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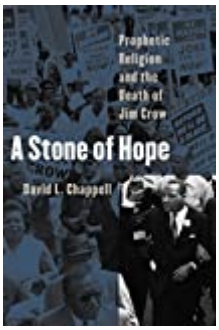

David L. Chappell. *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. 344 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2819-9.

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Politics and Religion

David L. Chappell's *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* explains the success of the post-war civil rights movement, partial as it may be, by posing and answering four pertinent questions. These are: "Why did the dominant voice in American political culture, liberalism, fail to achieve anything substantial for black rights at the height of liberal power in the 1960s? Where did black southerners find a philosophical inspiration to rebel, given the failure of liberalism, as they knew it? How did black southerners sustain the confidence, solidarity, and discipline of their rebellion through years of drudgery, setbacks, and risk? Finally, why were the enemies of the civil rights movement, for one fleeting but decisive moment, so weak" (p. 2)?

Chappell's study makes a major contribution to answering this last question by reconstructing white southern reaction to the civil rights movement–a project long neglected in the historiography of the black freedom struggle. The question is not only, where did southern black activists find the confidence and solidarity to challenge Jim Crow in the middle of the twentieth century, but also, why did southern white racists ultimately prove ineffectual in their attempt to maintain segregation? The "Achilles's heel" of Jim Crow, Chappell argues, was the failure of white southern churches to support segregation. "The historically significant thing about white religion in the 1950-1960s," he writes, "is not its failure to join the civil rights movement. The significant thing, given that the church was probably as racist as the rest of the white South, is that it failed in any meaningful way to join the anti-civil rights movement" (p. 107).

White southern churches did not have the will to fight for segregation. Nor could they, for a number of reasons, easily justify it on theological or practical grounds. Violence against civil rights workers impaired the efforts of southern evangelicals in their missions abroad. Southern whites refused to close the schools to maintain segregation. Segregationist activists, particularly those who were violent or stupid, alienated many middle-class southern whites as well as sympathetic intellectuals. Segregationism, as a movement, was therefore divided.

Unlike southern white segregationists, black civil rights workers were willing to accept great personal sacrifice. This willingness, Chappell argues, derived

not from any modern, liberal faith in rationality to end racism, but from religion, from a traditional and prophetic Christian understanding of the nature of "sin." Twentieth-century American liberalism, he contends, failed the civil rights movement because it insisted on the idea that rationality, education, and economic growth would prevail over racism eventually. Influenced by Gunnar Myrdal's famous 1944 report on American racism, liberals believed that civil rights would gradually prevail, without the need for force. They therefore lacked the vigor necessary to carry the fight.

By contrast, it was a traditional black form of "prophetic Christianity," articulated by Martin Luther King, Jr. and others, that inspired the necessary passion among civil rights workers to accept personal sacrifice and the blows of segregationist thugs. This passion was tempered by a deep pessimism about "human nature" that stemmed from the ideas of Reinhold Niebuhr and the reality of life under Jim Crow. But that pessimism never damaged the firm faith in eventual success. As the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth declared in 1958, "this is a religious crusade, a fight between light and darkness, right and wrong, good and evil, fair play and tyranny. We are assured of victory because we are using weapons of spiritual warfare" (p. 88). Ironically, therefore, it was an "irrational" (Chappell's term) and revivalistic religious sensibility that inspired the greatest victory since 1945 for the liberal-Enlightenment goal of justice and liberty.

Chappell, furthermore, implicitly rejects the idea that Black Power undermined the civil rights movement. The young fire-brands in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) did not break with the ideas and methods of the older generation as much as reorient those ideas and methods under changing circumstances. Scholars like Bruce Perry and Hugh Pearson have argued that Black Nationalism somehow developed apart from, and in fact ruined, the civil rights movement. Perry, in his study of Malcolm X, and Pearson, in his study of the Black Panther Party, sought to undermine the significance of Black Nationalism by associating its leadership with social and psychological pathology as well as the pursuit of power.[1]

But more recent scholarship has uncovered the roots of Black Nationalism in the history of black communities, particularly (though not exclusively) in the South.[2] For his part, Chappell demonstrates, in his discussion of SNCC leader John Lewis, that his radicalism owed a great deal to the ideas of Frederick Douglass, Gandhi, and biblical sources. It was, therefore, well within the tradition of agitation and "aggressive non-violent action" championed by King (p. 76).

Most intriguing, perhaps, is Chappell's argument that activists within African-American religious traditions were more realistic in a tactical sense than their liberal allies. By refusing to accept the supposedly rational view that racism would slowly give way to reason and by invoking a sense of urgency in a struggle against racist injustice interpreted as "sin," the civil rights movement maintained the backbone necessary to succeed–a backbone that white liberals admired but, with some notable exceptions, failed to develop. Chappell grounds his discussion of African-American prophetic religion within a long intellectual tradition that runs from Augustine to Martin Luther to Reinhold Niebuhr.

Chappell's concern with how the great figures of the civil rights movement, such as King, Lewis, and others, combined an appreciation for the harsh facts of everyday life with a religious tradition informed by intellectual awareness, is the essence of *A Stone of Hope*. And it is this synthesis that makes Chappell's work an important contribution to the historiography of the black freedom struggle.

Notes

1. Hugh Pearson, *The Shadow of the Panther: Huey Newton and the Price of Black Power in America* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1994); Bruce Perry, *The Life of a Man who Changed Black America* (New York: Talman Company, 1999).

2. Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Jon Rice, "The World of the Illinois Panthers" in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980*, eds. Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

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