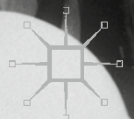


PALGRAVE STUDIES IN THE HISTORY
OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

The Religious Left in Modern America

Doorkeepers of a Radical Faith

Edited by Leilah Danielson,
Marian Mollin, and Doug Rossinow



Palgrave Studies in the History of Social
Movements

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Around the world, social movements have become legitimate, yet contested, actors in local, national and global politics and civil society, yet we still know relatively little about their longer histories and the trajectories of their development. This series seeks to promote innovative historical research on the history of social movements in the modern period since around 1750. We bring together conceptually-informed studies that analyse labour movements, new social movements and other forms of protest from early modernity to the present. We conceive of ‘social movements’ in the broadest possible sense, encompassing social formations that lie between formal organisations and mere protest events. We also offer a home for studies that systematically explore the political, social, economic and cultural conditions in which social movements can emerge. We are especially interested in transnational and global perspectives on the history of social movements, and in studies that engage critically and creatively with political, social and sociological theories in order to make historically grounded arguments about social movements. This new series seeks to offer innovative historical work on social movements, while also helping to historicise the concept of ‘social movement’. It hopes to revitalise the conversation between historians and historical sociologists in analysing what Charles Tilly has called the ‘dynamics of contention’.

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SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

Around the world, social movements have become legitimate, yet contested actors in local, national, and global politics and civil society, yet we still know relatively little about their longer histories and the trajectories of their development. Our series reacts to what can be described as a recent boom in the history of social movements. We can observe a development from the crisis of labor history in the 1980s to the boom in research on social movements in the 2000s. The rise of historical interests in the development of civil society and the role of strong civil societies as well as non-governmental organizations in stabilizing democratically constituted polities has strengthened the interest in social movements as a constituent element of civil societies.

In different parts of the world, social movements continue to have a strong influence on contemporary politics. In Latin America, trade unions, labor parties and various left-of-center civil society organizations have succeeded in supporting left-of-center governments. In Europe, peace movements, ecological movements, and alliances intent on campaigning against poverty and racial discrimination and discrimination on the basis of gender and sexual orientation have been able to set important political agendas for decades. In other parts of the world, including Africa, India, and South East Asia, social movements have played a significant role in various forms of community building and community politics. The contemporary political relevance of social movements has undoubtedly contributed to a growing historical interest in the topic.

Contemporary historians are not only beginning to historicize these relatively recent political developments; they are also trying to relate them

to a longer history of social movements, including traditional labour organizations, such as working-class parties and trade unions. In the *longue durée*, we recognise that social movements are by no means a recent phenomenon and are not even an exclusively modern phenomenon, although we realize that the onset of modernity emanating from Europe and North America across the wider world from the eighteenth century onwards marks an important departure point for the development of civil societies and social movements.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the dominance of national history over all other forms of history writing led to a thorough nationalization of the historical sciences. Hence social movements have been examined traditionally within the framework of the nation-state. Only during the last two decades have historians begun to question the validity of such methodological nationalism and to explore the development of social movements in comparative, connective, and transnational perspective taking into account processes of transfer, reception, and adaptation. Whilst our book series does not preclude work that is still being carried out within national frameworks (for, clearly, there is a place for such studies, given the historical importance of the nation-state in history), it hopes to encourage comparative and transnational histories on social movements.

At the same time as historians have begun to research the history of those movements, a range of social theorists, from Jürgen Habermas to Pierre Bourdieu and from Slavoj Žižek to Alain Badiou as well as Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to Miguel Abensour, to name but a few, have attempted to provide philosophical-cum-theoretical frameworks in which to place and contextualize the development of social movements. History has arguably been the most empirical of all the social and human sciences, but it will be necessary for historians to explore further to what extent these social theories can be helpful in guiding and framing the empirical work of the historian in making sense of the historical development of social movements. Hence the current series is also hoping to make a contribution to the ongoing dialogue between social theory and the history of social movements.

This series seeks to promote innovative historical research on the history of social movements in the modern period since around 1750. We bring together conceptually informed studies that analyse labor movements, new social movements, and other forms of protest from early modernity to the present. With this series, we seek to revive, within the

context of historiographical developments since the 1970s, a conversation between historians on the one hand and sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists on the other.

Unlike most of the concepts and theories developed by social scientists, we do not see social movements as directly linked, a priori, to processes of social and cultural change and therefore do not adhere to a view that distinguishes between old (labor) and new (middle-class) social movements. Instead, we want to establish the concept 'social movement' as a heuristic device that allows historians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to investigate social and political protests in novel settings. Our aim is to historicize notions of social and political activism in order to highlight different notions of political and social protest on both left and right.

Hence, we conceive of 'social movements' in the broadest possible sense, encompassing social formations that lie between formal organizations and mere protest events. But we also include processes of social and cultural change more generally in our understanding of social movements: this goes back to nineteenth-century understandings of "social movement" as processes of social and cultural change more generally. We also offer a home for studies that systematically explore the political, social, economic, and cultural conditions in which social movements can emerge. We are especially interested in transnational and global perspectives on the history of social movements, and in studies that engage critically and creatively with political, social, and sociological theories in order to make historically grounded arguments about social movements. In short, this series seeks to offer innovative historical work on social movements, while also helping to historicize the concept of "social movement." It also hopes to revitalize the conversation between historians and historical sociologists in analysing what Charles Tilly has called the "dynamics of contention."

Leilah Danielson, Marian Mollin, and Doug Rossinow's *The Religious Left in Modern America: Doorkeepers of a Radical Faith* draws attention to the rich history of the religious left in America that influenced a whole range of social movements in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While, for the nineteenth century, such influence, for example over the abolition or the temperance movements, is readily acknowledged, the historiography on social movements in modern industrial twentieth-century America has little to say on religion. An ever-more secular historiography has been emphasizing the impact of secularism in twentieth-century America, which allegedly pushed religion to the margins of society. The history of religion in the twentieth century seemed on its way to becoming

a niche concern for an increasingly small group of church historians. However, from the 1990s onward the history of historiography has seen a phenomenal rise in the history of religion, and historians have been successfully questioning the central secularization thesis that guided much older research on religion.

Yet, given that history writing also takes, to a large extent, its concerns from contemporary agendas, the history of religion in America, has, for the past twenty years, been overly concerned with the religious right and right-wing religious fundamentalism that have had such an influence on American politics over recent years. While this research has yielded highly fascinating results, it also contributed to a situation where the religious left was almost hidden from sight. This volume is setting out to change this as it explores the importance of religion to a history of American progressivism in the twentieth century. If the left is associated with seeking a morally better world through more economic justice, workers' rights, racial and gender equality as well as antimilitarism, anti-imperialism, and a commitment to human rights, then Christianity contributed to all of these agendas in the twentieth century.

The chapters in this volume highlight the diversity of political, cultural, and social contexts. Around 1900 a farmer-labor movement relied on a Social Gospel that integrated questions of poverty and class into religion. Such forms of equating sin with social evils remained prominent aspects of many non-mainstream Protestant churches in America well into the inter-war period. However, strands of Catholicism and Judaism also carried distinctly left-wing agendas in the first half of the twentieth century. During the Cold War, Christianity provided a home for pacifism, the Civil Rights Movement, antiracism and left-wing internationalism as well as anticapitalism. Sections of the Black Power movement and sections of radical feminism were deeply influenced by Christian ideas. Overall, this volume underlines how vital it is for modern scholars of social movements to integrate the study of religion into their concerns for a whole variety of very diverse social movements and we hope that this volume is successful in encouraging this trend within a wider literature on social movements.

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The editors found the process of writing and pulling together this volume both intellectually and personally fulfilling. It was a genuinely collaborative project for which we would like to acknowledge each other, as well as our contributors, whose essays together provide a deeply textured and vivid portrait of the religious left tradition. We would also like to thank our editor at Palgrave Macmillan, Molly Beck, whose support has been critical to this project's success.

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Leilah Danielson, Marian Mollin, and Doug Rossinow	
The Other Social Gospelers: The Working-Class Religious Left, 1877–1920	19
Janine Giordano Drake	
The Social Gospel, the YMCA, and the Emergence of the Religious Left After World War I	41
Christopher Evans	
Judaism, Yiddish Peoplehood, and American Radicalism	61
David Verbeeten	
Dorothy Day, Religion, and the Left	81
Nicholas Rademacher	
“Saints for this Age”: Religion and Radicalism in the American Century	101
Leilah Danielson	
Resisting Jim Crow Colonialism: Black Christianity and the International Roots of the Civil Rights Movement	125
Sarah Azaransky	

To Save the Soul of the Nation: Martin Luther King, Jr., Christian America, and the Religious Left	145
Douglas E. Thompson	
The Catholic Interracial Council and Mexican American Civil Rights in Davenport, Iowa, 1952–1974	163
Felipe Hinojosa	
Black Power/Black Faith: Rethinking the “De-Christianization” of the Black Freedom Struggle	185
Angela D. Dillard	
“Pray to God; She Will Hear Us”: Women Reimagining Religion and Politics in the 1970s	211
Lilian Calles Barger	
“The 1900-Year Crisis”: Arthur Waskow, the Question of Israel/Palestine, and the Effort to Form a Jewish Religious Left in America, 1967–1974	233
Doug Rossinow	
Ita Ford and the Spirit of Social Change	255
Marian Mollin	
Global Encounters and the Evangelical Left	277
David R. Swartz	
Index	295

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Introduction

Leilah Danielson, Marian Mollin, and Doug Rossinow

*For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.
I would rather be a doorkeeper in
the house of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness.
Psalm 84: 4–10*

The first year of Donald Trump’s presidency, 2017, may be recalled as, among other things, the moment when the religious left burst on the American political scene. A spate of news articles at this time heralded the appearance of faith-based progressive activism, following “40 years”—as one major account put it—“in which the Christian right has dominated the influence of organized religion on American politics.”¹ Observant

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Protestants, Catholics, Muslims, Jews, and others became newly vocal, or just newly heard, in their defiance of a conservative government and in their advocacy for a contemporary agenda of social democratic inclusion that many atheists might embrace. Diverse in terms of gender, race, and sexual identity, this political force appeared to many as a refreshingly new component in both the political left and American civic religion. The religious left might have historical antecedents, but these seemed obscure and weak, at least in recent times. The Rev. Jennifer Butler told a journalist with chagrin that, among religious folk, in her memory, “Those of us who were more social-justice oriented, we became embarrassed to speak to our faith and values publicly.”² She was glad that this seemed to be changing.

