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While Benjamin Mays (1895–1984) is best known as a mentor to Martin Luther King Jr., he was an influential figure in his own right. The author of pioneering works in black religion, Mays helped to lay the intellectual foundation of black theology and African-American religious studies. My interest in Mays emerged from research for *The Dream Is Freedom: Pauli Murray and American Democratic Faith* (Oxford University Press, 2011)

during which I became fascinated by a group of black theologians at Howard University in the 1930s and 1940s who developed a progressive, social Christianity. After writing this Murray book, I read everything I could get my hands on about two of the Howard University group — Benjamin Mays and Howard Thurman.

I found that Mays and Thurman were part of a larger network of black Christians who worked together to construct a theological vision and develop direct action tactics that could confront Jim Crow laws. I noticed too that members of this group — which I increasingly saw as an intellectual movement or school of thought — ventured abroad for potential resources, even looking at other religious traditions to develop ethical and political methods for Christians to transform the social order. As I observed fertile intersections of worldwide resistance movements, American racial politics, and interreligious exchanges that crossed literal borders and disciplinary boundaries, I became convinced that a closer examination of this group would enrich our understanding of the Civil Rights Movement and of King's later anticolonial politics.

Although historians have examined black internationalism, which describes how American intellectuals connected racism in the United States with racism and imperial oppression in other parts of the world, they have paid scant attention to religious black intellectuals; and even less so to the content of their theological outlooks. I wanted to uncover how internationalism shaped

these thinkers' theological perspectives and political visions, and to explore how internationalism sparked novel theological accounts of human beings, race, Jesus, God, and the church — and how these accounts, in turn, prompted lasting transformations in American Christianity and American democracy.

### Religion and Empire

With the support of an AAR individual research grant, I explored Mays's papers at Howard University's Moorland–Spingarn Research Center with an eye to his international travels. Among my findings, I uncovered materials that chronicled Mays's critical engagement with Indian religions and politics. Journal entries about his 1936 meeting with Mohandas Gandhi witness a historic exchange between two of the century's significant "freedom-oriented intellectuals" (using Sudarshan Kapur's phrase) and exemplify how a network of peoples of color shared information and tactics about local struggles against a global scourge — colonialism and white supremacy.

But diary entries also show how Mays pressed Gandhi on what he worried were "inconsistencies," asking Gandhi to "reconcile your nonviolence with what you did in the Boer War," (when Gandhi organized an ambulance corps in support of British forces) and why he declared war on the issues of untouchability, but not caste. Though Mays was in awe of Gandhi and eager to meet him, diary entries show that he was not afraid to challenge the Indian leader.

After his trip, Mays wrote about the Indian independence movement in a series of articles in the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, a regional black newspaper with a wide readership. His articles outlined what he saw as the Hindu roots of Gandhi's activism, but explained how Gandhi's use of *ahimsa* emerged also from Jainism, an ancient nontheistic South Asian religious tradition about which Mays's readers were likely unaware. He thereby avoided prevalent Western attitudes about Gandhi at the time that conflated his work with the Christian gospel or heralded him as a modern-day Christ. Instead, Mays engaged critically with South Asian religious categories and emphasized cultural and religious contexts of the Indian independence movement.

India's independence movement became a touchstone for Mays's thinking about the American situation. In a 1943 lecture at Paine College, a historically black institution in Georgia, he compared Southern white landlords with maharajas — regional Indian rulers who had support of the British colonial government. In drawing this connection Mays internationalized the social and economic experiences of sharecropping, which was part of his upbringing and that of many in

his audience. Sharecropping, he argued, was akin to the feudal-like system of regional landlords in India — Jim Crow was a local example of the global problem of colonialism and white supremacy. Just as the system of maharajas was undone by the nonviolent independence movement, so might unjust conditions in the American South be transformed.

Mays's work may contribute to contemporary discussions among religious studies scholars about how the development of our field has been shaped by Western imperialism. He was instrumental in the expansion of religious studies in the 1930s at the same time that he critiqued Western imperialism. As a black Christian theologian who was subjected to American apartheid, he disrupted a simple postcolonial binary of the West. Mays developed a black social Christianity, in part, through discussions with leaders from other religious traditions. Indeed, Mays's description of Gandhi as a "very religious man" raises the question of what counts as "religion" and points to how Western studies of South Asian cultures and traditions may reinforce past imperialisms. The achievements and limits of his anti-imperial work, therefore, may be a resource for contemporary Christian responses to imperialism.

## The Joys and Challenges of Archival Research

There are joys in archival discoveries that reveal dimensions of a person not usually available in published materials — handwriting certainly, receipts from room service charges, and sometimes notes surprising in their intimacy. In an untitled folder in Mays's papers are letters dated 1933 from his wife Sadie, when Mays was finishing his doctorate at the University of Chicago and she was working as a social worker in Atlanta. In one, Sadie wrote, "I'd love to look at you a little while — I think I would not be so blue if I could see and touch my Bennie. Heaps of love. Your me."

The joys and challenges of archival research extend to place. Mays's papers are indeed at Howard University, where he was dean of the school of religion. Moorland–Spingarn Research Center is in Founders Library, on the university's main quad and right next door to Rankin Chapel, where Thurman preached. Walking through the quad is necessary then in order to retrace Mays's and Thurman's footsteps, and it is a powerful experience to be among Howard's ghosts — intellectual greats such as Mays, Thurman, and also Alain Locke, Ralph Bunche, and E. Franklin Frazier.

Just outside Howard University's gates, Georgia Avenue is in the midst of transformation. By one measure, this historically black neighborhood — and once home to the Mays family — is one of the fastest gentrifying zip codes in the country. According to a report from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, the white population has grown from 6 percent in 2000 to 33 percent in 2010

( [Petrilli, 2012](#) ). Gentrification is a complex and variable phenomenon, but each case is an opportunity to investigate how American racial history affects distributions of wealth and housing and raises questions about economic opportunism. As a white scholar who regularly visits Howard University, Georgia Avenue's gentrification confronts the work I do. Does my research witness the vital community of Mays and his colleagues and the racial, religious, and economic struggles they undertook? Does my historical research help to uncover the roots of contemporary structures that continue to exploit and dehumanize people? This work has become the spark of a larger book project about religious black internationalism that includes Mays, Thurman, Bayard Rustin, James Farmer, and Pauli Murray.

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