

Leilah Danielson. *American Gandhi: A. J. Muste and the History of Radicalism in the Twentieth Century.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014. 472 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-4639-1.



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Commissioned by Bobby L. Smiley (Vanderbilt University)

This is a densely rich book. It is a “historian’s biography,” as Danielson (Northern Arizona University) puts it in her endnotes (p. 343n2). [1] It aims not only to place the great peace activist A. J. Muste in thick historical context, but also to show how Muste in turn shaped the history of the radical Left in the twentieth century. It succeeds, for the most part brilliantly. It is the first academic biography of Muste in over thirty years (Danielson graciously acknowledges her debt to previous biographies by Jo Ann Ooiman Robinson and Nat Hentoff) and will likely be the standard work on Muste for at least the next thirty. Others might offer contrasting or refined interpretations of Muste’s life and accomplishments, but Danielson’s comprehensiveness will be hard to surpass. It is a major advance in the historiography of American pacifism and radicalism, complementing such recent works as Kip Kosek’s *Acts of Conscience* (2009), on the Fellowship of Reconciliation; Patricia Appelbaum’s *Kingdom to Commune* (2009), on twentieth-century pacifism as a cultural movement; and John D’Emilio’s *Lost Prophet* (2003), on Muste’s friend, collaborator, and fellow Quaker Bayard Rustin. It is the kind of book that sets the table for a generational conversation, sparking dissertations, articles, and monographs. As Danielson herself concedes, there is much scholarship left to do on Muste’s relations

with the Protestant community and with the wider peace movement in the United States and abroad. (I for one would welcome more scholarship on Muste’s relations with other Quakers and with the American Friends Service Committee.)

Danielson argues that Muste was a Christian prophet in the Hebraic mold of one who sees history as a joint project between God and humanity. For Muste, the greatest force for remaking society and for changing individual hearts—the thought the former depended on the latter—was Jesus’s way of self-sacrificial love, the way of the Cross. Danielson argues further that something distinctly American enabled Muste to reconcile his spiritual idealism with the details of organization and the gritty realities of direct action. Pragmatism was the philosophy of William James and John Dewey that held that truth emerges from the dynamic interplay between thought and deed, between the ideal and the real. Muste’s prophetic pragmatism made him the spiritual, strategic, and in many cases tactical leader of the radical American Left between the time of his successful leadership of the Lawrence textile-workers strike in 1919 and his death in 1967. He was a minister, a workers’ educator, a war-resister, and the inspiration for countless nonviolent campaigns on behalf of racial and colonial liberation.

Martin Luther King Jr. credited him with the civil rights movement's emphasis on nonviolence; Indian pacifists called him the "American Gandhi."

Danielson, Kosek, and D'Emilio each have a different answer to the question of who was most responsible for transplanting political nonviolence from the soil of Indian independence to that of African American civil rights. For Kosek it was Richard Gregg; for D'Emilio, Bayard Rustin; for Danielson, A. J. Muste. Each is right in his or her own way. Gregg literally wrote the book on nonviolence, Muste translated it into organized action through his leadership of the Fellowship of Reconciliation from 1941 to 1953, and Rustin (together with Glenn Smiley) brought the methods of nonviolence down to Montgomery in early 1956. Together with Quinton Dixie and Peter Eisenstadt in their *Visions of a Better World* (2011), on Howard Thurman's pilgrimage to meet with Gandhi in the mid-1930s, these scholars have given us a genealogy of political nonviolence in the United States.

Yet Danielson's most important contribution to the historiography of American religious history might be her excavation of the formative and enduring influence Reformed Christianity had on Muste's thought and activism. Muste's sparring with Reinhold Niebuhr over pacifism and realism obscures the fact that Muste was born and raised a Dutch Calvinist and never entirely shook the doctrine of total depravity. He never leaned with the full weight of his hope upon the broken reed of humanity. Danielson gives us a vivid picture of Muste's working-class childhood in the furniture-making district of Grand Rapids, Michigan, where his parents emigrated from the Netherlands in 1891 when little Abraham Johannes was six. The Mustes fatefully decided to join the more assimilationist branch of the Dutch Reformed Church in the United States. A. J. slipped through this crack in the ethnic door and made his way to seminary just outside New York City. There he spread his arms wide to American society and culture. He was no as-

cetic. He smoked cigarettes, loved opera and poetry, and quickly became a diehard Yankees fan. But for all his love of art and popular culture and city life, he remained wary of human frailty. Paradoxically, this wariness led him not to adopt Christian realism and just-war theory, but to leave the ministry in protest over his church's acquiescence in Wilson's war to end all wars, to become a pacifist and labor leader, and to preach and practice nonviolence. He would not bend his conscience to any human institution, not even the church; human beings could not be trusted to wage just wars, to share wealth equitably, or to use force with restraint. A central tenet of Reformed Christianity thus helped convince Muste that love was ultimately more realistic than coercion, even if extreme injustice sometimes justified violent resistance.

Danielson relies heavily for Muste's biography on his oral memoir of 1954 and on his autobiographical sketches from 1957-60, but supplements these with her own research, largely in the Swarthmore Peace Collection at Swarthmore College just outside Philadelphia. Still, she leaves a few holes in his story. For instance, when Muste states that he chose the ministry over the academy because he was "too much interested in action," I was nonplussed (p. 43). The foregoing pages had emphasized Muste's intellect and love of school; little if anything had suggested his practicality. Perhaps such holes simply correspond to gaps in the evidence. I wonder, though, if Danielson let the "ahistorical" occasionally elbow out the "biographical." But no one book can do everything, and what this one book does—bringing the two approaches together to illuminate the former dynamism of the radical Left with the hope that it might be revived—does impressively well.

Note

[1]. Danielson is referring here to Alice Kessler-Harris, "Why Biography," in "AHR Roundtable: Historians and Biography," *American Historical Review* 114, no. 3 (June 2009): 625-30.

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