With such testimony on offer, many readers may have no idea that the religious left has had a rich and continuous history in the United States, although surely a history with its ups and downs. The notion that a religious left is alien to contemporary America is curiously ingrained. In part, this has to do with established assumptions about the secularization of modern American society. Although recent scholarship in U.S. religious history has come to highlight the myriad ways in which politics and religion have shaped one another up to the very present, the history of the left’s intersection with religious impulses remains largely untold.³ As far as progressive activism in the American past is concerned, textbook treatments of U.S. history routinely attribute religious inspiration to movements for reform and radical change in nineteenth-century America, from abolitionism and temperance to prison reform and women’s rights. Regarding later incarnations of radical activism, however, religion often appears as what Jon Butler, the dean of American religious historiography, memorably terms a “Jack-in-the-Box,” popping up surprisingly now and again.⁴ The reality is that the nexus of faith and social change was not totally eclipsed with the dawning of a more urban, diverse, and modern society. Matthew Sutton and Darren Dochuk correctly call the United States “one of the most religiously charged political cultures in the modern West”; this description held true throughout the twentieth century, and the political left was not sealed off from this truism of American civic life.⁵

This volume presents the all-too-often missing history of the religious left tradition in the industrial-era United States.⁶ It does so not with a single voice and a seamless narrative, but through a series of studies and stories from multiple places, times, and points of view. While we see a religious left tradition in modern America, we make no effort to downplay its tremendous heterogeneity, its diversity in terms of confessional tradition,

race and ethnicity, gender and sexual identity, social class, theology, and political doctrine. Both the cohesion and the complexity of this tradition are real to us.

Common threads emerge from diverse religious and political strands: themes of transformation, moral politics, and personal courage and fortitude have historically united people of faith on the left. From numerous vantage points, religious radicals looked at American society and concluded that it had to be reordered if they hoped to establish a world of justice, equality, and peace—spiritual and humanitarian goals that they all shared. All took from their faiths the personal strength they needed to choose the role of doorkeeper to a holy and righteous space—in the words of the Psalmist—instead of dwelling in an abode whose comforts were rooted in immorality. They burned with a desire to infuse American civic life with a vision of a better world and with the courage to make simple yet transcendent questions of morality urgent public matters.

This history is reflected in the ongoing activism of today, in formations such as Sojourners, the evangelical Protestant radical outfit long headed by the Rev. Jim Wallis, Jewish Voice for Peace, a national organization that seeks a peaceful solution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict from a left perspective, and the “Moral Mondays” campaign led and organized by the Rev. William J. Barber in protest of North Carolina’s legislative shift to the right. As Barber himself puts it, “We use the words that progressives have thrown away—morality, welfare, poor, faith—because those are soul words.”⁷ Surely some atheists talk in such terms of plain morality as well. Yet people of faith may have a distinctive claim to such “soul words,” guarding them and speaking them when others falter. We hope that believers and atheists, academics and activists, the doubtful and the committed, will read the essays collected here and know that this history is deep, wide, and still flowing onward. This is everyone’s history.

Making sense of this history requires starting with some definitions and some context. When we use the term “political left,” we are referring to a multi-pronged and evolving set of organizations and movements with shared commitments to a range of concerns, including struggles for economic justice, workers’ rights, racial equality, antimilitarism, anti-imperialism, and human rights. More basically, this work coheres around an idea of the left as a politics committed to reconstructing society in order to achieve social and political *equality*, *liberation* from oppressive traditions, and a new social *unity* that may overcome the divisions of modern capitalist life. These values of equality, liberation, and unity were

not shared with equal intensity by all of those on the left during the period the essays in this collection cover. Activists in the religious left, for example, tended to place higher value on unity than did their atheist counterparts, while many faith-based radicals harbored reservations about some of the demands for cultural liberation that secular radicals espoused. Their goals, however, formed a matrix of vision that leftists in general held in common.

These goals also gave left activists a distinct position on the spectrum of political practice and debate. Leftists stood in sharp opposition to the agendas of the political right, which focused on individual freedoms within a framework of cultural traditionalism and capitalist economics. Their relationship to political liberalism was more complex. Leftists and moderate reformers sometimes shared social ideals and critiques, and could collaborate when their goals aligned. But because liberals saw more of value in existing social institutions and patterns than did their leftist contemporaries, the liberal desire to reform rather than fundamentally transform society often placed the two groups at odds. Religious radicals thus carved out a distinctive, if heterogeneous, political identity across the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, one that acquired a coherent shape and content through the shifting challenges and different phases of that radical lineage's emergence.

The history of the modern American religious left can be divided into three phases of political development—rise, crisis, and revival—each featuring different political departures and distinct theological emphases. While the initiatives of these eras overlapped and emerged unevenly, to think in terms of a three-stage sequence clarifies and describes the larger arc of the religious left's development.

In the first phase, a long era stretching roughly from 1880 to the 1930s, reformers built a powerful concept of social Christianity into the foundation for a wide range of political action, some of it quite radical. The Social Gospel of this era held that sin was social as well as individual, and that salvation depended upon constructing a more just and united society. It combined a liberal theology of a God who was loving, benevolent, and “immanent” (i.e., present and emerging in Creation) with evangelical commitments to rebirth and proselytizing, and it manifested itself in a variety of forms. The Baptist Walter Rauschenbusch took Social Gospel theology in a leftist, anti-capitalist direction in the early twentieth century, and militant pacifists of the World War I era debuted a personal commitment to action against war—and sometimes against imperialism and racism as well.

Radical thinkers like Sherwood Eddy, A. J. Muste, and Howard Thurman embraced a vision of Christian social reconstruction and redemption. Despite their radicalism, however, such leftist thinkers remained rooted in the theology, and sometimes the institutions, of the liberal Protestant mainline churches. Catholics began to adopt a Social Gospel of their own, drawing on Catholic teachings that condemned the abuses of capitalism and calling on the Church to support working-class organization. The central figure in the new Catholic left was Dorothy Day, also a fierce opponent of war, who maintained that the real measure of social progress was the realization of human personhood.

The second phase of the religious left's history lasted from the late 1930s until about 1960. This was an era of crisis, repression, and rethinking for radicals who had become strongly drawn to pacifism and socialism. The war against fascism and then the Cold War against communism rocked the world of religious radicalism, reducing leftist ranks and marginalizing leftist believers. During World War II and after, Christian realists, led by the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, chastised Social Gospel adherents in general for failing to reckon with human sinfulness and the will to power, and called for compromise with the coercion and violence that characterized actual relations between social classes and nation-states. At the same time, the red scare of the 1940s and 1950s pushed Christian leftists, who were neither communists nor anticommunists, into a political and institutional netherworld, where they responded with a new countercultural identity and a politics of prophetic witness against atomic weapons, the warfare state, and white supremacy. Muste, like Day, now drew upon post-liberal currents of personalism and existentialism to insist that human time was open to messianic time and that suffering and witness by a small minority could help usher an ungodly empire into the Kingdom of God. By the mid-1950s, Martin Luther King, Jr. had begun to synthesize liberal and post-liberal theologies as he helped lead the African American movement against U.S. apartheid and put into practice the vision of redemptive, prophetic action against injustice and for a new social unity.

The third phase of this history saw a revival of the religious left in America between 1960 and 1990, an era of liberation theologies and new social movements "from below." The African-American freedom movement stood at the leading edge of this religious left, as it did for the U.S. left as a whole during this time. It was joined in the 1960s by a new mobilization against war and empire sparked by the American war in Vietnam. The struggles against racial injustice and violent imperial domination rele-

gitimized the religious left, whose dramatic expansion in the 1960s and 1970s persisted even into the more politically conservative period that followed. Religious African-American, Latino/a, women, and gay activists forced members of dominant groups to recognize them and their perspectives in a broad, multi-sided push for a reworked society that would transcend the forms of oppression that these groups experienced. Religious leftists embraced two different kinds of liberation during this era: the Catholic, Marxist-influenced “theology of liberation,” emanating from Latin America, which demanded a new society oriented around the needs of, and partly led by, the poor; and liberation from old attitudes about fixed and hierarchical identities, identities to which more conservative religious people were often profoundly committed. Activists of non-Christian faiths increasingly linked their own religious beliefs to left politics, although in small numbers, as the nation’s religious diversity grew. In the more conservative climate of the 1980s and 1990s, religious radicals and liberals once again worked together in reform and protest activities and within seminaries. The Social Gospel generation’s concerns with economic exploitation and labor rights gained new salience, as global economic changes and neoliberal state policies intensified old-but-new forms of inequality and division.

