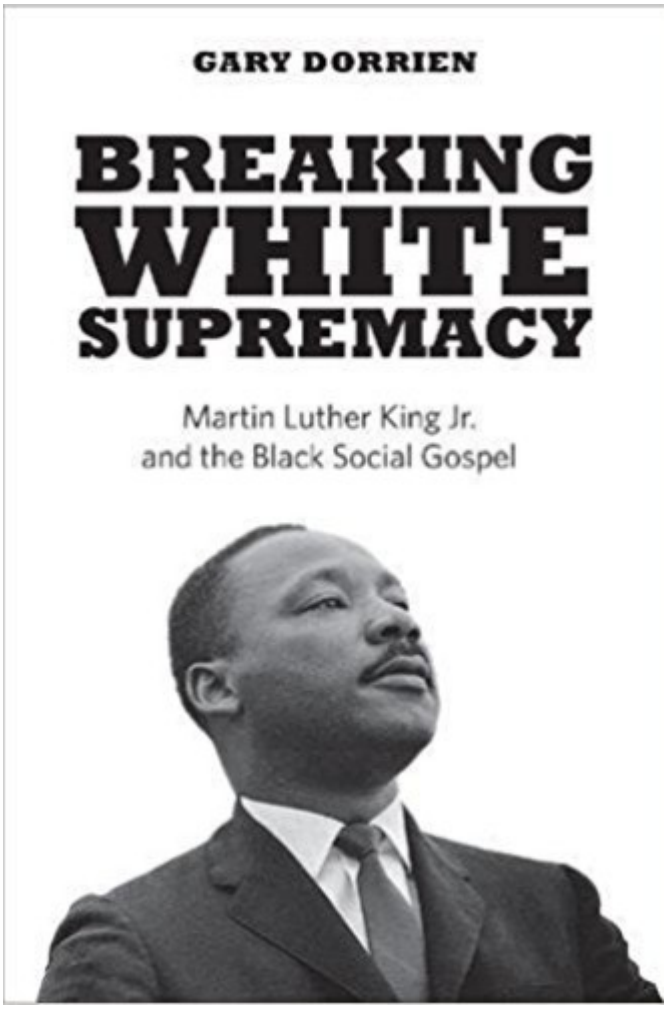
The black social gospel and the civil rights movement

Gary Dorrien chronicles the influential—but often forgotten—work of Mordecai Johnson, Benjamin Mays, and Howard Thurman.

by John Fea in the May 23, 2018 issue

In Review



Breaking White Supremacy

Martin Luther King Jr. and the Black Social Gospel

by Gary Dorrien
Yale University Press

Pick up any general survey of Christianity in America and turn to the section on the social gospel. It is likely that the narrative will be dominated by the names of two white pastors: Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch. Along with some other lesser-known white social gospel Protestants, they sought to Christianize America through reforms, government programs, and voluntary societies designed to address poverty, disease, immorality, and all forms of injustice resulting from industrialization, urbanization, and immigration.

It is highly *unlikely* that the names Mordecai Johnson, Benjamin Mays, or Howard Thurman appear alongside Gladden and Rauschenbusch in the typical textbook narrative. But according to Gary Dorrien, these leaders of the black social gospel movement represented an intellectual tradition in American Christianity that was "more accomplished and influential" than the white movement led by Gladden and Rauschenbusch.

Breaking White Supremacy is a deeply researched and beautifully written extension of Dorrien's award-winning *The New Abolition: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel*, a study of the roots of the black social gospel movement. In fact, it is really two books in one: a history of the black social gospel as it unfolded in the years between Du Bois and the civil rights movement, and a history of how this movement influenced Martin Luther King Jr. in the years between Montgomery (1955) and Memphis (1968). The final two chapters focus on the legacy of the black social gospel in the work of theologians J. Deotis Roberts and James H. Cone and the women's rights lawyer Pauli Murray.

Much of Dorrien's early narrative centers on Howard University in the 1930s and 1940s. During this era, the historically black college in Washington, D.C., was led by Johnson, a charismatic and controversial president. Johnson was deeply influenced by Rauschenbusch's theology and sought to turn Howard into a center of black intellectual life where the social gospel would be applied to the cause of racial injustice. Johnson filled his faculty with like-minded scholars, including Thurman, who served as chaplain from 1932 to 1944, and Mays, who ran the religion department from 1934 to 1940 until he left to become president of Morehouse College.

The troika of Johnson, Thurman, and Mays brought Gandhian nonresistance into the fight for civil rights. Thurman and Mays spent time with Gandhi in India, and Johnson was convinced that Gandhi's nonviolent approach to the world represented the essence of true religion. Whatever Martin Luther King Jr. learned from Gandhi was filtered through the black social gospel cultivated at Howard and transferred to King through Mays during his college years at Morehouse.

Johnson, Thurman, and Mays believed that social justice was best accomplished through socialism. They did not separate the fight for racial equality from the fight against poverty. Dorrien reminds us that King's "Poor People's Campaign" of 1967–68 was fully consistent with the black social gospel tradition he inherited and embraced. Throughout his career, King had to appeal to liberal politicians like Lyndon Johnson in order to keep the movement in the political mainstream, and he often had to quell those who wanted to move in a more radical direction. But King was a Christian socialist at heart.

The bulk of the book tells the familiar story of King's career as the leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Dorrien connects King to the social Christianity of Johnson, Mays, Thurman, and others with varying degrees of success. But his argument that the King wing of the civil rights movement would have been impossible without the work of these often forgotten Christian activists is convincing. After reading *Breaking White Supremacy*, it is hard to see King's formation in any other way.

Dorrien is clearly sympathetic to the black social gospel, but he is also a good historian who does not gloss over the unsavory moments in the fight for civil rights. He calls attention to Johnson's authoritarian leadership style at Howard and details the disappointing end to the career of Adam Clayton Powell Jr., one of the black social gospel's only national politicians. Murray's story shows that the civil rights movement was often a male chauvinist affair. And Dorrien does not let King and his fellow clergymen off the hook for what can only be described as serial adultery.

Breaking White Supremacy is at the same time honest and generous. It goes far in bringing the stories of Johnson, Mays, Thurman, and the lesser lights of the black social gospel into the narratives that historians tell about American Christianity.