

in the interests of political agendas. A fascinating case study that combines both hybrid faith and women's agency is Armin Nolzen's depiction of the League of German Girls as a surrogate spiritual community, with a "semantics of faith" built around topoi of loyalty, duty, and love of Führer. Nolzen underscores the limits of this initiative by citing the case of Ursula Meyer-Semlies, a member in East Prussia who rose to a position of regional leadership that afforded her entrée to party membership and an eventual career as a schoolteacher, in which capacity she stubbornly insisted on retaining religious instruction among her classroom duties in contravention of party officials' dictates, appealing to deeply held Protestant convictions and the freedom of conscience she claimed as a politically reliable National Socialist.

The final essay in the book, a stimulating comparative analysis by Mark Ruff, juxtaposes interpretive issues raised by the Church Struggle era with those raised by Trump-era American evangelicalism, showing how each case helps to shed light on the other. His reflections serve as a compelling reminder of the continued relevance of themes pursued throughout this book. It is manifestly impossible for a brief review to convey the full range of topics and approaches that its contributors explore. Taken as a whole, however, they provide a useful index of scholarly developments over the past generation and help identify avenues of inquiry that invite further investigation.

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***Subversive Habits: Black Catholic Nuns in the Long African American Freedom Struggle.* By Shannen Dee Williams. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022. xxiii + 394 pp. \$114.95 cloth; \$30.95 paper.**

*Subversive Habits*, Shannen Dee Williams's pioneering study of Black women religious in the United States, is an intense, demanding, extremely ambitious book. It is a heavily documented narrative, grounded in myriad mini-biographies, mined from archival sources, newspapers, and over one hundred oral interviews with sisters and former sisters. Williams does not sugarcoat her history. She is not afraid to use terms such as "white supremacy" with reference to the policies and proclivities of superiors in white (or predominantly white) congregations. At first, *Subversive Habits* (especially the endnotes) can feel like a slap on the cheek to those of us who have been writing the history of Catholic women over the past several decades, attempting to include Black women whenever possible, aware of how much of the history eludes us. Another metaphor might be more apt: *Subversive Habits* is like an ice water facial. It can wake us up, sharpen our awareness, and prepare us for the crucial journey to which Williams beckons us.

Williams's first chapter on "early struggles" in the nineteenth century covers some material that is familiar to American Catholic historians, approached from a distinctly different angle. For example, it explores why Black offspring of the Founding Fathers and victims of the *plaçage* system in Louisiana (which she accurately calls "sexual

slavery”) sought to enter the convent. Williams recovers for us the “emancipatory dimensions of Black female celibacy within religious life” (11–12) and the importance of the habit for African American women religious, even into the twenty-first century. She addresses the reasons for, and implications of, racial passing on the part of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Black candidates for membership in religious orders. She identifies the elitism and colorism within two pioneer Black congregations: the Oblate Sisters of Providence and the Sisters of the Holy Family.

Chapter 2, which addresses the first four decades of the twentieth century, probes the workings of Catholic institutional racism as experienced by Black sisters and how it was related to that of adjacent non-Catholic (even anti-Catholic) communities. American congregations responded to the challenges posed by rising teacher certification standards from the 1920s through the 1940s by sending sisters to summer schools, usually at Catholic colleges and universities. When many white bishops, priests, and sisters who supported (white) “missions” to Black Catholics opposed integrated summer schools, or even the racial mixing of professors and students, Black sister-administrators running Black Catholic schools were left with few options. Those Black sisters who were admitted to summer programs grappled with the correct approach to racist professors and fellow students. Some tried to speak discreetly to the perpetrators; “others embraced a code of silence and deference that would come back to haunt them years later” (88).

