The civil rights movement in the United States is seen by most historians as a great triumph of liberalism. According to the standard view, white liberals in the North, joining forces with masses of African Americans, succeeded in persuading a nation that racial segregation was in complete violation of the liberal traditions of freedom outlined by the Founding Fathers of our nation.

In his new book, *A Stone of Hope*, David L. Chappell, a professor of history at the University of Arkansas, takes a different view. Professor Chappell argues that the civil rights movement was not the culmination of white liberal traditions dating back to the New Deal era of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Rather, the civil rights movement was propelled by a conservative religious tradition unique to southern blacks.

Chappell’s position is that northern liberals believed that through the power of intellectual argument they would be able to convince an unwilling nation to abandon Jim Crow. Liberals had a strong sense of optimism that the nation would eventually embrace their positions in opposition to racial segregation. But Chappell believes that this optimism based on the goodness of the American character led to a propensity for inaction.

According to Chappell’s research, black southerners held no such illusions about the inherent goodness of their white southern counterparts. Nor did they believe in the inevitability that racial segregation would disappear through the power of intellectual persuasion.

But like the prophets of the Old Testament, black religious leaders in the South took the position that radical action was necessary to produce change. To these black leaders, racial segregation was a sin. It was their Christian duty to stamp it out. This religious mission gave southern blacks the courage to stand in the face of fire.

Religion in the United States was not simply brought to blacks by missionaries. To treat it that way is to miss the essence of the black action and reaction upon American religion. We must think of the black as transplanting to the United States a certain spiritual entity, and an unbreakable set of old-world beliefs, manners, superstitions, and religious observances...a philosophy of life.

— W.E.B. Du Bois (1924)
hoses, police dogs, and baton-wielding southern sheriffs. Northern white liberals had no such passion. Many northern liberals, in fact, disagreed with the tactics of civil disobedience employed by the southern black clergy and they were appalled when southern blacks took to the streets in protest.

While blacks in the South believed that they were doing the work of God, white southerners did not have the strong support of their religious leaders for their continuing opposition to any form of racial integration. For example, the governing body of the Southern Baptists had given its approval to racial desegregation in the 1950s. But Chappell’s extensive research shows that in their Sunday messages, white clergy largely avoided the issue of race. Therefore, in their opposition to integration white southerners did not possess the same religious fervor or conviction held by their black opponents.

For American blacks who have lived in a racist society that enslaved, segregated, and treated them as chattels or children, religion offered an appealing ray of hope. As a result, the black church became a powerful institution in southern communities which enabled it to assume a central role in the fight to end Jim Crow.

Banned from congregating in most public facilities in the South, the main meeting area for African Americans was the black church. For the most part, strategies for voter registration drives and civil rights protests were formulated in black churches. It was the black churches that organized carpools to get blacks to and from their jobs during the Montgomery bus boycott. And, of course, religion drove the politics of black leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Fred Shuttlesworth, Jesse Jackson, Louis Farrakhan, Malcolm X, Ralph Abernathy, Joseph Lowery, Andrew Young, William Gray III, and Benjamin Hooks.

It must be noted too that the importance of religion in the lives of blacks and the prominence of black church leaders in the African-American community had important impact in the academic world. The strong religious tradition in the black community propelled many young blacks to study religion.

Princeton’s Albert Raboteau, a leading professor of religion, told JBHE, “The ministry has been for such a long time a main intellectual and academic route for black men and later black women into the world of higher education. This tradition of religion and education is not surprising given the cultural shaping power of religion in African-American history. For blacks, religion was one of the few ‘humanities’ that was respectable for study in competition with the practical scholarship of law, medicine, and business, once these fields were open to African-American students.”