The Third Great Awakening: Religion and the Civil Rights Movement
A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow by David Chappell
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THE THIRD GREAT AWAKENING:
RELIGION AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

John M. Gigge


During a recent research trip to the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson, Mississippi, I studied photographs documenting the interiors of southern black homes from the early 1900s to the present. I was particularly interested in uses of religious art. Although I found little of what I was looking for, two archivists reminded me about a common feature of the visual culture of southern African-American domestic life popular at mid-century and persisting in some rural areas today. These archivists, both middle-aged black women who had grown up in Mississippi, told me that during the 1950s and 1960s every black home, no matter how rich or poor, displayed two portraits next to one another in the kitchen or living room. One was of Jesus, the other of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Finding images of Jesus and King tacked side-by-side to the walls of southern black homes fifty years ago would come as no surprise to David Chappell in his book about the role of religion in the civil rights movement, *Stone of Hope*. For this particular visual dimension of modern African-American life symbolizes the key point to his work—that the integration of religion and politics among southern blacks laboring to overthrow the system of Jim Crow was a crucial reason for their many victories. King and his followers found a unifying sense of political purpose and a range of cultural resources in African-American churches that ultimately ensured their triumphs. By contrast, Chappell argues, segregationists failed to garner the popular support necessary to turn back threats to the “southern way of life” because they lacked the enthusiastic backing of most of their spiritual leaders; for them, religion was a source of dissent and fragmentation that undermined their defensive stand. As he puts it, “The civil rights movement succeeded for many reasons. This book isolates and magnifies one reason that has received insufficient attention: black southern activists got strength from old-time religion, and white
supremacists failed, at the same moment, to muster the cultural strength that conservatives traditionally get from religion” (p. 8).

Chappell has written an important and entertaining book that deserves a wide audience. Already well known for his 1994 work, Inside Agitators: White Southerners in the Civil Rights Movement, he continues the spirited style of argumentation and bold attack on standard historical explanations that marked his earlier work. Stone of Hope takes it name from the famous “I Have a Dream” speech delivered by Martin Luther King, Jr., on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963. In the speech, King stated that he and his supporters would leave Washington, D.C., and return to the South armed with the faith necessary to carve “a stone of hope” from “a mountain of despair” and win their bloody battle against racial discrimination. Chappell himself hopes to return readers to debates over the importance of religion to the history of the movement and force them to grapple anew with the multiple relationships between faith, race, and politics in modern America.

Chappell begins his investigation of the relationship between “old-time religion” and the civil rights movement by reassessing the intellectual roots of the movement itself. He questions the extent to which liberalism was a powerful font of political ideology for the movement and suggests that, in its mid-twentieth-century formulation, it may have even retarded the movement had black civil rights leaders accepted its premises whole cloth. For liberalism offered no immediate or practical solution to the problem of racial discrimination in the South. As outlined by its most prominent spokesmen, Gunnar Myrdal and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., liberalism preached the power of enlightened human reason to solve society’s most intractable evils. “Liberals’ bright future was automatic,” Chappell writes. “The moral improvement of their world would come as a function of increased economic growth, scientific discovery, and educational dissemination of [their] new ideas.” Yet for the descendents of slaves living in the modern South, the liberal faith in ineluctable progress rang hollow because the diversification of the region’s economy and mechanization of industry and agriculture begun after World War I coincided not with greater freedom but with a hardening of segregation (p. 86). Liberalism simply lacked the power to attract and energize large numbers of black followers. To be sure, liberals and black Christian civil rights groups formed a political allegiance dedicated to breaking the yoke of southern segregation. Yet it was “more an alliance of convenience than one of deep ideological affinity” (p. 4).

The critical source of political inspiration and popular enthusiasm for the civil rights movement, submits Chappell, was revivalism and especially “prophetic religion,” or the tradition of spiritual conviction and cultural criticism running from “David and Isaiah in the Old Testament through Augustine and Martin Luther to Reinhold Niebuhr in the twentieth century” (p. 3). Like these
historic individuals and in contrast to twentieth-century liberals, many black
civil rights workers shared a deeply pessimistic view of human nature as relentlessly
tending toward corruption. They doubted the promise of education and
economic development ever to banish poverty and prejudice in full. Instead
they preached that social improvement rested squarely on their ability to stand
apart from the halls of power, reveal abuses of privilege and pretensions to
justice, and work fearlessly to correct them. Theirs was a mission to rid the
South of the sin of segregation through non-violence (pp.4, 45, 46–7).

Chappell notes that more than just black Christians drew encouragement
and guidance from prophetic religion during the civil rights movement. Indeed,
part of its strategic value for black protestors was its flexibility as a philosophy
of dissent. Within prophetic religion, diverse individuals found a common
language of criticism and a shared platform of social reform that broadened
the appeal of the movement and facilitated coordination between different
groups. For example, Bayard Rustin, one of King’s highest ranking lieutenants,
grew up in the North as a Quaker and was once a member of the Commu-
nist Party. Yet he came to embrace the tenets of prophetic religion, in part by
studying Gandhi and his meditations on non-violence (pp. 55–9). Similarly,
Bob Moses, a close friend of Rustin and the charismatic leader of the Student
Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, was an avowed atheist who was raised
in Harlem, New York. But based largely on his appreciation of the writings of
Albert Camus, Moses also preached a doctrine of social protest that mirrored
“King’s insistence on the inevitable evil of all politics and his insistence that
political action was nonetheless a moral obligation” (p. 80–1).

More significantly, blacks discovered in revivalism and prophetic religion a
wide collection of organizational and cultural resources to sustain the move-
ment. Here Chappell is on ground familiar to most scholars. Ministers and
laymen served as leaders, churches doubled as meeting halls, and local and
national denominational networks facilitated the rapid flow of information.
The vocabulary and history of black Christianity also helped many view
political events as spiritual ones. Political gatherings were revivals, positive
developments were miracles, and leaders like King and Bob Moses were
actually modern-day prophets sent to guide them into the promised land of
freedom. And black churchgoers widely turned to the archetypal biblical story
of African-American religious history, the story of Exodus, for inspiration.
Like generations of black Americans slave and free, they saw in the journey
of the Israelites from the Egypt of slavery to the Canaan Land of freedom a
historical reference and model for their own struggle.

Chappell ultimately sees the movement, with its pronounced “habit of draw-
ing on revivalists traditions and its injection of powerful religious emotions
into the public discussion that shaped civil rights legislation in the mid-1960s,”
as the Third Great Awakening in American history (p. 101). Chappell’s choice
of historical label is noteworthy: it is a phrase meant to remind readers that political movements have religious dimensions. Condemning the “modern habit of separating religion from politics,” he finds it is nearly impossible to understand the risks taken by civil rights workers without “some transcendent or millennial faith to sustain them” (pp. 101–2). Only by treating the movement as a time of massive religious revival can one comprehend how black Christians and their allies found the direction and strength to articulate a vision of social justice that eventually transformed national meanings of race and liberty.

Religion lies at the heart of not only why civil rights workers accomplished many of their goals but also why segregationists failed to realize their own. Unlike its beneficial role in the work of black protestors, religion sparked feuds and disunity among segregationists. The crux of the matter was two-fold. First, southern white religious leaders generally refused to openly endorse the demagoguery of segregationist politicians. Though most supported the maintenance of the color line, they believed its continued presence depended on powers of moral suasion and appeals to ideas of social respectability; few overtly campaigned for its defense by supporting calls for racial violence and terror (p. 109). Second, preachers typically did not teach that the bible sanctioned segregation. Effectively portraying racial discrimination as the product not of divine decree but of man’s passions and laws, preachers blocked segregationists from relying on religion as a source of moral sustenance and guidance. In an era when most southerners believed in the inerrancy of biblical teachings, segregationists were forced to confront the painful and disorientating fact that their work was not in harmony with what they thought was God’s revealed word (pp. 110, 112).

This split between southern white religion and politics doomed the cause of segregation. Desperate for the support of their religious leaders and the public legitimacy it would lend their efforts, segregationists spearheaded attempts to force preachers to change their minds by withholding tithes and penning letters of protest to regional and national denominational headquarters (p. 138). They also attempted to drive the most troublesome pastors from their pulpits. But nothing worked. The only enduring result of their campaign was popular confusion, dismay, and misgivings about the righteousness of their cause. “The churches failed to elevate their whiteness—the institutions and customs that oppressed black folk—above their other concerns,” asserts Chappell bluntly. “That is what they needed to do to defend those institutions and customs effectively” (p. 107).

Exacerbating the difficulty of gaining broad popular backing for anti-civil rights activity was dissent within the ranks of segregationists over organizational tactics. Most southern white intellectuals, journalists, and educated business leaders endorsed segregation. But they felt that respectability was a
necessary prerequisite for wielding social power and preferred the courtroom and newspaper to the street corner as a public forum to argue the merits of racial discrimination. (p. 158). They widely eschewed the politics of race baiting, abhorred the bloody tactics employed by groups like the Ku Klux Klan, and refused to cede any meaningful degree of public influence to those many segregationists who were uneducated and from the lower class. Newspapermen like Birmingham’s John Temple Graves and the Richmond News Leader editor James J. Kilpatrick spoke for many southern white elites when they praised the importance of preserving segregation as a social goal but rejected the ignorance, bigotry, and violence common to so many of its demagogues (pp. 7, 158–60). They believed in segregation as a way to secure peaceful coexistence between the races but did not want to resort to nakedly racist appeals as a means of whipping up support among the white masses. These internecine conflicts, in addition to the apathy of white preachers, crippled the ability of segregationists to work cooperatively and made it unlikely for them to win the battle over African-American civil rights.

Chappell hopes to advance our understanding of the history of the civil rights movement by studying the meaning of religion for black protestors and white resisters. Yet at times the terms of his analysis weaken his ability to achieve his chief objective. His handling of both black and white spiritual life and his conceptualization of the “religious” in southern society raise important questions about the explanatory limits of his investigation and, more generally, about how historians analyze the role of religion in modern America.

In the case of black religion, Chappell sees his examination, for the most part, as unprecedented. Chappell writes: “There is much testimony about conversion experiences during the [black] mass meetings and demonstrations, which no historian or social scientist has put at the center of his story before” (p. 5). And similarly: “My argument is that the prophetic content of the protestors’ minds is illuminating, though it has been all but ignored in books and articles about the movement” (p. 179). Every historian overstates the originality of his work and can be forgiven for a certain lack of modesty; sales numbers, after all, depend on a certain degree of authorial brashness. Yet in this case the statement of novelty is particularly difficult to accept in light of the literature on the topic; the claim creates an easily identifiable historiographical niche for the book, but this niche is hardly empty. Aldon Morris, David J. Garrow, and Charles Payne are the most notable among the many authors to plumb the relationship between black faith and the movement.1

More important is Chappell’s representation of the history of the political character of modern southern black churches and religious leaders. This history, in Chappell’s hands, has two distinct components. During the generations preceding the movement, religion basically restrained and denuded African-American political protest. “Much of the time,” he writes, “black
churches really did serve as opiates of the masses” (p. 54). But everything changed beginning in the 1950s. Suddenly black religion underwent a radical transformation and emerged as a force for social revolution. This particular periodization of African-American religious history, however, is drawn too cleanly. While few black Christians took to the streets and publicly protested discrimination from the end of Reconstruction to the start of the movement, black congregations invented a range of racial and religious identities that indirectly challenged racist stereotypes and strictures. Through their fraternal orders, habits of consumption, music, and presses, they nurtured ideas and practices that prepared them for later political struggles. To take one example: during the early 1900s, black Christians often attempted to spend their coin in black-owned stores or in white ones that treated them fairly, thus implicitly linking consumption to protest in a manner that would become widespread during the movement.

Similarly, Chappell plots the civil rights movement on a trajectory of large-scale revivalism arcing across the historical terrain of American religion. The 1950s and 1960s were decades when large numbers of Americans awoke to the call of prophetic religion, embraced a view of society as color-blind, and successfully labored to affect social reform on a scale that recalled earlier religiously motivated attempts such as temperance and abolitionism. Yet Chappell may be guilty of overstatement when he pronounces the movement as the Third Great Awakening. It is hard to ascribe a similar degree of theological novelty or success at popularizing new ideas about the relationship of faith to public life to King as to Jonathan Edward or Charles Finney. Unlike Edward’s views on predestination during the First Great Awakening in the 1730s and 1740s or Finney’s arguments over free will during the Second Great Awakening nearly a century later, King’s ideas about prophetic religion and social justice were already part and parcel of much of America—black America. Indeed, much of King’s theology was already deeply familiar to millions of black southerners and northerners long before he rose to prominence.

It makes more sense to situate the movement as part of another narrative trajectory within American religious history, one that incorporates more directly Chappell’s major axis of analysis: the ever-shifting relationship between race and religion and its meaning for America. That trajectory would be African-American religious history. In it, the movement appears as one of two historical episodes when popular black ideas about God and freedom became the nation’s, if only for a while. The crucial tenets of prophetic religion—its unwavering belief in the evil of racial discrimination and the moral hypocrisy of a democratic nation that drew a color line around the meaning of liberty—were, of course, common to black Christianity since slavery. They entered the larger public discourse of faith and justice in America only twice: during the Civil War, as best seen in Lincoln’s second inaugural address, and the civil rights movement.
Like his treatment of black religion, Chappell might have analyzed the faith of segregationists with greater nuance. He provides an impressive array of evidence to support his claims that "segregationists generally avoided religious topics" and "southern white ministers did not contribute much, and showed little enthusiasm for, the legal defense of segregation" (pp. 317, 318). Yet many politicians and preachers did invoke religious ideas and practices to defend the color line, especially when that goal was racial purity. For example, and as demonstrated most recently by Jane Dailey, pastors were at the forefront of aggressively supporting racial discrimination as a means of limiting contact between blacks and whites and, more importantly, the threat of interracial sex. The analytical point here is that Chappell puts religion in too neat of a cultural box, ascribing it power when the setting is the pulpit or pew but paying less attention when it intersects with other arenas of daily life. He tends to overlook religion's malleability and power as a force capable of affecting multiple dimensions of human activity.

Relatedly, in his appendix, "A Philosophical Note on Historical Explanation," Chappell promises an analytical model of religion fully integrated with other social phenomena. "I believe that material forces . . . are distinct from collective human creations like 'ideology' and 'religion,'" he writes. "I also believe that material forces have a preemptory, overriding quality about them that makes me lean away from idealists like Max Weber and toward materialists like Karl Marx" (p. 191). One wishes that Chappell had followed his intellectual leanings a bit more closely and created a working definition of white religion more closely twinned with materialist forces such as economics. By not doing so, he creates a suspect portrait of how white religion undercut the hopes and dreams of segregationists.

For example, Chappell sees the anti-civil rights culture as fatally flawed because it lacked the ideological and psychological support of white religion. He demonstrates the fundamental problems with this culture by comparing it repeatedly to the vigorous pro-slavery culture of the 1850s, which successfully rallied millions to defend the peculiar institution (pp. 5, 105, 150, 188). But Chappell's use of comparative history obfuscates the modern relationship between faith and economics and is an example of how his analytical treatment of religion at times leads him to overstress the importance of southern white religion to the demise of segregation. The diversification and industrialization of southern agriculture occurring in the middle of the twentieth century, on the one hand, and the simultaneous growth of the consumer economy, on the other, arguably made the maintenance of white economic power less dependent on absolute control over black politics and labor than during slavery. Modern segregationists operated under distinctive economic imperatives that made an all-or-nothing stand for disfranchisement or segregated transportation not absolutely vital to preserving their financial influence. In this broader type of
cultural analysis, white religion looks very different than Chappell’s portrayal of it. As a factor undermining segregation, white religion now appears equally important as—or perhaps less important than—the opinion of many white southerners that their economic livelihood and cultural authority simply did not hinge on giving their lives in the defense of the color line, regardless of the public opinions of their religious leaders.

In the end, Stone of Hope forces its readers to rethink the place of religion in the literature of the civil rights movement. Chappell offers conclusions that, while not always novel or tempered by historical context, amply demonstrate the need to keep religion at the center of future inquiries into the origins and path of the movement. And even if his understanding of religion as a category of cultural study is overly narrow at times, Chappell reminds us of one of the central ironies of the moment: that most civil rights workers and segregationists, though engaged in deadly combat over the future of the South, appealed to the same God for victory and salvation.

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2. Chappell does reveal that some black civil rights workers identified the movement as a re-awakening of older religious traditions and intimately connected to the world of their parents and grandparents (see pp. 93–4). Yet the brunt of his analysis rests on the assumption that black religious culture constrained acts of political revolt in the decades leading up to the movement.


