

**BURNING COLUMBIA AVENUE: BLACK
CHRISTIANITY, BLACK NATIONALISM,
AND 'RIOT LITURGY' IN THE 1964
PHILADELPHIA RACE RIOT**

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Introduction

This investigation explores the religio-theological boundaries between Black Muslims and Black Christians manifested in the 1964 Philadelphia race riot, revealing complicated divisions within Philadelphia's black community during the civil rights movement. Addressing the scholarly silence on the riot, the article not only pieces together the first extended narrative of the riot but also identifies the complicated negotiations of religion and theology manifested in the riot, namely, "riot liturgy" and ministerial response to the riot, arguing that religion assumed a fundamental role in the expression of and response to the riot.

Following a description of urban unrest in Philadelphia from the Great Migration through serial race riots in Northern urban cities in Summer 1964, this article reconstructs accounts of the riot from the two major white and black Philadelphia newspapers—*The Philadelphia Inquirer Public Ledger* and *The Philadelphia Tribune-Herald*—and oral history interviews with residents and clergy of North Philadelphia.¹

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Philadelphia boasted a rich heritage of racial equality including early abolition of slavery in 1779 and Richard Allen founding Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1792. However, this may be a “rich heritage” of Philadelphian façade.

Northern cities quickly overpopulated with the Great Migration. Employed blacks typically worked as unskilled or domestic laborers. Some factories hired blacks, usually for the dirtiest, most dangerous jobs, but Philadelphia’s large textile industry practiced segregated hiring. Government offices opened employment to blacks, primarily in agencies with a large black clientele. Fewer than four percent of blacks worked in white-collar jobs by the 1950s.² By the 1960s, the allegedly liberated Philadelphia boasted a primarily white police force, residential segregation (housing in black neighborhoods was typically old and neglected with exorbitant rent), separate and unequal education, economic inopportunity, and disproportional allocation of city resources.³

The Great Migration also introduced black religious diversity. While there is no such thing as “the” black church, most blacks in the South belonged to Baptist, Methodist, or Holiness-Pentecostal churches. Catholicism claimed limited black membership in the South, as did traditional African religions such as conjure and voodoo, though certain ritual elements of conjure and voodoo remained within black Christianity. When Southern blacks migrated North, they experienced a host of religious options including Judaism, Islam, Catholicism, black charismatic religion, and religions of black identity such as the Moorish Science Temple, later the Nation of Islam (NOI). Albert Raboteau suggested that some blacks changed their religious affiliation to join with worldwide religions devoid of racial categorization.⁴ Black Catholics increased dramatically in the North, especially in large cities, as parishes and affiliated parochial schools reflected the new population.⁵

Whether remaining in their former Protestant denomination or converting, black churches functioned as the centers of black communities. Black churches helped migrants adjust to urban life. Lincoln and Mamiya suggested that Northern urban black churches lost the communal ties and moral authority held in the South. Even so, black churches provided stability, order, and fellowship to Northern blacks.⁶

Black ministers were often the most educated leaders within black communities. Black ministers contributed momentum to the development of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League. They interpreted current events in terms of religion

for their parishioners. Interdenominational cooperation, such as the National Fraternal Council of Negro Churches, formed via networks created by black ministers and their congregations. Black ministers and churches boycotted segregated businesses, and many black ministers preached and published concerning racial issues for much of the twentieth century.⁷

Black churches gained strength and numbers in the twentieth century. According to Karl Ellis Johnson, black churches in the postwar period “demonstrated the ability of the black working class and working poor to pool their resources for self-help and community improvement.”⁸ The AME church outnumbered other black denominations in Philadelphia at the end of the nineteenth century, and black Baptist churches gained dominance by the mid-twentieth century. Major black denominations included mostly female membership and exclusively male leadership. Emphasizing the key roles of women in the development of black churches, Johnson has argued that black women’s commitment to protecting the black family, empowered by the early twentieth century Progressive movement, translated to women advocating for churches to commit to community service and civil rights activism.⁹

By the mid-twentieth century, the primary avenues of civil rights leadership in the North emerged from non-religious, political groups, though religious leaders participated in these secular organizations. In light of the staggering needs of most Northern urban blacks and the warming climate of urban unrest, some have criticized churches for failing to address the primary needs of their communities. In the South, black churches manned the civil rights movement, and almost every major civil rights organization was religiously originated and affiliated, such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Even those with no explicit religious affiliation were predominantly Christian, such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In Philadelphia, the NAACP, the Urban League, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) dominated civil rights activism.

Two exceptions to the largely non-ministry driven Northern civil rights movement in Philadelphia emerge. In 1958, Rev. Leon H. Sullivan demanded equal opportunity employment from some of Philadelphia’s leading companies. After almost unilateral rejection, Sullivan collaborated with 400 Philadelphia ministers to boycott businesses with discriminatory hiring practices including Tasty Baking Company, Sun Oil, Gulf Oil, Atlantic-Richfield, and Pepsi Cola. Sullivan’s selective patronage campaigns lasted from 1959 to 1963, championing the slogan, “Don’t buy where you can’t work.” Karl Ellis Johnson labeled Sullivan’s selective patronage campaign the

“zenith” of church activism in Philadelphia and credited most of the effort’s success to the support work of black churchwomen. The selective patronage campaigns also succeeded because of the city’s unified black community and the realistic demands ministers made of companies (non-discriminatory hiring and promotion).¹⁰ By 1962, many Philadelphia employers opened hiring to blacks. Sullivan’s selective patronage campaigns received national media attention and even solicited inquiries from Martin Luther King, Jr. and the SCLC. Many scholars suggest that the SCLC’s 1967 Operation Breadbasket drew directly from Sullivan’s selective patronage campaign work.¹¹

