
This anthology, edited by Professors Davis Houck and David Dixon, assembles one hundred and thirty speeches made by advocates of and participants in the Civil Rights Movement in the period beginning in 1954, the year of the United States Supreme Court’s seminal decision in Brown v. Board of Education,¹ and ending in 1965, the year of the passage of the federal Voting Rights Act. Searching the nation for the textual, video, and audio materials put into print in this volume, the editors argue that “rhetoric was central to the civil rights movement” and must be taken seriously. (5) They “seek to offer empirical evidence for the oft-stated claim that the Judeo-Christian religion was the rhetorical hinge on which the movement pivoted” and to recover many of the heretofore lost voices and texts of the movement in order to appreciate the full rhetorical diversity of the movement’s many participants as well as to offer new avenues of historical and critical inquiry. (6-7)

Guided by “rhetorical ecumenism rather than a narrow ‘great speaker’ approach to the black freedom movement” (11), the speakers selected by Houck and Dixon include a number of black clergy—such as Ralph David Abernathy, Fred Shuttlesworth, Wyatt Tee Walker, James Bevel, and (because of copyright costs) one selection by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.—as well as “numerous brave white southern clergy who were trying to lead typically recalcitrant all-white congregations to a more enlightened understanding of race relations.” (10) (Of course, courage was also displayed by black clergy and others who routinely faced the subordinating efforts of those opposed to black Americans’ quest for freedom, dignity, and racial justice.) In addition, the anthology contains speeches by other important figures, including Dr. Benjamin Mays, A. Philip Randolph, Adam Clayton Powell, Branch Rickey, Roy Wilkins, Dick Gregory, and Morris Abram. The editors specifically note, interestingly, the relatively few number of women

¹ 347 U.S. 483 (1954).
speakers (Ella Baker, Mary McLeod Bethune, Fannie Lou Hamer, Mamie Till-Bradley) contained in the book, and assure us that this level of representation reflects not their lack of effort in seeking a diverse selection of speakers, but the fact that few speeches by women involved in the movement survived and can be recovered. (685)

Recognizing that the Civil Rights Movement pre- and post-dates the years 1954 through 1965, the editors persuasively maintain that events occurring within this twelve-year period are pivotal moments in the freedom struggle.2 Brown v. Board of Education; the murder of fourteen-year old Emmett Till (the son of the aforementioned Mamie Till-Bradley) in Money, Mississippi; Governor Orval Faubus’s use of the state national guard to prevent the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas; the assassination of civil rights activist Medgar Evers; the 1963 March on Washington; the death of four young black girls in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama—these and other signal moments form the historical and contextual backdrop for the speakers’ arguments and articulations of what Houck and Davis call “the Judeo-Christian foundations of the modern civil rights movement.” (3) Biblical teaching, they argue, was “an organic whole with any freedom-seeking people” and “the Scriptures were often not so much a historical or philosophical support for civil rights as they were an animating, constitutive force behind it. God called the movement into being and not vice versa.” (12)

The focus of the anthology is on the rhetoric employed by persons speaking for civil rights and against the then-settled white supremacist and pro-segregationist order. Thus, any paraphrasing of the contents of the anthology’s speeches runs the very real risk of diluting or distorting the speaker’s intended message and chosen words and phraseology. While any informed assessment of the editors’ claim of the centrality of religious rhetoric in the movement requires a close examination of each selected sermon or speech, an enterprise beyond the scope of this review, the following passages may provide a helpful sample for those interested in the editors’ thesis.

In May 1954, Reverend A. Powell Davies delivered a sermon a few days after the Supreme Court’s issuance of its decision in Brown. Discussing “the story of the young man who came to Jesus to have a discussion ... as to who was his neighbor,” (42) Davies stated:

---

And you will remember that Jesus told him the story of the Good Samaritan, and then made him decide which of the three, the priest, the Levite, or the despised Samaritan was a true neighbor to the man who had been robbed, and lay by the side of the road. The young man, no matter how he felt about this story, seems to have made a prompt decision. The Samaritan, he said, was quite clearly the good neighbor. And then Jesus, for whom theory has only limited charm, greatly surprised the young man. "Go," said Jesus, "and do thou likewise."  