Despite this rich history, and despite the fact that recent scholarship in modern U.S. history has come to highlight the myriad ways in which politics and religion repeatedly shaped one another, the literature on the history of the religious left has been largely eclipsed by studies that emphasize right and center political sectors. The largest and most visible dimension of this scholarship relates to the rise of the evangelical Protestant right,⁸ reflecting that movement’s ascendancy within contemporary American politics and culture. Nevertheless, one does not have to look far to uncover studies that complicate this dominant narrative. Research on the intersections between Catholicism and politics, for example, makes it clear that the push towards Christian political conservatism was not the sole domain of Protestant evangelicals.⁹ Going beyond the world of the right, a range of new studies emphasize the role mainline denominations and religious doctrines played in shaping the currents of twentieth-century American liberalism.¹⁰ When it comes to discussions of the history of the modern American left, however, religion and religious faith are often hard to find.

Indeed, the literature on radicalism and left activism from the late nineteenth century onward, and especially writings that emphasize the decades that followed World War II, are primarily secular—if not atheist—in focus.

We use the loaded term “atheist” in its literal meaning—not to denote a definite and essential belief in the nonexistence of God, but rather to represent politics and people who are *a-theist*: whose activities and passions bracket the questions of God, faith, and transcendence as irrelevant, at least as far as politics is concerned. This decidedly irreligious framework dominates the vast collection of monographs that chronicle the history of the American left as well the best and most recent synthetic narratives, bolstering the established tropes of a Christian right and a secular left.¹¹

Where religion does appear in historical accounts of progressive politics, it remains marginalized and fragmented. Historians of peace and anti-war movements, for example, regularly highlight the workings of religious faith among radical pacifists and antimilitarists, but generally fall short by restricting their interpretive claims to the history of overtly religious groups or campaigns. In this way, even scholars who understand the importance of religion to political radicalism and the presence of leftists among people of faith ultimately reinforce a perception of the religious left as segregated from the “mainline” of modern American radicalism.¹² At the same time, confessional and racial lines of division truncate many accounts of religious radicalism, and thus challenge our ability to analyze how the intersections between religion and left activism operated as a whole. Historians of Catholic radicalism write about a Catholic world; those who study Protestant leftists describe a Protestant dominion.¹³ Scholars, similarly, treat religion’s role within the black freedom struggle as *sui generis*, reflective of the distinctive qualities of a particular movement in which clergy and the black church played central roles, but not necessarily indicative of broader trends.¹⁴ The task of integrating these individual stories into the collective narrative of left politics in the United States remains undone.

Equally worrisome is the tendency among some historians of the left to categorize religion and religious activism as manifestations of emotion and superstition among marginalized social groups rather than the foundation of a rational and forward-looking strategy of resistance to prevailing structures of oppression. To be sure, rarely, if ever, will one find in today’s scholarship an explicit statement that religion is merely a consolation of the downtrodden and a figment of the backward mind, only to be indulged by those with more mature and modern perspectives. Yet the echoes of such attitudes implicitly linger in the dominant narratives.

Similarly, while early works on the history of the black freedom struggle, specifically in the post-1954 era, gave pride of place to Christian

nonviolence, the salience of religion has receded dramatically even in contemporary scholarship on the “long civil rights movement.” Instead, recent scholarship on this topic embraces a new materialism that assigns religion, in the tradition of the great sociologist E. Franklin Frazier and others, to the status of an impediment to progress, as something to be overcome.¹⁵ Studies of labor and working-class history, which tend to follow a more explicitly Marxian frame, have long given religion short shrift. Although new research has begun to address issues of religious belief and practice, particularly with regard to Southern struggles for social and economic justice, as well as César Chávez’s efforts within the United Farm Workers,¹⁶ such efforts are few and far between, and essentially serve as an annex to decidedly secular treatments of union organizing in the industrial North. As a result, civil rights and labor activists motivated by spiritual faith appear as exceptions that prove the rule, anomalous examples of religious radicals who add flavor to the story of the American left but do not challenge our basic understanding of that tradition.

This collection of new essays draws from an emerging wave of scholarship on American social movements that forcefully underscores the close historical relationship between religion and ostensibly nonreligious forms of progressive, left, and radical politics. The 13 essays highlight the major developments and themes in the history of the religious left from the 1870s through the 1980s. We do not provide an overview of contemporary religious radicalism; readers will not find accounts of present-day social movements for LGBTQ rights,¹⁷ progressive Islam, or opposition to Donald Trump’s presidency. Instead, we take a decidedly historical approach, focusing on significant social formations that occurred during a time when the overwhelming majority of Americans came from Christian backgrounds, with concerns that reflected their particular historical and cultural contexts. Of course, Christians are a highly differentiated group with varied belief systems and agendas, a reality that is highlighted in the essays collected here. They also were not the only Americans who engaged in faith-based activism, as the chapters on Jewish radicalism reveal. Still, even as we have tried to capture the depth and complexity of Judeo-Christian radicalism, our account is not exhaustive. It is not meant to be. What this collection provides, instead, is a kaleidoscopic look at various dimensions of the religious left’s history, and a preview of new directions in scholarly treatments of these political movements and endeavors.

The early chapters map routes of intersection between religion and radicalism among major religious groups between 1870 and 1945. Chapter 2,

by Janine Giordano Drake, traces the emergence of a self-conscious religious left from the farmer-labor movements of the late nineteenth century through the 1910s. The proliferation of “working-class Christianities,” she argues, threatened the cultural authority of middle-class clergy, who in turn created a Social Gospel that absorbed much of their critique, but also tamed and harnessed it to their agenda of ministerial leadership. Chapter 3, by Christopher Evans, picks up Drake’s thread and argues that the Social Gospel did not collapse with World War I, but entered a new and dynamic phase. By focusing on radical clergy like Sherwood Eddy and his work with the Young Men’s Christian Association, Evans shows that the Christian left worked in networks and organizations outside of the mainline churches, where they inspired a new generation of youth to work on behalf of civil rights and peace. Chapter 4, by David Verbeeten, turns our attention from the predominantly Protestant narrative of religious radicalism to a thoughtful exploration of the overrepresentation of Jews in left-wing politics through the career of Communist leader Alexander Bittelman. Ostensibly secular and assimilationist, Bittelman’s Jewish radicalism reflected Judaic values and theological tropes, and served to affirm difference and resist embourgeoisement. The Catholic radical Dorothy Day similarly fused her left-wing politics and religious faith, as Nicholas Rademacher shows in Chap. 5. Combining Catholic social thought and anarchist philosophy, Day enacted a politics of personalism that stood as a challenge to liberal religion and the liberal state.

Another cluster of chapters explores religious left interventions into pressing questions of global power and racial hierarchy in the era of the Cold War. Chapter 6, by Leilah Danielson, argues that religion was an important factor in the midcentury shift from an “Old Left” to a “New Left.” Against the backdrop of America’s rise to the status of global superpower and the onset of the Cold War, the venerable radical A. J. Muste posited a “true church” of pacifists and nonconformists whose prophetic action would break through the alienation and oppression of organized society and Cold War power politics and make the beloved community possible. Chapter 7, by Sarah Azaransky, explores the internationalist roots of radical black Christianity through the activism of Howard Thurman, Pauli Murray, and Bayard Rustin. By highlighting how black intellectuals and theologians looked outside of the United States, and even outside of their religious traditions, in search of ideas and practices that could transform American democracy, Azaransky’s essay forcefully places the U.S. civil rights movement within the context of a global wave of anticolonial struggle. Staying

closer to home, Douglas Thompson's examination of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., in Chap. 8, illuminates King's commitment to specific ideas about what it meant for the nation to live up to the ideals of a Christian America. As Thompson argues, these religious beliefs fundamentally shaped King's engagement with the state as he resisted the politics of racial injustice and inequality. Chapter 9, by Felipe Hinojosa, shows how antiracist Catholic clergy and laity in Davenport, Iowa, created a space where the profoundly marginalized community of Mexican Americans could organize and mobilize an interethnic coalition to fight for civil rights. As Hinojosa points out, these coalitions persisted, with faith-based groups serving as the center of the 1980s Sanctuary movement and the contemporary movement for immigrant rights.

Further chapters demonstrate the centrality of religion in the identity politics of the late 1960s and 1970s. Chapter 10, by Angela Dillard, challenges the secular bias in the historiography of the Black Power movement by revisiting James Forman's "Black Manifesto" and highlighting the involvement of African-American Christians. In so doing, she demonstrates the complexity of the movement's engagement with Christianity, and argues that one of its greatest legacies was black liberation theology. Lilian Calles Barger makes a similar argument about radical feminism in Chap. 11. In contrast to the secular narrative of the feminist movement, Barger shows that religion was deeply meaningful and relevant to many radical feminists who deconstructed its patriarchal foundations and invented a theology and practice of women's liberation. Chapter 12, by Doug Rossinow, examines the rise of Jewish identity politics in the late 1960s and the attempt to build the first intentionally religious Jewish left in U.S. history. Arthur Waskow, a central figure in this effort, found that this project became problematic in the context of a global left that increasingly identified Israel with imperialism and oppression toward the Palestinians.

If the religious left turned inward during the 1960s and embraced a politics of culture and difference, it was also transnational and global, as demonstrated by the remaining essays. In Chap. 13, Marian Mollin explores the intersection of spiritual and political praxis in the life of Maryknoll Sister Ita Ford, one of four North American churchwomen murdered by the El Salvadoran military in late 1980. Ford's activism grew out the Sixties zeitgeist and Vatican II, and evolved further under the influence of liberation theology in Latin America. Chapter 7, by David R. Swartz, further explores the transnational and mutually constitutive

culture and politics of the modern left by showing how evangelical immigrants pushed their conservative American coreligionists toward progressive stances on poverty, neocolonialism, and immigration. These stances led to alliances with other religious radicals and the secular left, but evangelical traditionalist theology and views on marriage and sexuality reveal continuing points of tension and rupture on the left. Whether or not the left chooses to accommodate this diversity, ultimately it will have to reckon with the dense and expansive religious networks that span the United States and the world.