In April, 1963, largely in response to the SCLC in Birmingham, Philadelphia branches of CORE and the NAACP protested city government’s discriminatory hiring in city-sponsored building projects. Protesters blocked the front of the mayor’s home, City Hall, building sites, and other public locations. By May, demonstrations regularly interfered with city building projects. A group of young protestors marched on a North Philadelphia construction site chanting a black spiritual which Southern marchers had sung as, “We sha-all o-verco-o-ome,” as “WE ... SHALL ... OVER ... COME,” while thumping rolled-up newspapers in their hands.¹²

Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech at the August, 1963 March on Washington, shortly after which President Lyndon Johnson passed the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Meanwhile, Philadelphia experienced increasing tension concerning civil rights due to police brutality, continued school segregation, and the growing student-led sit-in and voter registration movements. Newspapers regularly reported gatherings of students, arrests of young black males, and any formal efforts to register black voters. While no major civil rights conflicts occurred in Philadelphia during these fourteen months, the city was by no means at peace. Racial, generational, and economic stereotypes continued to polarize Philadelphians, and the combustibility needed only a spark.

Between late July and mid-August of 1964 race riots erupted in Rochester, NY (July 24–25), Jersey City, NJ (August 2–4), Patterson and Elizabeth, NJ (August 11–13), and Chicago (August 16–17). In each case, a police incident in a Black neighborhood catapulted into a rumor of white police assaulting or killing an innocent black.¹³

White police brutality undoubtedly became the most explosive issue behind race riots in the mid-1960s. Police arrested blacks at high rates yet protected illegal activities in black neighborhoods, such as the drug trade and prostitution. Black-on-white crime received more severe punishment

than white-on-black or black-on-black crime. "Tough cop" Frank Rizzo's "roundups" in black neighborhoods escalated tensions in Philadelphia in the 1950s. Rizzo ordered random raids, arrests, and beatings of innocent young blacks.¹⁴ Rizzo's police force notoriously planted evidence to frame innocents. Of Philadelphia's prisoners, 40 percent were black; blacks comprised only 18 percent of the city's population.¹⁵ Blacks filed complaints against the Philadelphia Police Department (PPD) for arrests without cause, excessive force, and ignoring intra-black crime. The city established a Police Trial Board to facilitate complaints against the PPD; the Board often ignored complaints as most rank-and-file police officers upheld racism and classism.

The Philadelphia Fellowship Commission's Committee on Community Tensions created a Subcommittee on Police-Community Relations in 1955 to help Philadelphia's white and Black leaders collaborate to avoid a riot. Rev. Sullivan and other ministers, NAACP leaders, city and police officials, and press attended these meetings, which sought to improve relations between police and the community with positivity and education.¹⁶

Civil rights and religious leaders often accused white police of harassing Blacks with unnecessary force. Moreover, many leaders aided Black Philadelphians in exercising their civil rights. The Peace Mission Movement in the summer of 1952, led by "Father Divine" George Baker, affirmed Black access to public facilities like swimming pools, notorious for city-enforced prejudice.

Roger Lane suggested the parallel existence of two Philadelphias: white Philadelphia and black Philadelphia. White Philadelphia was orderly, economically prosperous, low in crime, historically prejudiced and corrupt in city management. Black Philadelphia was crowded, economically disadvantaged, high in crime, and bore the brunt of racial and class prejudice.¹⁷ Black neighborhoods experienced limited resources, rising crime levels, and a growing spirit of unrest among residents.¹⁸ City and police neglect of North Philadelphia reinforced racial and economic hostility.

Racial hostility, however, was not exclusively black and white. Within the white community, ethnicity mattered tremendously. Even Italian-American Frank Rizzo, received prejudicial treatment from Irish- and German-Americans during his police career.¹⁹ Within the black community, lines were drawn between conservatives (those who pursued civil liberty through legislation or non-violent direct action) and radicals (those who pursued civil liberty through left-wing political revolution or militancy).

Black Nationalist movements like NOI flourished in this environment, adding religious fervor to urban unrest. The Nation of Islam was founded

in Detroit in 1930 by W.D. Fard Muhammad, who claimed Allah was God, white people the devil, and Negroes the Original People. He claimed the evil scientist Yacub conducted genetic experiments to create as light a race as possible to challenge Allah's design, the results of which created yellow, white, brown, and red races. He recruited heavily in the early 1930s, succeeded by Elijah Poole, a.k.a. Elijah Muhammad, who advocated absolute separation from whites and America. NOI became the largest growing Black Nationalism organization in the 1950s, largely due to the public career of Malcolm X, whom Elijah Muhammad converted while X was in prison.

NOI flourished in Northern urban areas, like North Philadelphia, particularly among poor, young, black males because of specific condemnation of police brutality and demand for equal justice under the law. NOI rejected American culture and music, advocated a strict diet and religious discipline, rapidly acquired property wealth to form a black nation, and forbid political participation. Many Black Muslims trained in self-defense against white attack.²⁰

Self-defense and condemnation of police brutality easily developed into hyper-militant Black Islam. NOI eliminated hyper-militant members, and by the early-mid 1960s, multiple militant Black Nationalist sects emerged, emphasizing condemnation of white oppression of black people, the right to self-defend, and a proud black identity. These exclusive groups were frequently suspected of antagonizing anti-white sentiments in urban Northern areas, leading to outbursts of racial rioting and other fighting.

