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REVIEW ARTICLE

A Leftist Religious Internationalism?

The Social Gospel in American Religion: A History, by Christopher H. Evans, New York, NY, New York University Press, 2017, 304pp., \$28 US [Paper], ISBN: 9781479888573

This Worldwide Struggle: Religion and the International Routes of the Civil Rights Movement, by Sarah Azaransky, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017, 296pp., \$35US [Hardcover], ISBN: 9780190262204

Both the United States and the international order face a Trumpian crisis in political governance.¹ Increasingly, progressives have sought a role for religiously grounded political philosophies to respond to this crisis capable of avoiding the stale solutions of Washington's foreign policy establishment, undergirding an alternative with a moral force that transcends both economic materialism and *realpolitik*.² These are not new problems, and in order to solve our current crisis we must revisit old solutions. We must look to the historical failures and successes of international progressive religious ideologies and the theological visions that underpin them. Two books by Christopher Evans and Sarah Azaransky do precisely this, chronicling the radical economic and racial political paths forged by transnational networks of religious leaders. They also document a moment in which imperialism masqueraded as humanitarianism, and center-left intellectuals struggled to articulate a coherent and unified vision for the national order.

Developing a consistent anti-racist and anti-imperialist internationalism has proven an elusive task even for those who sought to meld Christianity with supra-national visions. As Michael G. Thompson's *For God and Globe* pointed out,³ American foreign policy mandarins eventually turned even an explicit ecumenical and international project into a tool for enshrining US priorities into the founding documents of the international order. Nevertheless, developing a consistent internationalist theology and politics would go a long way to solving many of the left's issues abroad and at home. A religious left, a left capable of balancing traditionalist religious values with a progressive economic message, has captured the imaginations of some progressives, offering a 'moral and spiritual response' to white nationalism and the 'neutral language of economic or contemporary social science.'⁴ Such a vision aligns the redistributionist principles of Christian thinkers with leftist critiques of capitalism.⁵ Parallel to the religious discussion runs the increasing importance of transnational black activists in transforming

¹Kevin Mattson, 'The Trumpian Personality', *Dissent* Winter 2017. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/revisiting-frankfurt-school-authoritarian-personality-trump>; Samuel Moyn, 'Beyond Liberal Internationalism', *Dissent* Winter 2017. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/left-foreign-policy-beyond-liberal-internationalism>.

²Daniel Bessner, 'The Specter of Liberal Internationalism', *Dissent* Fall 2017. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/specter-liberal-internationalism-brookings-foreign-policy>.

³See Gene Zubovitch's review of *For God and Globe* at The Immanent Frame, 19 May 2016: <https://tif.ssrc.org/2016/05/19/god-and-globe/>

⁴Matthew Sitman, 'Against Moral Austerity: On the Need for a Christian Left', *Dissent* Summer 2017. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/moral-austerity-need-christian-left>.

⁵Elizabeth Stoker, 'Why the Left Needs Religion', *Dissent* Fall 2015. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/why-left-needs-religion>.

global education and bringing attention to inequality.⁶ Combine these factors, and a black religious internationalism offers a viable choice after a search stretching back the First World War. The hypocrisy of an internationalism based on American power, combined with the socially and economically conservative assumptions built into the post-1945 order made Trump's xenophobia rewarding for iconoclasts foreign and domestic.⁷ That is, the mix of values represented by the notion of a 'religious left' deserve a rigorous thought experiment whatever the group's electoral sway worldwide.⁸

Azaransky and Evans's work helps to refresh our memory of this history, suggesting paths that led to both arrivals and dead ends. Evans's book explains the decline of Mainline Protestantism and the rise of Moral Majority politics.⁹ He traces the theological and intellectual growth of the Social Gospel movement and how conservative evangelical political engagement stood as the fruit of both the Social Gospel's shortcomings and its successes. He sees the Social Gospel, a philosophy which counted African-Americans among its more radical proponents, as something past in need of reconstruction. Azaransky's book tells a story of success and resilience. She hones in specifically on black intellectuals' international travels and explains how these routes changed and strengthened each of her protagonists as theologians and militants.

