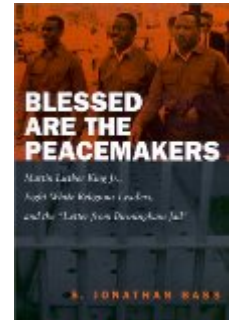


S. Jonathan Bass. *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Martin Luther King Jr., Eight White Religious Leaders, and the "Letter from Birmingham Jail"*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001. xiv + 322 pp. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8071-2800-8.



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Neither Cold nor Hot: White Moderate Religious Leaders in Birmingham

In the biblical book of Revelation, John, an exile on the island of Patmos, writes to the church of Laodicea and harshly judges it for its faithlessness to Christ's works, in the face of Roman imperial power. John accuses the church of being "neither cold nor hot." He believes the congregation must choose sides as the apocalypse approaches. As a result of the church's accommodation, John judges them as "lukewarm." [1] John's apocalyptic vision finds little sympathy for the difficult political situation of the Laodicean church leaders. His uncompromising theological vision of judgment gives no consideration to the viewpoint of those he condemns--it is a choice between good and evil. In a manner quite the opposite of the searing hot vision of John, historian S. Jonathan Bass' recent monograph on the civil rights movement humanizes those who sought compromise in the midst of struggle.

Bass's narrative tells the untold story of the eight religious leaders to whom King responded, in his well-publicized letter of 1963. He uncovers

their lives and the complexity of their institutional leadership. He observes, "For their part, a small group of white Alabama clergymen, Nolan Harmon, Paul Hardin, Charles Carpenter, George Murray, Joseph Durick, Joe Allen, Ed Ramage, Earl Stallings, and Milton Grafman, felt like fools caught in the middle between radical segregationists and civil rights activists" (p. 9). Bass' aim, an ambitious one, is to offer "the first comprehensive history of Martin Luther King's 'Letter from Birmingham Jail,'" and to tell "the story of how clergymen from different religious communities responded to the racial crisis in the Deep South; of how King and his associates planned, composed, edited, and distributed the letter; of a document's impact on the civil rights movement, the American public, and the eight white clergymen, a story deeper than shallow headlines and popular myths" (p. 7).

To his credit, Bass achieves a good deal of what he has set out to do. He describes the generational and institutional setting well. For example, he shows how difficult it was for Rabbi Milton Grafman, whose Jewish congregation was unde-

cidedly caught between the varieties of protest in an overwhelmingly Protestant city. Grafman lived in fear of having synagogues bombed by racial extremists who were virulently anti-Semitic (pp. 60-65). Bass shows how each of these individuals had different viewpoints on how to achieve the full integration of the African American community of Birmingham, following the 1954 ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Their opinions ranged depending on religious their traditions, theological training, and generation. Each religious leader had to deal with the expectations of his constituents. Another example of this was Earl Stallings who attempted to show hospitality as the pastor of the First Baptist Church to Civil Rights activists who made a point of showing up at all white congregations on Sunday mornings. Stallings found himself in a thorny position when many in his congregation did not agree with his principled stance of Christian hospitality being shown to everyone (p. 213). His approach was also unappealing to the activists because it did not dramatize the problem of segregation effectively enough. While Stallings wrestled with principle, many members of the various other congregations did not want to welcome integration in their worship services in any form and their pastors did not advocate it strongly; the other ministers thought it a good idea, except in their respective congregations.

However, what each of the religious leaders agreed upon was that the arrival of the SCLC in Birmingham was trouble for a city divided. The failure of the local city elections to properly seat a city council served as a recipe for disaster in heading off the protest movement in a peaceful and judicious manner. These clergymen therefore wrote King their letter, "An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense," to bring some moderation to both sides of the debate as the city heated up from the agitation.

By the standards of the time, the letter was measured and thoughtful. It affirmed that "hatred

and violence have no sanction in our religious and political traditions." Second, that there may be disagreement concerning laws and social change without advocating defiance, anarchy and subversion." It also affirmed that the law and the courts should be obeyed. As Bass points out, the goals of the civil rights community and the eight white clergymen whom King responded to held many of the same objectives for the integration of Birmingham. That is, for the city to be regulated by the rule of law and not the "whims of individuals," and for justice equally meted out for all citizens. (Appendix 1) So, why did King and the SCLC leadership miss the boat with these leaders and make them fodder in the course of history through the publication of the "Letter from Birmingham Jail"?

