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Between Gandhi and Black Lives Matter:
The Interreligious Roots of Civil Rights Activism

Sarah Azaransky. *This Worldwide Struggle: Religion and the International Roots of the Civil Rights Movement*. Oxford University Press, 2017.

The key to Social Ethics Prof. Sarah Azaransky's book is the beginning of the subtitle, *Religion*. Because, as she states, there have been so many books written on the Civil Rights movement, she can't list them all (218). And there have been other books looking at the international connections between African Americans and Indians, exploring how India's independence movement, along with Gandhi's thought or example, had inspired African Americans. For example, see Nico Slate's 2012 book, *Colored Cosmopolitanism*, which covers some of the same figures as does Azaransky.

Azaransky argues that earlier works did not pay enough attention to the historical activists as theologians, as pioneers in intercultural approaches to religion, or as social ethicists. Her book focuses on their thoughts, which she discovers in their newspaper articles, speeches, and correspondence as well as in their better-known publications. With a more personal approach toward the activists, Azaransky delves into sensitive, private issues, such as their gender identities or sexuality. She also takes her heroes to task for sidelining women (193-94, 199). An additional focus of her book is the time frame, 1935 to 1959, and her coverage of those who counseled Martin Luther King, Jr., with only a comparatively brief account of King (no doubt because so much had been written on King already). In this way, she carves out a niche of unexplored topics in a field that already has quite a few substantial works.

Her focus would, therefore, have a particular interest for philosophers and Religious Studies professors. Already there have been projects such as Robert Birt's collection, *The Liberatory Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr: Critical Essays on the Philosopher, King*, (Lexington, 2012) and the earlier R. Greg Moses monograph, *Revolution of Conscience: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Philosophy of Nonviolence* (Guilford, 1998; Amazon Digital Services, 2018), both of which argued that King should be seen as a philosopher, and his serious contributions to our field should be better known and further studied. Azaransky is here doing similar work but focusing on other vital Civil Rights leaders who likewise should be studied and appreciated in our disciplines, such as Howard Thurman and Benjamin Mays (discussed by Moses) as well as William Stuart Nelson. Each of these leaders knew each other, followed each other to India, met with Gandhi, and were enriched by their international experience. None of them carbon-copied Gandhi. They gained some insights, not just from Gandhi, but from their overall international experience. These insights enriched their perspectives, which showed when they wrote down their theological and philosophical discernments. The first three men mentioned were Baptist ministers. Bayard Rustin, who also figures prominently in the book, was a Quaker.

Each figure furthers Christian insights into topics like racism and violence but in a way that draws on their context as practitioners of a particular Christian denomination. They are also practitioners of "interreligious receptivity." Learning about other religions, from their trips to India and elsewhere, they gain new insights into Christianity (149). Each of these men has a chapter devoted to their story and ideas. Azaransky also discusses several African American women activist-theologians, notably Pauli Murray (an Episcopal priest) and Juliette Derricotte (YWCA leader and dean of women at Fisk University).

Azaransky traces out the influence of Gandhi, even in cases where Gandhi is not directly credited. She sketches out the content of handwritten notes from Thurman, Mays, and Nelson's meetings with the Mahatma to ascertain what was asked and what answers were given by Gandhi (42-43, 68-69, 150-51). Thurman's speeches on "The Significance of Jesus," which don't mention Gandhi at all, and his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, which names Gandhi only once, all have "Gandhian bones." They focus on key themes of the Mahatma, such as fear, hate, and deception, and the antidotes of fearlessness, love, truth, and *ahimsa* or nonviolence (45). Following the example of Gandhi, who found sources in Hinduism that gave guidance to social movements regarding both ends and means, Thurman turned to Christianity. He found that the Bible had the resources Christians needed to take on racism at home and imperialism internationally. Thurman's revolutionary Christian ethic is based on God's identification with all of life (128).

