Harlem's experiment in interracial, pacifist community

By Sarah Azaransky
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The Harlem Ashram (1940–1948) was a grand experiment that didn't go very far. The interracial Christian commune at Fifth Avenue and 125th Street was modeled after ashrams, or Hindu religious centers, that Gandhi had established in India. Its founders were two white men, Ralph Templin and Jay Holmes Smith, who had been Methodist missionaries in India in the 1930s. There they became interested in Gandhi's synthesis of religion, politics, and nonviolent protest.

Templin and Smith were part of a cohort of American pacifists who saw Gandhi's work as a potential model for political and religious activism in the United States. Other Harlem Ashram residents included Ruth Reynolds, a pacifist who would become a leader in Puerto Rico's independence movement; James Farmer, an activist who would become a leader of the 1961 Freedom Rides; and Pauli Murray, a critical figure at the intersection of the civil rights and women's movements. Bayard Rustin, later confidant of Martin Luther King Jr. and organizer of the March on Washington, lived nearby and visited the ashram often.

Ashram residents agreed that religious reflection was integral to building a social movement for peace and racial justice. Daily life included Christian worship, Bible study, and discussion of Gandhi's organizing, often with visiting Indian activists and scholars. The ashram helped recently migrated African Americans to find housing and work, investigated police violence against striking workers, and planned for a credit union run by and for the black and Puerto Rican communities.

Ashram residents tried to confront persistent white racism that took various and stifling forms in the 1940s. Locally it meant workplace discrimination, being targets of police violence, discrimination and segregation in housing, and segregation in restaurants and hotels. Nationally it meant Jim Crow in all its violent and repressive forms.

Reading ashram brochures about how it aspired to "bring the reality of the kingdom of God to earth" may leave an impression that the ashram was straightforwardly

committed to social gospel ideals: that the kingdom about which Jesus preached was a vision of social equality and that the Gospels called Christians to enact the kingdom as a historic force in the world. But as kingdom builders, Ashramites looked east, to a Hindu, for practical guidance about how to accomplish their Christian theological and communal goals. They learned about *ahimsa*, or action without violence, and satyagraha, or action on the basis of truth, and devised ways to enact these in Harlem and the broader U.S. context.

Ashramites described their activist forays in the way Gandhi would, as experiments. Gandhi had titled his 1921 memoir *Experiments with Truth*, in which he recounted how many of his ascetic and activist practices were a result of a trial-and-error process to see what worked best. Ashramites adopted this disposition, but may not have learned from their mistakes in time. The asceticism of the ashram rubbed some residents the wrong way. James Farmer didn't see voluntary poverty as a priority for black Americans, the vast majority of whom experienced it involuntarily. Many residents were troubled that though it imagined itself as interracial, the ashram was nevertheless led and managed by white men.

The ashram folded in 1948. It is easy to read it as a historical footnote, but it provided an important training ground for activists. Ashramites organized the Pilgrimage to the Lincoln Memorial, a multi-city march from New York to the Lincoln Memorial to protest the poll tax. In turn, that was a model for the Rustin-organized Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom in 1957 and later multi-city marches. During their association with the ashram, Murray and Farmer organized sit-ins in Washington, D.C., and Chicago, precursors to sit-ins of the 1960s. Rustin and Murray were on the planning team and Rustin rode on the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, a model for the 1961 Freedom Rides.

Though a short-lived experiment, the Harlem Ashram reveals how an international and interreligious worldview motivated strategy and activism that would become foundational to what Rustin would call the "classical phase" of the civil rights movement.

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