The Philadelphia Riot

On August 28, 1964, Rush and Odessa Bradford engaged in a domestic squabble in their car when the vehicle stalled at Columbia Ave. and 22nd St. in North Philadelphia, a predominantly black neighborhood. White patrolmen Robert Wells and John Hoff approached the car and demanded the vehicle be moved. Odessa Bradford refused to even remove her foot from the brake pedal. An argument ensued between Mrs. Bradford and the policemen, and the patrolmen dragged her from the vehicle.²¹

Several passersby attacked the policemen for mistreating a woman. Onlookers pelted the officers with bricks to challenge their treatment of Bradford. Rumors that white police fatally assaulted an innocent, pregnant, Black woman spread like wildfire to 52nd St. and Columbia Ave., a bar

district of Philadelphia. The bar crowd flocked to the scene, and within thirty minutes, four square miles of North Philadelphia erupted into more than two days of looting and vandalizing white-owned businesses, overturning cars, and brick throwing.²²

Two weeks after the riot, police arrested Shaykh Muhammad, also known as Abyssinia Hayes, Raymond Hall, also known as Yussef Abdullah, and Florence Mobley for inciting the riot.²³ Police detained Muhammad within days of the riot after finding fabric-stuffed bottles, large quantities of cleaning fluid, and an “arsenal” of guns and knives in the African-Asian Culture Center on Columbia Ave. Muhammad formed the Center as a religious establishment, which sun-lighted as a drycleaner.²⁴ Muhammad defended himself, claiming the fluid was for his business, but police labeled the Center a Molotov cocktail factory.²⁵ Inside his Center hung signs bearing slogans such as “Rebellion against tyrants is obedience to God.”²⁶

Muhammad formerly adhered to the Nation of Islam (NOI), which expunged him as a liability for his hyper-militancy. Muhammad allegedly created his own version of Islam, combining NOI teachings with militant Black Nationalism, founded the African-Asian Culture Center, and was a well-known Muslim leader and business owner in the community. Muhammad and Hall’s records included previous arrests for disorderly conduct, conspiracy, assaulting a police officer, disturbing the peace, and assault and battery. Mobley had no previous record.²⁷

Organization of the riot assumed several forms. Muhammad clearly led, assisted by Hall and Mobley. First, Muhammad developed his arsenal of bricks, guns, and knives for easy distribution.²⁸ According to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, two hundred brick-throwers were on the scene within minutes. Police also found Muhammad, Hall, and Mobley to be in possession of two-way radios and police scanners.²⁹

Second, Muhammad, Hall, and Mobley created street platforms, “preached” to passersby against white police brutality, and spread rumors that police assaulted a pregnant Odessa Bradford and shot a Negro teenager. They decried police and clergy. Bradford and Muhammad encouraged their hearers to: “[K]ill all those . . . cops! . . . Wait until we get organized and we kill those ----- cops!”³⁰ Rioters regurgitated these sentiments: “Kill those dirty b—s. Those rotten cop b—s ought to be dead. . . . Let’s run them out of North Philadelphia. Those white cops have no business up here. . . . You killed a pregnant woman tonight. We’re going to get an eye for an eye, a life for a life.”³¹

Deputy Police Commissioner Richard Edwards relayed to the *Inquirer*: “[They] influenced the minds of the people in the riot area and induced them to commit violent acts by shouting, starting chants, and spreading vicious rumors. . . . [Muhammad and Hall] had clear direction and control over the rioters and drove them into a frenzy,” taking advantage of a situation to begin a looting spree of white-owned businesses in North Philadelphia.³² Rioters overturned police cars, threw bricks, and waited on roofs with guns aimed at police. Caught in the whirlwind, many Asian business owners on Columbia Ave. placed “We colored, too” signs in their store windows for protection.³³

Third, Muhammad created several phony assist-officer calls over police radios, sending police on false calls away from the riot’s path. Police reported that on several of these calls, Muhammad waited at the scene, approached officers to ask if any supervisors were present, and assured them he could “handle the crowd.”³⁴ Patrolman Albert Harris testified that Muhammad led a crowd, linked at the arm, and started jumping and chanting: “We want freedom. We want justice.”³⁵ The crowd joined the chanting and threw rocks, bottles, and bricks. Other police confirmed reports of rioters chanting and singing.³⁶

Mayor Howard Tate and Police Commissioner Howard Leary ordered police neither to shoot at looters, nor to attempt to stop the riot.³⁷ A “beleaguered” city police sergeant phoned the *Inquirer* to complain that: “During the rioting, we were told not to use pistols no matter what. Our only weapon was to be our nightsticks. How the hell do we defend ourselves? . . . We were told not to interfere with the rioting or the looting. We saw people looting the stores, and we didn’t stop them.”³⁸

Police received permission to shoot back at 10:30 p.m. on the second day of the riot, after reporting rioters on rooftops with guns.³⁹ Mayor Tate ordered a curfew on “all persons” within the riot area, punishable by up to two years’ imprisonment, banned the use of liquor, and patrolled the area with overwhelming police force for nearly two weeks.⁴⁰ Police arrested over 1,000 persons and allegedly grabbed young black males off the street and arrested then beat them, confirmed by Rev. Horace Means, Sr., president of the Philadelphia SCLC and Assistant Pastor of Mt. Olivet Tabernacle Baptist Church, and patrolman R. T. Jones, Associate Pastor of Jones Memorial Church of God in Christ and one of the few black PPD officers, coincidentally assigned to patrol the riot.⁴¹

