

Essay explores male authority in religious, social movements

May 26 2014, by George Diepenbrock

As the violent militant Islamic group Boko Haram recently kidnapped more than 200 Nigerian schoolgirls, it sparked intentional outrage, particularly over the girls being sold into slavery.

The group's name translates into "Western education is a sin," which is rooted in group leaders' interpretation of the Koranic texts on the duties of [men](#) and that women are to be subservient. A University of Kansas researcher who studies social movements of the 20th century, including in relation to religion and gender roles, said the subordination of women has been a struggle throughout history in various religious and social groups.

"If you look at what's going on from Nigeria to Afghanistan, the way male religious authority grab at power is by controlling women, I'm interested in the question of what is the thinking behind this kind patriarchal thought," said Randal Maurice Jelks, professor of American studies and African and African American studies. "The way men think, even the most liberal of men, think like men. They interpret texts in certain ways to hold power as men, the challenge is to get all men to think in broader ways about matters of religion, politics and families."

Jelks explored this topic in a recent essay about two influential figures of the American civil rights movement, Morehouse College President Benjamin Elijah Mays—a mentor to Martin Luther King Jr.—and novelist Richard Wright. The journal *Women, Gender, and Families of Color* this spring published his essay "Masculinity, Religion, and

Modernism: A Consideration of Benjamin Elijah Mays and Richard Wright."

He said both men, who grew up in Jim Crow South, through their efforts in various ways helped substantially affect black liberation in 1960s America, but he takes a deeper look at their own backgrounds, including each one's relationship with their maternal figures that help to rear them.

Jelks said the fact that Mays and Wright view the maternal women in their lives in similar ways is interesting because there are several juxtapositions between the two. They both responded differently to theism and Christianity. Wright became an atheist after growing up in household of a Seventh Day Adventist grandmother. On the other hand, Mays became an ordained Baptist minister.

Mays sentimentalized his mother, while Wright tended to vilify his grandmother, who reared him. But Jelks said regarding their own modernist views, both men are connected having grown up in the racially segregated South and fighting for civic freedoms and [civil rights](#).

"Here are two people who are at minimum liberal to radical in the American perspective, and even if they are having patriarchal ideas about how the family should operate, about how ideas of men and women's relationship, then in a more traditional society, this would be even more so," he said. "I'm trying to explore one person who claims to be atheistic and one who claims to be theistic, but those ideas still run in them. So it's not whether those ideas run in them. It is to what extent."

Jelks said Jim Crow laws also profoundly affected women as much as men, but the writings of both Mays and Wright placed "black maleness" at the center of the struggle to overthrow the oppressive laws.

"They are trying to figure a way out of that system, but there are other

questions that have to be answered. What is the meaning of any emancipatory project?" Jelks said. "I try to give them credit for trying to think through on one level and on the other level they are kind of caught in a trap or they catch women in a trap."

Jelks has written an award-winning book "Benjamin Elijah Mays, Schoolmaster of the Movement: A Biography." His research comparing Mays and Wright developed out of his participation as an instructor in a summer institute at KU sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities for high school teachers on Richard Wright called the "Wright Connection" in conjunction with KU's History of Black Writing Project.

Provided by University of Kansas

Citation: Essay explores male authority in religious, social movements (2014, May 26) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-05-essay-explores-male-authority-religious.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.