Review of A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow by David L. Chappell

Brian D. Behnken, University of California - Davis

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/brian_behnken/3/

In this provocative new book, David Chappell examines the role of religion and religious thought in the Civil Rights movement. By focusing on the intellectual and religious underpinnings of both the activists and their segregationist rivals, he makes a persuasive argument that the struggle should best be understood as a prophetic religious movement, rather than as a social movement or as the triumph of a liberal consensus. Scrutinizing religion allows Chappell to shift the historiographical debate away from protests and violence to the role of ideas, principles, and faith.

The New Deal liberal coalition, Chappell avers, had an opportunity to destroy Jim Crow in the 1930s. Liberals failed to do so because they lacked an appreciation of faith. Some, like John Dewey, attempted to focus attention on religion. Dewey realized that many liberals viewed prophetic faith negatively, but he could not create a program that melded liberal ideals of gradual progress with a secular version of faith. Civil rights thinkers like Martin Luther King, Modjeska Simkins, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Bayard Rustin rejected liberals' understanding of progress in favor of a vision of divinely inspired and immediate change. "The conviction that God was on their side," Chappell observes, gave the movement an authority that both white liberals and segregationists lacked. Besides leaders like King, student activists also relied on faith. James Lawson and John Lewis saw the movement as biblically mandated and utilized a missionary spirit in nonviolent protests.

Faith succored the activists. Segregationists, on the other hand, did not see their fight as a religious struggle in the same way that African Americans did. "The historically significant failure of white southern churches," Chappell writes, "was their inability to live up to the militant image that southern politicians had shown. ... [W]hite churches were unwilling to make sacrifices to preserve segregation." The white church found no corollary to the African American belief that the movement was biblically ordained because the Bible did not validate Jim Crow. Consequently, denominations like the southern Presbyterians and many Baptists favored gradual desegregation. This stance frustrated groups like the White Citizens' Council. Segregationists attempted to keep the church out of politics because they felt it would support integration. This deprived them of the prophetic religious strength that the Civil Rights movement depended upon. Chappell concludes that segregationists only mustered a minimal fight against the movement because they lacked faith.

A Stone of Hope is an important addition to the fields of southern, intellectual, and civil rights history. Chappell presents a story that focuses on one aspect of the movement—religion—and this makes the book reductionist. But he is reductionist with a point: to illuminate how prophetic religion helped the movement succeed. He wisely examines men and women, white and black, integrationists and segregationists. And although some will take issue with his characterization of the movement as the "Third Great Awakening," his depiction of the activists' victories as coming with "relative ease," and the absence of a discussion on Black Power, there is little else to complain about.

Brian D. Behnken

University of California, Davis