Community leaders and clergy raced to the scene to urge people to return home. Philadelphia NAACP chapter President Cecil Moore commissioned

five sound-trucks carrying figures like Judge Alexander Raymond Pace through the riot area.⁴² After the second day of the riot, Moore carried Odessa Bradford on the sound-truck to prove her safety to rioters.⁴³ Moore later created controversy when he publicly stated that Blacks should not be blamed for the riot, both sides carried fault, and the police should release the curfew placed upon residents of North Philadelphia. Police brutality complaints to the Philadelphia NAACP skyrocketed after the riot, and Moore demanded that police reduce their “quasi-martial law . . . [and] virtual occupation.”⁴⁴

Black and White in Print

Philadelphia’s leading newspapers—the white *Philadelphia Inquirer-Public Ledger* and the black *Philadelphia Tribune-Herald*—reported essentially identical accounts of the riot, and both depicted Shaykh Muhammad, Raymond Hall, and Florence Mobley as co-inciters, attributable to their NOI affiliation.

The two Philadelphias, as Lane has identified them, likewise narrated the events of the 1964 riots differently. The daily *Inquirer* scantily covered the riots until the second day. Subsequent issues reported the investigation and trials of responsible parties, the economic impact on affected white business owners, and methods of city rehabilitation; coverage subsided after the inciters’ arrests. The twice-weekly *Tribune-Herald* covered the riots heavily. Coverage of the riot subsided after arrests, but that of civic unrest and riot-prevention continued. Subsequent issues discussed the reactions of prominent community leaders, updates of perpetrators and arrests, and how the riot could negatively impact Lyndon Johnson’s 1964 presidential campaign.

The biggest difference in the papers’ coverage of the riots concerned police action. Though police cordoned the riot area, they took no action. In the first two days of the riot, many police officers and store owners called the *Inquirer* to complain that police watched looters leave crime scenes, even stopping their patrol cars to allow looters to safely cross the streets. Complaints abounded such that Mayor Tate felt compelled to call the *Inquirer* himself to explain his actions.⁴⁵ Editorials in the *Inquirer* expressed outrage that police did not use the Birmingham Sheriff “Bull” Connor method of threatening with guns, tear gas, water hoses, and police dogs. Quite oppositely, *Tribune-Herald* editorials praised police for their restraint and responsible riot management. On its first day of riot coverage, the front page of the *Tribune-Herald* featured an editorial headlined “Respect for Law and Order Philadelphia’s Only Salvation.”⁴⁶

Increasing poverty and systemic neglect haunted urban Black communities, and some believed violence the only way to be heard. After the July Harlem riot, North Philadelphia welder Roosevelt Cofield opined, “[S]uch bad conditions for Negroes exist here in Philadelphia right now. It appears that we have to fight for our rights.”⁴⁷ Domestic worker Mabel Smith added, “It’s plain to see that we are sick and tired of being pushed around.”⁴⁸ Division between just violence and non-violence occurred along generational and gender lines: the strongest cries for violence came from young black males.

In light of growing unrest, both papers took great lengths to emphasize condemnation of the riot, distinguishing the riots from the civil rights movement. The *Inquirer* quoted Rev. Sullivan that the riots were “not civil rights . . . [but] civil destruction.”⁴⁹ Mayor Tate claimed the riot was “the outgrowth of a traffic incident and had nothing to do with civil rights. . . . This has nothing to do with civil liberties. This is outright looting.”⁵⁰ Scrap iron dealer Eddie Carter fumed: “I just can’t understand this rioting. We’re supposed to be a civilized people.” Housewife Ruth Palmer added, “I’m a churchgoer, and I think the riots are a disgrace.”⁵¹ A similar quip appeared in both papers: “It was a long night in the City of Brotherly Love” in the *Inquirer* and “Quaking City of Robberly Loot” in the *Tribune-Herald*.⁵²

Challenging rigid stereotypes, the *Inquirer* quoted riot-disapprovers who blamed the riot on police brutality and other forms of white exploitation of blacks. The *Inquirer* quoted construction worker Levon Moses: “First thing, you got too many bad cops. And the landlord takes advantage of the people and they cannot do anything about. That ain’t all. This thing is just beginning.”⁵³ The *Inquirer* also quoted Temple University student Larry Nottage: “This was coming for a long time. The people are very bitter. These merchants come down here and make a lot of money and we have to live here for life.”⁵⁴ Officials of a YMCA branch in the riot area reported: “Bad as the rioting is, wrong as the looting and stealing are, they are insignificant when measured against centuries of injustice . . . There will be other explosions unless the situation is corrected.”⁵⁵

Before the Philadelphia riot, the *Inquirer* included statements such as: “But evidence has come forth that the overwhelming majority of responsible Negroes—as distinguished from the extremist and hoodlum fringe—are far more frightened of the rioting than even the whites, as they have more to lose.”⁵⁶ After the Philadelphia riot, the *Inquirer* continued to emphasize disapproval by most blacks of the rioters’ actions as well as black community leaders’ support of law and order.⁵⁷

