



THIS WORLDWIDE STRUGGLE

**RELIGION AND THE INTERNATIONAL ROOTS
OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

SARAH AZARANSKY

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Abbreviations

AFSC	American Friends Service Committee
CO	Conscientious Objector
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
DAC	Direct Action Committee
FOR	Fellowship of Reconciliation (referring to the U.S. organization)
FSU	Friends Service Unit (referring to the Calcutta office)
HBCUs	historically black colleges and universities
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NCNW	National Council of Negro Women
NNA	National Negro Alliance
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Conference
WCC	World Council of Churches
WRL	War Resisters League
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association
YWCA	Young Women's Christian Association

This Worldwide Struggle

Introduction

PART OF THIS WORLDWIDE STRUGGLE

“THERE IS A great revolution going on all over the world,” Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed in May 1959. He was introducing Tom Mboya, a Kenyan independence leader and the keynote speaker at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) African Freedom Dinner. King saw Mboya as a fellow-traveler, someone who was trying to rid his country of colonial oppression in the same way King was trying to win freedom for black Americans in the South. King insisted that their work was of a piece, for “what we are trying to do in the South and in the United States is part of this worldwide struggle for freedom and human dignity.” We are, continued King, “all caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality . . . so we are all concerned about what is happening in Africa and what is happening in Asia because we are part of this whole movement.”¹

Bayard Rustin, a black Christian pacifist and SCLC founder, was likely pleased when he heard King connect their work to international, anticolonial movements. Rustin knew what was happening in Asia and in Africa, because he had traveled around the world to strategize with independence leaders and to learn nonviolent tactics for the American movement. In the course of these travels he met Mboya, and many other independence-era leaders, and built alliances among American, African, and Asian activists. Rustin cultivated international exchanges because he had himself been transformed by seeing how pacifists in other parts of the world were developing radical—and effective—responses to colonialism and white supremacy in their contexts.

Rustin was not unique in his internationally oriented black Christian pacifism. He belonged to a cadre of black Christian intellectuals and activists who looked abroad, even in other religious traditions, for ideas and practices that could transform American democracy. This group included professors and public intellectuals Howard Thurman, Benjamin Mays, and William Stuart Nelson, each of whom met with Mohandas Gandhi in India; ecumenical movement leaders, notably YWCA women, Juliette Derricotte, Sue Bailey Thurman, and Celestine Smith; and pioneers of African American Christian nonviolence James Farmer, Pauli Murray, and Rustin himself. They believed that a black social Christianity nourished by international and interreligious resources could fuel a movement for racial justice in the United States. From the 1930s to the 1950s, this group of intellectuals and activists drew lessons from independence movements around the world as they envisioned an American campaign as part of a global network of resistance to colonialism and white supremacy.

These intellectuals and activists knew each other and exchanged ideas. At the American YM and YWCA, they worked on interracialism, learned about movement building, and took advantage of opportunities to travel and live abroad. They transformed Howard University's School of Religion into the intellectual center of African American religion and black church studies, thirty years before the advent of black liberation theology. They served on the boards of and worked for majority-white organizations like the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the American Friends Service Committee, where they practiced nonviolent tactics that would later galvanize a nationwide movement. They became mentors and advisors to and coworkers with King, thus became links between Gandhi, who died in 1948, and King, who became a national figure in 1956. This book argues that these intellectuals and activists formulated religious perspectives, methods of moral reasoning, and arguments about a specifically black social Christianity that served as theological blueprints for what Rustin later called the "classical" phase of the civil rights movement.²

The Christian activists and intellectuals at the center of this book were part of an international turn in black political thought that followed World War I, when hundreds of thousands of African Americans migrated north and west. The early 1920s heralded a "flurry of new black political activity," facilitated by diverse black populations in urban centers.³ African-descended Americans articulated frustration and disappointment that military service in the World War had not resulted in full citizenship. Harlem became the heart of black America, a meeting place of blacks from all over the United States

and throughout the African diaspora; southern black Americans compared their experiences of Jim Crow with Caribbean expatriates of British and French Empires and developed solidarities. Shaped by connections between racism in the United States with racism and imperial oppression in other parts of the world, black internationalism underscored how black Americans' struggles for citizenship rights were part of a global resistance movement that included the struggles of blacks and Indians in South Africa as well as Hindus and Muslims in India and Aboriginal peoples in Australia, among others.