Evans's work gets to the root of the philosophical flaws that permitted the Social Gospel's failures at home and its cooptation abroad (a trajectory that has historically made it a suspect option for progressive action). The Social Gospel reached its apex in the late nineteenth century as theologians, largely Protestant, began to emphasize the link between heavenly salvation and action-based Christian faith on earth. While most accounts of the Social Gospel focus on its heyday around 1900, Evans's comprehensive work traces the long arc of evangelical and mainline Protestant philosophy from its early nineteenth-century revivalist and Unitarian roots, to the pietist and missionary movements of the mid-nineteenth century, winding through the struggles and culture wars of the Civil Rights and anti-war eras, to the dawn of the modern Christian Right. Evans opens with the diverging theologies of Evangelicalism and mainline Protestantism and gets to the heart of the risks and rewards of the left evangelicalism invoked by leaders like Jim Wallis.¹⁰ A combination of postmillennial evangelicals like Josiah Strong and liberal Protestants such as Richard Eli, Henry George, and Washington Gladden all advocated for direct changes to the national economy. These economic changes were to dovetail with the Christianization of America, either through conversions or the imbuing of civic character with Christ's ethical sentiments. Other Christian writers like Walter Rauschenbusch supported socialist ideas while remaining wary of the socialist party. Despite these radical roots, many white Social Gospel theorists fell into an embrace of Woodrow Wilson's imperialist internationalism and the 'holy crusade' of World War I. This embrace would turn to shock after the war shattered an optimistic reading of human capacity. The failure of Woodrow Wilson's internationalism seemed to equal the

⁶History of South African student protests reflects inequality's grip', *The Conversation* 9 October 2016. <https://theconversation.com/history-of-south-african-student-protests-reflects-inequalitys-grip-66279>.

⁷Udi Greenberg, 'Against Conservative Internationalism', A Review of *The Conservative Human Rights Revolution: European Identity, Transnational Politics, and the Origins of the European Convention* by Marco Duranti Oxford University Press, 2017, 528 pp. and *Christian Human Rights* by Samuel Moyn University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015, 264 pp. *Dissent* Spring 2017. <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/conservative-internationalism-review-marco-duranti-samuel-moyn-christian-human-rights>.

⁸Luke Bretherton, 'Blue Labor Welcomes Religious Belief', *The Guardian* 3 May 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/may/03/blue-labour-religious-belief>. Daniel Cox, 'Don't Bet on the Emergence of a 'Religious Left'', *FiveThirtyEight* 20 April 2017. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/dont-bet-on-the-emergence-of-a-religious-left/>.

⁹Lyman Stone, "'Mainline' Churches are Emptying. The Political Effects could be Huge", *Vox* 14 July 2017. <https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/7/14/15959682/evangelical-mainline-voting-patterns-trump>.

¹⁰The least of these: Even evangelical Christians are not uniformly right-wing', *The Economist* 27 February 2016. <https://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21693555-politics-american-christians-more-nuanced-sometimes-assumed-not-all>.

failure of a white-centric religious internationalism at achieving the universal stability it purportedly sought.

Within Evans's Social Gospel community, those intellectuals that addressed race directly represented the most radical political projects, often putting them in a principled minority. Many pioneering intellectuals were already thinking through the relationship between the social gospel and racism, often called America's 'original sin.'¹¹ Leaders like Gladden, who read and praised W.E.B. Dubois's work, even addressed the plight of African-Americans and worked in parallel to black Social Gospel activists such as Reverdy Ransom and Henry Hugh Proctor. Additionally, thinkers such as Borden Parker Bowne, the founder of the Boston Personalist movement exerted influence on future civil rights leader Martin Luther King. Evans also addresses the differing economic models employed by different religious traditions. Some Protestants, like William Dwight Porter Bliss, expressed frustration at the timid proposals put forth by Gladden and actively called for socialist redistribution. Others proved more influenced by the search for an 'ethics' of Jesus carried out by German theologians such as Albrecht Ritschl and Adolf von Harnack. Others yet combined a rudimentary theology with the new social scientific methods emerging from the US's nascent research universities like the University of Chicago. These efforts dovetailed with simultaneous development of Reform Judaism, which mirrored Protestant social efforts and Catholic social teaching, sharing similar goals but keeping a political and theological distance from the two aforementioned currents. In short, the Social Gospel was more than merely the Christian 'Good News.'

