

UNCG's Hart examines civil rights leaders who abandoned Christianity

CHRONICLE STAFF REPORT

A professor of religion at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro says that it's a myth that the Civil Rights Movement and those who led it were almost always tied to Protestant Christianity.

Dr. William Hart's new book, "Black Religion: Malcolm X, Julius Lester and Jan Willis," (Palgrave MacMillan) examines the spiritual lives of three icons of the Civil Rights Movement. All three would eventually leave the

Before his assassination, he converted to the more traditional Sunni Islam and made a pilgrimage to Mecca.

Lester, a retired academic and a children's book writer, is known for his activism with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He was raised an African Methodist, but became disenchanted with Christianity as a child and converted to Judaism as an



Hart

adult.

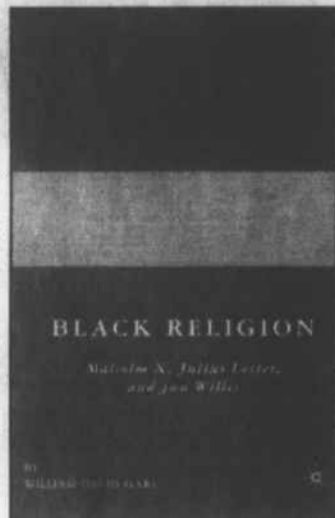
Willis, a professor of religion at Wesleyan College, grew up Baptist. She was part of a group of student protesters who seized control of the administration building at Cornell University in the late 1960s. Although she considered joining the Black Panthers, Willis instead travelled to India to study in a temple. Willis now calls herself a

Baptist Buddhist.

"Part of their struggle is to make sense of new religious traditions in a primarily Christian culture," Hart says. "For all three, Christianity did not answer the questions they had. They had to construct their own Jesus - a Jesus that allowed them to become the Muslim, Jew and Baptist-Buddhist, respectively, that they are."



Malcolm X



Christian faith.

"There has always been religious diversity among African Americans, but it's been obscured by the standard narrative," Hart says. "Black religion has been reduced to the Black Protestant Church. There is a complex relationship between racial identity, religious affiliation and political commitment, especially because of the peculiar history of Black Americans."

Malcolm X was raised a Baptist, but came to believe that Western culture and religion were inherently racist. He joined the Nation of Islam as a young man.

Johnson

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luncheon as a head of state run by the "modern-day KKK ... the Kennedy-Kerry Klan." The campaign suggested Walpin was using the case for publicity.

"We have said all along that there may have been administrative errors, much like the hundreds of other small nonprofits that have been investigated in the past," Johnson's campaign said in a statement.

"We are confident that the U.S. Attorney will decide not to proceed when it conducts a nonpolitical review of the allegations."

Bill Portanova, a former federal prosecutor now representing Johnson, said the letter was the opinion of one person and doesn't represent all of the nonprofit's work.

"We do know that volunteer organizations are staffed by people with good hearts and intentions and, as a rule, are not accountants by trade," he said.

According to last week's letter, the corporation's investigation is ongoing. Officials declined to elaborate on when it would be complete or whether money would have to be repaid. Similar letters were sent to two other St. HOPE executives.

Johnson, who retired from the NBA in 2000, bested Fargo 47 percent to 40 percent in the June primary, but the two face a runoff Nov. 4 because Johnson did not get more than 50 percent of the vote.

St. HOPE oversees two charter schools as well as a number of nonprofit endeavors in Sacramento. Johnson's hometown. Those include a development company and Hood Corps, an urban peace corps program at the center of the federal investigation.

Hood Corps received \$807,000 in federal money between 2004 and 2007.



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