One of Williams’s most important contributions is her detailed account of how Black sisters, occasionally supported by a small cadre of white allies, desegregated Catholic institutions during the critical years between the Second World War and the mid-1960s. Her granular examination of the Sisters of St. Mary (SSM) in St. Louis illuminates the shift that occurred after the war. In July 1946, this nursing order admitted three African American women, including Elizabeth Louise Ebo, a former US Cadet Nurse who had trained in the SSM’s segregated nursing school. (As Sister Mary Antona Ebo, she would be a vocal, visible force in the fight for social justice within her order, the Catholic Church, and American society-at-large until her death in 2017 at age ninety-three). For years, the St. Louis SSMs had been known for their support of Black Catholics in the surrounding community, even as they strenuously avoided integrating their congregation. Williams shows how their shift toward integration appears to have persuaded others to take the same step. Integrated orders were still a tiny minority, but by the late 1940s, allies were able to publish lists of potential congregations, a veritable *Green Book* for any Black Catholic woman who believed that she had a vocation.

Among the most disturbing (and enlightening) aspects of Williams’s narrative is the negative trajectory that she draws from the successes of the Civil Rights Era in the 1950s and 1960s through the setbacks of the final decades of the twentieth century and beyond. The monumental achievement represented by the establishment of the National Black Sisters’ Conference in 1968 is followed almost immediately by the virtual abandonment of Black Catholic schools and the Black sisters who ran them. During the same period, for a variety of reasons examined by Williams, the ranks of African American sisters are decimated, some by exhaustion and illness (possibly stress-related), some to pursue other ministries. Williams tracks down pioneering Black sister-activists who had left their religious congregations and shares the reasons for their departures (often in their own words). In an evocative chapter on the recent past entitled “The Future of the Black Nun Is Dubious,” one hears traces of resignation in Williams’s argument that after two centuries of grueling effort and sacrifice on the part of African American sisters, the most hopeful signs now come from the “reverse-missions” originating in sub-Saharan Africa.

Williams generalizes boldly from interview material and occasionally from small samples of data. This could raise eyebrows, but it is the only way to proceed when recovering the (often suppressed) history of a neglected subset of the American Catholic community. Williams has gathered material on a small percentage of women religious who have great significance for our understanding of the church's past legacies and prospects for the future. Her research is timely, capturing the voices and stories of Black sisters while they are still with us. Generations of scholars will be in her debt.

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***Oral Roberts and the Rise of the Prosperity Gospel.* By Jonathan Root. Foreword by Daniel Vaca. Library of Religious Biography. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2023. xiv + 254 pp. \$26.00 paper.**

When the televangelist scandals broke in the 1980s, the “greed is good” era of spiritualized Reaganism, Granville Oral Roberts was caught in the maelstrom, even though his transgression was far less tawdry than those of others—Marvin Gorman, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart. On January 4, 1987, Roberts informed his television audience that God would “call me home” unless God’s people ponied up \$8 million in support of a medical missionary program. The fact that this information had come directly to the evangelist from the Almighty provoked ridicule, especially on the heels of an earlier conversation with the deity, a 900-foot Jesus who had instructed Roberts to construct a massive City of Faith hospital. The flagging finances of the hospital had prompted the \$8 million appeal.

In this excellent, accessible biography, Jonathan Root manages to steer clear of sensationalism and cheap shots, even though the temptation might have been overwhelming at times. The Roberts presented here is a sympathetic figure, a poor country boy who overcame a stutter, was divinely healed, and went on to fame on radio, television, and founder of an eponymous university.

Roberts’s trajectory, however, was anything but straight, and the author expertly guides us through the evangelist’s remarkable life, beginning with the adversities of a penurious childhood, Oral’s early gift of healing, the shadow of an older brother, the death of an older sister, and an evangelical conversion, “when suddenly the likeness of Jesus appeared in his face” (20). Oral’s younger brother transported him to a healing revival, where he was cured of both tuberculosis and stuttering.

Following his marriage to Evelyn Wingate in 1938, Roberts accepted his first pastorate in Fuquay Springs, North Carolina, then on to Shawnee, Oklahoma, where he ventured into radio. But congregational ministry could not contain his ambition. “My blood craves action,” he wrote in 1943. “I desire advancement!” (33). A reading of 3 John prompted his breakthrough into prosperity theology: “Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth” (KJV). An immediate test of the Almighty’s munificence yielded a new Buick, and Roberts was on his way, eventually bundling prosperity theology with Norman