The Social Gospel found new life in the interwar period, and again during the struggle for Civil Rights, which applied Social Gospel rhetoric in constructing its own moral basis. The work of Howard Thurman and Benjamin May would inspire the social questioning and the civil disobedience that marked the struggle for Civil Rights. But despite these successes, the philosophy proved a victim of its own success. Evans describes the marginalization of racial justice despite its role as the Social Gospel's most effective political, social, and economic lens. In Evans' narrative, race appears peripherally, not because he ignores it, but because the Social Gospel's own failure to incorporate blackness as a philosophical, theological, and political paradigm proved a major factor of its undoing, both domestically and on the international stage.

While Evans hints at a transnational, racially conscious religious internationalism as a viable escape route for the American religious left, his work focuses on the transformation of the Social Gospel from a social movement to an institutional force within mainline Protestantism. For anyone versed in the back-and-forth over Niebuhr's pragmatic 'Christian realist' embrace of American power as a bulwark against Communism and fascism, the second ironic decline of a white radical Social Gospel and its replacement (both politically and organizationally) by Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority should feel familiar.¹² The Social Gospel's inevitable self-critique would also sow the seeds of its decline as mainline Protestant denominations reckoned with the darker side of white liberal and progressive idealism and moved on to more radical alternatives. If Evans' book shows us the rise and fall of mainstream Liberal Protestant progressivism, its focus at the close of the book on the successful Civil Rights coalition also tugs at a tantalizing possibility. Progressives can escape the spiritual-materialist and religious-atheist binaries, in order to break the vicious cycle of restorationism both in the hearts of the faithful and in our public discourse.

¹¹Jim Wallis, 'Racism: America's Original Sin', *Sojourners* 29 July 2013. <https://sojo.net/articles/remembering-trayvon/racism-americas-original-sin>.

¹²Matthew Berke, 'The Disputed Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr', *First Things* November 1992. <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1992/11/004-the-disputed-legacy-of-reinhold-niebuhr>. Edmund N. Santurri, 'Reinhold Niebuhr, Barack Obama, and the Sense of a Reality that "judges yet forgives"', *Library of America* 3 February, 2016. <https://www.loa.org/news-and-views/1118-reinhold-niebuhr-barack-obama-and-the-sense-of-a-reality-that-judges-yet-forgives>.

While Evans focuses on domestic developments, Azaransky shows us what Evans merely hints at: that black Christian radicalism was always a transnational movement. Azaransky presents a focused and solid evidentiary case for a black Protestant construction of an international force and well before the rise of urban black militancy on the heels of the Great Migration to the North. She structures the book around intellectual genealogies, biography, and travel. She details how in the 1940s and 1950s, young black theologians invited by Howard University president Mordecai Johnson—among them Benjamin Mays, Howard Thurman, and William Stuart Nelson—transformed the religion department into a Mecca of black theological inquiry tying the movement to the black liberation theology that would succeed it thirty years later. She details how the theological work of these black intellectuals on the American Friends Service Committee and the Fellowship of Reconciliation developed a nonviolence movement that would sweep the nation and receive major attention abroad. These authors developed the moral basis for this movement through educational exchanges. Thus, they influenced and were influenced by anti-colonial movements as far away as India, Nigeria, and Ghana.

Azaransky revises our often binary portrayal of early twentieth-century black militancy. This movement stood distinct from Marcus Garvey's Black nationalism and DuBois' historical-materialist internationalism. Citing religion scholar Thomas Tweed, Azaransky argues that at the heart of religious consciousness, lies a 'locative approach' that takes as its center the act of 'crossing and dwelling.' In this framework, Martin Luther King and his intellectual-spiritual predecessors sought to expose Christianity as a theological category instead of a fixed set of cultural assumptions. King and his mentors did this by 'crossing' the segregated but relatively progressive spaces offered by the Young Men organizations and 'dwelling' in the Indian religious traditions that laid at the heart of the independence struggle.

