

Black Christian Nationalism in the Jim Crow South

How a Black community in the South utilized Christian Nationalism for Empowerment

Early Black Christian Nationalist Ideology

➤ Based in **Savannah, GA** in the 1920s, Black Christian Nationalism was born out of a desire of black-middle class men to merge secular interests (business), and a thriving religious community (Black southern Baptism) to advance **"racial uplift"**, and possibility for all black people in the US (Oltman 2008).

➤ Like other forms of Christian Nationalism, Black Christian Nationalism advocated for a mythical, **"utopian"** society that used the combination of spirituality and business to achieve a greater "perfection" (Oltman 2008, 48). It manifested as a "lived experience" and cultural phenomenon, rather than a strict political ideology, and is characterized as more introspective instead of directly in response to "white oppression" [Oltman 2008, 38 (includes endnote 44 in book, listed as "44" in bib) and 4].

➤ Black Christian Nationalism derived from the black middle-class in Savannah, but it was an **"inter-class philosophy"** (Oltman 2008, 21). There was a belief amongst the leaders of the movement that in order to achieve **"black advancement"**, they needed unity amongst the classes. Religion broadly, and the church served as a catalyst for uniting the classes and promoting black progress in society (Oltman 2008, 21).



(Courtesy: FB, Doodlecraft)

Daniel Simmons

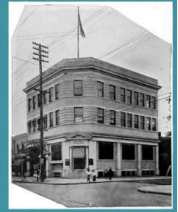
Daniel Simmons was the owner of Savannah Mattress Factory and a skilled orator who is renowned in the black community for conveying the ideals of a "black nation", and an "indivisible black America" (Oltman 2008, 38-39). He also served as an example of black prosperity, and the idea of black people working "hard enough" to achieve their goals in Black Christian Savannah (Oltman 2008, 39).

Notable Institutions and People

➤ The Black Christian Nationalist movement in Savannah was driven by several **major churches**: these were the First Bryan, First African, and Second Baptist Churches (Oltman 2008, 33).

- The Churches provided fundamental structure to social activities (concerts, games, etc.). They also broadly dictated social morals and punished those who deviated from Church manners (Oltman 2008, 150-151).

➤ Major commerce and other specialized enterprise dominated business on West Broad Street in Savannah. The most major black-run business was called **Wage Earners Savings Bank** (Oltman 2008, 3).



Wage Earners Savings Bank
(courtesy: Laurel Grove South)

Map of Savannah
(courtesy: DGA and Cooper 1856/Rockwell 1909).



(Courtesy: Boston College)

Identity and Race Politics within the Movement

➤ Skin tone amongst black people (different "tones" ex. "Mulatto") in Black Christian Nationalist Savannah did not have much effect on class standing. The lack of interracial tension promoted "group solidarity" and **"collective destiny"** of Black Christian Nationalism (Oltman 2008, 27-28).

➤ The women's suffrage movement of the early twentieth century led to the **mobilization of many black Baptist women** in Savannah. Notably, while white southerners were divided regarding women's suffrage, African Americans were mostly behind it (Oltman 2008, 93; Oltman 2008, 92 – endnote 26 in book, listed as "26" in bib).

➤ After the black women's suffrage movement, a broader movement took hold called the Savannah **"Talented Tenth"**. This movement, which combined middle class black and religious business leaders, men and women, in Savannah, which sought to political mobilize the black vote through voter registration campaigns (Oltman 2008, 94-95 – endnote 29 in book, listed as "29" in bib).



First African Baptist Church - 1920s
(courtesy: Atlanta Voice)

Decline and the Civil Rights Movement

➤ Multiple key factors led to the decline of this Black Christian Nationalism. The most notable factors were:

- The **failing of Wage Earners Savings Bank** in 1928 and other black business, and larger Great Depression (Oltman 2008, 186)
- **"Secular institutional diversification"** → the long term influence of the black church in the South led to the development and growth of the secular environment separately → more secular influence in society (Oltman 2008, 184)
- **Black Migration North** due to shifting industry and job opportunity → "a Promised Land" (Oltman 2008, 189 – endnote 7 in book, listed as "7" in bib).

➤ The diminishing role of the churches led into Civil Rights Era, where the more secular development in society led to more intense and relentless political and social activism (Oltman 2008, 196).

Legacy: Modern Black Christian Nationalism

➤ PRRI finds that roughly **3 in 10 Black Americans identify as "adherents" or "sympathizers" to Christian Nationalism** (PRRI 2024 in Butler 2024).

➤ According to author Anthea Butler, in contrast to White and Hispanic Americans, Black Americans who believe in Christian Nationalism believe it is based on the extension of democracy to Black Americans and a **"prophetic call for justice"** (Butler 2024). This mirrors the ideals conveyed by Black Christian Nationalists in Savannah in the 1920s.

➤ Other specific movements sprouted from black empowerment and a call for justice, including minister **Albert Cleage's** 1960s Black Christian Nationalist movement (PBS, n.d.). Today, **"Black utopianism"**, and the search for black justice **remains in the minds** of many (Atencio 2025).



Albert Cleage Jr.,
(Courtesy: Fine Art Storehouse)



(Courtesy: AAHHS - Black Perspectives)

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