

Manis, Andrew M. *A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Right's Life of Birmingham's Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth*, Religion and American Culture. Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1999. Pp. xxxii, 541. \$39.95, cloth.

With *A Fire You Can't Put Out*, Andrew Manis provides a thorough biography of Fred Shuttlesworth, the fiery preacher who led the fight for civil rights in Birmingham as head of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR). Certainly, Shuttlesworth is a familiar figure to scholars of civil rights, but Manis argues that Shuttlesworth is known primarily because of his association with Martin Luther King. Indeed, Manis' main goal appears to be to cast light into King's shadow to illuminate those civil rights leaders whose lives and legacies have been obscured by it.

Manis does an admirable job of illuminating the life and legacy of Fred Shuttlesworth. Manis elucidates how Shuttlesworth became involved in civil rights activism in Birmingham and how, even after moving to Cincinnati, his primary focus remained on Birmingham. While Manis never underestimates King's importance to the movement, he does show that Shuttlesworth worked *with*, but clearly not *for*, King. Indeed, he notes that the working relationship between King and Shuttlesworth was fairly smooth until late in the famous Birmingham struggles of 1963, when Shuttlesworth came to believe that King had sacrificed real progress in Birmingham after obtaining the national publicity needed to pressure President Kennedy to support broad-based civil rights legislation (380–386). In doing so, Manis provides important context, as well as an alternative perspective, for the split between the two leaders, which King biographer David J. Garrow seems to attribute more to Shuttlesworth's brash personality than to real grievances.¹

In Manis's telling, Shuttlesworth was a headstrong leader, sometimes impulsive, often abrasive, but always willing to make the same sacrifices he asked of others. As a result, Shuttlesworth was often in jail, and, even when he was out of jail, he typically had court cases pending. He also incurred physical battle scars from bombs, beatings, and fire hoses. Indeed, his willingness to be on the front line of battle earned him an almost fanatical following in the ACMHR. As pastor of Bethel Baptist Church in Birmingham, Shuttlesworth's improbable survival of a bombing at the parsonage convinced many Birmingham African Americans—and clearly convinced Shuttlesworth—that God was watching out for him and would protect him from whatever segregationist violence might come his way (109–112).

With such confidence, Shuttlesworth was willing to launch a frontal assault on segregation in Birmingham and to publicly joust with Bull Conner, the rabidly segregationist Commissioner of Public Safety. Manis notes that Shuttlesworth's critics, both whites and African Americans, accused him of seeking self-promotion; Manis maintains, however, that Shuttlesworth always sought progress, with or without publicity. Still, no one, then or now, could easily deny the link between publicity and progress. Shuttlesworth sought to tell the world—and most especially the Kennedy brothers—how it was to live in Birmingham in the early 1960s. Publicity brought attention, attention brought pressure, pressure brought progress.

¹ David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Vintage Books, a division of Random House, 1988) 255–58.

If Shuttlesworth has long been in King's shadow, he was an odd fit. Manis is clear about the significant differences between the two leaders, noting that Shuttlesworth's concerns were mainly local, while national concerns were subsidiary and had to be viewed in terms of their relationship to civil rights in Birmingham; for King, the main concerns were national, and each local effort had to be evaluated according to the way it fit the broader agenda (334–335). Furthermore, Shuttlesworth was a country preacher; he was less polished, diplomatic or educated than King. Manis also notes that Shuttlesworth remained a full-time pastor while conducting his civil rights campaigns, whereas King left Dexter Avenue to become a full-time civil rights leader and an associate pastor at Ebenezer, where others took care of the day-to-day running of the church. This difference, Manis suggests, helps explain why Shuttlesworth's focus was more local than King's, but that argument is weakened substantially by the fact that Shuttlesworth continually focused on Birmingham even after taking a pastorate in Cincinnati—a city with its own racial problems. Certainly, as Manis argues, Shuttlesworth was convinced that Birmingham represented the Gordian Knot of segregation in America and that breaking Birmingham would break the South (321); yet this—it seems—was far more the reason he remained focused on Birmingham than was his rootedness in the pastorate. This idea is further suggested by Manis' own argument that many members of Revelation Baptist in Cincinnati complained, as some members of Bethel Baptist in Birmingham had earlier, that Shuttlesworth devoted his time and attention to civil rights rather than to the church, and came to believe that they had a part-time pastor with full-time pay (258–259, 421).

Shuttlesworth's problems with his churches also grew from what some members saw as a dictatorial, even tyrannical, approach to church government. The same absolute confidence that drove him to action in civil rights carried over into his pastorate as well as into his marriage. While it served him well as leader of the ACMHR and in the battles against Bull Connor, it led to a split in Revelation Baptist Church and, ultimately, a split in his family when he and his wife Ruby divorced in 1970 (419–427, 438). Indeed, while Manis clearly sees that Shuttlesworth could be autocratic in his leadership of the ACMHR, he most harshly criticizes Shuttlesworth for being “oblivious to the toll his life was taking on the health of his wife or his marriage” (319).

Andrew Manis' background as a religious historian contributed significantly to his insights into Shuttlesworth's life. Though he only occasionally discusses civil religion directly, a topic with which he is most familiar, Manis clearly elucidates the ways in which Shuttlesworth used the idea of a Christian America to promote the cause of civil rights. According to Manis, “no one in the civil rights movement interpreted it as a religious crusade as literally or as consistently as Fred Shuttlesworth...” (319). Shuttlesworth also consistently praised the America, but critiqued its shortcomings, once noting “I can think of nothing more un-American than the House Committee on Un-American Activities” (397). Shuttlesworth also had sharp barbs for white Christians who failed to take a prophetic role in calling for social justice. While Shuttlesworth and many African American Christians held a holistic view of Christianity which saw the political, social, and physical realms as intertwined with the spiritual realm, many—though clearly

not all—white southern evangelicals rigidly separated those spheres.² For Shuttlesworth, this meant, “the white pulpit is captive... afraid to stand and speak to men’s hearts on the issues of freedom, justice, equality, and brotherhood.”(317).

Manis’ insightful biography was a long time in the making, published a full decade after he began interviewing Fred Shuttlesworth and his acquaintances. Manis balances those interviews with extensive research in archives. The result is an excellently researched biography that offers significant insights into civil rights organizing, the Birmingham movement, and—of course—the life and struggles of one of the movement’s most important leaders, Fred Shuttlesworth.

Alan Scot Willis
Northern Michigan University

² Manis makes this point on page 76. Two recent studies of Southern Baptists show divisions within the South’s dominate religious group regarding the relationship between religion and social issues, and specifically segregation. See Mark Newman, *Getting Right With God: Southern Baptists and Desegregation, 1945–1995* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2001); Alan Scot Willis, *All According to God’s Plan: Southern Baptist Missions and Race, 1945–1970* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2005).