

Civil Religion in African-American Mourning Songs about John F. Kennedy

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ABSTRACT

This research focuses on a selection of African-American songs about the death of John F. Kennedy. The paper thereby particularly concentrates on the question how African-American artists express civil religious ideas in relation to the efforts and accomplishments of the Kennedy Administration, the comparisons that are made between Biblical figures and the slain president, and the manner in which these artists express civil religion when discussing the future of the United States after the death of the President. It thereby not only zooms in on the African-American musical and cultural heritage, but also on the role of Christianity in 1960s America.

Keywords

Civil religion, African-American music, John F. Kennedy, United States, 1960s.

INTRODUCTION

Even though there has been extensive research since the 1960s looking at the phenomenon of American civil religion, no agreement has been reached about an exact definition. At the core of the concept, however, is the idea that citizens of the United States imbue their nation with transcendent value. This is seen, for example, in national ceremonies, respect for war heroes, or the veneration of the American President. Most scholars, besides, agree that Americans generally see themselves as a chosen people who live in a nation guided by God – or, as Kenneth Wald puts it, a “nation with the soul of a church” (Wald 55).

Although there has been a lot of research looking at civil religion, the interaction between civil religion and African-American music in the sixties has thus far been neglected.

SECTIONS

Many of the African-American songs about the death of John F. Kennedy on 22 November 1963 were rooted in a civil religious belief. This increase in the expression of civil religion in the black American population is remarkable because this group has, historically, been less prone to expressions of civil religion (Woodrum & Bell 365).

An analysis of a selection of songs leads to roughly three categories in which African-American artists express civil religion.

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BIBLICAL COMPARISONS WITH THE PRESIDENT

Granting the President saintly status is common practice in the American culture of civil religion. A large group of African-American singers venerate the President and the Kennedy Administration and make specific references to passages and characters from the Bible.

Singer Mary Ross, for example, points out the resemblances between Christ and the President. The lyrics of her song “President Kennedy Gave His Life” are largely devoted to a comparison between the Messiah and the slain President. She stresses, for instance, that Kennedy “Like Christ, gave his life” (van Rijn 148) for the people he served. Furthermore, she notes that God not only chose President Kennedy as the new Jesus, but also put a message in his heart and in his hand: “God gave him the message to pass on, to the people of his land” (van Rijn 148). The singer, besides, stresses that both died not of sickness but because they were brutally killed by mankind: “Jesus died on the Calvary Cross, with nails in the palms of his hands / The president died with a bullet in his head that was made by man” (van Rijn 148).

A similar comparison could be found in the song “The Modern Joshua” by gospel singer Doris Ann Allen. As the title of the song already suggests, Allen compares Kennedy to the Biblical figure Joshua. The most prominent Biblical reference in Allen’s song thereby relates to Joshua’s Battle of Jericho. She reshapes the battle to give it more contemporary relevance in the following lines:

We’ll march around hatred, around deceit,
Walls of prejudice, defeat,
The walls of ignorance, of fear,
The walls of bigotry and then love will appear
(van Rijn 147).

The problematic walls in this song symbolize the troubles of contemporary American society: the words ‘walls of prejudice’, ‘defeat’ and ‘ignorance’ clearly refer to segregation, racism and general thinking about the subordinate position of the African-American population. Most importantly, Allen stresses that Kennedy – the contemporary Joshua – was a heaven-sent saint who broke down the walls: “Oh, John Kennedy / Our modern-day Joshua, (...) He marched around the walls” (van Rijn 146). She thereby suggests that Kennedy helped America to tackle its troubles with racial minorities.

The incorporation of biblical tales in these selected songs is remarkable: since the earliest days of slavery, Biblical tales were central to many black songs and spirituals. Songs about God and the Bible were sung throughout the day: at work, during rest time, and on Sundays (Gates Jr. & McKay 8). This could lead to the assumption that the discussed African American artists took their cultural heritage into consideration when writing these songs.

NON-BIBLICAL VENERATION OF THE KENNEDY ADMINISTRATION

A second group of artists also express civil religion by hailing the president, but do not make specific Biblical references. Most of those artists specifically focus on the President's support for civil rights. The general message of many of these songs – the idea that Kennedy was a savior for the black people – is in line with what many scholars emphasize in their analyses of the role of the president in American civil religion. Researcher Kenneth D. Wald even notes that the discovery that Kennedy could take on a religious significance of the public “provided further evidence that the nation is viewed in transcendent terms” (38).

The famous African-American gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, for example, sang about Kennedy's death. On 29 November 1963, she recorded the song “In the Summer of His Years”, in which she does not hesitate to put the President on a pedestal. Her song says that hopes for racial equality ended for many African Americans when the President was shot: “A shot rang out like a sudden shout, and Heaven held its breath / For the dream of a multitude of men rode with him to his death” (van Rijn 123).