Ministerial Response

Clergy assumed two roles in response to the riot: peacemaker and protector. Clergy across Philadelphia rushed to the streets, urging rioters to cease and desist. Several rioters canvassed other Philadelphia neighborhoods, trying to spread the riot across the city, and ministers city-wide actively prevented the riot from spreading. Clergy worked in cooperation with police action to restore peace and contain the riot. North Philadelphia ministers even cancelled Sunday morning church services in observation of the mayor's curfew restriction.⁵⁸ Several ministers publicly praised police restraint from violent control tactics.⁵⁹ Many clergy who had been among the people during the riot testified as eyewitnesses against Muhammad, Hall, and Mobley including: Rev. Wrennie Morgan Sr. (Emmanuel Institutional Baptist Church), Roland V. Jones (Miller Memorial Baptist Church), William P. Stevenson (Allen African Methodist Episcopal Church) and Rev. Lloyd C. Wilson (Jones Tabernacle African Methodist Episcopal Church).⁶⁰

Alternatively, some ministers guarded their church buildings. Rev. Means recounted that rioters set several businesses ablaze during the riot, and some ministers remained on site to protect their churches from catching fire. This action was largely unnecessary as rioters targeted white-owned businesses, not black churches; the only known exception to this was the anomalous looting and vandalism of select Muslim businesses.⁶¹

After the riots, congregations frequently strategized for greater peace. Churches cooperated with each other and with civil rights leaders to reach political and economic solutions to their congregants' problems. Well-known North Philadelphia minister Rev. Sullivan's Opportunities Industrialization Center emerged from his selective patronage campaigns to address the social and economic needs of the communities, and many area ministers supported his endeavors.⁶²

An official Interfaith Interracial Council of Clergymen, formed after the riot, sought "to serve all people, helping them to find a solution to their everyday problems with God's help." Primarily Protestant with one Catholic member, the Council met often to discuss pressing issues within the community as problems mutual to their congregations. Realizing the riot might have been prevented if churches assumed greater responsibility for meeting parishioners' needs, they collaborated to strategize solutions.⁶³

Unofficial ecumenical alliances formed as well. A Jewish synagogue hosted interracial, ecumenical worship services to demonstrate community

cooperation and harmony.⁶⁴ Bishop Jones' church shared friendly association with a NOI mosque across the street from their building. Before the riot, interfaith interaction primarily happened ad hoc, but after the riot, churches purposefully collaborated for peace in their neighborhoods. Jeremiah X, a well known NOI minister of the mosque across from Jones Memorial Church of God in Christ, often came to Bishop Jones' house to discuss ecumenical efforts for peace. Jones reflected that in spite of the prejudices—racial, religious, and cultural—that divided various churches in North Philadelphia, they united on the issue of peace and were committed to working together to prevent future outbreaks and to meet the needs of the people.⁶⁵

Interracial clergy cooperation was monumental. In 1964, Philadelphia Methodists were segregated, Black Methodist churches belonging to the Delaware Conference and white to the Philadelphia Conference.⁶⁶ The Philadelphia Baptist Association (American Baptist) desegregated, though dominated by white churches. The Baptist Minister's Conference of Philadelphia and Vicinity (Progressive National Baptist Association) was a black organization. Catholic churches in North Philadelphia were in the midst of integration. Philadelphia's Jewish population migrated outward from the inner city after the Great Migration ("white flight"). Ministerial response to the riot, through the Interfaith Interracial Council of Clergymen and unofficial ecumenical partnerships, prompted initial steps toward bridging racial divides in Philadelphia's ecclesial structures. Churches, synagogues, and mosques cooperated across the board, laying their differences aside, to foster community cooperation and peace.⁶⁷

Two elements of ministerial response deserve further elaboration. First, Lincoln and Mamiya suggest that a contributing factor to Northern urban riots was black church failure to address the needs of urban life. In the Southern civil rights movement, churches were on the front lines of non-violent direct action and decisively combated discrimination and inequality; ministers were unequivocally championing civil rights and fighting for the spiritual and civil freedom of the people and were seen as activists. The Northern civil rights movement occurred through primarily secular organizations, though many black church members participated through these organizations. Consequently, ministerial leadership and civil rights action disconnected in the North. Many young Northern urbanites saw their ministers as "Uncle Toms" who cooperated with white power structures to keep blacks "in line," so to speak. Lincoln and Mamiya discussed the historical black church dialectic between resistance and accommodation, noting that black churches have historically functioned as "mediating institutions."⁶⁸

This discontinuity between civil rights action and faith created an atmosphere particularly ripe for rejecting ministerial authority.⁶⁹ While ministers urged residents to return to their homes, rioter response reflected the diversity of opinions concerning the clergy within the neighborhood. On the first day of the riot, the crowd included rioters, onlookers, and passersby, undoubtedly a crowd with gender and generational diversity. After ministers and other authorities urged looters to go home, those remaining were young black males between the ages of eight and thirty. This suggests that while females and middle-aged and older residents deferred to pastoral leadership, these young black males equally ignored ministerial leadership and police because they saw these figures through a similar lens of repeatedly failing to advocate for black freedom.

Karl Ellis Johnson's work strongly counters this argument, offering detailed evidence of the considerable community ministries of black churches in Philadelphia. Throughout the twentieth century, black churches not only anchored their communities but met practical needs of their members. These ministries included home-buyer loan programs, nursing care facilities, fraternal lodges, child-care centers, boarding schools, attorney services, job training, and job placement. Rev. Sullivan's Zion Baptist Church drew upon its long history of community missions with its Citizens Committee Against Juvenile Delinquency.⁷⁰ While Johnson's case for black church engagement with black communities respectably stands, these ministry programs may not have connected with young black males as churches hoped, with the exception of Sullivan's.

