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Faith and the struggle for social justice

By JIM SLEEPER

A Stone of Hope

Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow

David L. Chappell

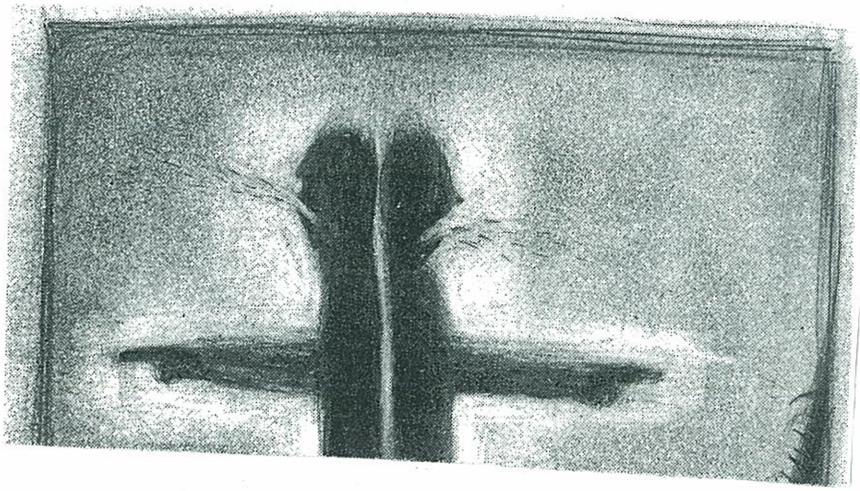
University of North Carolina Press: 330 pp., $34.95

The Serenity Prayer

Faith and Politics in Times of Peace and War

Elisabeth Sifton

W.W. Norton: 368 pp., $26.95

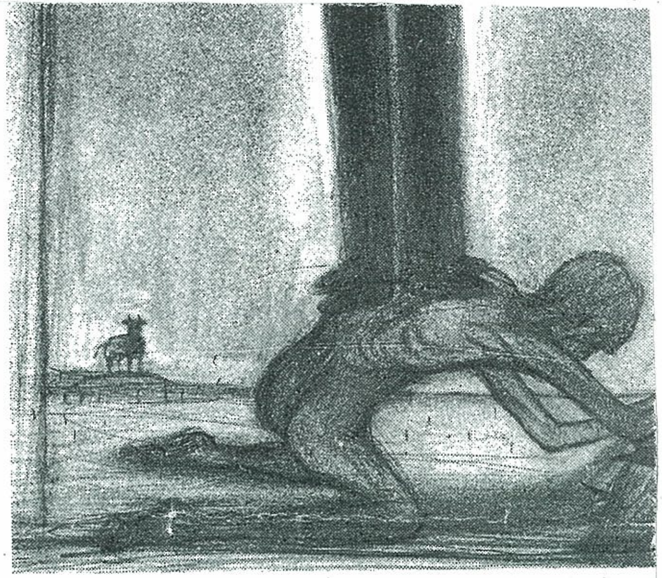


LIBERALISM is "living on borrowed time — taking for granted the spiritual and cultural resources that liberals depend on but do nothing to replenish," writes historian David L. Chappell, revivifying an old argument in his stunning reinterpretation of the American civil rights movement as a profoundly illiberal undertaking.

You've read that correctly: In Chappell's account — which is not a polemic but the harvest of exhaustive research and judgment worthy of his mentor Christopher Lasch — many liberals in the 1950s were taken aback by early civil rights demonstrations. Having broken with Communist Popular Frontism and missing the glories of union organizing, prominent liberals were suffering from "pulpit envy" of conservative demagogues such as Father Charles Coughlin and Joe McCarthy. But they didn't know what to make of the deeply Christian, non-demagogic, nonviolent movement emerging from pulpits such as the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s.

A few liberals rushed to the movement; others later wrote themselves into its history, more glowingly than warranted. Chappell probes some liberals' displacement of their own spiritual and cultural desperation into support for activists who, like King, were actually skeptical of liberalism and even "opposed to humanism in the modern world and in favor of theism," as King put it. No reader of "A Stone of Hope," to be published by the University of North Carolina Press in January, will fail to acknowledge these tensions and incomprehension between the movement's progress-affirming enthusiasts and its darkly Christian, sometimes fatalistic organizers: King, John Lewis, James Lawson, Fanny Lou Hamer and Modjeska Simpkins — even its Quaker "house philosopher" and master tactician Bayard Rustin and the Camus-like existentialist Bob Moses.