Gospel singer Ollie Hoskens, who wrote the song “Assassination”, expresses civil religion in a similar manner. A large part of the song is devoted to the international mourning over the death of the President: “The world became a sphere of solitude and sadness, rich men / and poor men cried” (van Rijn 120). The key concept of this short song is the idea that Kennedy put himself in the line of fire for the African-American population. At the end of the song, Hoskens says that Kennedy was not only “a man of honor” and “a man who had pride” (van Rijn 120), but also a man who valued the rights of African Americans: he “faced responsibility, had equality in his eye” (van Rijn 120).

It is remarkable, however, that many artists hail the President in ways that express civil religion, but fail to take Kennedy's shortcomings with regard to civil rights into consideration. Many historians, namely, concluded that Kennedy could have done a lot more for the African-American people. Researcher Taylor Branch, for instance, claims that John F. Kennedy strongly opposed the introduction of a civil rights bill because he believed that it would not pass. More importantly, Branch claims that Kennedy feared that this bill would divide or even destroy the Democratic Party – which would be undesirable considering the context of the Cold War. It was only at the end of Kennedy's first term that the civil rights of black Americans started to take priority over foreign relations (Branch 376-377).

ONE NATION UNDER GOD

A third category of African-American artists draws specifically on the idea that the United States is closely connected to God. They believe that this transcendental relationship between the nation and God will also help the citizens of the United States to overcome their grief about Kennedy's death. By means of this, they assert there is a relationship between the United States and the Lord. The suggested bond between God and the United States is

an important aspect of American civil religion, as argued by many scholars. Researchers Jon Butler, Grant Wacker and Randall Balmer, for instance, note that civil religion symbolized a desire to place the United States in a larger framework of significance. They argue that it is “an attempt to say that America occupied a special or even unique place in God's plan for the world” (162).

The African-American band The Dixie Hummingbirds devoted their song “Our Prayer for Peace” to the death of Kennedy, and specifically ask for the help of God in building up the country again: “Oh God, please guide our mind and tongue, Oh, keep our hand, oh Lord, please, don't let our hands do anything wrong” (van Rijn 113). The first half of the song eventually ends with the message: “Father, let all of this hatred cease / Let us all live down here together / Lord, let us all live in peace” (van Rijn 113).

Similarly does the African-American evangelist singer Rosie Wallace's song “Take Courage” (1963) stress the relationship between God and the United States. Wallace's song, however, does not refer directly to the efforts of the Kennedy Administration. Like other artists discussed here, she mainly invokes the idea that God has a special relationship with the people of the United States. To strengthen this message, she stresses the idea that the United States is supervised directly by God, who has “blessed our country to be strong and brave” (van Rijn 115) and reminds her fellow-Americans that – as a result of this sanctification – their country had never been enslaved or been defeated by other countries. She believes that this transcendental relationship between the nation and God will also help the citizens of the United States to overcome their grief about Kennedy's death. Americans should therefore be strong in the faith of God and continue to walk “hand in hand behind those who are brave” (van Rijn 115). The importance of this firm belief in God is already underlined in the opening passage of the song, when Wallace directly quotes from the Biblical passage Isaiah 40:31: “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength / They shall mount up with wings as eagles / They shall run and not be wary, they shall walk and not faint” (van Rijn 114). As in the songs discussed in the first section, the influence of the religious negro spiritual also seems to resonate through Wallace's work.

CONCLUSION

Many African-American artists adopt three different approaches based on civil religion when paying homage to their President. Some artists portray the president as a heaven-sent Messiah and make clear-cut comparisons with passages from the Bible. Other African-American singers express civil religion by hailing the accomplishments of the Kennedy administration. Most of these singers specifically stress the political progress made by the United States at that time with regard to civil rights. Finally, there are artists who invoke the idea found in civil religion that there is a relationship between God and the United States. They ask the Creator for help in building up the United States again after the loss of the President. A clear oversight of the three discussed categories could be found in Appendix A.

It is noteworthy that the influence of spirituals often resonates through the lyrics discussed in this study, suggesting that African Americans in the 1960s took their

musical and cultural heritage into consideration while writing their songs.

Besides this, the analysis provides further evidence that African-Americans did indeed express civil religion during the 1960s. The discussed artists thereby show that songs are an excellent medium for the expression of concerns about the future in times of national distress. The research also shows how much the image of the President changed after his death; even though he did have significant shortcomings with regard to civil rights, the discussed artists sought to portray him as someone who devoted a great deal of his career to the rights of black Americans.

All in all, it is important to note that the role of Kennedy in civil religion acquired significance through the work of these African-American artists, even though President Kennedy was not always an unequivocal supporter of civil rights for the African-American citizens. Although the findings should be interpreted with caution, it could be stated that the results of this research give some insight in the both the role of civil religion, as well as the role of Christianity in the African-American culture of the 1960s.

ROLE OF THE STUDENT

Anne Wester was an undergraduate student working under the supervision of dr. Nicole Reith when the research in this report was performed. The topic and the research itself were both initiated and carried out by the student, as was the design of the model found in Appendix A. The findings of the research were recently presented on *Amerikanistendag 2016*, an annual American Studies conference at VU Amsterdam.

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Appendix A:

