Religious Dimensions of the American Civil Rights Movement
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Book Review Essay

Religious Dimensions of the American Civil Rights Movement


David Chappell’s book, A Stone of Hope, is a welcome addition to the literature of the civil rights movement, American intellectual history, and American religious history. He has justly received advance praise for this book. Chappell’s book is impressive and quite persuasive at times. His analysis of the divided house of white southerners is noteworthy.1 Additionally, placing the civil rights movement squarely in the trajectory of American intellectual debate is also commendable.2

According to Chappell the civil rights movement, which fully bloomed between the years 1955 and 1965, was rooted in a conservative Protestant Christianity that stood in striking contrast to the then prevalent American intellectual discourse rooted in the cultural and political liberalism of the 1930s and 1940s. Chappell sets the stage for his study by dissecting the thought of John Dewey. Chappell argues that liberal thinkers such as Dewey were in search of a civic faith that would guide the nation. Dewey desired the positive attributes of religious faith such as self-giving, altruism, self-sacrifice, and discipline (which the Harvard sociologist Daniel Bell would later imitate in the late 1970s in his book, The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism)—without the problematic of real religion: religious faith. Dewey’s scientific naturalism left him clinging to uncertainty. Uncertainty could never be as totalizing and all encompassing as the irrational forces of religion. According to Chappell, “it is hardly surprising that Dewey never worked out the problem of securing the blessings of faith to his secular program” (18).


Liberals in Dewey's wake all suffered "pulpit envy" in that they had no call of faith upon which to construct their political program. If Dewey and his pragmatic minions were doubtful about liberalism's power to unite politically, there was no such reticence in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. Schlesinger's 1949 book, *The Vital Center*, was "the manifesto of postwar liberalism" (25). The book optimistically described in the aftermath of the Great Depression the commonality that political liberals shared with large corporate interest in the fight against expanding Soviet power and its totalitarian threat. Liberalism to him appeared to be pliable enough "to construct a society where men will be both free and happy" (27). Schlesinger demonstrated pessimism only at unchecked political power. The blind spot for liberals like Schlesinger was in the area of American race relations and the national independence struggles in the Third World. With unabashed elite eastern regional arrogance, Schlesinger dismissed Gandhi's use of nonviolent coercion in winning India's independence. He further believed that racial prejudices in the United States would in the end yield to education. On the liberals of Schlesinger's ilk, Chappell writes, "their very liberalism blinded them to the intractable social conflicts, even as many of them appeared (in the wake of World War II) earnest about facing them. For they were intent on regarding such conflicts as product of mental stubbornness and the overweening expectations of other, illiberal minds" (30). This glaring oversight by the American liberal establishment left an opening for Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish social scientist, to address the American racial divide.

For many white liberals, Gunnar Myrdal became the most important source about American race relations. Like Schlesinger, Myrdal was unduly optimistic about the possibility of constructive social change in America without struggle. Myrdal was persuaded that white Americans genuinely believed in equality and that African Americans eventually would be granted equality. Americans had a civic creed at odds with racial discrimination. The influence of Myrdal's *American Dilemma* was so strong that it became the basis of President Truman's 1947 special Committee on Civil Rights report, *To Secure These Rights*, and later the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Although Myrdal was greatly influential, his interpretation of American race relations did not inspire white liberal political organizing to eradicate Jim Crow laws. As Chappell observes, "the report was welcomed by the liberals: it was in sync with the thinking of those who acted very little on racism in the late 1940s and early 1950s" (43). Politically, white liberals in light of the Cold War were still trying to hold the New Deal domestic coalition together, and the needs of African Americans, though recognized, were a secondary concern to intellectuals and politicians alike.

The heart of the civil rights struggle therefore came from African Americans, especially Afro-Southerners who held onto an old-time religion that gave them a more sober assessment about human goodness and the need for sacrificial struggle to make changes. Their leadership as seen in Martin Luther King, Jr., Bayard Rustin, Modjeska Simkins, and Fanny Lou Hamer—shared an affinity with the biblical prophets and, most especially in this book, Reinhold Niebuhr. They saw the intractable nature of human behavior and realized that change had to be made by coercion. In their case, they elected nonviolent coercion. Power had to be met with power. Central to Chappell's argument is that civil rights leaders such as King were more in line with the theological ideas of Reinhold Niebuhr than, say, the theological tradition of
personalism of Edgar Sheffield Brightman or the amorphous "black church tradition" identified by contemporary theological thinkers. In many ways the most significant intellectual in the civil rights movement is Reinhold Niebuhr, especially for his analysis of collective human behavior in his 1932 classic, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Chappell sees King's analysis of structure as being quintessentially Niebuhrian. He states, "what makes King a world-historical figure is his Niebuhrian pessimism about human institutions and his Niebuhrian insistence that coercion is tragically necessary to achieve justice" (53). The movement was fed by the notion that force had to be used in the fight to create a more just society. Biblically, these leaders fought "powers and principalities" and not simply the ill informed and the uneducated. Various civil rights leaders culled together (in the sense of Levi Strauss's use of the term *bricolage*) from their Protestant Christian origins a prophetic tradition. In Chappell's estimation, "what makes the civil rights movement matter are the prophetic ideas it embodies—not the liberal progressive elements it also undeniably, inescapably contains" (83). While liberals appreciated this prophetic tradition for the advancements it rendered politically, they could not understand the source of the hope that galvanized civil rights activists.

For the activists especially in the initial phase of the movement from 1955 to 1963, the civil rights movement was revival. Chappell points out how "miracle" stories played an important functional role in the movement's success in encouraging those on the sidelines to join the struggle. King and his assistants even sought out advice from Billy Graham as to how to run the mass meetings. Chappell notes that King and Graham, as clergy, had shared affinities about God's salvation and judgment that at times left King's less pious associates befuddled. Nevertheless, ordinary Afro-Southerners understood this language and responded to it. "What is remarkable about the civil rights movement," Chappell remarks, "and what makes it most like one of the great historic revivals, is that the enthusiasm moved out of the church and into the streets. The movement also shifted the focus of church doctrine, as revivals usually do, though not always in the same direction as this time: away from eternal salvation and toward attaining justice in this life" (97). The revivalist tradition draped the massive political resistance of Afro-Southerners with an air of religious sanctification. The movement was righteous, and even though very few northern whites really cared about the conditions of black Americans, they found themselves sympathizing and appealed to by power of religious rhetoric. The civil rights movement as the third great awakening (with all Jon Butler's caveats about awakenings) had moral power that translated into political force.

While the prophetic tradition could draw black religionists and nonreligionists into a powerful coalition, white southern churches had no galvanizing intellectual set of ideas to hold them into a religiously based segregationist opposition. Unlike Afro-Southern Christians, "white churches were unwilling to make sacrifices to preserve segregation. They loved other things—peace, social order—more. They could not make defense of segregation the unifying principle of their culture" (107). Chappell describes numerous fiery white clergymen, such as Rev. Carey Daniel, Rev. Leon Burns, and Rev. G. T. Gillespie, all of whom attempted to defend segregationist principles biblically. However, they were unable to generate support. As Chappell explains, "The question of biblical provenance of their taboos and traditions
was, for many white southerners, a subject of great soul-searching. It was not simple propaganda. The soul-searching required honest and literate segregationists to drop any pretensions of conservative views on biblical interpretation: they would have to become radically unbiblical in their derivation of moral support for, let alone commands to maintain, their political institution" (115). Evangelical thinkers like L. Nelson Bell were culturally and socially white supremacist but could not find a biblical justification for segregation. Bell's son-in-law, Billy Graham, went even further. By 1954, Graham integrated seating at his crusades and through the strength of his popularity won compromises with segregationist politicians to hold integrated crusades throughout the South (140). This moderate theological stance on segregation by southern based denominations and leaders left the religious apologist for segregation and the politically driven segregationist apoplectic. The division among white southerners left African Americans in a position to overcome their weak opponents.

Segregationist intellectuals and writers such as John Temple Grave, the Dixiecrat and columnist, and James J. Kilpatrick, editor of the Richmond News-Leader and syndicated columnist, were in a quandary too. "It turns out that thoughtful segregationists feared other white southerners as much as they feared the civil rights movement or the federal government." The question for these men "was how to stir the majority to militant and effective action without sacrificing order and respectability" (155). Religion and the search for middle-class respectability divided white southerners and united black ones.

Chappell makes a strong case for the affinity between Martin Luther King and Reinhold Niebuhr except for a few underdeveloped areas. First, what made Niebuhr appealing to King was Niebuhr's thirteen-year tenure as a church pastor in Detroit. Niebuhr had dealt with Detroit's ethnic and racial divide in the 1920s. This provided him with an experiential level that few academic or theological liberals, with the exception of Walter Rauschenbusch, possessed. Niebuhr, as a German American, understood the ethnic politics and the use of political coercion to attain social advantage. It is understandable that King would gravitate toward such a thinker. Another area not fully discussed in Stone of Hope in relation to King and Niebuhr is that both men came from pietistic traditions that placed heavy emphasis on the emotional appeal of faith and viewed doctrine as a secondary concern.3 King undoubtedly found Niebuhr's reclamation of the Augustinian-Calvinist nexus of human depravity welcome because Afro-Baptist believers were in the same theological tradition—human beings were sinful and deluded by their sin. If not sin, why else conversion? This is the real connection between King and Billy Graham as well.4