Two leading figures of black internationalism were W. E. B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey. One of the greatest American thinkers of the twentieth century, Du Bois was a towering intellectual who wrote landmark works in sociology, history, and philosophy over a period of fifty years. Du Bois was founder of the Niagara Movement, part of which grew into the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and his career was characterized by this complementary focus on scholarship and activism. And Du Bois always understood black Americans' experiences in a global frame. Too often we neglect how Du Bois gave geographic specificity to the dilemma of the last century: in 1903 he wrote, "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea."⁴

Representative of Du Bois's international commitments was his leadership of a series of Pan-African conferences between 1919 and 1945—these were international gatherings of black people, many of whom would become leaders of anticolonial movements in the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa. As founding editor of the *Crisis*, the NAACP's journal of politics and ideas, Du Bois prioritized international reporting about freedom struggles around the world; the journal became a paradigm for the international focus that would characterize the rest of the black press.

Jamaican Marcus Garvey formed a diasporic political program around an international black identity, as he advocated for Jamaica's independence from British colonial rule. Garvey founded the United Negro Improvement Association in Kingston with the ambition of politically uniting all of Africa and its diaspora. Soon Garvey made Harlem the headquarters of the Association and so the de facto capital of the black world. Garvey acquitted himself nobly of his grand ambition; by 1920 the Association had more than nineteen hundred chapters in over forty countries and colonies, including Cuba, India, the Gold Coast (later Ghana), Ecuador, and the United Kingdom.⁵

Garvey prioritized racial identification as having political meaning for people of African descent. He rejected integration, the goal of the Niagara movement. Garvey proposed instead that blacks throughout the diaspora return to Africa, and he promoted the idea of an African empire. Garvey encouraged group solidarity through a “focus on uniforms, parades, and other trappings of group solidarity” that became an excuse for some black intellectuals not to take Garvey’s project seriously.⁶ Du Bois, and others, dismissed Garvey’s imperial ambitions and his call to emigrate as unrealistic and bad politics. Garvey’s program would fall apart after the federal government prosecuted him for mail fraud. (The government claimed that the photograph of the container ship on the cover of his *Black Star Liner* brochure for which Garvey’s group was selling stock was not yet owned by the Association.)⁷ Though Garvey and Du Bois are often described as two poles of black internationalist thinking, they shared a conviction that “the world beyond the United States was especially important for blacks at home because it presented the possibility of wider publics—indeed a global majority—who had been denied historical protections and benefits of nationality.”⁸

THE BLACK PRESS was instrumental in fostering this internationalist perspective, manifested in its decades-long interest in the Indian independence movement. Mohandas Gandhi’s campaigns became a cause célèbre for black Americans. Beginning in earnest with Gandhi’s noncooperation campaign in 1921, African American newspapers and journals weighed in on the significance of Gandhi’s methods and political vision for black resistance to white racism. The black press emphasized him as an important example of a person of color leading a freedom struggle against an entrenched racist colonial power.⁹ In the 1920s, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells–Barnett, and E. Franklin Frazier, among others, parsed Gandhi’s activities and stoked a spirited conversation among black intellectuals about Gandhi’s nationalism, the Indian independence movement, and the applicability of nonviolence for the American scene.¹⁰ While the “black response to Gandhi was neither static nor uniform,” black interpreters tended to glean from Gandhi’s example “the need for strong and determined leadership.”¹¹

Gandhi’s blending of religious and political ideals caught the attention of a group of African American religious intellectuals. In a 1930 speech, Mordecai Johnson asserted that “Gandhi is conducting today the most significant religious movement in the world, in his endeavor to inject religion

into questions of economics and politics.”¹² Johnson, who was president of Howard University and a renowned Baptist minister, recruited Benjamin Mays, Howard Thurman, and William Stuart Nelson to join him at Howard, where they “sensed earlier than most that engagement with India could be mutually beneficial, striking a blow against white supremacy globally, which would have a decided impact locally.”¹³

Johnson’s gathering of these religious intellectuals and his support of their international travels were preconditions for the theological innovation and interreligious critique that influenced a subsequent generation of Christian activists. Mays, Thurman, and Nelson laid foundations of black theology and wrote landmark texts in black religion. Each met with Gandhi, who served as a catalyst for questions about Christianity’s connection to imperialism and whether nonviolence could be effective in the American context. Each man was later influential in how King understood and employed lessons from the Indian independence movement.¹⁴ They were part of a network of scholars and activists who innovated a third kind of black internationalism.

Howard theologians became leading exponents of a black Christian internationalism that drew from international and interreligious sources to stimulate a religiously inspired American racial justice movement. They were certainly aware of radical black internationalist politics, epitomized by Garvey and Du Bois, but they had additional religious sources that sparked an international outlook—a history of Christian missions and contemporary work with international ecumenical organizations, especially the YMCA. Mays’s biographer Randal Jelks has distinguished a black internationalism “rooted in political radicalism” from one that grew out of Protestant missions.¹⁵ It was from the latter, in part, that this group of religious thinkers drew. For more than a century, black American Christians had been developing a sense of the black international.¹⁶ Before the Great Migration and the creation of a self-consciously internationalist black politics in the urban North, black Christians throughout the country heard visiting missionaries’ stories from abroad. Since the late 1700s, black American missionaries had traveled to the Caribbean and West Africa at the behest of white denominations and, later, supported by African Methodist Episcopal and black Baptist churches.

Black missionaries’ work in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to found American-style schools had repercussions in the twentieth century’s independence era, when many West Africans enrolled at U.S. historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Kwame

Nkrumah of the Gold Coast (later Ghana) and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria studied at HBCUs in the 1920s and 1930s. Nkrumah and Azikiwe became the first postindependence elected heads of state of their respective countries and were among Rustin's international contacts. These transatlantic exchanges contributed to freedom movements in all three countries.

The international Christian ecumenical movement opened further international channels for black Christians. The YMCA and YWCA play a key role in this book's story because they enabled international travel and invited self-examination. Though the Ys were officially segregated until 1946, both focused on interracial work, beginning in World War I. As a result, the Ys became a training ground for black professionals, who led black YM and YW branches and who traveled abroad on Y business. In South Asia, West Africa, and Europe, travel under the auspices of the Y enabled black American Christians to meet and build alliances with Christians of color from around the world. Y travel also afforded opportunities to investigate the color line internationally, draw firsthand comparisons between colonialism and Jim Crow, build transnational protofeminist networks of women of color, and meet with world-renowned anticolonial leaders. On their return from Asia or Africa, they toured the country and shared lessons from freedom campaigns in other parts of the world. Black Americans were not alone, they taught, in struggling against white supremacy and in building a movement for racial justice.

By identifying this network of Christian intellectuals and activists and through analyzing their work over three decades, this book sits at the intersections of and benefits greatly from various histories: a growing scholarship on black internationalism that identifies broader networks of freedom in which black Americans participated; histories of the peace movement that describe its religious foundations; civil rights studies, which has become its own subfield of American history, including local, southern, northern, individual, and organizational histories and attendant historiographical debates about when, how, where, and who constituted the movement; and recent biographical studies of Rustin, Thurman, Mays, and Nelson that emphasize their international work.¹⁷

This book provides what none of the aforementioned accounts does—a group portrait of a cadre of black Christian intellectuals and activists who sought international and interreligious resources to set in motion an American racial justice movement. In doing so, the book aspires to fill lacunae in existing histories—in black internationalism accounts that overlook religious intellectuals; in peace movement histories that do not

pay adequate attention to the racial specificity that black activists assigned to their pacifism; in civil rights studies, which has yet to explore this generation of religious intellectuals; and in biographies that have not focused on collaborations and streams of influence within this group. This book reveals the depth and complexity of their theological arguments and the role of interreligious engagement as important precursors to the later civil rights movement.

THESE BLACK CHRISTIAN intellectuals and activists embraced American democratic ideals and Christian egalitarian visions, even as they recognized that neither American politics nor American churches put them into practice. They looked in other countries and in other religions for political and moral sources to shore up American and Christian traditions, as they elaborated manifold visions of black Christianity that ranged from early protests of enslavement to Quaker experiments with civil disobedience. Indeed, these black intellectuals and activists were at a religious vanguard—identifying a variety of black American Christian traditions and initiating interreligious exchanges that modified their Christian theological stances. Their attention to the category of religion, in its substantive and functional forms, is an object lesson for how religion can operate in social movements. Throughout the book, I employ the terms “religion,” “moral,” and “ethical” to describe the ways these activists and intellectuals were making arguments. They also often used these terms themselves.

Thurman, Mays, and Nelson were ordained Baptist ministers and professors of theology and used the category “religion” in their comparative study of Indian religions. The previous sentence is freighted with terms that beg clarification: what is religion? how do or should Christian theologians undertake comparative religious study? and what is the particular history of Western study of Indian religions? Underlying these questions are further historiographical and epistemological challenges raised by the period and the people the book examines. For the sake of defining my terms, I want to dwell for a moment on the conceptual challenge presented by the category “religion” and even by the terms “ethical” and “moral.” But I also want to signpost how the approaches that this group of activists and intellectuals developed in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s can help to address current questions. Contemporary scholars of religion do not agree about just what it is we study. From an expansive academic discussion, I pull three threads to indicate what may be at stake when I use “religion.”