Our outline of religious left history clearly shows that, over the course of the long twentieth century, faith served as a touchstone for followers of the religious left tradition, an inspiration during times that seemed, to them, both good and bad. Religious faith was a life raft they could hold onto through the darkest of eras, a source of hope that, despite the circumstances surrounding them, allowed them to believe their work would usher in a better day. During more optimistic periods, when believers thought they saw that new day dawning, religion remained a “true north” that might keep them on a moral path while pointing them toward society’s destination. Inspired by a sense of prophetic witness as well as a hunger for justice in the here and now, this diverse array of activists drew from the influences of mainstream culture and secular left activism even as they charted new directions of protest and new visions of what the world could become.

Despite their differences, the various incarnations of the modern American religious left shared important commonalities that shaped their distinctive style of activism and influenced the broader culture of American radicalism. Individuals, groups, and organizations within the religious left often served as important sites of organizing and resistance that transcended the faith-based communities they grew out of to include their secular allies on the left. These groups, however, were more than simply “movement halfway houses” that provided critical training and support for existing and growing mass movements.¹⁸ Faith in a transcendent power greater than humankind, and belief in the scriptures that this power inspired, could push activists to engage in activities and take risks that sometimes went beyond the imagination of their secular counterparts and which challenged prevailing paradigms of political protest. This perspective allowed members of the religious left to embrace an alternative definition of effectiveness that moved beyond a sole reliance on worldly rationality and logic to promote new ways of thinking and acting. Their

organizing frameworks unabashedly celebrated idealistic and utopian goals, advanced new and prefigurative ways of envisioning social relations, and modeled innovative strategies and tactics, all of which they carried with them as they worked within larger movements for social and political change. Because of their influence, the secular left itself came to reflect the religious cultures and spiritual tropes that its faith-based members and allies brought into their shared struggles for a more just, compassionate, and egalitarian world.

The relationship between the religious and nonreligious left ran in multiple directions. Participation in left activism profoundly shaped how people understood their spiritual beliefs and put them into practice. Many saw radical politics as an embodiment of their “lived religion” and a means by which to actualize their faith. And as they developed critiques of the institutions of power that defined society at large, their relationship with religious structures of power also changed. Some discovered that their activism led them to question, even defy, what they decried as “institutional” or “bourgeois” religion. Others found that their involvement in left activism led them to develop and adopt radical new theologies rooted in their commitments to social justice and liberation.

Just as important, despite the fact that members of the religious left often framed their efforts in terms of prophetic witness and judgment, and although they may have considered themselves estranged from, and certainly critical of, the mainstream of American life, their faiths insured they were never completely cut off from the heart of American culture. Their prophecy did not come entirely from an outsider stance. Even as they called for sweeping societal shifts, they also maintained essential links to some of the fundamental cultural norms and practices of the world they hoped to change. Some on the left might view this cultural groundedness as a factor that compromised the radicalism of these religious believers. In fact, the deep ties of faithful radicals to broadly shared religious and cultural traditions furnished them with a vital source of authority and legitimacy, and preserved paths of communication and even communion with other Americans.

The American religious left did not hold any monopolies on idealism, transcendent hope, or creative strategies and tactics for radical protest and resistance. Nor did the fact that faith spurred members of the religious left into action make them more dedicated or successful than their secular counterparts as they worked to foment fundamental social and political change. Nevertheless, the essays in this volume remind us that visions of

utopian radicalism and prefigurative politics came from a range of sources: sacred and secular, spiritual and corporeal, mortal and transcendent. Neither the history of American religion nor that of the American left is even close to complete without knowledge of their ideas, their feelings, and their acts.

NOTES

1. Laurie Goodstein, “Religious Liberals Sat Out of Politics for 40 Years. Now They Want in the Game,” *New York Times*, June 10, 2017. Other important accounts were: Scott Malone, “‘Religious left’ emerging as U.S. political force in Trump era,” *Reuters*, March 27, 2017; Julie Zauzmer, “People are looking for a ‘Religious Left.’ This little-known network of clergy has been organizing it,” *Washington Post*, April 26, 2017; and Holly Meyer, “You know the religious right. Here’s the religious left (and it’s fired up),” *USA Today Network*, April 15, 2017.
2. Laurie Goodstein, “What a Leader of the Religious Left Admires about the Religious Right,” *New York Times*, June 12, 2017.
3. For a sampling of the newest and most exciting research in this area, see: Matthew Avery Sutton and Darren Dochuk, eds., *Faith in the New Millennium: The Future of Religion and American Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Andrew Preston, Bruce J. Schulman, and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *Faithful Republic: Religion and Politics in Modern America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); and R. Marie Griffith and Melani McAlister, eds., *Religion and Politics in the Contemporary United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008).
4. Jon Butler, “Jack-in-the-Box Faith: The Religion Problem in Modern American History,” *Journal of American History* 90, no. 4 (March 2004): 1357–78. Butler was describing the role of religion overall in narratives of modern America.
5. Sutton and Dochuk, *Faith in the New Millennium*, 2.
6. Too often missing, but not completely. The major efforts at synthetic narratives of the American religious left are Robert H. Craig, *Religion and Radical Politics: An Alternative Christian Tradition in the United States* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1992) and Dan McKanan, *Prophetic Encounters: Religion and the American Radical Tradition* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2011).
7. Goodstein, “Religious Liberals Sat Out.”
8. On the history of the America religious right, see: Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution*

- (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010); Molly Worthen, *Apostles of Reason: The Crisis of Authority in Modern Evangelicalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014); Grant Wacker, *America's Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014); Seth Dowland, *Family Values and the Rise of the Christian Right* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); and Neil J. Young, *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
9. For examples of recent scholarship on the history of Catholic conservatism, see: Stacie Taranto, *Kitchen Table Politics: Conservative Women and Family Values in New York* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017); and Todd Scribner, *A Partisan Church: American Catholicism and the Rise of Neoconservative Catholics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015).
 10. On Protestantism's influence on modern American liberalism, see: David Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013). See also: Mark A. Lempke, *My Brother's Keeper: George McGovern and Progressive Christianity* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2017); Cara Lea Burnidge, *A Peaceful Conquest: Woodrow Wilson, Religion, and the New World Order* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); Michael G. Thompson, *For God and Globe: Christian Internationalism in the United States Between the Great War and the Cold War* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2015); Elisha J. Coffman, *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Matthew S. Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
 11. Here we refer to two otherwise outstanding syntheses: Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011); and Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, *Radicals in America: The U.S. Left since the Second World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Among the many monographs that detail the histories of Communist and Marxist-inspired leftist movements in the modern United States, almost all narrate the course of the atheist left. Noteworthy examples include: Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The*

- American Communist Party: A Critical History, 1919–1957* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1957); Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984); Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism in the United States: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Books, 1984); Fraser M. Ottanelli, *The Communist Party of the United States: From the Depression to World War II* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997); Christopher Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook: Marxist and Pragmatist* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); James R. Barrett, *William Z. Foster and the Tragedy of American Communism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Tony Michels, *A Fire in Their Hearts: Yiddish Socialism in New York* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005); and Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: A History of the American Left* (London: Verso, 2013).
12. For strong treatments of the religious left that present this history more as an essential part of the American *religious* tradition rather than as a revision of our familiar pictures of *both* religion and radicalism in the United States, see McKanan, *Prophetic Encounters and* Craig, *Religion and Radical Politics*. For peace historians' attention to faith-based activism, see: Patricia McNeal, *Harder than War: Catholic Peacemaking in Twentieth-Century America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Rachel Waltner Goossen, *Women Against the Good War: Conscientious Objection and Gender on the American Home Front, 1941–1947* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Sharon Erickson Nepstad, *Convictions of the Soul: Religion, Culture, and Agency in the Central America Solidarity Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Roger Peace, *A Call to Conscience: The Anti-Contra War Campaign* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012); Rosalie Riegle, *Crossing the Line: Nonviolent Resisters Speak Out for Peace* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2013); Melissa Klapper, *Ballots, Babies, and Banners of Peace: American Jewish Women's Activism, 1890–1940* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); and Allan Austin, *Quaker Brotherhood: Interracial Activism and the American Friends Service Committee* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012).
 13. For examples of the history of the Protestant left, see: Mark Hulsether, *Building a Protestant Left: Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941–1993* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999); Kip Kosek, *Acts of Conscience: Christian Nonviolence and Modern American Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Patricia Applebaum, *Kingdom to*

- Commune: Protestant Pacifist Culture between World War I and the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Jill K. Gill, *Embattled Ecumenicists: The National Council of Churches, the Vietnam War, and the Trials of the Protestant Left* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011); David Swartz, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); and Perry Bush, *Peace, Progress, and the Professor: The Mennonite History of C. Henry Smith* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2015). On the history of Catholic radicalism, see: Mel Piehl, *Breaking Bread: The Catholic Worker and the Origin of Catholic Radicalism in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982); Nancy L. Roberts, *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984); and Murray Polner and Jim O'Grady, *Disarmed and Dangerous: The Radical Life and Times of Daniel and Philip Berrigan* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).
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 15. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005): 1233–63. Key works in the new vein include: Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Matthew J. Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008); Patrick D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); and Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel

- Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). Recent exceptions in their attention to Christian nonviolence are: Kosek, *Acts of Conscience*; and Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006). See Angela D. Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007) for a unique perspective on religion in the black movement. On Frazier and many others, and generally on the contested status of religion in the African-American freedom struggle, see: Barbara Dianne Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: The Politics of Black Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).
16. Heath W. Carter, *Union Made: Working People and the Rise of Social Christianity in Chicago* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Ken Fones-Wolf and Elizabeth Fones Wolf, *Struggle for the Soul of the Postwar South: White Evangelical Protestants and Operation Dixie* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Jarod Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Jarod Roll and Erik Gellman, *The Gospel of the Working Class: Labor's Southern Prophets in New Deal America* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); Randy Shaw, *Beyond the Fields: Cesar Chavez, the UFW, and the Struggle for Justice in the 20th Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); and Luis D. Leon, *The Political Spirituality of Cesar Chavez: Crossing Religious Borders* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014)
 17. The history of religious support for gay rights has a longer history than is commonly known. As Heather White has shown, a small group of Protestant clergy began to question received wisdom on homosexuality and collaborated with gay rights activists in the 1960s. See White, *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).
 18. On “movement halfway houses,” see Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*.



