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Author/s:  
Scalmer, S

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

The African American movement for civil rights looms large in the history of nonviolent politics and in the scholarship that it has inspired. This is a reflection of the scope and achievements of the movement, and of the creativity and courage of its adherents. But it also partly because of the power of the American state (which grants its political life an importance to many peoples, all over the world) and partly because key institutions of the global intellectual order (major universities, publishing houses, journals, and conferences) are American, too.

In this crowded historiographical field, the transnational inspirations and connections of African American activists began to attract systematic attention more than a decade ago. Very many scholarly articles, edited collections, and several monographs have closely examined the relationship between Gandhi's political experiments in India and South Africa and nonviolent political struggles in the United States. Sarah Azaransky's new book, handsomely produced, is a useful contribution to this already substantial field.

Azaransky offers a group portrait of a cluster of black Christian intellectuals and activists from the 1930s through to the later 1950s. Her chosen subjects are mostly well known: Howard Thurman, Benjamin Mays, Bayard Rustin, James Farmer, Pauli Murray, William Stuart Nelson, Blanche Nelson. Many have attracted full biographical treatment; nearly all have been granted substantial attention in thematic works. The novelty of her book, then, lies not in her identification of their embeddedness in transnational political networks, but rather in her more concentrated analysis of the intellectual contributions of her subjects and in her insistence that their theological arguments merit much greater recognition than these have previously been granted.

Across six chapters, Azaransky traces the sustained engagement of black Christian activists with Indian struggles and with the religious life of its people. She considers the sometimes repeated visits of these activists to India; their observations of the struggle for Indian Home Rule and then of an independent democratic state; their conversations with Gandhi, Nehru, and other Indian leaders; their sensitive interest in religious traditions in India; their capacity to view Indian campaigns and society with critical as well as sympathetic eyes; and their ability to creatively meditate on these

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experiences and ideas, so as to develop new conceptions of ethics and morality, and new resources for nonviolent struggles for justice.

The transnational examination exhaustively considers what African Americans brought to and took from international exchanges. It is comparatively less curious in what their partners brought to and learned from such exchanges. Only in Chapters 5 and 6 do these matters receive fuller attention, wherein Azaransky examines Bayard Rustin's proposals for a program of nonviolent action in Africa, Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah's American connections and his nonviolent activism, and the campaign against French nuclear testing in the Sahara in the later 1950s. These sections of the book seemed to me especially valuable.

Azaransky's substantial expertise in religious studies equips her with the capacity to draw out the theological context in which her chosen activists thought and acted as Christians. It leads her to emphasize their pioneering of "interreligious" intellectual exchanges. It thereby brings out more fully the ways in which creative nonviolent action was often tied to creative religious thinking. And it consequently enhances our understanding of civil rights activism and of the history of nonviolent politics more broadly.

The strengths of the book imply possible limitations. The decision to focus on a group of key individuals sometimes leads to a relative neglect of the import of those institutions and networks that provided the infrastructure necessary to make transnational and interreligious learning possible. The strong attention devoted to intellectual contributions—essays, books, lectures, letters—means that the practical bases of activism are not treated so fully, and that the difficulty of the passage from "thought" to "action" may not be given due attention. The book's deliberate placement in the field of religious studies and intellectual history means that the author does not engage very fully with earlier works that have examined the transnational dimensions of the civil rights movement or the processes of transnational political exchange more generally.

Azaransky's decision to limit her investigation nonetheless brings substantial benefits, and her book will be welcomed by those with an interest in peace and change. Her prose is engaging. Her historical imagination is empathetic. Her conclusions arise from a rich exposition, and will be relevant to activists as well as scholars. In an epilogue, the author lays out three "interrelated principles" expressed in her subjects' lives. First, that our moral and democratic visions can be "challenged" and "sharpened" by engagement with those from different religions and different parts of the world. Second, that such engagement requires self-awareness and self-examination. Third, that such engagement must be critical (acknowledging that others are marked by their own limits), but that such criticism should not be a barrier to listening and learning. Azaransky's subjects embodied these lessons. Their lives—carefully considered in this book—encourage all of us to such openness and creativity in the quest for freedom and peace.

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# Author Manuscript

Sean Scalmer  
*University of Melbourne*