The first issue is a definition of the term: what is religion? Two definitions that differ but do not disagree point to a wide range of possibilities for what scholars mean when they write about “religion.” Bruce Lincoln offers a four-part “polythetic and flexible” definition of religion: it includes discourses that address authority and truth; sets of practices whose goal is to create proper social order and/or proper human subjects; a community who construct their identity in reference to aforementioned discourses and practices; and institutions to regulate the previous three elements.¹⁸ Thomas Tweed, meanwhile, defines religion in terms of movement and process, as “crossing and dwelling.”¹⁹ Tweed advocates a “locative approach” that recognizes that theories and theorists who assert them are both always on the move, so that “our sightings and our own shifting position are always partial.”²⁰ But even in advancing these affirmative definitions—that there is a such a thing or process called religion and here is how to know when we see/hear/feel it, Lincoln and Tweed (among many others) recognize critiques that “religion” is an inherently and inescapably Western and Christian category, which leads to a second issue in the conceptual challenge of “religion.”

Whether scholars of religion trace the concept to the second century of the Common Era in Rome (as Richard King does) or to the last two centuries in Europe and North America (as Talal Asad does), they show how “religion” is a product of Christian understanding and priorities. Asad alerts us to the fact that “there are dangers in employing it as a normalizing concept” when analyzing non-Christian traditions.²¹ When Christians invented the category of religion they gave more weight to kinds and ways of belief and practices that they knew, so what came to count of religion looks a lot like Christianity, that is, religion is theistic, concerned with doctrines, and describes individual or privatized belief. King wants us to keep in the front of our minds how “the central explanatory category of religious studies, namely the notion of ‘religion’ itself, is a Christian theological category.”²²

Scholars who problematize religion as a recent concept point out that “religion” has served political and even imperial ends. Russell McCutcheon compares sociopolitical changes in Europe as a result of the Reformation with the emergence of the United States as a global power in the last century: “in both cases the changes were in part made evident in (and made possible by) a discursive contest between differing parties vying for control over the rhetoric of religion and the public authority that comes with such control. In other words, I believe there is a link between managing

an emerging empire and the rhetoric of religion.”²³ Employing the category of religion to “classify and thus govern diverse populations,” as McCutcheon would have it, points to a third issue—how the category of religion is entangled with the history of European colonialism.

Arvind-Pal Mandair, a scholar of Sikhism, notes that “Indians have no exact word for religion,”²⁴ yet “religion came to be ascribed to Indic cultures through an imperial dynamic in which colonized indigenous elites collaborated with Orientalists and Christian missionaries in the search for origins and an identifiable theological core proper to the indigenous culture.”²⁵ This is important on its face—“religion” may not adequately describe what scholars of so-called Indian religions think it does. But Mandair points out another, more insidious, possibility, that connections between colonialism and the study of religion, particularly in the case of India, means that Indian religions “can only exist today as static, frozen objects, namely as phenomena to be known and studied by conceptually more advanced cultures.”²⁶ I have barely scratched the surface of a far-reaching debate about the category and study of religion, but I hope it is becoming clear that the term is, as Bruce Lincoln puts it, “discursively loaded.”²⁷ Lincoln, King, Tweed, and others continue to use the term, despite its limitations, because they find it useful in contemporary discussions.

When the intellectuals and activists at the center of this book wrote about religion and theology and when they met and worked with people from other religious traditions, they worked in the midst of academic disciplinary transition. The terms were available—religion, theology, comparative—but their meanings were shifting. We will miss the significance of their innovation if we read theirs as simply interdisciplinary work (which is challenging enough, of course). The disciplines that early twenty-first century scholars recognize as theology and religious studies were even more in flux in the 1930s. As the following chapters depict, Thurman, Mays, and Nelson were trained when theology, as it adopted modernist and liberal dispositions, and religious studies, as it practiced various methods to qualify, quantify, and compare its (still) elusive objects of study, were becoming academic fields as we know them today. Thurman, Mays, and Nelson, who taught in and administered theological schools, brought tools from religious studies, including sociological categories, hermeneutical strategies, comparative studies, in order to develop fresh Christian theological insights.

