

10/25/20

Dear Colleagues and Fellow Participants in the Warren Center Fellowship,

I am looking forward to our discussion of the FCC's anti-lynching campaign. The chapter I will be presenting is chapter 2 of a larger work on the FCC's theological critiques of and projects to undermine racial discrimination (primarily against African Americans, though not limited to them) in the US from 1923 to 1950. I have included the full chapter titles below.

While I am hesitant to prescribe responses to an essay or chapter in progress, below I do want to ask for specific feedback on particular issues. Let me say that I am aware of the graphic nature of the topic I will be discussing and I can only offer an advance warning about the violent dehumanization of black bodies that you will read about in this chapter. I have tried to be sensitive to these concerns in writing and talking about this topic in other venues, and I remind myself of the somber subject matter in each instance. This warning is both about contents and about my own struggle to write, talk, and think about this extremely difficult topic without appearing too detached and accustomed to these violent incidents, however familiar I might be with the subject matter.

First, I would like suggestions or commentary on whether my situating the FCC's emerging anti-lynching campaign in the early 1920s is sufficiently historicized and contextualized. I will explain in person why I have chosen to narrate and organize the chapter as I have and why I decided to leave out details of broader anti-lynching activism that preceded the work of the FCC.

Second, I am still wrestling with the tone and stance of my approach to the FCC. As an historian and a scholar of religion, I don't want to come across as an apologist for any organization or movement such that I obscure important details or overlook aspects of a movement or historical moment that does not comport with my thesis. I have tried to aim in this and other works to tease out contradictions and tensions in the actions of historical actors, to allow ambiguities and ironies to remain in the stories I discover and examine, and not to impose a static and closed order on evolving conceptions of moral and social problems. Yet, in this project and especially in this chapter, I not only make a claim about an act of historical retrieval and significance, but I admit my admiration for the work undertaken by the FCC and I do this with awareness of contemporary critics (and activists' complaints) of the gradualism of the FCC and the NCC's approach to social change and racial justice. But I worry that in trying to rectify a problem and make a positive claim about a religious organization contributing to debates about cultural pluralism (in the larger project, beginning in the 1920s), I might seem too sympathetic. But I am less exercised about this issue in this chapter given the urgency that all activists had about action against the brutal and grim practice of lynching and how the work of the FCC was welcomed, even if there was not agreement about the fuller discussion of the nature of racism in the US and how to go about mitigating or trying to end it.

So to reiterate, I would like any advice about my tone and the approach I take to the FCC in this chapter.

I am eager to receive any and all other suggestions and commentary that you have to offer.

All the best,

Curtis Evans

Here are the tentative chapter titles of my book project:

“A Theology of Brotherhood: The Federal Council of Churches and the Problem of Race”

Introduction

Chapter 1: A Protestant Theology of Brotherhood

Chapter 2: “A Stain upon Our National Honor”: The Anti-Lynching Campaign

Chapter 3: Race Relations Sundays: Changing Persons and the Church

Chapter 4: The Church in the World: Interracial Workshops

Chapter 5: The Dynamics of Race and Interracialism within the Federal Council

Chapter 6: Ecumenical Protestantism and the Limits of Social Reform