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## Holy Wars at Home: Religion and Activism in U.S. Social Movements

*Anne M. Martínez*

*A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow.* By David L. Chappell. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004. 360 pages. \$34.95 (cloth). \$18.95 (paper).

*La Lucha for Cuba: Religion and Politics on the Streets of Miami.* By Miguel A. de la Torre. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003. 204 pages. \$55.00 (cloth). \$21.95 (paper).

*Las Hermanas: Chicana/Latina Religious-Political Activism in the U.S. Catholic Church.* By Lara Medina. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004. 240 pages. \$24.95 (paper).

In his 2000 book, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, Scott Appleby notes the importance of local religious leaders since “about two-thirds of contemporary wars turn on issues of religion, ethnic, or national identity.”<sup>1</sup> Appleby examines conflicts in South Africa, Bosnia, and Southeast Asia to highlight the work of peacebuilders—those working to break the cycle of violence in their communities. Appleby’s study confirms our understanding that holy wars happen in other parts of the contemporary world. David L. Chappell, Lara Medina, and Miguel A. de la Torre demonstrate that such struggles are alive and well in the United States, and that the spiritual warriors are not necessarily who we might expect. On the left, where American studies scholars are presumed to be, the idea of “spiritual warriors” in our midst brings to mind conservative Christians, evangelicals, even religious extremists. If we asked these “spiritual warriors” about religious extremism, we would perhaps hear about Islamic terrorists. Such is the rhetoric on religion in the United States in the early twenty-first century.

As Appleby and others have suggested, academic and political conversations often either minimize the importance of religion or emphasize the damage done by religious extremists. Lara Medina rightly points out that religious narratives have been overlooked by Chicano studies scholars who resist high-

lighting the contributions of the Catholic Church in Chicana/o communities. She cites the estrangement of many Chicano scholars from the Church, the associations of Catholicism with colonialism, and the Marxist bent of early Chicano studies as reasons for this exclusion. Chicana feminists, in addition, criticized the patriarchal hierarchy of the Church. Similar assumptions seem to have informed American studies scholars in recent years. Each of the authors under review here, however, finds that spiritual warriors are ordinary people, living in extraordinary moments and capable of extraordinary accomplishments, some in the name of religion in the twentieth-century United States.

David Chappell's study of the civil rights movement, and opposition to it, considers prophetic religion as the difference between success and failure in the U.S. South in the 1950s and 1960s. *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* focuses on the intellectual leadership of various movements. Chappell examines the role religion played on both sides of the slavery debate, and finds that southern preachers vigorously constructed the South's benevolent defense against the "anarchical and irresponsible 'freedom'" offered by the North. White southerners did not have the same support during the civil rights movement, and in fact identified their churches as enemies in their struggle to maintain segregation. In the mid-1950s, according to Chappell, representatives of southern Baptist and Presbyterian congregations voted in favor of desegregation (5). In what Chappell suggests is a desire to avoid controversy, most white southern clergy remained neutral, at least publicly, in the debate on segregation.

Whereas ministers and theologians provided intellectual and spiritual leadership for the proslavery movement, in the 1950s and 1960s segregationists were dependent on newspaper editors and lawyers for guidance. These "respectable segregationists," as Chappell terms them, attempted to center the debate on states' rights, rather than on race. To counter the charges of racism, editors encouraged increased funding for education, emphasizing the goal of separate but equal facilities for blacks. The challenge for these respectable segregationists was how to rally the troops, so to speak, without gathering the disreputable. Respectable segregationists feared fanatical bigots almost as much as they feared integration. They distanced themselves from the Ku Klux Klan to reinforce their self-perceived image as southern gentlemen who embraced law and order.

Surprisingly, the Fourteenth Amendment provided opportunities to challenge desegregation. Some "radicals" argued the Fourteenth Amendment was never properly ratified. The meaning of the Fourteenth Amendment was also

debated, including whether or not it applied to schools. After all, D.C. and northern schools were largely segregated at the time of the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment. The core legal argument, however, was that desegregation of public education would interfere with states' rights.

