the Deacons for Defense and Justice.

## Notes

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