Thurman, Mays, and Nelson deftly navigated these emerging fields to make original and compelling theological arguments, in large part by

changing the subject. By centering black God-talk, the Christian Gospel as a manual of resistance against Jim Crow, and black Americans as international orphans, these black American Christian intellectuals made critical contributions to ideas about blackness and black religion that were also in flux and formation. In short, they examined what it meant to be black, American, and Christian, when each category in itself was unstable and its meaning became less certain when modifying the other two. They also called on white colleagues to understand how changing the subject is significant, because it raises questions about who we do and do not know about, to whom we are accountable, and, indeed, what it is that we know. These epistemological questions are also moral ones because they shape theological imagination about God's justice, God's love, and God's parenthood of all people.

It is important to point out that Thurman, Mays, and Nelson were ordained Baptist ministers, yet their theological approaches and career trajectories show the diversity within one particular denomination. They also mentored many others, like Methodist James Farmer, Episcopalian Pauli Murray, and Quaker Bayard Rustin, whose religious writing and practices, as subsequent chapters will argue, indelibly shaped black American Christian nonviolence. In so doing, Rustin's work expands what is typically meant by black religion (during the period of this study and today). By including YWCA women activists and despite Rustin's Quakerism, this account might seem to align with familiar narratives that present African American religious history as predominantly mainline and Protestant. The figures at the center of the book were indeed mainline, but international travel and interreligious engagement prompted new and diverse theological expressions that transcend familiar mainline visions and practices.

This group of activists and intellectuals offers a compelling historical case of Christians who studied Indian religions as living traditions that might have lessons for their own lives and contexts. That is, these American Christian men and women attempted to make concepts from Indian traditions into resources for their own constructive theological reflection.²⁸ Correlated to the controversy over "religion" is a lively conversation about whether and how Christian theologians can undertake interreligious learning to further a constructive, comparative Christian theology.²⁹ I propose that the book's subjects are historical cases of what contemporary theologians are calling for. From these historical figures, we can glean lessons that complicate what we mean when we classify an approach as anticolonial or Christian or religious. During the period these

black intellectuals advanced sophisticated accounts of black religion, they resisted a predominant view that black religion was underdeveloped and irrational. This provides an interesting counterpoint to how Mandair and other contemporary postcolonial scholars have shown that non-Christian religious traditions are depicted as “bound to a particular area” or only having “a limited life span on the time-chart of world history.”³⁰ The black Christian intellectuals and activists at the center of this book were doing anticolonial, international interreligious engagement, even as they were defending black Christianity against the kinds of miscategorization that today repeat past imperialisms.

I AM MOST interested in what the book’s subjects can teach us about morality and ethics. Although none identified as an ethicist, each provides us with compelling methods for moral reflection and action.³¹ As scholars and activists, they believed religion provided ethical guidance and resources for moral reflection. The people at the center of this book show us how to do ethics well and, perhaps more importantly, confirm the capacity of moral reflection to promote democratic transformation. A quick note on the term “moral”: at times, a distinction is drawn between ethics, as choices we make, and morals, as rules people follow without thinking, but as Robin Lovin points out, “it’s easy to overstate the difference” because their etymologies (from *ethos*, a Greek root, and *mores*, a Latin root) basically mean the same thing.³² I use the adjectives “moral” and “ethical” interchangeably.

The term “ethics” describes analysis of conduct, goals, and forms of character with the aim of human happiness and well-being. This kind of ethical reflection is typically traced to Aristotelian roots and is at home in university philosophy departments. Ethical reflection that religious people undertake does not necessarily have the goal of human happiness. Religious people may instead have a goal of union with the divine, or of eliminating suffering, or of enacting justice. Although a religious ethicist may share with a philosopher a focus on goals or conduct or forms of character, she does so within a particular religious framework that informs her understanding, for example, of human capacity for justice, or of the value of the created world, or of the meaning of love.

There are indeed people who have been professionally trained at universities’ religious studies departments and at seminaries to be ethicists (I am one such person), but anyone can reflect ethically. The key is deliberation. Ethical reflection happens when a person asks *what is going on*

here and then chooses what she believes to be the best course of action. Ethical inquiry ought to do two things, according to Beverly Harrison: “to improve our ability to reflect on and also to choose better or worse ways of shaping our personal and social actions.”³³ Harrison was a professor at Union Theological Seminary and taught and wrote as a social ethicist. According to Harrison, Christian ethics is about “discerning what we are to do by wrestling both with what others have taught about Christian practice in the past and with what has changed and what is required in the present.”³⁴ Traci West, a Christian social ethicist and former student of Harrison, confirms that Christian ethics ought to recognize “the multiple actors and innovators in the moral dramas of history” in order to broaden “our understanding of how important moral knowledge is generated.”³⁵

Social ethics distinguishes itself by a focus on community, institutions, and social systems. “To begin with,” West explains, “ethics, particularly social ethics, is a normative project. Its major purpose is not only to analyze existing practices that inhibit and assault the social well-being of persons, but also to specify how those practices should be transformed to provide or support socially just and spiritually nurturing relations among us.”³⁶ This book is a wager that the group of activists and intellectuals at its center accomplished such analysis and developed social, political, and religious experiments that had lasting and far-reaching effects in American history. In order to analyze existing practices, furthermore, they drew from international and interreligious resources to sharpen their moral sights anew on the American scene.