According to Bass, the answer lies in publicity. He argues that the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" served primarily as the SCLC's fundraising tool (p. 134). The "Letter" was further redacted by editors and King's ghostwriter when it reappeared in King's book *Why We Can't Wait* (pp. 135-38). Bass's research relies heavily on the scholarship of David Garrow and rhetorician Keith Miller. Drawing upon Garrow's account of the Selma campaign he correctly analyzes how King and the SCLC staff carefully curtailed their message to the national and international news media.[2] The "Letter" serves as yet another example of the savvy media politics used to get the message out and keep the protest alive. Relying on Miller's scholarship, Bass additionally tells us that the rhetorical sources that King used were not original to him, but rather borrowed from numerous other clergymen and scholars without sufficient credit and that the "Letter" is yet another instance of this.[3]

Bass explains that the "Letter" grew in stature despite its flaws as it circulated through magazines such as *New Leader*, *Ebony* and *Christian Century* during the summer of 1964. The magazines often cast the letter as one of good triumph-

ing over evil, or good responding to moral indifference on the issue of segregation (pp. 142-43). The assassination of King in 1968 allowed the "Letter's" production to go critically unexamined and take on mythic proportion in the mind of the public, which was aided by its reproduction in anthologies and textbooks. All the while, "the reputations" of the eight clergy "who had written King out of their sincere concern for Birmingham continued to descend" (p. 145).

Bass's assessment is that the "Letter" effectively silenced some of the white moderate religious leaders in the city. On the other hand, he also recognizes that it empowered others to be more engaged in the struggle for a better Birmingham. By 1964, in light of the letter, Rabbi Grafman led a resistance to the Klan, challenging their prerogatives in determining civic life (p. 184). The prophetic pronouncements contained within the "Letter" also motivated those who were already inclined, such as the local Catholic Bishop Durick, to lead his diocese toward integration. Many of the other pastors were caught between their congregations and disinclined from further engagement after having signed off on the letter. Although King stated in the "Letter" that he would meet with these leaders, he never did. The aftermath of the "Letter" left these leaders feeling an undeserved condemnation.

Bass observes that he who lives by the sword dies by it. He correctly recognizes that the undue reliance of the SCLC on the news media came back to haunt it. By the end of 1965, the organization was complaining about the news coverage as both television and print journalism turned their gaze on the schism occurring within the Civil Rights coalition. The SCLC had a much more difficult time "staying on message" as issues they wanted to present became secondary to the various Black Power ideologies and civil unrest in Watts and later Detroit.

Bass concludes that the "Letter" and the campaign ironically created a setback in the city's race

relations. Although African Americans achieved their rightful place in the civic sphere in the city, which eventually led to the election of the city's first African American mayor, Richard Arrington, the city remained deeply scarred. Following the growing trend in the United States the white congregations, which these eight clergymen led, eventually recreated themselves in the suburbs, intensifying segregation in a new and perhaps even more divisive form (pp. 227-28). Bass has done admirable work in making the lives of these southern clergy real, and their opinions known. The record deserves to be fully aired. He has also done a fine job of critically analyzing the sources and the redaction of the "Birmingham Letter." Furthermore, he has told an aspect of the local history behind the "Letter" that has been ignored in other historical accounts of the Birmingham campaign.

Still, although *Blessed Are the Peacemakers* is a thought-provoking book, Bass' analysis falls short of the mark numerous times in its assumptions and research. The first error is that it fails to contextualize the eight clergy within the larger historical context of Birmingham church relationships and the Civil Rights Movement as a whole. Bass also ignores the long history of theological debate between white and black clergy over the question of race, which had taken place both in the South and the North.[4] For example, southern African American educated clergy, such as Gordon Blaine Hancock, had advocated a reasoned and slow approach to southern race relations from the 1930s. Such voices, however, were ignored by those in power and policy making positions.

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen also pushed for more harmonious and good working relationships between white and black clergy and laity only to be marginalized as the radical fringe. The legal approach of the "Appeal for Law and Order" had always been the approach of the NAACP. Per-

haps forgotten by the author was the effort of the White Citizens Councils to thwart the legal recourse of the NAACP in each of the Southern states. This forced activist protest in cities from Montgomery to Little Rock to Birmingham. Bass never explores whether or not Council members belonged to these congregations, even unbeknownst to their religious leaders. White moderates had tolerated segregation since the 1890s. Only a few exceptional individuals had questioned the wisdom of a bifurcated world of black and white.