An interreligious exchange of ideas, especially with Mohandas Gandhi, reshaped these black theological approaches, placing race and colonialism at the center of interpreting Christian narratives. Far from idolizing and canonizing Gandhi's religious principles, however, black authors, especially Thurman in his nonviolent campaigns in South Africa, pushed back against Gandhi's reticence to address racial inequalities. Nelson, the dean of Howard's School of Religion and a founder of the university's Institute of Religion, observed the ineffectiveness of Gandhi's later years, in which the latter increasingly fell from the center of Indian politics, unable to influence India's post-independence path. With Gandhi weakened, Nelson turned toward Bengali authors such as Amiya Chakravarty who helped organize Nelson's talk in India on the need of a plurality of values focused on notions of 'the good' in all of its forms. That's not to say Gandhi proved completely irrelevant. Leaders like Pauli Murray and Blanche Nelson still drew on Gandhi's religious insights, especially on his Hindu religious centers, by participating in Christian communal communities like the Harlem Ashram and crossing the religious divide by starting western schools in marginalized Muslim communities that taught Arabic and the Koran alongside standard Western subjects.¹³

Azaransky also covers the long-underemphasized black women, especially YWCA workers Bailey Thurman, Juliette Derricotte, and Celestine Smith who networked in international organizations such as UNESCO, the inter-American system of human rights promotion, and the Council on African Affairs in order to raise awareness of black-led anti-racist struggles that universalized the Christian story. This universal meaning drew its strength not from doctrinal debates but, as Howard Thurman and Rabindranath Tagore discovered, from a 'fellowship' which transcended creed, race, or national origin. Authors and activists, such as Thurman in his *Jesus and the Disinherited*, channeled this universal meaning through

¹³Sarah Azaransky, 'Harlem's Experiment in Interracial, Pacifist Community', *The Christian Century* 21 May 2014. <https://www.christiancentury.org/blogs/archive/2014-05/harlems-experiment-interracial-pacifist-community>.

Gospel analogies. Jim Crow echoed Roman occupation; Jesus, indeed God himself, acted as a (nonviolent) political resister and marginalized actor against imperial ambitions; The Roman captain who begged Jesus to heal his servant (Mt. 8: 5–13; Lk. 7:1–10) stood as an example of a humble ally ready to temporarily lay aside his status to fight with the marginalized of the world. Analogies of race and empire also seared themselves into the minds of those like Benjamin Mays, who taught Howard Thurman. He witnessed the hopelessly anti-democratic white ‘coup d’état’ in Wilmington, North Carolina alongside the triumphalist racist rise of the US empire in the 1898 Spanish American War.¹⁴ The Roman imperial analogy also proved a strong motivation for Pauli Murray, who fought for admission into University of North Carolina, cofounded the National Organization for Women, and gained religious ordination in 1977. She directly linked religiously inspired civil rights protest to anti-colonial, non-violent internationalism.

Azaransky ends positively, arguing that despite a dip in anti-colonialist sentiments with the onset of the Cold War, black internationalism and comparative theological inquiry provided the basis for activities ranging from nonviolent protest to theologically-based African aesthetic movements. Azaransky ends with a call to ‘consistently reimagine our received traditions—both religious and democratic—so that they might enact the freedom they promise (p.216).’ Intellectuals and activists continue the struggle for a racially-conscious, economically aware, and anti-colonial international movement. Black internationalism can expand to include Black Catholics and Muslims, chronicled in books like Mary Shawn Copeland’s collection *Uncommon Faithfulness* (2009) Sohail Daulatzai’s *Black Star, Crescent Moon* (2012) which recall the Pan-African experiences of Muslim leaders such as Malcom X and Catholic organizations such as the National Black Catholic Clergy Conference. They can also include lesser-known Civil Rights figures in the US heartland such as Zan Holmes and Clara Luper