THE STORY THAT follows highlights the lives and work of a handful of intellectuals and activists, whose work I deem to be daring and innovative and who were intellectually and theologically formed in the era of freedom movements. This means the book does not engage earlier generations of internationally-minded black American intellectuals, like Frederick Douglass, Anna Julia Cooper, or Addie Hunton. There are others, whom I mention sparingly because their work was primarily administrative (Channing Tobias) or they came after intellectual and activist traditions had already been forged (James Lawson). The book argues for the later civil rights movement’s international roots by focusing on India, Ghana, and Nigeria. In these pages is certainly other evidence of international exchanges, on trains to Cairo, in the streets of Aldermaston, and in Cuban cafés, but India was the lodestar for black Christians who were building a

racial justice movement, and Ghana and Nigeria served as entry points to the African continent.

The moral problem of whiteness is a specter throughout the story, shadowing and undermining efforts at black freedom. But these Christian intellectuals and activists bring it into the light, demanding accountability from whites who profess to be allies in the freedom struggle. Their critiques of whiteness charge me, a white American woman, in the writing of this book to listen to them and to reflect on analytical shortcomings that whiteness produces. They caution me not merely to supplement the (particularly white) chorus of “praise poems for the good, nonviolent” black intellectuals, but instead to develop a complex and critical portrait that examines their ideas in historical context and shows their continued relevance to academic and activist work to enable black freedom and to subvert white supremacy.³⁷ To do so, the book proceeds in six chapters.

The first chapter considers how international travel influenced a network of black Christian activists and intellectuals who developed theological and political responses to Jim Crow in the mid-1930s. Chief among them was Howard Thurman, who led a delegation of black Christians on a five-month speaking tour of India. The chapter explores how India challenged Thurman to articulate a black Christian theological perspective in light of colonialism and segregation in the United States.

Chapter 2 follows Thurman’s good friend and Howard University colleague Benjamin Mays to India, where he, too, met with Indian independence leaders. The chapter demonstrates Mays’s critical engagement with other religious traditions and anticolonialism, even challenging Gandhi about his prior support of the British. A Christian theologian, Mays modeled how comparative religious studies could be an important tool for Americans to apply lessons from other religious traditions to the U.S. context.

After Thurman and Mays advanced versions of black social Christianity to inspire an American racial justice movement, a group of black Christian activists experimented with religiously inspired nonviolence in the United States in the 1940s. Chapter 3 examines the moral reasoning and practices of Bayard Rustin, James Farmer, and Pauli Murray, who innovated a black Christian pacifism that employed Gandhian nonviolence. These activists knew each other well; they also knew Thurman and Mays, from whom they drew lessons about the role of black Christianity in social change.

Chapter 4 charts the travel and work of William Stuart Nelson and Blanche Nelson in India in the months before independence, when

they witnessed Gandhi's failure to curtail fierce interreligious violence in Bengal. A decade after Thurman and Mays had visited, Nelson, their friend and colleague, witnessed the successes and tragedies of Indian independence, as he and his wife struggled to glean ongoing lessons for the American scene.

Through a theological analysis of Bayard Rustin's Quaker moral and political arguments, Chapter 5 argues that Rustin was one of the most important midcentury American religious thinkers. The chapter turns to West Africa, another front in the global freedom struggle, and charts Rustin's travel through Ghana (then the Gold Coast) and Nigeria and the alliances he developed between African independence movements and American activists.

Chapter 6 examines Mays's return to India and his conclusion that American exceptionalism was disproved by Indian democracy. It also considers Rustin's work on to organize an international protest of French nuclear testing in the Sahara as exemplary of intersections between civil rights, pan-Africanism, and pacifism. The chapter, and the book, conclude by revisiting key lessons this network of scholars and activists teach us about how important moral knowledge is generated.

THE "NETWORK OF MUTUALITY" King spoke about in 1959 has had repercussions in the early twenty-first century that few could have foreseen. The SCLC hosted Tom Mboya, because King and Rustin wanted to strengthen ties between African and black American anticolonial activists. It is also the case that Rustin knew Mboya well. "When Tom was in this country I was one of his hosts," Rustin later recalled "and in fact I brought his brother to this country to be educated and he lived with me for awhile."³⁸ Mboya's 1959 visit to Atlanta was part of an American speaking tour to raise money for East African students to study at American universities.³⁹ The "airlift generation" of more than 800 students transformed parliaments, universities, and professions in newly independent East African nations, and indeed had political ramifications around the world. One prominent airlift student was Wangari Maathai, who went on to win the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize. Another was a Mboya protégé, twenty-three year old Barack Obama, who arrived at the University of Hawaii in 1959 to study economics.⁴⁰

What King called a "network of mutuality"—that linked King, Rustin, Mboya, Obama, and many others—was sustained through personal connections, sharing strategies, and decades-long friendships. This book identifies and examines a cadre of black American Christians, who were

part of this larger movement, this worldwide struggle against colonialism and white supremacy. The people at the center of this book were among the finest religious and democratic thinkers of the twentieth century, and their careful moral reasoning and experimental practices were fundamental to the later civil rights movement.

Spiritual Recognition of Empire

IN 1936, HOWARD Thurman met Mohandas Gandhi. Thurman, a theologian and social critic born and raised in the South, was eager to ask about tactics African Americans could use in their resistance to Jim Crow. But Gandhi had his own pressing questions: how could Thurman be a Christian when Christianity was associated with segregation and colonialism the world over? Why wasn't Thurman a Muslim instead, for Islam asserted there is no color line?¹

Gandhi's questions pointed to a contradiction Thurman knew well: how Christianity was fundamental to segregation in the United States and how Jesus's teaching promised a just social order. In the wake of their meeting Thurman turned to the Gospels and concluded that Jesus, as a poor Jew living under Roman occupation, had a special relationship to people whose "backs are against the wall." In part a result of his conversation with Gandhi, Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* became a landmark text in black theology and a primer for Martin Luther King Jr. and other civil rights leaders for using the Gospels as a manual of resistance.²

Though the book was published in 1949, Thurman developed its central argument more than a decade earlier, when his theological and political perspectives had been shaped by his ambivalent relationship with the church, his embrace of Social Gospel theology, and his participation in Christian and pacifist international volunteer associations.³ For Thurman, a visit to India crystallized the potential and limitations of these intellectual and activist streams. Under the auspices of the YMCA, Thurman led a Negro Delegation on a Pilgrimage of Friendship from November 1935 to March 1936. During the five-month journey through Ceylon, Burma, and India, Thurman wondered whether or not Christianity could effectively resist colonialism and despaired that it might be irredeemably aligned

with imperial interests, be they British or American. In the Indian independence movement, Thurman witnessed how a political movement drew inspiration and energy from religious beliefs and felt that this kind of religiously inspired social action could promote racial justice in the United States. While Thurman encountered extraordinarily diverse people and ideas on the trip, his impressions were indicative of the views of other black Christian intellectuals and activists of his generation: they, too, were drawing from international and interreligious experiences to foment a movement against Jim Crow. His visit to India did not change the course of his thinking; rather, it sharpened his questions and provided new contexts for received intellectual traditions.

This chapter focuses on the contexts and content of Thurman's work, but it also examines lesser known thinkers who were theologically and politically astute, like Celestine Smith, Juliette Derricotte, and Thurman's wife, Sue Bailey Thurman. It demonstrates how international travel and interreligious exchanges influenced a community of black Christian intellectuals and activists who were developing theological blueprints for an American racial justice movement.

When he met Gandhi in 1936, Thurman (1899–1981) was thirty-seven years old and already one of America's best known religious thinkers. An ordained Baptist minister and dean of Howard University's Rankin Chapel, Thurman was a Christian by profession, then as throughout his life. Yet he had a knotty relationship with traditional religion that he traced to his boyhood. Thurman grew up in Daytona Beach, Florida, where the majority of black residents, like his grandmother and mother, were formerly enslaved or were the children or grandchildren of slaves from nearby cotton plantations. His mother and grandmother were devout Baptists who brought him and his older sister to church each week. He grew up in the midst of the church; its rhythms and calendar became a primary thread of his childhood. But sometimes he struggled to find God in the church, which, he felt, had abandoned him when he needed it most—after his father died suddenly. His father was, by Thurman's description, a quiet and thoughtful man who stayed home on Sundays, preferring to read the newspaper and sit on the porch. As a railroad worker, Thurman's father was habitually away for weeklong stretches. One week he arrived home early with what turned out to be a fatal case of pneumonia; he died at home a few days later. Since his father had not attended, local churches refused to perform the funeral; the family was compelled to employ a traveling minister for the service.