Azaransky's protagonists had critical engagements with Gandhi and Gandhian approaches. For example, Mays asked Gandhi to reconcile his service in the Boer War with his nonviolent philosophy. Mays also challenged Gandhi's position on caste as too limited (68-72). Pauli Murray, during her time at the Harlem Ashram, disagreed with Gandhian emphases on "bodily discipline" and asceticism (see 95).

Benjamin Mays' story is told in the context of Howard University's central importance to Black intellectual life in the 1930s and 40s. His book, *The Negro's God*, was published right after he traveled around the world and met with Gandhi. He studied postwar disillusionment with God among some African Americans. White Christians showed by their acts of oppression, such

as enslavement, discrimination, and segregation, that they did not understand God's love, God's "parenthood of all people," or God's justice. Still, for Mays, it would be important to challenge these injustices and misconceptions using "pacific and legal methods" (64). Through pondering the example of Gandhi and India, Mays realized that nonviolence was a practical way to confront an adversary who had more power. Further, Gandhian reticence to harm one's opponent is nurtured by recognizing human mutuality, so that one wants the well-being of one's opponent (73). Azaransky insists that we see Mays' intellectual project for what it is: a sensitive cross-cultural exploration of world religions in their historical contexts, which was rare for its time and is still a good example for current religious studies (77). Later in the book, she highlights his philosophical insights in the context of his critique of racial inequality and segregation (190-91).

Not only as scholars but as activists, the book's protagonists experimented with Gandhian nonviolence. Rustin and Murray refused to give up their seats on segregated public transport (86-87, 104). Later, Rustin's protests of conscription led to his imprisonment, where he worked to challenge segregation in the prisons. Azaransky relies on a host of lesser-known sources to fill in some details of their struggles with gender identity (Murray) and sexuality (Rustin). Her sympathetic accounts show how being misunderstood or rejected was an added injustice to the racism they already experienced and a constant source of tension throughout their careers (113-15,178-80, 183).

Aside from Gandhi, several other Indian scholars and activists influenced these Civil Rights leaders, such as Krishnalal Shridharani, author of *War Without Violence*, who often visited the Harlem Ashram. On Thurman's visit to India, he was greatly impressed with Kshiti Mohan Sen and described their time together as "one of the most important spiritual experiences" of his life (39). Azaranksy also discusses Haridas Muzumdar, who had lived at the Harlem Ashram, was connected with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), and helped the Nelsons get a position working for AFSC in Calcutta (131).

In the chapter on Nelson, Azaranky recaps the Pan-African Congresses, the role of DuBois and Garvey, and how Nelson became involved in the 1921 conference. Nelson, who became "the first black president of two historically black universities," argued that racism in the U.S. could destroy democracy since racism is a "cancer in the body politic" leading to undemocratic practices (126). Nelson also challenged African Americans to practice democracy in their churches, schools, and homes. Azaransky notes, however, that Nelson did not promote women's equality or leadership in churches or schools, although this was typical at the time (127).

The Nelsons met Gandhi when he was working on his peace mission in Noakhali, a place where there had been Muslim attacks on Hindus. Thousands had been killed. The Nelsons stayed in Noakhali and helped people who had fled their homes to come back safely. Studying the lectures that Nelson gave on his tour of India, Azaransky notes that Amiya Chakravarty, who had been Tagore's personal secretary, asked Nelson to speak on inter-religious learning. Nelson spoke of the importance of "a belief in the plurality of values, the many-sidedness of the good" (143). Azaranzky calls Nelson's 1947 Calcutta lectures, *Bases of World Understanding,* an "excellent example of Christian comparative theology," and she covers its ideas in detail (143).