Rev. Means Sr., president of the Philadelphia SCLC, emphasized that all churches were declining in authority during the early 1960s. In the particular case of young black males, he argued that respect for pastors did not abate, but that young black males rejected the "turn the other cheek" message. Police brutality was so "brutal" and "horrible" that young black males could not stomach the message of peace amidst such volatility.⁷¹

Second, unlike in the Southern civil rights movement where ministers led the people using religious means (i.e. spirituals, singing, chanting, mass meetings, prayer, etc.), the ministers who responded to the riot did so using political leadership strategies. There were no mass meetings to gather the people and shepherd their activism. The ministers led no singing or chanting to counter the riot inciters. Ministers did not kneel to pray in the face of persecution. The ministers rode on sound-trucks, cooperated with police, and used newspaper quotes to communicate their message.

This second aspect may be subject to several caveats. Because the riot inciters fomented rioters using spiritual singing and chanting, the ministers may have purposefully used alternative means to avoid accidentally rekindling the riot. The pandemonium of the riot may have prevented any kind of subtle response; they may have deemed a united front with police and politicians a more effective means of quelling the riot. Because of the curfew, ministers most likely rejected any notion of a mass meeting to prevent, first, the appearance of their cooperation with the riot, and, second, the opportunity for an ill-intentioned inciter to gain the attention of a large gathering of people. Arguably, personal appeals on the street for rioters to return home matched the urgency of the situation and were extraordinarily pastoral.

Without a doubt, ministers rushed to the scene concerned for the welfare of their communities. However, their use of political, rather than spiritual, means to calm the riot intrigues because this contrasted the almost exclusively religious means of the Southern civil rights movement. After the riot, ministerial response assumed an overtly religious nature in ecclesial contexts, both local and cooperative, though the public presence of the civil rights movement in the North remained secular.

The most prominent ecumenical ecclesial cooperation toward economic relief for blacks came through Rev. Leon Sullivan (Zion Baptist Church). "The Lion of Zion" built upon the success of his late 1950s selective patronage campaigns to found the Opportunities Industrialization Center (OIC) in 1964. Sullivan had initiated a fund-raising campaign in 1962 for a large-scale economic relief program, pooling the pledges from over 400 black churches. The OIC provided job training, job placement, and classes in black history and self-esteem. Though the OIC never affiliated with a particular denomination, the organization maintained a firmly spiritual and moral foundation for its endeavors, and four of its five directors were ministers. The OIC quickly expanded nationwide, to 70 cities within five years, and regularly accepted multimillion dollar government contracts. Rev. Sullivan's apotheosis of black ministers engaging complicated economic problems forged new precedents for black ministers and for government race-poverty initiatives.⁷²

Riot Liturgy

"Riot liturgy" seems oxymoronic. Yet, soapbox rants assumed homiletic vocabulary and promoted a theology of justified militancy. Spiritual music

accompanied violent behavior. An argument can be made, however, for the incorporation of religious rituals into riot activity, whether expressed intentionally or otherwise.

Muhammad, Hall, and Mobley primarily incited the riot through homiletics. Across the neighborhood, the three created street platforms from which they preached an invitation to rioting and the overthrow of white oppression. Mobley stood atop a refrigerator, passionately attacked black clergy for their failure to lead God's people from such oppression, and invited her hearers to riot. The nature of her proclamations resembled homiletic exhortation and created a spiritually-charged dichotomy between action (rioting) and inaction (following the "turn the other cheek" leadership of black clergy). She equated rioting to the level of God's plan of deliverance as opposed to long-held freedom strategies of the church such as moral uplift and non-violent direct action.

Mobley's hearers clearly understood the religious undertones of her invitation because their responses echo her message of righteousness of the oppressed and justification for overthrowing their oppressors. "Kill those dirty b—s. Those rotten cop b—s ought to be dead. . . . Let's run them out of North Philadelphia. Those white cops have no business up here. . . . You killed a pregnant woman tonight. We're going to get an eye for an eye, a life for a life."⁷³

The "eye for an eye, a life for a life" language comes directly from the Old Testament. "If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for bound, wound for wound, stripe for stripe."⁷⁴ "Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered."⁷⁵ "Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot."⁷⁶ These scriptures referenced the law of equivalency, meaning punishment should suit the crime.

Neither Mobley nor the rioters quoted scripture directly, but the phrase "eye for an eye" drew upon a longstanding black religious affinity for the Exodus narratives. Referencing Hebrew law undoubtedly aroused Christian, Jewish, and Muslim religious sensitivities to the language of deliverance from oppression. Mobley's hearers made such associations as they connected her "message" with Hebrew law, evidenced in their replies to her. While the Hebrew law referenced intra-Hebrew conflict, Mobley's riot homiletics mentally appropriated the law of equivalency to justify black rebellion against white oppression, which she identified with white police brutality and white economic hegemony in black neighborhoods.

Certain police officials recognized the re-appropriation of religious ideas to justify rioting. Deputy Police Commissioner Richard Edwards said: “[They] influenced the minds of the people in the riot area and induced them to commit violent acts by shouting, starting chants, and spreading vicious rumors. . . . [Muhammad and Hall] had clear direction and control over the rioters and drove them into a frenzy.”⁷⁷ Patrolman Albert Harris testified that Muhammad led a crowd, linked at the arm, and started jumping and chanting: “We want freedom. We want justice.”⁷⁸ The crowd joined the chanting and threw rocks, bottles, and bricks. Other police confirmed reports of rioters chanting and singing.⁷⁹

Muhammad’s incorporation of singing and chanting in the riot offered elements of religious ritual resonant with black culture and religion. Singing and chanting have been among the most important spiritual practices of black religion throughout its history. Before blacks could establish independent churches or develop a distinctly African American Christian theology, spirituals transmitted the message of Christianity and connected faith in God with surviving daily living.