"With wonderment, then anger, then finally mounting rage," Thurman listened as the evangelist preached his father "into hell," exploiting the elder Thurman's funeral as bully pulpit, taking the opportunity of his father's death to preach about the risks of a person not giving his life over to Jesus.⁴ Thurman despaired at the cruelty of a pastor who was more eager to make a theological point than offer succor to his grieving family. He had loved and revered his father, so he wanted nothing to do with a theological framework that denied his father a last rite and damned him to hell. The father would come to exemplify for the son how moral persons could, and often did, exist outside denominational religion. From an early age, then, Thurman was unsure of the church's authority to do God's will. On the way back from the cemetery, he whispered to himself, "One thing is sure. When I grow up and become a man, I will never have anything to do with the church."⁵

His father's funeral was Thurman's "first real introduction to institutional Christianity, and it was a searing indictment of its theological narrowness, its heartlessness, and the cruelty that passed for teaching unfortunate lessons."⁶ Even after he became one of the country's best known preachers, Thurman remained faithful to the spirit of his boyhood promise. For the rest of his life, he carried a suspicion of institutional religion and a conviction that dogmas could distance people from the true meaning of religion.⁷ But he did believe that God was available throughout the world, coursing through all life. Since he was a boy Thurman had religious experiences in the natural world. He recalled nights spent along the dunes, where "I found, alone, a special benediction. The ocean and the night surrounded my little life with a reassurance that could not be affronted by the behavior of human beings. The ocean at night gave me a sense of timelessness, of existing beyond the reach of the ebb and flow of circumstances."⁸ His reverence for nature inspired an ethic of "mutual interdependence . . . characteristic of all life" that is evident throughout his writing.⁹

Thurman's radical religious sensibilities persisted despite conventional academic training as an undergraduate at Morehouse College (1919–1923) and seminarian at Rochester Theological Seminary (1924–1926). Valedictorian of his high school class, he received a scholarship to Morehouse and charged through college with a compulsion to wring as much out of the experience as he could. He claimed to have read every book in the college's library (then a much smaller collection, but this was doubtless hundreds of books more than his classmates probably read); he

also led the debate team and was once again valedictorian. He plunged headlong into his studies, learning from Benjamin Mays, who was himself newly arrived at Morehouse and became Thurman's future colleague at Howard University.

At Morehouse, Thurman dedicated himself to campus chapters of the YMCA and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), an ecumenical pacifist organization. Thurman may have initially been drawn to FOR not for its pacifism but because it was one of the few white organizations committed to fighting racism.¹⁰ Through Y student organizations he established a network of colleagues and friends who shared his activist faith. Founded in England in the mid-1800s, YM and YW chapters had sprouted up in the United States by the early 1920s. Though officially segregated until 1946, the YM and YW offered black college students opportunities for leadership, networking, and the potential for relationships with white college leaders. Black YMs and YWs were nondenominational yet strongly Protestant and aspired to provide for the needs of growing black urban populations. The fact that organizations founded to put Christian principles into practice upheld a national policy of separate black and white branches was not lost on Thurman and other black Y leaders, including Frank Wilson, Benjamin Mays, Juliette Derricotte, and Sue Bailey, who would become Thurman's wife. Despite its obvious limitations, the Y provided opportunities for interracial networking that was fundamental to making civil rights gains.

Before he graduated from Morehouse, Thurman won a scholarship from the University of Chicago to further his work in economics, but he chose seminary instead. His autobiography doesn't include much self-conscious reflection about this decision; he simply states that his "vocational choice was settled by the time he reached senior year."¹¹ Being away from home may have given him time to reflect on the role of the church in his family's life. Though his mother had a "deep inner sadness" and was surrounded by a "quiet overcast of feeling," she loved her church. Thurman recalled hearing his mother speak aloud at a prayer meeting, not recognizing her voice, because "it had an unfamiliar quality at first; then I knew it was she. She spread her life out before God, telling him of her anxieties and dreams for me and my sisters, and of her weariness. I learned what could not be *told* to me."¹² The church served his community in ways that his mother and grandmother cared for him and his sisters; it convinced them that their lives mattered, that their lives "were a precious gift."¹³ Thurman dismissed the idea that the "traditional