Carleton Putnam, a Columbia University educated but nonpracticing lawyer, resisted legal strategies as unrealistic and distractions from the real issue: race. Putnam's open letters to federal officials attempted to draw readers back to the burning *moral* issue: the risk to white civilization posed by integration. He believed northerners were more likely to support a moral, rather than a legal argument. Other segregationists were not confident enough with this moral declaration. "They lacked Putnam's belief that racism was strong enough, that enough people were proud and defiant enough about their racism, to rally around it" (171). Perhaps more important, they feared those they could not control: demagogues and their fanatics. Had white southern churches created and sustained a moral argument in favor of segregation, Chappell indicates, respectable segregationists could have succeeded. Under the circumstances, however, the segregationist movement remained deeply divided.

On the other side of the aisle, black southern activists drew great strength from their churches. Chappell confessed his own surprise at discovering the prophetic basis of the black civil rights movement. The testimonies he analyzed suggest "that it may be misleading to view the civil rights movement as a social and political event that had religious overtones. The words of many participants suggest that it was, for them, primarily a religious event, whose social and political aspects were, in their minds, secondary or incidental" (87). In 1958, Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, of Birmingham, told a gathering, "This is a religious crusade, a fight between light and darkness, right and wrong, good and evil, fair play and tyranny. We are assured of a victory because we are using weapons of spiritual warfare."<sup>2</sup> Chappell was surprised to get similar responses from presumed irreligious figures such as Bayard Rustin and Kwame Toure (formerly Stokely Carmichael). The younger generation of activists inherited, with some reluctance, the religious mantle left by figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Shuttlesworth. Bob Moses, uncomfortable with his followers spiritualizing his message through references to Moses of the Old Testament, attempted to change his name. Toure reported that he and other Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) members professed to be King followers to bolster their own outreach efforts. Black southerners also managed to weave their spiritual message into a patriotic one. Shuttlesworth and others spoke of having "faith in America," a "Christian nation" (100). The movement carried the spiritual message into the streets, using political

action to address political injustice. As Chappell outlines, they were outgunned and outvoted, but miraculously, were able to overcome.

These spiritual warriors were not seeking to convert sinners. Rather, in true revival fashion, they promised deliverance—*political* deliverance, *on earth*—to those who would follow. The sin would be to disrupt the movement through violence or other diversions from the message of justice, in God’s eyes, in this lifetime. “Black southern activists got strength from old-time religion, and white supremacists failed, at the same moment, to muster the cultural strength that conservatives traditionally get from religion. . . . Those who could use religion to inspire solidarity and self-sacrificial devotion to their cause [won]” (8). Chappell tells a convincing story. The testimonies he cites make clear the religious narratives of the civil rights movement.

In the case of Chicana/o/Latina/o communities, Lara Medina examines the struggle of women to make changes to their Church and to support social movements of their communities. Medina, in *Las Hermanas: Chicana/Latina Religious-Political Activism in the U.S. Catholic Church*, provides a rich history of the first organization of Chicana/Latina Catholics in the United States. Drawing on oral histories with founding and subsequent membership, as well as archival documentation, Medina charts the fascinating journey of this political organization of Latina Catholics. Medina argues that *Las Hermanas* took the Catholic Church to the Chicano movement and the Chicano movement to the Church. Members of *Las Hermanas* were active in most sectors of the Chicano movement: school walk-outs, the farm worker movement, and numerous local Chicano community struggles. The Chicano movement and the development of Chicano studies closely mirrored each other. As previously noted, Chicano studies was resistant and even hostile toward the Catholic Church. Chicana feminists also criticized the workings of the Church. *Las Hermanas* chose to address these issues from within the Church, rather than ignore the Church completely.