The Other Social Gospelers: The Working-Class Religious Left, 1877–1920

Janine Giordano Drake

In the late nineteenth century, one could find in every corner of the country reformers and visionaries who saw themselves personally tasked with creating a more Christian Commonwealth. The Knights of Labor, a union which demanded that workers were entitled to the value that they produced, was known for its morally upstanding members, spiritual songs, and pretensions to an alternate working-class church.¹ Hundreds of socialist “colonies” in the Old Northwest Territories cooperatively owned land and resources, and believed that they were restoring the type of community the original Apostles had designed.² Temperance advocates, women and men, lobbied to restore Christian justice to the domestic sphere by exterminating drinking, prostitution, gambling, promiscuity, and domestic violence. Missionaries dedicated themselves to educating and economically uplifting the poor, both within and outside the territorial United States.³ Christian socialists rallied behind a radical, proletarian Jesus who defended the Beatitudes. Farmers organized the People’s Party, which called for radical social and economic changes to enable a Christian

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Commonwealth. Protestant ministers agreed with the need to evangelize and “Americanize” the North American continent.⁴ Yet, while important for their national networks and fundraising capabilities, professional ministers were hardly necessary to sustain the national conversation on the reality of deepening poverty amidst conspicuous opulence. In fact, in the eyes of many Americans, ministers often served as a major obstacle to Christian reforms.

Despite the cacophony of Christian calls for reform, most accounts of the “Social Gospel” look at social, political, and economic developments through the lens of the middle class, and especially through the eyes of highly educated ministers. According to Henry May’s 1949 *Protestant Churches and Industrial America*, the Social Gospel was a movement led by ministers, magazine editors, seminary chairs, and other “official, articulate leaders of American Protestantism.” May argued that the Social Gospel represented a spectrum of ministries seeking to dispel the “secularism” and “irreligion” of freethinkers and other skeptics. On the Social Gospel’s right, he observed, were those who believed that capitalism and the republican political system needed to be salvaged from corruption and inefficiency. On the Social Gospel’s left, May argued, were those who believed that big businesses’ never-ending directive for profit, coupled with their insistence on outsized political influence, interfered with a commonwealth’s ability to provide for the common good. “Whether conservatives or liberals in theology,” May wrote, these leaders “agreed on one thing: their assumption that theirs was the task of uplifting the masses.”⁵

May was not far off the mark in characterizing the posture and goals of many elite ministers. However, he gave a generation of historians the false impression that ministers were already recognized as public authorities before, during, and after the Social Gospel movement, and that their political goals were of secondary importance to evangelism. In doing so, May suppressed the era’s deep disagreements over the extent to which professional ministers were the nation’s best interlocutors for the Christian faith. Instead, this essay suggests that the era manifested a crisis of religious authority; a number of competing movements each claimed to know how to build a more Christian nation. Religious actors on all sides called their foes “skeptics,” “atheists,” and “heretics” in order to set the terms of debate to favor their version of Christian orthodoxy. The very same people clergy called “infidels,” for example, believed that ministers and priests practiced a version of Christianity that perverted the truths offered by the historical Jesus. A wide range of Americans contended that ministers

defended and condoned capitalism primarily because they were beholden to the wealthy for their own financial security. When we reduce the era's religious reformers to a set of ideas and goals which they held in common, we fail to acknowledge the deep disagreements among orthodox, Protestant ministers, lay people, persons of other faiths, and so-called infidels.⁶

This chapter distinguishes between the minister-led Social Gospel movement and the much broader cacophony of religious visionaries. The term "religious left" is used to describe those disparate figures who used religious rhetoric to offer a trenchant critique of industrial capitalism. Within this category are the self-identified Christian members of the populist, socialist, labor, social democratic, syndicalist, Black Nationalist and other radical movements, as well as the clergy who aligned themselves with these movements. No matter the degree to which these political actors practiced a robust spiritual life, the religious left was united by their consistent critique of modern industrial capitalism on the twin bases of Jesus' historic life and ministry, and the Church's professed principles of cooperative ownership and exchange.

I approach the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries through the framework of ever-present American expansion. Protestant denominations, at once strong during Reconstruction, could not build churches fast enough to establish their authority on the frontier. The growth of the railroads, coupled with prodigious international migrations, led to massive strikes in areas where there were not a clear set of "church leaders" from what later would become known as the mainline denominations (i.e. Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Episcopal). Working-class Christianities, expressed in myriad forms, rivaled ordained preachers and claimed moral authority through their attacks on monopoly capitalism. Protestant ministers grew anxious, and united to undermine the religious authority of their plebeian counterparts.

The religious left can be broken into three phases: an era of non-denominational, producerist Christianities; an era of rivalry, and temporary truce, between denominational churches and the labor movement; and an era of distancing between the Protestant religious establishment and the labor movement. The story told here is a chronicle of how the working-class religious left competed with, temporarily allied with, and was nearly coopted by the Social Gospel movement. However, the religious left both predated and outlasted the Social Gospel movement. From the perspective of many working Christians, an abundance of local churches was only one of a variety of ways to turn the nation toward Christ.

PRODUCERIST CHRISTIANITIES

The largest Protestant denominations that predominated in urban areas (Episcopalian, Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist) found it hard to keep up with the rapid growth of rural communities around mines and railroad lines. These urban churches also catered to the new middle classes and were in the habit of enforcing dress codes and collecting pew rents. As a result, others moved into the breach; for example, the Holiness movement, an offshoot of the Methodist church, took like wildfire to rural communities in the Southwest and Midwest. Such churches reorganized services around preaching, musical worship, healing, and speaking in tongues. Lay and informally trained ministers often promised the blessings of physical health and financial prosperity through the power of faith in the Holy Spirit.⁷ While this movement was widespread, such churches were only loosely networked together. Many religious gatherings took place in large barns or open-air tent meetings, offering participants membership in a community which prized self-ownership, pride in manual labor, and hope that God would vindicate hard work with material blessings. Religious tent meetings were often decorated with broadsides for the Socialist Party, and Socialist Party revivals advertised religious meetings. Not only despite the small number of trained preachers, but because of the vacuum created by the lack of trained and nationally organized clergy, Christian revivalism and visions of political change pervaded all aspects of culture in the late nineteenth century.⁸

Tenant farmers and railroad workers, often the very same people, were among the most popular revival leaders and attendants. They were particularly taken with the prospect of “cooperative enterprise,” which grew in popularity throughout the United States and England in the late nineteenth century. Robert Blatchford, Henry George, Edward Bellamy, and W.D.P. Bliss, among many others, wrote essays and books emphasizing the potential of cooperative enterprises to capture the “progress” of industrial efficiency, but redeem the selfish motives of profit-driven industries. For their supporters, cooperative enterprises demonstrated the possibility of Christianized industry. Cooperative settlements often involved pooling resources, buying land, creating jointly owned companies, sharing profits, and providing a high standard of living for all. More than a dozen Christian communes, including New Harmony, Nashoba, Skaneateles, Brook Farm and Hopedale, were founded on the “frontier” in the late antebellum period.⁹

Inspired by such experiments but confident that they could be more prosperous through modern technologies, John Wayland, editor of the left-wing weekly *The Appeal to Reason*, founded the Ruskin “colony” in Tennessee in 1894. Designed as a Christian socialist commune, the settlers attended meetings they called “church” and “Sunday School,” but which celebrated an unorthodox, socialist Christian faith. Eugene Debs’ Social Democratic Party drew considerable energy from the colony’s early success, and planned to establish many more. Debs believed in the potential of such colonies to “work out their salvation, their redemption and independence... break every fetter, rise superior to present environments, and produce a change such as shall challenge the admiration of the world.”¹⁰

Henry George’s *Progress and Poverty*, and his Union Labor Party and single-tax movements which followed, also built upon the popular energy for “redeeming” industrial capitalism through Christian cooperation. George argued that a single tax on land would cost a comparable fee to rent payments, but it could be directed to support thriving public facilities like schools, roads, and public parks. “It is not the Almighty, but we who are responsible for the vice and misery that fester amid our civilization,” George explained in starkly Christian terms. Union Labor Parties grew around the country after 1886. The Knights of Labor adopted the “single tax” soon thereafter. George’s writings grew to such popularity that in 1889, the Vatican placed *Progress and Poverty* on its Index of Forbidden Works.¹¹ However, Georgism maintained much appeal among working-class Protestants. “Landlordism is ungodly and opposed to true Christianity,” a Missouri farmer echoed George a decade later.¹²