Religious conservatives may lay claim to Chappell's account, as neoconservatives have to George Orwell, Reinhold Niebuhr and the Hebrew prophets. Keepers of secular-liberal civil rights orthodoxy may try to dismiss or debunk it. But Chappell's finding that more than a few liberal movement boosters were compensating for their own moral exhaustion and pulpit envy is no partisan conservative thrust. It identifies a real dilemma of classical liberalism, which encompasses libertarian and mainstream conservatives: The dilemma is that an all-consuming "logic" of individual rights, free markets and corporate contracts, even one leavened by bureaucratic social-welfare initiatives, can't sustain freedom in a liberal republic. It becomes such a cold tangle of contracts and rights that its freedoms rely ultimately on beliefs and virtues — religious, philosophical, ethno-cultural — that the liberal state itself cannot nurture, much less enforce.



PAIGE IMATANI *For The Times*

At least liberalism promises to enforce "civil rights," and those who litigated against Jim Crow (and took political and personal risks doing so) meant to vindicate a liberalism that is not merely neutral and procedural but progressive. Chappell doesn't quarrel with them; he doesn't propound the "borrowed time" arguments about liberalism's moral incapacities as much as he discovers how the civil rights movement was nourished by nearly tribal, illiberal beliefs, including its leading activists' conviction that their organizing depended on a realistic pessimism about human nature, lightened only by Hebraic prophecy and Christian love and hope.

It was the activists' darkling faith that gave them the courage to face dogs and mobs with the intentionally coercive yet loving nonviolence that so astonished liberals and segregationists alike. When civil rights leader James Lawson said that the nonviolent demonstrations "convicted us all of sin," he meant that activists who had the religious strength to acknowledge their own illiberal motives could best understand the oppressor's efforts to maintain a façade of decency atop his own sins.

As important as Chappell's fresh reading of movement leaders' tragic faith is his discovery, through groundbreaking research, that segregationists were befuddled. Few Southern white clergy were Bible-thumping apologists for Jim Crow; most deflected the problem or responded to it in ways that were more complicated than is widely assumed. To Southern politicians' dismay, the South's Baptist and Presbyterian conventions voted overwhelmingly to accept desegregation in the 1950s,

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and their seminaries admitted black students. Billy Graham integrated his huge revival meetings, even bringing King to the pulpit in 1957. Segregationists didn't dare take him on.

Nor did most white ministers stretch Scripture to justify segregation: "The question of biblical provenance of their taboos and traditions was, for many white Southerners, a subject of great soul searching. It was not simply propaganda," Chappell explains, after poring over their "anguished" exegetics, notes and sermons. Even the famed "curse of Ham," taken by some to justify black pariahdom, was cited far more often by anti-segregationists seeking to discredit their opponents than it ever was by the segregationists themselves.

King knew that even as he assailed white clerics in his "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" for wanting to "go slow" on integration, segregationist politicians and pamphleteers were denouncing them too for going slow in defending segregation. He knew that the ministers' paralysis reflected the besieged decency of God-fearing elites uneasy about their complicity in a system maintained by racist demagoguery and mob violence.

But where the secular left would have delighted in exposing such hypocrisy, King and his cohort had the distinctively Christian insight that the more they affirmed segregationists' decency — and did so not as crafty tacticians but as loving fellow Christians — the more the will to oppress would weaken.

Chappell will surprise some readers, as he did me, by averring that he is really more a materialist or structuralist than a spiritualist. In describing the power of "prophetic religion," he does not downplay such currents as the egalitarian ethos of World War II, postwar decolonization in Africa, black Americans' migration north and increasing electoral power there, economic development in the "New South" and the effect of television on Northern whites who'd otherwise have been content not to know what Jim Crow entailed.

What he did not expect to discover was that a strange, saving grace, set against intimations of human depravity, had unhinged segregation as effectively as had progressive optimism and brute structural change.

THE charge that liberals were living on "borrowed time" was advanced, Chappell notes, in the 1930s by H. Richard Niebuhr, younger brother of the theologian and public philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr. The latter impressed it more directly on American leaders such as Ambassador George Kennan, author of the Cold War containment theory, who called the older Niebuhr "the father of us all."

Chappell also shows that many black civil rights leaders took their bearings, including principles and tactics of Gandhian nonviolence, from Reinhold Niebuhr, whom King studied and mentions in the "Letter From a Birmingham Jail." King agreed with Niebuhr that liberalism cannot overcome injustice through its moral and rational suasions. Niebuhr's "Moral Man and Immoral Society" explained, in American contexts, the necessity of nonviolence as a form of coercion even though it risked unleashing the oppressor's violence and embittering the demonstrators.