Chapters 5 and 6 are mostly devoted to covering Bayard Rustin. Azaransky insists that unlike other studies of Rustin, hers will focus on his contributions as a Quaker theological thinker who also made vital moral arguments in the course of his many writings and speaking engagements. Starting with his criticisms of the U.S. dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Rustin argued that "the use of violent technologies had theological implications, for it prevented human beings from experiencing the way God was available in each person" (155). Emphasizing the law of cause and effect, he noted that unfriendly actions make a more unfriendly world. It is clear to Rustin, therefore, that violence can't make a better world. He outlined a program of civil disobedience that could help to address current injustices without the use of violence. Over a decade later, Rustin was still making arguments against the arms race and possible use of nuclear weapons, arguing that "military power in today's world is incompatible with freedom, incapable of providing security, and ineffective in dealing with evil" (181).

Rustin had plans to meet Gandhi in India in 1948, but Gandhi was assassinated before Rustin could meet with him. Rustin went to India anyway and met many nonviolence activists there, developing his critique of nationalism and becoming more committed to internationalism. Azaransky presents Rustin as an advocate of nonviolence who was devoted to ending racism as a critical form of violence but who was also dedicated to ending war in its many forms. We make an error when we think we need to hate certain people as our enemies; instead, we have to see the dignity in each person.

While Azaransky wants to draw attention to Rustin's intellectual achievements, because they are often overlooked, she also gives a thorough account of his activism. She explains Rustin's daring experiments with nonviolence as part of his courageous personality and the fruits of his theological insights. Azaransky provides some background on Kwame Nkrumah and Benjamin Nnamdi "Zik" Azikiwe and their struggles for freedom from colonialism in Ghana and Nigeria. She also gives an account of Rustin's work with Bill Sutherland and George Houser in Africa for AFSC, including Rustin's dedication to an anti-nuclear testing protest in the Sahara. She also explains Rustin's direct influence on Martin Luther King, Jr., and the tactics used to challenge segregation in the U.S.

Azaransky concludes by stating that she hopes her readers can see from these examples that "transnational and interreligious encounters" can bear great fruits and push forward the cause for justice in our world. Reading the book is worthwhile. The reader gains insights into how to go about change, why it is ethically important, and is inspired to learn about these brave souls who enacted their philosophies decades before our current time. Their message is today still dear to us and inspirational. But some readers will wonder whether the insights of Gandhi or these Civil Rights leaders are still relevant in our day and age, when people in general and activists in particular may be less likely to be members of traditional Christian churches. Why might today's reader want to learn about the interreligious insights of these historical activists?

Recently, Georgia Congressman John Lewis passed away. At Lewis' memorial service, Senior Pastor Raphael Warnock of Ebenezer Baptist Church quoted Thurman to make the point that African Americans embraced and transformed a religion preached to them by slaveholders, reinterpreting its message to focus on freedom, justice and dignity to all. While not all of the current younger generation of activists have that same Christian faith of Lewis, many are engaged in reinterpreting the faith that has come down to them through the Civil Rights era.

While continuing to emphasize justice, some reinterpret Christianity, rejecting its patriarchy as Gandhi came to reject caste, using the language of God as a great and female spirit.

Co-founders of #BlackLivesMatter promote liberation theology, transatlantic Ifa spiritual connections with ancestors, and solidarity with Black queer, transgender, and disabled persons as well as the undocumented. And, although their political opponents repeatedly characterize their movement as filled with hate, the young activists themselves frequently express their motivation as love and express that their goal is creating a Beloved Community (Vincent).

Movements like the Poor People's Campaign, led by two Christian Ministers, William Barber II and Liz Theoharis, weave together topics that are spiritual, secular, international, and inter-species intersectional. But that doesn't mean the religious focus of this book has become irrelevant. Azaransky has highlighted how activists central to the Civil Rights movement already critiqued narrow and traditional ideas of Christianity and pioneered interreligious experience and transformations. Those same insights and interpretations of the past, chronicled in this book, are still creatively unfolding in spiritually inspired movements today. And so, it would be important to read this book, both to let go of any erroneous, narrow ideas about the past Civil Rights movements and to gain inspiration and insights from past struggles to help shape the present.

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