*Las Hermanas* was founded in 1971 to push for change in the Catholic Church. Founding members were concerned with the underrepresentation of Latina/os in leadership roles and the need for culturally sensitive outreach to Latina/o communities. Their concerns were not limited to the structural church. They were also concerned with the human church—their communities. *Las Hermanas* worked to improve conditions for laborers and was active in the Chicano movement and struggles for women’s empowerment. *Las Hermanas* joined forces with *Padres Asociados para Derechos Religiosos, Educativos y Sociales* (PADRES), an organization of Chicano priests, to push for institutional progress, resulting in the appointment of Chicano bishops, support for

the gathering of Latina/o religious, and educational programs for non-Latina/o religious leadership (3). Eventually, gendered tensions grew between Las Hermanas and PADRES, particularly around the issue of ordination of women.

Las Hermanas was unique in breaking down the sacred barrier between religious women, those affiliated with religious orders, and laity. It recognized the important contributions of laywomen as well as sisters, and created an organization that recognized and embraced Latinas, regardless of their position within the Church. Las Hermanas was at the forefront of the development of *mujerista* theology, which brings together social activism and women-centered, community-based expressions of spirituality. With the rapidly changing demographics of the U.S. Catholic Church, the work of Las Hermanas is vital to a Latina/o Catholic future in the United States.

This is not to suggest that Las Hermanas received the endorsement of the U.S. Catholic hierarchy. In 1985, Las Hermanas was invited to speak with the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops. In a dramatic show of solidarity with their communities, Las Hermanas invoked slain Salvadoran archbishop Oscar Romero, perhaps the most public face of liberation theology, saying, "I am the voice of the voiceless." The women spoke of their experiences of discrimination within the church, as well as their desire to remain within the system and work for change. They were not particularly well received. The bishops were criticized by other Catholic women for their response to Las Hermanas and "abandoned their intent to write a pastoral letter about and for women" (104). The efforts of Las Hermanas within the Women-Church movement, a largely white Catholic feminist organization, were no better received. Las Hermanas withdrew from formal participation in Women-Church activities in the early 1990s.

If Las Hermanas is viewed as solely a movement to change the Catholic Church, it was marginally successful. However, the women sought transformative change not only for the Church, but also for themselves and their communities. In 1989, members tweaked their mission statement to make clearer their own sources of strength and empowerment. They clarified their desire to serve Latinas, within the broader community, with a focus on resistance and liberation. They embraced women-centered rituals, inclusive language, and empowerment for themselves and their communities. In these *mujerista* theologies, "feminist values and a shared historical project of personal and social change find expression" (138). *Mujerista* theology does not replace traditional Catholic teachings; it provides a new, more relevant, and revelatory point of entry for Chicanas/Latinas. Las Hermanas created a church within the Catholic Church that was its own, a space that recognized and

embraced its unique contributions to both Chicana/o/Latina/o communities and their religious communities. Members of Las Hermanas pushed their own orders to address the needs of Latina/os and committed their own time and energy to Chicana/o/Latina/o issues and concerns.

Miguel de la Torre examines the Miami Cuban community in his ethnography, *La Lucha for Cuba: Religion and Politics on the Streets of Miami*. He proposes a “religion indigenous to the Miami Cuban experience” that arises from the emotional connection Cubans have for Cuba and exile (xvi). *La lucha*, as de la Torre names this religious expression, explains and even justifies the Cuban rise to power in Miami. He assigns religious significance to the hatred Miami Cubans have for Fidel Castro, and their quest for a post-Castro Cuba, their promised land.

De la Torre provides an incisive examination of the intra-Cuban oppression that has developed in Miami since 1959. He reviews the development of racism, sexism, and classism in Cuban history, and argues that this history contributes to the machismo present both on the island and in Miami. Present-day Cuba is constructed as black, socialist, feminized, while Miami is white, capitalist, and macho.