The point where I differ from Chappell, and where I think his greatest error lies, is his inadequate treatment of the Afro-Baptist religious inheritance. I


agree with Chappell’s assessment that King as a part of the “Black Church” studies is too wide of the mark to be a fully constructive analysis of King’s anthropology.\(^5\) However, King was an Afro-Baptist and a part of an educated middle class where serious conversation had been ongoing about civil rights. Additionally, Morehouse College was a college with a Baptist identity and with representative preachers and teachers who had written about impending civil rights concerns of the African American community. Underrepresented in this study are the influences of notable Afro-Baptists such as Benjamin Mays, Howard Thurman, Mordecai Johnson, and George Kelsey; these men certainly had a corpus of writings and sermons that served King well as sources for his own ideas. What is troubling about Chappell’s heavy emphasis on Niebuhr is that it seems as though African Americans themselves had no intellectual ideas coming specifically derivative of their own religious communities. Niebuhr was certainly influential on an entire generation of Christian activists,\(^6\) but so were the above named individuals—and their influence on King, in particular, should not be dismissed.\(^7\) They spoke his language and influenced his faith and preaching as an Afro-Baptist.\(^8\)

Chappell’s omissions about Afro-American religious intellectual tradition beg the question: Do some scholars really believe that African Americans have seriously thought about their own religious traditions and their commitments to social justice?\(^9\) Chappell’s book leaves us thinking that King had only white religious models to help mold his thinking.

Clarence Taylor’s *Black Religious Intellectuals* is an attempt to counter the dearth of knowledge about black religious thinkers. Taylor points out that a number of historians and culture critics have ignored or paid scant attention to this aspect of African American tradition.\(^10\) “One of the reason for the dearth of study on black religious intellectuals,” Taylor explains, “has to do with the emergence of a class of African Americans, at the end of the twentieth century, who were studying more secular disciplines and going into fields other than ministry.” The net result is “that when examining the black intellectual tradition, especially in the twentieth century, scholars have, for the most part, secularized this endeavor” (4). Another critical point that

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5. Chappell rightly critiques Lewis Baldwin’s *A Balm in Gilead: The Cultural Roots of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress, 1991) for his wide assertion about a generalized “black church tradition.”


9. Joseph R. Washington, Jr. asserted the following: “The condition of the American Negro has forced him to be individualistic even in matters of worship. As a result, there have been creative individuals within the context of worship. Negroes have produced great preachers, but few intellectual leaders. The gap between spiritual depth and social action has never been quite bridged,” in *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Boston: Beacon, 1966), 104. A number of scholars have accepted this assertion without question and, therefore, reduplicate it in their scholarship.

Taylor makes regarding the “lack of focus on black religious thinkers is that those writing on black intellectuals find the secular revolutionaries, such as DuBois, Cyril Briggs, Hubert Harrison, C. L. R. James, and, most recently, Amiri Baraka, much more attractive characters.” He contends that “the amount of attention these figures receive could be that in large part they reflect the politics of those writing about these revolutionaries” (5). Taylor’s chief concern is that the nonrecognition of black religious intellectual thought dismisses the intellectual capital and activities of African Americans.” The “near non-appearance of black religious thinkers in the literature on black intellectuals and American religion forges the view that few if any religious figures were worthy” of being written about. “It also leaves the impression that African Americans stress intuition and not analytical thought” (5).

Taylor’s critique is an excellent one. However, it is in his execution of helping the reader to understand the significance of the particular intellectual’s thought that he has chosen to portray in this volume that is disappointing. Taylor’s representative religious intellectuals range from A. Philip Randolph, pentecostal bishop Smallwood Williams, John Culmer, Al Sharpton, Louis Farrakhan, and Pauli Murray to Ella Baker. The problem for the reader is that these essays are not fully developed enough as models of Antonio Gramsci’s notion of “organic intellectuals.” Taylor, using Gramsci, argues that these diverse individuals were not academicians, but thinkers and activists who were shaped within various black communities and represented the ideas derived from religious traditions within their communities. Taylor unfortunately drifts away from religious analysis toward the holy trinity of the academy—race, gender, and class—which, although important, are not sufficient in helping the reader understand the religious world view and audiences that shaped the thinking of these individuals. Since some of these individuals held such a commanding faith in God, it is incumbent upon Taylor to explain how their religious worlds made them so uncomfortable with Jim Crow? What is an Afro-pentecostal world view and what are the sources of this thought that Jim Crow goes counter to? How did Pauli Murray explain her social convictions about women’s justice as an Episcopalian in theological terms? What are the religious terms of Louis Farrakhan’s racially chauvinistic Islam? Many historians find theological language and discussion bothersome. However, ideas derived from theological reflection commanded the attention of the people we study. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the historian to master the theological lexicon in analyzing the way religious thinking factors into social movements. While I think this volume is too shallow as intellectual history, I find that Taylor’s critique has laid a building block to explore more fully the black religious thinking in undermining Jim Crow and the religious renewal of black communities.

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