

decisions of White diocesan boards to close growing Black Catholic inner-city schools (with clear archival data belying shallow justifications); be it the scepticism and even misogyny surrounding the formation of the National Black Sisters' Conference (NBSC) in 1968. But Williams's honesty resists any ahistorical agenda. The book excels in the author's ability to outline complexity in the story of Black sisters. For instance, White communities receptive to Black novices harboured diverse opinions about the NBSC in relation to Black Power movements. The NBSC itself championed the virtue of celibacy as an evangelical tool while remaining sceptical of progressive White sisters' motives for racial justice alongside calls for women's ordination. Later decades witnessed many ardent NBSC members leave the sisterhood, some because of Catholic misogyny, others simply from burnout. Whatever patterns Williams notes, the reader concludes that no two stories are alike, that one must appreciate first and foremost that the history of 'Black nuns' is not Hollywood fantasy or tragedy. The history is about individual lives, not nameless faces in veils, women with a personalised conviction that their faith and Church was and is far richer, more diverse and more deeply universal than any Bing Crosby screenplay or Whoopi Goldberg musical.

Overall, Williams provides an essential text for conversations about race, gender and religion in American history. Scholars in sociology, theology, political theory and feminism should also take note of Williams's research. Some historians may question the book's fairness in its assessment of Black Catholic bishops' ostensible betrayal of Black Catholic activism (Williams oddly omits any reference of Wilton Gregory) or its sharp criticism of Katharine Drexel and her religious order. Nevertheless, any future history of US Catholicism will need to reference Williams's work if one is to take it seriously. *Subversive habits* alters the landscape of American religious studies and Catholic studies. For Catholics, the book offers critical context for current efforts to canonise Mary Lange, Henriette Delille and Thea Bowman (complementing and nuancing the concurrent cause for Augustus Tolton). Christian or not, readers will fail to forget the lives that leap from the book's pages, from Sister Mary Antona Ebo (d. 2017) and her presence in Selma to Dr Patricia Grey (formerly Sister M. Martin de Porres) and her reconciliation with the White religious community that originally rejected her. Williams breathes life into a tragic and forgotten past through stories of resilient sacrifices, lessons of love from the dead and the living.

SACRED HEART SEMINARY AND SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY,
WISCONSIN

PAUL G. MONSON

The gospel of J. Edgar Hoover. How the FBI aided and abetted the rise of White Christian nationalism. By Lerone A. Martin. Pp. xii + 340 incl. frontispiece and 15 figs. Princeton-Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2023. £25. 978 0 691 17511 9
JEH (75) 2024; doi:10.1017/S0022046924000599

'White Christian nationalism' has become increasingly popular in recent US American discourse as a descriptor for contemporary manifestations of an ideology with a much longer history. It is, in other words, a new name for an old idea: that the United States has been favoured by God since its founding, that the

nation has always been and should continue to be uniquely Christian and that the country's ongoing success depends upon the willingness of faithful American Christians to defend the nation's Christian heritage against threats both internal and external. Due in part to the significant White Christian representation among the various right-wing groups involved in the 6 January 2021 insurrection, and the resulting effort by journalists, commentators and pundits to explain the ideological motivations of the protestors, the term quickly spread from its primarily academic origins into the broader public consciousness. In relatively short order, what began as a helpful sociological framework for interpreting contemporary trends in US American religious and political life has rapidly developed a range of additional usages – perhaps unsurprisingly including both as epithet and self-designation, for example, 'Christian nationalist'. Increasingly associated almost exclusively with conservative White Evangelical/fundamentalist Protestants, the term's ongoing utility as something more than just another name for the 'Christian Right' will arguably depend on more nuanced pictures of its complex history and more precise taxonomies of its current varieties. By systematically showing how the FBI and its infamous leader supported nationalistic expressions of Christianity both within the organisation and far beyond, Lerone A. Martin's *The gospel of J. Edgar Hoover* is an indispensable start.