And the command still remains. As it always will until we acknowledge from our hearts that there is only one race—the human race—and that the neighbors of each of us are all of us, everywhere throughout the world. (42)  

In a June 1954 speech Mary McLeod Bethune told an audience that "[w]hen I first heard of the Supreme Court decision, I lifted my voice to utter the first inspiration of my heart—and I said, 'Let the people praise Thee, O God! Let ALL the people praise thee.'" (50-51) And in his August 1954 speech, *The Disturbing Christ*, Dr. J.R. Brokhoff urged that "Jesus . . . aroused animosity by his disregard of . . . racial barriers." (67) In light of *Brown*, every law still existing enforcing segregation is unconstitutional. The church is disturbed today because it is the most segregated organization in America, and the church's pronouncements against segregation are disturbing the non-Christian forces of our land. (70)  

In another speech delivered in October 1955 at the Sharp Street Methodist Church in Baltimore, Maryland, Dr. T.R.M. Howard shared with his audience his view that "we must have the religion of Jesus Christ in an integrated society. Religion and democracy have been cooperating forces in American life." (130)  

Consider an additional sermon discussing the post-*Brown* responsibility of Christians. Reverend D. Perry Glinn, speaking to his Hodgenville, Kentucky congregation in November 1956, remarked:  

Color is of no consequence with God. The same God is Father of white and colored, and they are brothers and sisters in Christ, united by a tie that is greater than color or race. The very nature of the gospel condemns racial prejudice, for all men are equally in need of the grace of God, equally worthy of salvation and equally members of the family of God. (204)  

3. Luke 10:37 (Biblical citations are taken from the King James Version).
Other speeches given in the later years covered by the anthology discussed the importance of religion to the struggle for freedom from racial subjugation and oppression. Ella Josephine Baker: “You know, I always like to think that the very God who gave us life, gave us liberty. And if we don’t have liberty it is because somebody else has stood between us and that which God has granted us.” (686) Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, speaking at Medgar Evers’s memorial service in 1964:

Our generation can claim Medgar Evers as a star of destiny, its martyr of our age. For Medgar helped in a dramatic way to bring about the changes he will never see. Like Moses, he saw from afar that Promised Land into which his people must enter. (768)

And (last but certainly not least) Fannie Lou Hamer:

Every night of my life that I lay down, before I go to sleep, I pray for those people that despitefully use me. And Christ said, “The meek shall inherit the earth.” And he said before one tenth of one dot of his word would fail, heaven and earth would pass away, but his word would stand forever. And I believe tonight that one day in Mississippi, if I have to die for this, we shall overcome “We shall overcome” means something to me tonight. We shall overcome mean[s] as much to me tonight as, “Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.” Because if grace has saved a wretch like me [then] we shall overcome. Because he said, “Seek and ye shall find. Knock and the door will be opened. Aks [sic] and it shall be given.” It was a long time but now we see. We can see, we can design the new day. . . . (792)

While the foregoing cannot adequately display the depth, breadth, and rhetorical approaches taken and devices employed in the large number of speeches and sermons compiled in the anthology, this collection (with “biocritical headnote[s]” (14) and bibliography) provides a valuable resource for the study of the role of religious rhetoric and liberation theology in the Civil Rights Movement. Those interested in a thematic approach or subject matter or denominational grouping of the material, or in reading examples of the use of Biblical scriptures by supporters of racial separatism, will find instead a chronological catalogue of speeches by “racial progressives.” (9) The editors considered but ultimately decided against a non-sequential structuring of the volume, and also decided to leave to others the task of documenting the pro-segregationist positions of racists like “Preacher” Edgar Ray Killen and other clergy who “used the Scriptures to advocate

4. As quoted in the book and not corrected for grammar or punctuation.
a ponderous gradualism in which 'extremists' on both sides were roundly condemned for their provocations." (9) As I completed reading this lengthy volume I found myself considering whether these structural and substantive editorial choices missed an opportunity to offer a nuanced analysis of the different and oppositional uses of religion in the Civil Rights Movement era. But this observation, the mere quibble of a reviewer, is not intended as unconstructive criticism of this important and worthwhile contribution to the literature.

Ronald Turner*

* Alumnae Law Center Professor of Law, University of Houston Law Center, Houston, Texas.