Protestants in the rural areas of the South and Midwest often built vibrant religious communities outside of the domination of Northern denominations. The Farmers’ Alliance, for example, developed strong, state-wide networks around Christian visions for redeeming the nation. Citing biblical passages which held that Christian workers were entitled to live by the fruits of their labor, farmers claimed that high interest rates offered by Eastern banks, combined with unpredictable railroad costs, robbed the nation’s producers of their God-given rights to social, political, and financial independence. The Populist Party, the political vehicle of the Alliance, called for the monetization of silver, the nationalization of the means of communication and transportation, and the creation of local and low-interest, postal savings banks. However, they equally fought against the hypocrisy of Protestant denominational churches for serving as obstacles to Christian justice. Books like William Stead’s *If Christ Should*

Come to Chicago! (1894) and Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* (1896) were popular in rural areas, for they illustrated the ways that elite churches diverged widely from the messages of Jesus. As one Populist newspaper argued, "IF CHRIST CAME TO TOPEKA, He would be cheered by the Commonwealer and Hobos. NOT BY THE CHURCHES [emphasis in original]." The growing Pentecostal movement gave rise to independent churches and a variety of new denominations, but they always distinguished their theology from Northeastern orthodoxies. Southern African-Americans built several new denominations, universities, and parachurch networks, but they too stood independent of Northern churches. Many emphasized pan-Africanism and even advocated the return of African Americans to Africa.¹³

In cities as well, Protestant clergy and their once-powerful denominations were receding from cultural prominence. In *Twenty Years at Hull House*, Jane Addams reflected on the ways Hull House was part of the cultural shift away from narrow-minded evangelism toward the "secular religion" which celebrated "the hope of the world and the protection of all who suffer." It was through the establishment of Hull House in Chicago that Addams made room for the development of working-class social clubs, unions, dances, and lecture series. To Addams, these gatherings helped create sacred, social bonds which she saw as more sustaining to life than any narrow, church definition of Christianity. Addams was like many progressives in her beliefs that the universal religion of humanity, at the foundation of all other faiths, emphasized love and the value of human interdependence. This religion, though called by different names, was practiced through the establishment of cooperatively funded sanitation services, medical care, schools, libraries, and public parks, in addition to the already-established services of a police and fire department. Even as Catholic and Protestant ministers continued to attack Hull House as "irreligious" and cooperative settlements as unorthodox, the vision of a "Cooperative Commonwealth" founded on Christian justice had earned unprecedented popularity.¹⁴

Despite the popularity of nondenominational Christian movements directed against for-profit enterprise and in the name of public facilities, they were not easily united into a political alliance. In the early 1880s, the Knights of Labor and the Populist Party joined together to defend free-holding farmers and wage workers as "producers" who earned their own living. However, even while Alabama and North Carolina Populists

defended black voting rights, compromises at the national level led to the suppression of many interests. The new farmer-labor coalition became a powerful political contender in local, state, and even national politics, but it relied upon historically white entitlements to self-ownership, property, and suffrage. The cost of the coherence gained for the producerist movement was the suppression of tenant farmers' critiques of landlordism and African-Americans' claims to civil rights. The farmer-labor alliance offered a national platform for a segment of the religious left, but it also fragmented both the working classes and the variety of leftist, Christian movements.¹⁵

In part because of this national alliance, even those calling themselves socialists and radicals often carried on racist visions of Cooperative Commonwealth. As one woman framed her support for socialism, "We women are tired of being put beneath the negro who can stagger up to the polls and vote." Noted Socialist Party organizer Kate Richards O'Hare similarly observed that "in the cotton fields the white daughters of white voters drag the cotton sacks down the cotton row next to 'nigger bucks.'" Persistent competition with the Democratic Party in Southern states meant that most Populists defended white supremacy in order to compete in state and local elections. In Georgia, Populists engaged in vigilante violence against African Americans and cooperated in the suppression of black voting rights. Both the Populists and the Knights of Labor included African Americans, but within segregated locals. Even those who condemned racism and called for the organization of black workers, such as Socialist Party leader Eugene Debs, colluded with white supremacy insofar as they supported public elections as a means to secure their political goals.¹⁶

By the mid-1890s, the farmer-labor alliance was only a fraction of the religious left, but it was the contingent of that movement with the most national power. Throwing their energy behind the Democratic nominee for president, William Jennings Bryan, the producerist coalition risked many of their principles for the hope of gaining the presidency. However, the Republican William McKinley won the presidential election of 1896. The farmer-labor alliance effectively ended the same year. In its wake, Eugene Debs tried to salvage the religious and producerist rhetoric of the Populist movement within his Social Democratic Party, the predecessor of the Socialist Party. However, to the extent the party boasted the potential of a politically potent religious left, it endured tremendous attacks from mainstream Catholic and Protestant clergy.

COMPETITION AND SOLIDARITY BETWEEN LABOR AND THE CHURCHES

On July 3, 1887, Father Edward McGlynn was excommunicated from the Catholic Church for his acceptance of socialist ideas and defiance of his monsignor's warnings to stay away from them. As workingmen's parties and unions grew throughout Europe in the late nineteenth century, the Catholic Church stood firmly against socialism. In the Pope's 1891 encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, he argued that "the main tenet of socialism, the community of goods, must be utterly rejected." Humans, Pope Leo XIII argued, had the natural right to own property and maintain a nuclear family. Protestant ministers, as well, identified socialism as a danger that threatened the future of American churches. In 1908, for example, Unitarian pastor Bertrand Thompson warned, "Socialism has become a distinct substitute" for church. "Its organizations meet on Sunday... It has regularly organized Sunday-schools, in which the children are instructed, by the most fundamental principles of economic creed." In short, both Catholic and Protestant clergy saw socialist fellowships and unions as rivals to churches for the trust and loyalty of the working classes.¹⁷

These clergy were not wrong about the popularity of socialist spiritualities. Socialist Christians built organizations called Labor Churches, Labor Temples, and "Christian Socialist Fellowships" to establish the "Kingdom of God and his justice on earth" through reeducation in the truth of the gospel and the sinfulness of the capitalist economic system. As one such member of the "United People's Church" wrote on behalf of a fundraising campaign for their socialist Sunday School, "Our Institution stands as the one truly socialist institution; it known locally as 'The Socialist Church,' and has gone far to silencing the opposition to socialism because of [its] reputation for being atheistic."¹⁸ Indeed, on a near-weekly basis, American socialist newspapers reminded workers that their movement was entirely consistent with the gospel of Christianity. Frequently, editors insisted that Christ was a workingman whose Sermon on the Mount inaugurated a "social revolution... side by side with the theological." Still, most American socialists never sought the communal ownership of personal property, nor the liberation of men and women from the nuclear family. Rather, they insisted that "for millions of poor, capitalism has destroyed the home." Socialists, they argued, prized "mother's love and care" for babies more than capitalists themselves.¹⁹

As political parties, the two major socialist organizations of the era, the Socialist Party of America and the Socialist Labor Party, only rarely—and through significant debate—took sides publicly on the question of religion. Party statements emphasized common desires to cooperatively own and manage factories and public utilities. Extending the producerist ethic of the previous generation, these workers sought to direct the profits of industry to both wages and other public goods. They sought shorter work days, public works programs for the unemployed, insurance against accidents, and a range of progressive, political reforms. While some American Socialists—often of German and Jewish heritage—did profess atheism and agnosticism, another major fraction of the party's membership were Christian socialists. More than a dozen such members were active Christian ministers and shepherds of socialist congregations, for they believed that laity should see the continuities between Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and the objectives of a Christian, cooperative commonwealth. As one Socialist delegate argued at the party's 1908 convention, "I have a right to believe in the existence of a heaven or a God. I am as good a Socialist, so far as I am concerned, as I can be." Many party members subscribed to the Christian Socialist Fellowship's national magazine, and thus maintained a national presence which attempted to undermine clerical attacks.²⁰

Still, the popularity of Christian socialism did not assuage many Catholic and Protestant clergy. In fact, a spate of popular books which insisted that Jesus would not be comfortable with contemporary "Churchianity" only compounded many clerical insecurities about the rising influence of socialism. Socialists offered images of a proletarian Jesus who was homeless, a little-respected carpenter, and one who spent more time with reformers and radicals than church members.²¹ By the early 1900s, the Socialist Party of America was growing so rapidly in popularity throughout rural and urban areas that the Presbyterian minister Charles Stelzle alarmed the nation: "The literature of socialism far surpasses the literature of the Church." For every open air church meeting, he said, Socialists had fifteen. In 1906, he noted that so many labor organizers preached the gospel on street corners and in open air meetings, either "the labor movement will capture the church, or the church shall capture the labor movement." He worried that at the rate the Socialist Party was growing, there would be a Socialist president within eight years. Stelzle and other ministers recognized that Socialists espoused a sincere and coherent set of principles about how to reconstruct the nation. As he phrased it, "Socialism has

become to thousands of workingmen a religion, and they strive with the utmost sincerity to solve the social, economic and political problems by which they are confronted."²²