By focusing primarily on the 'subversive' (p. 7) religious leaders targeted by the bureau's surveillance, in Martin's telling, previous accounts of FBI history have unfailingly missed the overwhelming significance of Hoover's personal faith, both for the formation of the organisation's internal religious culture and for the religious climate of the nation more broadly. And by viewing White Evangelicalism primarily through the lens of its 'professionally defined theological commitments' (p. 5), standard accounts of twentieth-century Evangelical history have similarly and nearly universally overlooked Hoover's pivotal role as supporter, legitimator and unofficial member of the ascendant, mid-century, White Evangelical movement. Although 'not by virtue of being born-again, nor by church membership or name' (p. 6), Martin argues, for all intents and purposes Hoover's ideological alignment with the White nationalist vision at the heart of post-war Evangelicalism made him a prototypical White Evangelical. The book's critical intervention, then, involves viewing J. Edgar Hoover as a White Evangelical figurehead who not only successfully wielded his considerable power and influence to establish and sustain White nationalist Christianity as the unofficial orthodoxy of the FBI, but who also helped create, promote and popularise a White nationalist Evangelical movement that remains a major – and baleful – force within contemporary US American politics.

Drawing upon thousands of recently declassified FBI documents, as well as a number of personal interviews, Martin makes the case for Hoover's ongoing religious influence in three parts: proselytising, promoting and policing. Part 1, 'Proselytizing Faith', recounts Hoover's efforts to shape the organisation's White male agents into an army of Christian nationalist 'soldier-saints' and 'lay ministers' (p. 66). By authorising a regular series of religious retreats, communion breakfasts and vesper services, led by a cast of carefully vetted, sufficiently conservative, pro-FBI Catholic and Protestant clergy, Martin suggests, Hoover thereby established an institutional religious culture that promoted a 'spiritual unity' (p. 115) among his

agents based on a shared understanding of their role ‘as the moral custodians of the nation’s Christian soul’ (p. 116). From there, in part II, the story turns to Hoover’s partnership with ‘the upstart group of conservative White Protestants’ (p. 122) who eventually became known simply as Evangelicals. In ‘Promoting Faith’, Martin highlights the FBI director’s increasingly close alliance with the architects and figureheads of the White Evangelical movement, as well as his growing appeal among ‘the white evangelical grassroots’ (p. 159) as a religious authority in his own right. In both cases, the foremost example is Hoover’s mutually beneficial relationship with the massively influential Evangelical periodical *Christianity Today*. Beginning in the late 1950s and continuing through the 1960s, Martin explains, *CT* eagerly solicited and enthusiastically published the FBI director’s essays, offering Hoover invaluable access to a rapidly growing readership of conservative White Protestants and providing ‘the fledgling flagship evangelical magazine’ (p.123) the mainstream respectability that came with his imprimatur in return. The final section, ‘Policing Faith’, details the various ways that Hoover embodied his role ‘as the nation’s leading evangelical statesman’ (p. 178). Viewing the FBI director as a ‘bishop’ (p. 181), Martin argues, Evangelical laypeople and ministers sought Hoover’s judgement on the safety and legitimacy of new Bible translations, popular ministers and parachurch ministries alike. For their part, a number of major Evangelical organisations recognised Hoover as the undisputed ‘political champion of white evangelicalism’ (p. 201), showering him with an unprecedented litany of honours, awards and praise. In turn, throughout the 1960s, Hoover wielded his religious authority as a ‘crusader’ (p. 220), hellbent on undermining the Civil Rights Movement and the religious credentials of Martin Luther King Jr.

The gospel of J. Edgar Hoover is thorough, compelling and often utterly fascinating. It sheds new light on a widely overlooked aspect of Hoover’s life and legacy, conclusively uncovering the infamous FBI director’s crucial role in recent US religious history. Martin’s provocative case for categorising Hoover as a White Evangelical leader based on his commitment to White Christian nationalism brilliantly demonstrates the insufficiency of conventional definitions of Evangelicalism based purely on theological criteria. As the book capably highlights, the historical supporters and enablers of White Christian nationalism have by no means been found exclusively among the ranks of the ‘officially’ Evangelical. Martin’s account arguably adds even more nuance to the story of White Christian nationalism than its overarching argument sometimes implies, though. The book’s extensive reconstruction of Hoover’s roster of religious allies includes detailed portraits of the bureau’s close ties both to the Jesuits and to a number of crucially supportive mainline Protestant clergy and congregations as well. Although it thus could have added a bit more emphasis on the ecclesial diversity of White nationalism’s Christian supporters, Martin’s book makes an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the true extent of its historical and contemporary reach.

UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY,
NEW YORK

ISAAC B. SHARP