The second matter which makes Bass's analysis suspect is that he does not tell us anything about the institutional relations between these religious leaders and the local African American clergy in the city. Only two African American clergy from Birmingham appear in this narrative, John Porter and Fred Shuttlesworth. What about the long-standing relations between local congregations in Birmingham and the local religious leadership of the city? This is a major omission, because white and black clergy across a wide denominational spectrum did have interactions on many different levels. Bass's story does not give us access to the extent that local African American clergy felt frustrations or agreement with their counterparts' gradualist approach at the time. King came to Birmingham with not only the approval of Shuttlesworth, but other African American clergymen as well. As we know from the Montgomery Bus boycott, the African American laity pushed the clergymen to be more active than they wanted to be, just as the white laity pushed their clergymen to be more conservative than they wanted to be.

Another oversight in Bass's analysis is his reluctance to concede that King and the SCLC had dealt with white southern moderate clergy in Montgomery and Albany before the Birmingham campaign. They had heard this kind of rhetoric used before, as a stalling technique. The author needs to recall for his readers that the activist

clergy of the Civil Right movement saw that most southern religious moderates simply ducked for cover as the Freedom Riders were viciously attacked and the student sit-in protesters were brutalized. If King and the other civil rights activists had not had prior experience with southern moderate religious leaders who took caution more seriously than religious conviction, they might have received more attention. Bass's contention that King ignored the white clergy and misconstrued their positions might have made sense had it not been for these historical details. However, in 1963, as the U.S. Congress was considering the strongest Civil Rights legislation since 1875, there had been no room for nuance.

Finally, the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" tells us more about the theological schism between African American Christians and white Southern Christians than Bass acknowledges. African Americans had critiqued white American Christianity for centuries. The publication of the "Letter" was a culmination of those earlier critiques published in a manner that the mass readers of *Ebony* magazine could appreciate. Through the words of the "Letter" came the expression of the deepest theology that was derived out of the long years of suffering of Black Christians about love and justice. It was, to paraphrase the theologian and clergyman Howard Thurman, like the collective composition of Negro Spirituals, the voice of people "whose backs were against the wall." It resonated not because it was derived from numerous sources, as were Shakespeare's plays or the Bible, but because it captured the truth of Christianity and the interpretation of Christianity from an African American perspective.

Although black and white Southerners shared many things in common, in their practice of revivalist Protestantism, their viewpoint on race was a theological line of demarcation. For nearly all white Southerners—including moderates who supported a theology that colored God white and

justified all types of injustices against the numerous American racial minorities--racism was their philosophy of history. White supremacy, and the accompanying policies of segregation, violated African Americans' theological notions about being one in Christ through baptism and being sanctified by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Segregation was the most egregious spiritual violation of the Pauline ethic which stated that "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus." [5]

Segregation in the minds of many African American Christians was not merely a legal violation, but foremost a spiritual one too. The Civil Rights movement, if we see it from a religious vantage point was the "Third Great Awakening" in American history and was therefore a movement not only to redress historical injustices, but to correct the heresy of racial bigotry and reclaim Christianity from the idolatry of racism. The "Letter from Birmingham Jail" helped the sons and daughters of ex-slaves and the segregated poor to define the terms of American Christian practice challenging the hegemony of white American Christian theology rooted in race and nation. The "Letter" simply declared that black people would no longer go along with state power which reinforced hatred and violence. It required a stand and drive toward what King termed the "Beloved Community."

Like the apocalypse of John, whose biting metaphors condemn moderates for being unwilling to pay a cost of their life in the name of faith, the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" judged these moderate men harshly. In retrospect, perhaps it did this too harshly. Nevertheless, what makes this "Letter" magisterial is its uncompromising posture and expression of just human community. This is why we read it and re-read it. Bass has written an informative book and one that contributes to the ongoing discussion about the Civil Rights movement, but it is too bad that he does

not go far enough in evaluating the context in which this struggle took place in Birmingham, and across the nation.

Notes

[1]. Revelation 3:15-16, NRSV.

[2]. David Garrow, *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978).

[3]. Keith D. Miller, *Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr. and its Sources* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

[4]. For example of this debate see Ralph Luker's *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1885-1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

[5]. Galatians 3:28 NRSV.

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