Stelzle was a trained social scientist and his observations were not far off the mark. As Stelzle's own social surveys proved, socialism grew much more quickly in the 1900s than any of the mainline denominations. The Federal Council of Churches, which organized in 1908, united around the principle that Protestants had to stand together in the face of such rapidly growing heresy, irreligion, and Catholicism. Endorsing Harry Ward's *Social Creed of the Churches*, the body of Protestant ministers committed themselves and their denominations to multiple national revival movements, tireless investigative work in strike reporting and mediation, and an enormous body of pamphlets preaching the sympathy of Christ for American workers. At the same time, during this period, many socialists participated in the more politically moderate labor movement and built alliances with Protestant denominational leaders in the hopes that each of these groups could lend credence, and authority, to the other. In 1908, the result of years of relationships built between ministers and moderate union leaders, the Federal Council endorsed certain key tenets of workers' historic demands, including an end to child labor, shorter workweeks, and higher pay. In some respects, this coalition represented a victory for the religious left. The American Federation of Labor (AFL), the largest trade union of the era, celebrated its broad alliances with religious and other reformers.²³

However, while this newly framed religious left had positioned itself well to defend the Christian value of unions and even publicly owned and managed industries, it offered little more than vague commentary on *how* that goal would be accomplished. In the United States and around the world, socialists routinely fought over the extent to which parliamentary politics or trade union organization ought to be the primary method of achieving the cooperative commonwealth. The AFL boasted of its nonpolitical stance as a union. Socialists, therefore, had the burden of proving why their movement was important beyond attention to wages and working conditions. Few socialists of the 1910s, for example, thought that strikes ought to be mediated by clergy. Some actively opposed their intervention; for example, many blamed the intervention of Protestant ministers for the speedy settlement of the 1911 garment workers' strike in Illinois, which was viewed a great loss for the power of labor and the future of collective bargaining.²⁴

Through their relationships with the AFL, Protestant ministers and reform organizations like the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) brought publicity and a patriotic stamp of approval to the labor movement. In doing so, however, they suggested that justice should not be arbitrated by laborers and employers alone. Moreover, ministers imposed their own priorities onto the labor movement. The price the religious left paid for partnerships with the Federal Council of Churches was the loss of their own independent voice to speak on behalf of labor. Thus, on the eve of World War I, new solidarities with middle-class clergy and other reformers had cost labor organizers dearly. Their emphasis on union contracts had already distanced their problems from those of tenant farmers and agricultural workers (black and white). But the rising respectability granted to trade unions by middle-class clergy meant that the rising numbers of low-skilled laborers—often African American and immigrants, were rendered invisible to the religious left. The fact that these deskilled and unskilled laborers often hailed from communities outside of white Protestant denominations made them all the more irrelevant to the coalition. When the Great War began, the most radical American workers at odds with the AFL and its clerical bedfellows.

DISTANCING BETWEEN THE SOCIAL GOSPEL AND THE RELIGIOUS LEFT

When Congress approved U.S. entry into the Great War in 1917, radical laborers around the world had been protesting the war by insisting that this rivalry among empires had nothing to offer workers. In the United States, Eugene Debs told workers to resist the draft. He said that the master class always declared the wars, and the working classes always fought the battles. "The working class, who furnish the corpses," Debs argued before a crowd in Canton, Ohio, "have never yet had a voice in declaring war and have never yet had a voice in declaring peace." Yet, President Woodrow Wilson's powerful, wartime state tolerated little dissent. The Espionage Act of 1917 criminalized criticism of the nation's foreign policy aims, the war, and the draft. Debs was convicted of inciting "insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny, and refusal of duty in the military." That year, attorney general A. Mitchell Palmer authorized raids on numerous union headquarters, resulting in the arrest and deportation of hundreds of union members.²⁵

Neither the Federal Council of Churches nor the American Catholic War Council, however, offered any public comment in defense of the radical workers who had protested the war. The Secretarial Council of the Federal Council of Churches in October of 1917 recorded that "It was decided inadvisable to do anything in the matter of suppression of the IWW [Industrial Workers of the World] although it was recognized that they have grievances." On the contrary, they agreed to a request from Wilson to announce publicly, in every pulpit in the country, their unflinching support for the president and his decision to enter the war.²⁶ The AFL, too, despite the large number of socialists and other radicals within its membership, distanced itself from the working-class left as it officially supported U.S. entry into the war. They supported Wilson's America First campaign, his Americanization programs, and policy proposals to restrict immigration. They stuck by the value of highly skilled workers, and distanced themselves from the IWW's organizing drives for the unskilled, unemployed, and migrant workers. Race remained an invisible category within these unions, and by that token union leaders condoned white privilege. Both Protestant and Catholic leaders maintained relationships with leaders of the AFL, but they no longer even admitted to supporting long-term collective bargaining rights.²⁷

Therefore, while the Great War shaped opportunities for clergy to align with labor and the federal government in support of wartime measures to regulate industrial production and guarantee collective bargaining rights, the gains won for labor came at a significant cost to the left, both secular and religious. Woodrow Wilson's War Industries Board and the Social Gospel movement had coopted the meaning of "industrial democracy," a fact that became vivid in the Great Steel Strike of 1919. That fall, the AFL-related union, the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers, shut down mills in half the steel industry. While the AFL was officially politically neutral, many union members stood on the left. Strike chairman William Z Foster, for example, was a well-known radical who had been a member of the Socialist Party, the IWW, and a syndicalist, and who would soon join the Communist Party. The strike investigation sponsored by the Bureau of Industrial Research and the Federal Council of Churches illustrated to the American public that workers were indeed underpaid and overworked. But it also dismissed syndicalism and working-class Christianity, principles central to organizing the strike, as irrelevant to the conflict at hand. The strike report referenced a number of striking workers who said that they went on strike because of

their religious convictions, but the report's analysis emphasized poverty and broken families as the most important reasons workers deserved concessions. Moreover, instead of recommending legal protections for the future of collective bargaining, the nationalization of the steel industry, or the redistribution of the profits of industry—reasons strikers said they went on strike—their report concluded, “We plead with the pulpit that it be diligent to discharge its legitimate prophetic role as advocate of justice.” Social Gospel leaders used their authority as “neutral” observers not to defend the principles of the labor movement but to advocate for an enhanced role for clergy in industrial relations. In 1920, the Federal Council of Churches summarized their work with labor by reflecting that the “doctrine of class conscious struggle... tends toward the breaking up of society...into bitterly antagonistic factions, thus defeating its own ends.” The report did not refer to their historic relationships with the AFL; instead of emphasizing industrial justice, clergy now emphasized “industrial peace.”²⁸

After the war, clergy used their history of alliances with labor to deliver reports on workers' entitlement to better wages, safer working conditions, unemployment and accident insurance, and other workplace reforms. But they did not speak for the religious left. Socialists, though decimated in number, still advocated public ownership of “all the means of production, transportation, and distribution,” an economy planned and governed by workers, and robust protections for civil liberties. The IWW, also greatly reduced in size, continued to emphasize shop organization as the foundation for a syndicalist movement.²⁹ Neither the Federal Council of Churches nor the American Catholic War Council represented these demands, and they stopped short of making any definitive statements about how these workplace reforms would take place. Harry Ward and Father John Ryan, for example, each defended a “living wage” in principle. But they also suggested that employers should offer it voluntarily, in the spirit of Christian service. The Federal Council of Churches insisted that labor unions were naturally self-interested and combative; “democracy,” meanwhile, was characterized by Christian brotherhood.³⁰

In some respects, the Espionage Act alone was responsible for destruction of the radical labor movement in the United States. Systematic raids on Socialist Party headquarters, combined with the arrests and deportations of socialist and antiwar “enemies” of the state, worked together to cow many radicals into silence and drive others deeply underground. While the AFL survived the war, the collapse of Woodrow Wilson's War Industries

Board also spelled the end of federally mandated arbitration of strikes and enforcement of union contracts. No sooner than 1919, many unions no longer pulled any power at all. Many of the largest employers, including Rockefeller and Ford, refused to even recognize unions. While the Harding and Coolidge administrations welcomed clergy and other progressives' recommendations for minimum wages and workplace safety regulations (particularly for women and children), their trust in the recommendations of "experts" only further suppressed workers' power on the shopfloor.³¹

In the end, the Federal Council of Churches' wartime alliances with Woodrow Wilson, the American Catholic War Council, and the AFL had come at a considerable cost. Liberal clergy who defended workers during the Red Scare and supported striking steel workers took notable risks only to face a backlash from conservative evangelicals who accused them of capitulating to modern secular atheism and communism. Social Christianity increasingly assumed a defensive position as a large chasm emerged between Northern Protestants and anti-Communist evangelicals, especially in the South. In the long run, the Federal Council's alliances during the Great War may have lost them more national influence than if they had remained entirely outside of politics.³²

However, even if the Federal Council did take some political backlash intended for communists, they did not represent the religious left. Instead, radical clergy largely worked outside the churches in groups like the American Civil Liberties Union and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which focused on the protection of pacifists, socialists, and others from persecution based on "crimes of conscience." While they worked to keep socialists out of jail, their focus was not economic justice per se. When they did criticize capitalism, they did not usually look to the working classes for leadership, but rather positioned themselves as the interlocutors for the poor and oppressed. Many, small Christian organizations revived progressive-era, working-class visions of social and economic justice in the 1920s and 1930s, but these groups often struggled against constant red-baiting.³³

CONCLUSION

As Gary Scott Smith deftly summarized, "By the mid 1920s the social Christian crusade to redeem America had significantly dissipated." This is undoubtedly true. Church leaders became more resigned to entrusting business leaders as moral and cultural authorities who would do their best to

protect workers' rights.³⁴ The fundamentalist movement dismissed the value of social redemption outside of the "message of eternal salvation through trust in Christ's atoning work."³⁵ The Red Scare, meanwhile, not only cast aspersion on images of a socialist Jesus, but authorized raids on socialists' religious gatherings and shut down newspapers which espoused the cause.³⁶

However, if we look at the Social Gospel era as a set of rivalries for the authority to speak on behalf of working-class Christians, the Great War is only another turning point in the history, and strategy, of the religious left. If we look to the Gilded Age's farmer-labor alliance as the highpoint of working-class Christian solidarity, we risk forgetting the white supremacist, racial and cultural politics embedded in that alliance, and the socialist and trade union movements which followed it. If we look to the highpoint of church-labor solidarity in the 1910s as the richest example of the Social Gospel, we not only again minimize the fact that a small fraction of the working classes belonged to trade unions. We also risk forgetting ways unions sacrificed their independent bargaining rights in exchange for "industrial experts" and arbitrators who supported higher wages and working conditions.