By leading crowds in singing and chanting, Muhammad connected the act of rioting with the historic religious quest for spiritual and national freedoms, the core of Black theology. Further, because singing and chanting were among the most prominent practices of Southern civil rights activists—the Southern civil rights movement had been framed in the language of the quest for spiritual and national freedom and was inherently a faith-based movement—riot singing and chanting connected the riot with the Southern civil rights movement.

Muhammad intentionally used core black religious liturgy as “riot liturgy” to create solidarity, group purpose, and emotional fervor.⁸⁰ By using primary practices of the black church—preaching and singing—Muhammad caused his message to resonate with the prevailing Protestant evangelical faith of North Philadelphia.

“Riot liturgy” points to a pivotal reversal. Muhammad used Christian liturgy to communicate non-Christian (if not anti-Christian) Black Nationalist ideology, while Christian ministers used political tactics to calm the people. The riot inciters appropriated the Christian heritage to bolster their message, and Christian ministers drew upon the authority of government tactics to regain and maintain peace. Previous analysis has suggested several possible reasons for Christian minister hesitation to use traditional religious practices in their communication. But what of Muhammad?

If Muhammad's spiritual journey resembled others' in that neighborhood, he was raised as a Protestant, probably Baptist, Methodist, or Pentecostal. He did convert to the Nation of Islam, most likely because of growing unrest with his surroundings. He became too extreme for NOI and started a sectarian Black Nationalist Islamic religion with obvious throwbacks to NOI theology. NOI praxis rejected Western culture, including music. For Muhammad to have initiated the use of singing and chanting in the riot, he either continued to carry aspects of his probably Protestant spiritual formation in his self-expression, or he brilliantly re-appropriated the traditions of those who might oppose his efforts to gain their cooperation.

Shaykh "Scapegoat" Muhammad

Police assumed Muhammad's guilt. Neither newspaper challenged Muhammad's guilt, though the *Tribune-Herald* did report more of Muhammad's side of the story than the *Inquirer*. Both papers frequently referred to Muhammad's Muslim identity, noting his goatee, fez hat, and large property holdings in the riot area.

According to the *Tribune-Herald*, "the fiery Muhammad claimed that he was being used as a 'scapegoat' by police officials who are seeking someone to blame. . . ." He explained the cleaning fluid as essential to his drycleaner business. What police described as an "arsenal," Muhammad described as "a pistol," which he claimed a friend loaned him. Police justified Muhammad's arrest after receiving "an anonymous tip that he had a small arsenal in one of his establishments on Columbia av." Police searches uncovered the alleged Molotov cocktails and the gun. Hours before his arrest, Muhammad called *Tribune-Herald* reporter Chet Coleman to name those responsible for the riot. Muhammad told Coleman that he helped police quiet the riot, yet still was among those later "clubbed about the head by police." The article then lists other high-profile public disturbances in which Muhammad had been involved and his break with NOI to form his own Black Muslim Center.⁸¹

Rizzo's police force was notorious for planting evidence on suspects, yet neither paper investigated the possibility of framing Muhammad.⁸² Conceivably, police could have planted the fabric-stuffed bottles, knowing that the presence of cleaning fluid associated with the drycleaner would increase the likelihood of Muhammad's conviction. Conceivably, Muhammad could have been among the rioters, though not an inciter, and was unjustly

framed. Conceivably, Muhammad could have been innocently among the ministers responding to the riot, urging residents to go home.

After being released on \$10,000 bail, Muhammad gave an exclusive interview to the *Tribune-Herald* with an alternate theory of what triggered the riot. Muhammad claimed that within an hour of the riot, police were randomly searching homes on the 1700 block of N. 22nd St., allegedly for an officer assigned to a drug operation who never returned. When Muhammad returned from the police station, where he had been discussing the situation with the police captain, the intersection of 22nd and Columbia was flooded with police cars, wagons, and people. According to Muhammad, Rizzo handed him a police speaker, through which he “pleaded with the mob to go home and not to start trouble.” Still in front of the crowd, Muhammad told the *Tribune-Herald* that he heard the police shout “charge,” at which point “black-jacks were swinging in every direction,” and Muhammad was among those beaten by police. Rizzo ordered Muhammad be taken to the hospital, which Muhammad believed the people misunderstood: “The mob thought the police had beaten me intentionally and that they were hauling me off to jail.” According to Muhammad, his becoming the next victim of police brutality, in the minds of the people, triggered the riot, not the Bradford incident.⁸³

Overwhelmingly, police and eyewitness accounts and Muhammad’s previous record condemn Muhammad as an inciter. Even Muhammad claimed his role as a passive inciter, in that crowds responded to his victimization. Both papers framed their narrations in terms of Muhammad’s religious affiliation (“fez-wearing, goateed religious leader who owns several businesses in the 2300 block of Columbia ave ...”), previous record, and police evidence.⁸⁴ Thus, both white and black communities carried suspicions of the Muslim religion, further corroborated by riot damage to Muslim properties.

Muhammad believed he was trusted by both the white and black communities, telling the *Tribune-Herald* that police and the mob turned to his leadership during the riot because “I help those who are hungry, give clothing to those who have none and preach love.”⁸⁵ While Muhammad may have been a well-known Muslim leader, neither the white nor black communities largely trusted him, as both quickly attributed his riot behavior to his religious radicalism. Newspaper attention to Muhammad’s “riot liturgy,” further corroborated widespread distrust and disrespect in its critique of Muhammad’s inappropriate use of religious traditions in a radical, non-Christian context.

Was Muhammad innocent or guilty? Most of Philadelphia readily found Muhammad guilty of inciting the riot and not because of his victimization.

Black and white residents alike rejected his radical extremism and developed their oral tradition of the riot using language of danger to describe his religious otherness and the potential of his deviance to interfere with the progress of the civil rights movement. If police did plant the “arsenal” and the Molotov cocktails, sufficient evidence and public suspicion convicted Muhammad.

Aftermath

The editorial “they have more to lose” hit the nail on the head.⁸⁶ The riot destroyed over 200 white-owned businesses in North Philadelphia. Over 1,000 people were arrested, nearly 400 injured, and two killed.⁸⁷ Residents of North Philadelphia suffered most directly from the riots. Taxicabs avoided the area. Insurance companies revoked business policies, such that many damaged businesses could not reopen.⁸⁸

City officials assumed responsibility for damage done to businesses on the first two days of the riot, proposed a real estate tax to cover rehabilitation costs, and reconsidered distribution of resources.⁸⁹ After the riot, police dispatched one white and one Black officer in every car patrolling Black neighborhoods to limit incidents of police brutality, which, coincidentally, created more positions for Blacks within the PPD. Police and the community invested significant effort into repairing community-police relations in North Philadelphia. The prestigious all-white Girard College opened its doors to black students following the riot. State-regulated charter schools expanded educational opportunities for black children, yet drove many private and parochial schools in North Philadelphia to close. Temple and Drexel Universities provided limited employment, but amassed property as they grew and displaced many residents.⁹⁰

Ecumenical clerical cooperation to address community needs and prevent future outbreaks was one of the most constructive consequences of the riot. The Interfaith, Interracial Council of Clergymen, unofficial ecumenical partnerships, and Rev. Sullivan’s OIC, among others, further concentrated ministerial investment in North Philadelphia’s social, economic, and spiritual needs. Riots erupted across the nation throughout the 1960s, many for similar reasons and in similar fashion to Philadelphia. After the 1964 riot, clergy pioneered efforts for healing and reconciliation. Churches modeled practices of envisioning partnerships rather than hostilities and negotiating

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peacefully rather than striking violently. Across the North, churches have incorporated social ministries into their core programming. Theology in the urban North has adapted to its particular context and has, by and large, renewed commitment to social justice issues in spiritual practice and ecclesial purpose.

More research is needed of the Northern urban race riots of the 1960s. Very little research has studied the precise nature of these riots: triggers, specific events, damages, community response, organizational involvement, and effects on communities. Even less research has focused on the religious nature of these riots including the roles of the Nation of Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Catholicism concerning riot participation, prevention efforts, or community-wide rehabilitation efforts. Newspapers and media archives are ripe with information for historians, and significant research could be done presently using the innovations of oral history. The intersection of race, religion, and economics is pivotal to understanding the larger historical and social trends of the late twentieth century, and study of the 1960s race riots necessarily must be a key component of such research.

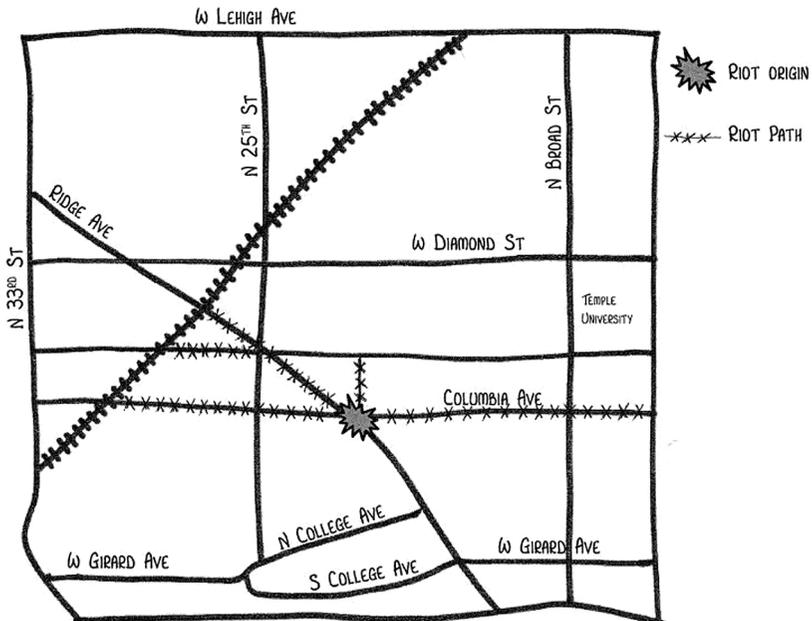


FIGURE 1: Quarantined Area

NOTES

1. The white *Philadelphia Bulletin* and the *Philadelphia Afro-American* also covered the riot, but I have chosen to compare and contrast the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Philadelphia Tribune-Herald* as representative primary sources because they were the largest and most widely circulated of the white and black newspapers in Philadelphia. Late 1940s issues of the *Philadelphia Afro-American* include hundreds of profiles of black churches in Philadelphia and their postwar community outreach programs. Other primary sources which would contribute to further study of the riot include the papers of the Philadelphia chapters of the NAACP, SCLC, and NUL. I contacted every major Christian denominational association in Philadelphia for information on ministerial response, and only two ministers replied to my query, both of whom contributed oral history memoirs of the riot and the general nature of North Philadelphia ecclesial civil rights and community activism in the early 1960s.
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