The intolerance of political opposition demonstrated in both sites is an expression of machismo. Any consideration of compromise or negotiation would be viewed as a display of weakness. The racial, class, and gendered structures that existed in Cuba are translated into a new form in Miami. The layering of forms of oppression contributes to the religious formula of *la lucha*, the struggle to regain Cuba. *La lucha* is really an expression of the intra-Cuban gender, race, and class oppression, shrouded in the rhetoric of return (117).

*Ajiaco* Christianity, a term de la Torre coins to describe a response to *la lucha*, is also a product of Cuba’s colonial past, and the community’s neocolonial existence within the United States. *Ajiaco* Christianity attempts to incorporate the diverse roots of Cuban society and culture, in the diaspora. For de la Torre, traditional Latina/o theologies will not suffice. Liberation theologies, from which Latina/o theologies draw heavily, are tainted by accusations of communist influence, making them unacceptable for Cubans fleeing Castro’s Cuba. “In contrast to *la lucha*, *ajiaco* Christianity calls for the dismantling of systemic white racism and elitism constructed to oppress the descendents of Amerindians, Africans, and Asians” (110). *Ajiaco* Christianity, rather than drawing on a specific religious tradition, centers on the Miami Cuban experience.

According to de la Torre, the struggle to keep Elián González in the United States is the most recent and public expression of *la lucha*. The religious subtext of this event is marked by the gathering of Catholic and Protestant leadership

in daily prayer and nightly vigils at the home where Elián stayed. Elián is cast as a savior for the Cuban exile community, a symbol of the religious and political desires of Cubans in Miami, who were more concerned with a victory over Castro than with Elián's welfare (9). The battle to keep Elián in Miami was constructed as a struggle of good versus evil. Returning Elián to Cuba—to Castro—would suggest that Cuba is a good, safe, proper place for a child to be raised. This was an unbearable thought for the Miami Cuban community. The return of Elián to his father in Cuba ran counter to everything Miami Cubans believed.

This political belief system, *la lucha*, not only legislated relations with Cuba; it also influenced other "foreign policy" decisions made by Cuban leadership in Miami. Cuban leaders withdrew their welcome to Nelson Mandela when, shortly before his visit, he mentioned his friendship with Castro in an interview. Likewise, a Miami Haitian celebration of Jean Bertrand Aristide's inauguration as Haiti's president was contingent on Castro being excluded from the inauguration. The imprint of *la lucha* marked relations with other "Americans," not just Castro and resident Cubans.

The mainstream U.S. public and non-Cuban Latina/os demonstrated their ignorance of the Cuban experience in Miami by their condemnation of the Miami Cuban response to the Elián crisis. These spiritual warriors, Cubans in Miami, create a predictable story of good and evil, with exiles cast as the heroes and Castro and resident Cubans as the enemy. What is unusual in this narrative is de la Torre's frank acknowledgment that the Cuban rise to power in Miami has been very costly for racialized, gendered, and economic "others" within the Cuban community. The machismo that characterized the colonial past of Cuba lives on in Miami's Cuban community.

Chappell, Medina, and de la Torre offer intriguing views of spiritual warriors at work. It is useful at this point to consider how each author uses the concept of religion. Chappell focuses on the prophetic, rather than on specific denominations or even a broader Protestant framework. This prophetic rhetoric looked to the future and embraced the belief that "we" would win—that God would make things right. Chappell's title refers to an analogy King used repeatedly—his belief that blacks and their supporters, faced with a mountain of despair, could carve out a stone of hope (1). The prophetic language that King and other preachers used was adopted and adapted by secular organizations. These leaders honed their speeches to emphasize a stone of hope when souls were tired, God's will when momentum was building, and "God Almighty" speaking "from Washington, D.C.," when the Supreme Court struck down segregation on local buses (90–91). This multi- and nondenominational