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[*Civil rights, from Page 11*]

All this makes Elisabeth Sifton's "The Serenity Prayer," a loving memoir and apologia for Niebuhr, her father, a worthy accompaniment to Chappell's history. It is no substitute for reading Niebuhr himself, but it explains how — like King and other moral leaders — he wrote and lived from coordinates invisible and mystifying to both right and left.

When he argued that working-class insurgencies are necessary to a just society even though they risk violence, leftists overlooked his anticipations of the corruption and sinfulness they entailed. When he wrote of the need to prosecute the Cold War against communism, conservatives overlooked his despair of American blindness and arrogance and his condemnations of "preventive war."

There was also no more scathing critic of most organized religion than Niebuhr, Sifton shows, whether of the failed German Lutheranism he examined in Europe in the inter-war years or the pompous pettiness of so many American clergy and of that ultimate Cold Warrior, John Foster Dulles. It is an irony of both Sifton's and Chappell's books that even as they show religious faith to be indispensable to movements for social justice, they emphasize the need to separate church power from state power.

Yet without faith and the pessimism at its base, all would have been lost. In "The Irony of American History," published in 1952, Niebuhr defended the Christian doctrine of original sin even though it was rejected by almost all schools of modern thought, because it recognized that "all men are persistently inclined to regard themselves more highly and are more assiduously concerned with their own interests than any 'objective' view of their importance would warrant."

Southern blacks pressed on with a faith that passed modern understanding.

Civil rights leaders understood this because so many of them had studied for the ministry, but such passages don't make Niebuhr sound like someone most people would cozy up to. Fortunately, Sifton's account shows us her father's "characteristic tone of paradox, vigor, benevolence, and what Isaiah Berlin interestingly called his 'moral charm.' " Similarly, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. has remembered him as "direct, unassuming, approachable, wise, trenchant, erudite, yet disarmingly open . . . full of humor and humanity. . . . [A]n unforced humility always underlay his polemical vigor."

But the profusion of accolades suggests a certain uneasiness about Niebuhr that's not hard to fathom. While he shared "progressives' " commitment to justice, he saw too many snares and delusions in their path and in their wake, based on their blindness to evil's sway — not only over their adversaries but also within themselves. He thus denied to progressive politics precisely what draws many young people to it: its optimism, its golden tomorrows. These, he said, come only through divine grace, which comes only to those who have felt deeply convicted of their sins.

Yet it was this same, dour Niebuhr who composed "the Serenity Prayer": "God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other." Sifton explains how the prayer has been recast in anodyne form by peddlers of wall decorations and misappropriated by postwar Germans as an ancient Teutonic prayer. Alcoholics Anonymous dropped the reference to "grace" and changed the "us" to "me," turning a Niebuhrian communal supplication into a mantra for liberal self-improvement.

So it has been with Niebuhr, whose coordinates the civil rights leaders understood and many of the rest of us have lost. Time will tell whether we're also losing the republic they did so much to sustain. Blacks who summoned the faith-based courage to reenact the Exodus myth against police dogs and mobs had few illusions: "[T]heir very indifference to the issue of success or failure provided the stamina which made success possible," Niebuhr wrote in 1952 of earlier historical struggles. "Sometimes the heroes of the faith perished outside the promised land."

He hadn't yet heard of King, who was then a student absorbing his admonition that "[t]his paradoxical relation between the possible and the impossible in history proves that the frame of history is wider than the nature-time in which it is grounded. The injunction of Christ: 'Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul' (Matthew 10:28) neatly indicates the dimension of human existence which transcends the basis which human life and history have in nature."

It's uncanny and unsettling. King and others opened the hearts of astonished Northern WASPs and Jews whose ancestors had made history out of the same Exodus myth in ages past. Suddenly, Southern blacks knew best what others had forgotten: that the myth would unfold across years of wandering in the wilderness, of the worship of golden calves, of brutal conquests and other perfidies.

They pressed on with a faith that passed modern understanding. The structural changes mentioned above may have parted the waters, but Chappell understands, as did Niebuhr, the irony that it was a knowing pessimism, not litigation, that brought them through. They won believing that, on the cross, God had used the apparently foolish to shame the wise, the weak to shame the strong. They believed that the kingdom of God would enter the world only through the crucifixion.

They were not living on borrowed time; they were regenerating what we who do live that way have been borrowing *from*. They encouraged American politics to acknowledge the indispensability of faith while rejecting any imposition of doctrine. That is the central message of these two very unusual and very American books. ■