

COMMENTARY: Moral Mondays: 'Democratic tool' or Great Awakening?

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(RNS) When 15 North Carolinians walked into N.C. Speaker of the House Thom Tillis' office last month, they said they had come to talk about issues of moral concern and would not leave until Tillis agreed to speak with them. The "Tillis 15" waited almost 11 hours in his office before they were finally arrested early the following morning.

Because an unprecedented 1,000 people were arrested as part of Moral Monday protests during last year's legislative session, national and international media were on hand to witness this prolonged sit-in.

Many political reporters see Moral Mondays as little more than a tool in the Democratic defense strategy. But the Rev. William Barber II, architect of the Moral Mondays/Forward Together campaign, which began under a Democratic administration in 2006, sees things differently.

"We're not asking them to go left or right," said Barber. "We're asking them to go deeper. This is a movement about our moral center."

The scene at the door to Tillis' office, when viewed as an act of faith, suggests Barber is on to something. If we take Moral Mondays on its own terms and see what's happening as a religion story, something much more interesting emerges. Maybe we're on the verge of a Great Awakening.

After most of the reporters had gone, a small congregation gathered outside the office where the Tillis 15 sat, humming "We Shall Not Be Moved."

Hours before, when they gathered with hundreds of others outside, this choir rehearsed freedom songs in a tradition of group singing that has become central to Moral Mondays. With the doorway as their stage, sit-in participants stood to testify between verses in the tradition of spontaneous speech that stretches back to the

Cane Ridge Revival of 1802.

Two centuries ago, it was untutored slaves and lay people (even women) who interrupted business as usual with a word from the Lord.

Last summer, when tens of thousands of people gathered on the Halifax Mall outside the state Legislature building for 13 consecutive Mondays, a few reporters noted that the meetings had a “revival feel.”

Barber’s preaching is often compared to Martin Luther King Jr.’s for its capacity to captivate a crowd. But unlike the stirring sermons of the civil rights movement that primarily energized folk for the work they were already doing, Barber’s sermons hark back to evangelist Charles Finney who popularized the “altar call” to bring people forward who would give their life to Jesus and sign on as volunteers in campaigns for abolition and women’s suffrage.

A preacher I talked to after a Moral Monday last summer stood in awe as he watched the crowd part to make way for scores of people who came forward to risk arrest.

“I’ve never in my life seen as direct a connection between Word and act,” the preacher said.

If Moral Mondays are, in fact, the beginnings of another Great Awakening, they promise not only to speak to people in a context of social crisis but also to reshape religious practice in America.

The fastest growing religious group in the country, according to recent polls, is the “nones”—people with no religious affiliation. Religionists have speculated about what this means. Are these people simply disaffected from the established traditions—“spiritual but not religious”? Or is America following the trend of Western Europe and becoming a more secular society?

Moral Mondays offer us an example of a religious movement that includes, as Barber often says to the crowd, “people of faith and people who are struggling with faith.”

“It’s been years since I went to church,” one woman told me at a Moral Monday. “But this is church to me!” Many who consider themselves atheists find that the God folks at Moral Mondays are talking about is a God they can get behind.

But what sort of church or mosque or synagogue would you send someone to if they found faith at a Moral Monday? Hearing the “Amen” from folks in the black church tradition, a rabbi who stood to pray at a recent Moral Monday quipped, “Wow, I’ve got to get some of you to start coming to my congregation!”

What might a synagogue look like with a couple dozen black Baptists interspersed throughout?

In her book *Christianity After Religion*, Diana Butler Bass has written about her hope for a new spiritual awakening in 21st-century America. “Political parties wither,” she wrote. “Religions lose their power to inspire. But that only means we have work to do here and now.”

To some, Moral Mondays may look like little more than the tool of a withering political party. But to those with eyes to see, this is a wake-up call. The Tillis 15 are standing to testify that we need a new imagination for our time.