Azaransky’s more optimistic history serves the internationalist left as viable model for long-term activism better than Evans’s tale of cyclical rise and decline. That said, in one sense, Evans’ pessimism about the cycle of self-critique gifts us with a better warning than the ‘long arc’ ethos of Azaransky’s narrative. Since Trump’s election, black militancy and political participation has rebounded. That said, even as black internationalist anti-colonial critiques can serve as political fuel and a unifying glue—as shown by the efforts of Rev. William Barber who spoke about racism and religious extremism to an international Vatican conference¹⁵ last November—they risk repelling, as Rev. Jeremiah Wright found during the heated 2008 presidential campaign. During Election 2008, Wright’s post-9/11 reminder that ‘[US imperial] violence begets [Palestinian] violence ... terrorism begets terrorism’ generated fierce controversy in both the conservative and the mainstream press.¹⁶ Lumped in with decontextualized extracts from that sermon were other now-familiar motifs linking the Roman Empire to white supremacy and Jesus to black marginalization.¹⁷ Famously ‘damning America’ when it dehumanized its own citizens, Wright compared the failures of the Roman, British, and US empires to the steadfastness and righteousness of God.¹⁸

¹⁴David S. Cecelski and Timothy B. Tyson, *Democracy Betrayed: The Wilmington Race Riot of 1898 and its Legacy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2000).

¹⁵Cash Michaels, ‘Dr. Barber Attends Global Conference at the Vatican’, *Richmond Free Press* 5 January, 2018. <http://richmondfreepress.com/news/2018/jan/05/dr-barber-attends-global-conference-vatican/>. ‘Letter of the Holy Father Francis to the participants in the International Conference “From Populorum progressio to Laudato si”’, *Vatican City* 23 November, 2017. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/11/24/171124g.html>.

¹⁶Jeremiah Wright, ‘America’s Chickens Coming Home to Roost’, Released on 1 April 2008. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUtZnQ0REFA&t=166s>.

¹⁷Ben Smith, ‘Wright on film’, *Politico* 12 March, 2008. <https://www.politico.com/blogs/ben-smith/2008/03/wright-on-film-006974>.

¹⁸Jeremiah Wright, ‘Confusing God and Government’, Released on 1 April 2008. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07pmQiEp57E&t=179s>.

Embracing black internationalism means striking a balance between the palatable planks of its platform connected to canonical figures like Martin Luther King, but also those prophetic portions of his work which condemn the US government as ‘the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today: my own government.’¹⁹

While such a position may prove easy to take during overtly repressive administrations, a confrontational posture could prove isolating in the short run under administrations that put diversity, human rights, and black culture at the center of their agendas. As the long-running debates surrounding Obama’s national and international legacy between Ta-Nehisi Coates and Cornel West show today, practicing a black internationalism against symbolic allies, as West does when criticizing Obama’s ‘563 drone strikes ... and 550 Palestinian children killed’, blurs lines between progressive and radical.²⁰

If Azaransky and Evans share one conclusion, despite their diverging historical objects and outcomes, it is this: Radical black religion, united by practices of justice and western principles but also open to non-western theological perspectives, may go a long way to unscrambling these old alliances. The religious element in King, West, and Wright’s critiques transforms them from pure laments into optimistic clarion calls for America to ‘come home’ in the foreign policy arena.²¹ Radical religion, unlike mainstream social Christianity, does not collapse under the weight of pessimistic critique, but rather holds to a prophetic ‘audacious hope’²² in a perennial fight for national and international transformation.

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¹⁹Brandon M. Terry, ‘MLK Now’, *Boston Review* 9 January 2018. <http://bostonreview.net/race/brandon-m-terry-mlk-now>. Benjamin Hedin, ‘Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Searing Antiwar Speech, Fifty Years Later’, *New Yorker*. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/martin-luther-king-jr-s-searing-antiwar-speech-fifty-years-later>.

²⁰Cornel West, ‘Ta-Nehisi Coates is the Neoliberal Face of the Black Freedom Struggle’, *The Guardian* 17 December 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/dec/17/ta-nehisi-coates-neoliberal-black-struggle-cornel-west>.

²¹George McGovern, ‘Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Democratic National Convention in Miami Beach, Florida’, 14 July 1972. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=25967>.

²²Jeremiah Wright, ‘The Audacity to Hope’, Reprinted in *The Atlantic* 16 March 2008. <https://www.theatlantic.com/daily-dish/archive/2008/03/for-the-record/218866/>.