effort drew strength from its religious leaders and their allusions to God's will but built a movement by focusing on the rewards in the here and now, not the afterlife. Chappell's religion is built on the discourses used by leaders and intellectuals active in the civil rights movement. As Chappell attests, black radicalism eventually moved in a more secular direction, "to the detriment of both radicalism and religion" (94). Chappell makes an important contribution to the literature on the civil rights movement. He returns the spiritual element to civil rights activism, restoring what other studies have neglected to incorporate. My one concern with Chappell is his reliance on "body count" to determine the costs of various struggles. Accordingly, he finds the civil rights movement to be a relatively bloodless movement. He compares the forty martyrs named on the Civil Rights Memorial to the Civil War's 600,000 deaths, as well as the casualty tolls of apartheid and Tiananmen Square. I am uncomfortable with an examination that overlooks social and economic violence, violence against women, and other forms of nonlethal violence. Such violence has caused significant damage to individuals and communities of color in U.S. history.

Lara Medina starts within the realm of Roman Catholicism, but details the alternative space created by Chicana/Latina Catholics within the Church. Contrary to the precepts of Catholicism, Las Hermanas granted equality to all members, regardless of the participants' status as women religious or laywomen. The organization worked for the ordination of women and reproductive rights for Latina Catholics, in spite of the Church's clear policy on both of these issues. These spiritual warriors were creative in their construction of a religion that drew from the Catholic faith they knew and practiced, but changed to suit their own needs and concerns, to empower themselves. Las Hermanas used religion, drawing on liberationist theologies, to inspire political activism, to break down barriers faced by Chicanas/Latinas and their communities. Members conceived *mujerista* theology to theorize their use of political activism in their practice of Catholicism.

Medina is clear in stating the commitment of Las Hermanas to maintaining a structure that was not biased based on status within the church—sisters and laywomen had equal standing within the organization. I would have appreciated learning more about this unusual aspect of Las Hermanas. I wonder how others—PADRES, the U.S. Catholic Conference of Bishops, their own religious orders—viewed this decision, and what price the organization and individuals may have paid for this important stand on equality. As an autonomous feminist Catholic organization, Las Hermanas creates a model for empowerment within the Church setting.

In contrast, Miguel de la Torre describes religion as the moral code Miami Cubans use to justify their political decisions. He argues that *la lucha* “fuses and confuses religiosity with political power” (xvii). My sense is that de la Torre does the same. His insightful analysis of intra-Cuban conflict, in particular, is an important contribution to the literature on Cubans and Cuban Americans. I am not convinced, however, that *la lucha* is a religion. Rather, borrowing from Chappell, it seems that it is a “social and political event that [has] religious overtones” (87). Despite its use of religious symbolism or imagery, *la lucha* falls short of being a “new” religion or even a new view of a traditional religion.

I am intrigued by *ajiaco* Christianity, but see something broader than de la Torre conceptualized. In the Elián González case, de la Torre describes the neighborhood where Elián stayed in Miami. Across the street a *santera*, a follower of the African-based Cuban religion Santería, framed Elián’s journey as “a child of Ochún, the quasi-deity of the sea” (1). This intersection of Santería, Protestant, and Catholic narratives in the body of Elián is fascinating. De la Torre misses an opportunity to demonstrate a true Cuban *ajiaco* by not acknowledging this important intersection of religions and furthering his analysis of it. De la Torre claims that *ajiaco* Christianity embraces the indigenous, African, and Asian roots of Cuban life and culture, but by deeming this struggle a form of *Christianity*, de la Torre erases the non-European presence in Cuba’s past and present.

All three authors make important contributions to our understanding of the social and political activity of “minority” groups in the last fifty years. They use religion to reveal the transformative and liberating power of these movements. Latinas and black southerners used religion to fight exclusion and discrimination, while Miami Cubans used it to justify their political goals. Each writer makes dents in the literature of their fields—inserting religion where it has at times been minimized or ignored. These authors thus further our thinking on social movements within the field of American studies.

#### Notes

1. R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 17.
2. Fred Shuttlesworth, address to Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, June 5, 1964, quoted in Chappell, 88.