

The Washington Post Book World  
February 15, 2004 Sunday

### Keeping the Faith

A scholar examines the roots of an epic American struggle.

Reviewed by David J. Garrow

**PAGES** 3, 4; **LENGTH:** 1088 words

### A STONE OF HOPE: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow

By David L. Chappell. Univ. of North Carolina. 344 pp. \$34.95

Advance notices for *A Stone of Hope* have heralded David Chappell's new volume as a "stunning reinterpretation of the American civil rights movement" and "one of the three or four most important books" yet written about a struggle that continues to fascinate writers and readers alike. Given the plethora of previous histories, an apparently novel interpretation can generate buzz. Yet experienced scholars will appreciate how such claims of novelty often involve more sizzle than steak.

*A Stone of Hope* brings together articles that Chappell, a historian at the University of Arkansas, has previously published in professional journals, and some awkward seams have survived his efforts to combine them. Copious endnotes and an extensive bibliographical essay result in more than 150 pages of back matter supporting 190 pages of narrative text.

Yet the professed originality of Chappell's three-part argument will no doubt attract critical attention. He devotes his first two chapters to asserting that mid-20th-century American liberalism gave no significant sustenance or support to African Americans' quest for racial equality. Then, building upon that contention, he argues that the success of the African-American freedom struggle during the 1950s and 1960s stemmed largely, if not wholly, from the movement's grounding in what he terms the "irrational wellsprings" of religion. In stark contrast to what Chappell claims is liberalism's "inability to inspire solidarity, sacrifice, and commitment," Southern black activists mustered the courage and devotion necessary to prevail from the "the irrational traditions of prophetic, revivalistic religion."

That religiously grounded strength stood in yet further contrast to what Chappell says was white segregationists' surprising failure to mobilize religious resources on behalf of their side in the struggle. "White supremacists in the South failed to get their churches to give their cause active support," he writes, because "white religious leaders of the South did not care deeply enough about segregation to make its defense the most important thing in their lives." He acknowledges "the abiding racism of most of the white southern clergy" but observes that most ministers were "unwilling to claim biblical sanction" for segregation and that their churches "failed in any meaningful way to join the anti-civil rights movement." Chappell thus posits a surprising historical irony: While both liberals and segregationists failed to create "a basis for solidarity and self-sacrifice," "old-time religion" provided that crucial resource not for the conservative white side in the struggle but for the transformative African-American one.

Chappell's argument is most compelling in its simplest form and loses both strength and credibility as its details are fleshed out. His opinionated assault on liberalism has little relationship to the civil rights movement, and is characterized by an odd and unpersuasive attempt to bash Arthur Schlesinger Jr., one of the mid-20th century's leading liberal voices, for allegedly giving insufficient attention to civil rights. Chappell's attack also wholly ignores the widespread inspirational impact that one of liberalism's landmark achievements, the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, had on black civic activists all across the South.

When Chappell looks directly at those activists, his portrait is sometimes vastly oversimplified. Historians and theologians have emphasized in countless tomes how religious faith helped sustain the black freedom struggle, but Chappell overreaches badly when he asserts that for "many participants" the movement was "primarily a religious event" rather than "a social and political event that had religious overtones." His comments about the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) are repeatedly imprecise, as when he erroneously writes that outgoing SNCC chairman John Lewis, now a U.S. representative from Georgia, was expelled from the group in 1966. He was not. Although his treatment of Martin Luther King Jr. is generally on the mark, most readers will probably wonder what sort of proofreading error produced Chappell's otherwise bizarre assertion that King believed "there was no moral superiority in the choice of nonviolent over violent means."

While Chappell's treatment of African-American activism is not terribly novel, his three chapters on segregationists are considerably more valuable and original. Relatively little scholarly effort to date has focused upon the movement's opponents, and Chappell's interpretation may help stimulate significant new work. He begins by asking "why were the enemies of the civil rights movement . . . so weak," and quickly -- perhaps too quickly -- identifies white political leaders' inability to mobilize white churches as a large part of the answer. That failure had two root causes, he suggests. Given the absence of any plausible biblical support for racial segregation, white racist clergymen made no significant oratorical contribution to the segregationist cause.

But even more important, Chappell says, was white leaders' overriding preoccupation with respectability and their attendant unwillingness to embrace baldly racist arguments. "Respectable segregationists needed to prove -- perhaps to themselves first of all -- that they were not fanatical bigots," he perceptively writes. Early on, segregationists realized that they "had popular opinion behind them, but not popular conviction," yet they recognized as well that mobilizing any "popular militancy" would saddle their quest for a respectable white supremacy with the most violent depredations of various Ku Klux Klanners. It was a devil's bargain that respectable segregationists regrettably refused to make, Chappell suggests.

*A Stone of Hope* is a richly provocative book if only for its valuable discussion of segregationists' surprisingly speedy defeat. But Chappell has a far grander aspiration -- to convince the gullible that "revivalist religion" is not invariably a political resource for reactionary conservatism but may instead "supply the raw materials of successful social change in the future." This claim is premised more on a wishful faith than on historical facts. \* David J. Garrow is the author of "Bearing the Cross," a Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.