Recognizing the Social Gospel era as the first chapter in a longer history of the religious left allows us to appreciate the resilience and flexibility at the heart of working-class protest. After all, while the fundamentalist assault upon mainline Protestant churches in the 1920s undermined the theological defense for Social Christianity, it did little to critique the underpinnings of the religious left. The left was never united on theological principles, so they had little to lose from fundamentalist attacks on their religious orthodoxy. The Red Scare, the Great War, and the assault of business leaders upon collective bargaining rights damaged the trust workers had placed in ministers as their lobbyists and advocates. But the relationship between working-class Christians and Northern, denominational ministers had been short-lived and tenuous at best. While the minister-led Social Gospel was almost crushed under the weight of the Red Scare and the Woodrow Wilson's failed League of Nations, anticapitalist Christianities revived in new movements, even underground.³⁷

In the midst of the Great Depression, the religious left surfaced once again. In Detroit, Catholic and Protestant clergy worked closely with the United Auto Workers (UAW) to construct versions of "worker religion" which supported organized labor. As a result of the UAW's collaborations with clergy, auto workers achieved unprecedented contracts in Depression-era Detroit. Just the same, Christian mutual aid societies, socialist organi-

zations, and Black Nationalist organizations, founded in the era of Social Christianity and kept underground since the Red Scare, surfaced on the Mississippi Delta inspired by the New Deal.³⁸ One could mark the Great War as the moment when the Federal Council was lambasted and business leaders grew in moral and cultural authority. But only the minister-led Social Gospel came to a dramatic end, and even it would experience a revival in the 1930s. One can equally mark the Great War as the moment when working-class Christians successfully unseated the authority of mainline Protestant clergy to determine the politics of Christianity in the United States. After the war, a rising number of Christians, left and right, rejected the authority of mainline ministers. Yet even those who rejected Social Christianity on the grounds of Biblical hermeneutics usually revived older, progressive-era visions of a Christian Commonwealth which celebrated independent, American farmers and free-laborers in their identities as producers. In the vacuum created by the collapse of the minister-led Social Gospel, the working classes would dictate the role of faith in American politics for at least the next fifty years.³⁹

NOTES

1. On the Knights of Labor and their function as a working-class church, see Robert Weir, *Beyond Labor's Veil: The Culture of the Knights of Labor* (State College: Penn State Press, 2006) and Leon Fink, *Workingmen's Democracy: The Knights of Labor and American Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).
2. On the history of utopian movements, see William Fitzhugh Brundage, *A Socialist Utopia in the New South: The Ruskin Colonies in Tennessee and Georgia, 1894–1901* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Charles Pierce Lewarne, *Utopias on the Puget Sound, 1885–1915* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995); and Robert Sutton, *Communal Utopias and the American Experience: Secular Communities, 1824–2000* (Westport: Praeger, 2004).
3. On the particularly religious elements of these reform efforts, see Gaines Foster, *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) and Kristin Kobes Du Mez, *A New Gospel for Women: Katharine Bushnell and the Challenge of Christian Feminism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). On home missions, see Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876–1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000) and Ralph Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1885–1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

4. Conrad Cherry (ed.), *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) and Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues*.
5. Henry May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York: Octagon Books, 1963), 3, 4, 25, and viii.
6. Dave Burns, *Life and Death of the Radical Historical Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 6.
7. For the connections between the Holiness movement and the gospel of health and wealth, see Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 11–40.
8. For the role of religion in producerism and socialism, see Bruce Stave (ed.), *Socialism in the Cities* (Port Washington: Kennikat Press, 1975); James Green, *Grass Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest, 1895–1943* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1978), 12–15; Jarod Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 23, 39; Jeremy Young, *Age of Charisma: Leaders, Followers, and Emotions in American Society, 1870–1940* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and Priscilla Pope-Levison, *Building the Old Time Religion: Women Evangelists in the Progressive Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).
9. Brundage, *A Socialist Utopia*; Lewarne, *Utopias on the Puget Sound*; Sutton, *Communal Utopias*; S.M. Lipset, *Agrarian Socialism: The Cooperative Commonwealth Federation in Saskatchewan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968); Jim Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904–1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999); Garin Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red: The Gospel of Socialism in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1910–1924* (Greenwood Press, 1977); and Jeffrey Johnson, *They Are All Red Out Here: Socialist Politics in the Pacific Northwest, 1895–1925* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2008).
10. *Railway Times* (June 15, 1897), as quoted in Nick Salvatore, *Eugene Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 163.
11. Edward O'Donnell, *Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality: Progress and Poverty in the Gilded Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 158, 164.
12. Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 40.
13. Populist newspaper article quoted in Charles Postel, *A Populist Vision* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 257. For Pentecostalism, see, for example, Priscilla Pope-Levison, *Building the Old Time Religion: Women Evangelists in the Progressive Era* (New York: NYU Press, 2015). A helpful discussion of nineteenth-century African American religious history can be found in Paul Harvey, *Through the Storm, Through the Night: A History of African American Christianity*, 82.

14. Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1912), 39, 187.
15. On the Farmer–Labor alliance, see Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999) and Matthew Hild, *Greenbackers, Knights of Labor and Populists: Farmer–Labor Insurgency in the Late-Nineteenth Century South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 110, 278.
16. Quotes can be found in Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion*, 45–46. On race and Populism, see Robert McMath, *American Populism: A Social History*, 174.
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The Social Gospel, the YMCA, and the Emergence of the Religious Left After World War I

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In 1916, Walter Rauschenbusch, the major figure of the Social Gospel movement in American Protestantism, published *The Social Principles of Jesus*. Written as a study guide for college students, the book summarized many themes that characterized the Social Gospel movement as it developed in American Protestantism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Picking up on a persistent emphasis in his earlier writings, Rauschenbusch asserted that Jesus' teachings were not primarily preserved in religious doctrines, but in the social ideals that he imparted to his followers. As he concluded the book, Rauschenbusch addressed the anxiety that many American youth felt regarding institutional Christianity, reassuring his readers that there was more to Christianity than what was practiced in the nation's churches. "If there is a student who can not [*sic*] at present affirm all that the Christian Church holds concerning the nature of Christ, why should he not approach him as the earliest disciples did, by personal love and obedience, following him and cooperating with him in the

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business of the Kingdom of God, and arriving in time at full faith in his Messiahship?”¹ Rauschenbusch’s assertion provides an important insight toward understanding the rise of the religious left after World War I.

The historical contours of the Social Gospel have been widely debated by scholars.² Largely associated with the development of nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism, what became known as the Social Gospel represented a continuation of the social reform ethos coming from segments of American evangelicalism prior to the Civil War.³ Between approximately 1880 and 1920, figures associated with the Social Gospel shared a belief in “social salvation.” As opposed to a belief in otherworldly salvation, social gospelers stressed that the primary objective of Christianity was to create a just society through the transformation of social structures. Responding primarily to social problems associated with urbanization and industrial capitalism, proponents of the Social Gospel, such as Washington Gladden, Richard Ely, and Walter Rauschenbusch, believed that the ultimate end of Christianity was to create a society rooted in principles of economic justice and approximate social equality. As the movement matured in the early decades of the twentieth century, its major spokespersons, particularly Rauschenbusch, often saw the realization of a “Christianized” social order through various models of democratic socialism.⁴

Rauschenbusch and other Social Gospel leaders frequently interpreted their successes through their efforts to change the institutional culture of mainline Protestantism, and in many ways they succeeded. In the years between 1907 and 1916, the largest Protestant denominations, and ecumenical bodies such as the Federal Council of Churches, adopted social creeds and sponsored ecclesiastical “social service” agencies that supported an eight-hour work day, a minimum wage, and a range of other legislative proposals that would safeguard the rights of organized labor. As several scholars have noted, these reform efforts were largely confined to the relatively elite Protestant cultures represented by prominent church and denominational leaders, and their academic counterparts within universities and theological seminaries.⁵

On the other hand, Rauschenbusch argued in *The Social Principles of Jesus* that the main purpose of Christianity was not simply to transform ecclesiastical structures. The Social Gospel’s mission was to infuse society with the spirit of Jesus. As two Social Gospel leaders, Harry F. Ward and Richard Henry Edwards, observed in 1917, “Christianizing community life” was nothing short of a spiritual revolution that would interpenetrate

the social fabric of the nation. “The beginning of this development in community life is the effort to establish equal justice. This is a task to which Christianity long ago addressed itself.”⁶

Ward’s and Edwards’s insistence that Christianity needed to generate a “cooperative spirit” in America came to symbolize for many later critics, like Reinhold Niebuhr, the myopic worldview of the Social Gospel.⁷ Without minimizing Niebuhr’s importance to the history of twentieth-century American Protestantism, we should note that the tendency of historians to fixate on Niebuhr’s significance obscures the broader impact of the early-twentieth-century Social Gospel movement in forging an important template for religiously based models of social reform—especially in the period between World War I and World War II. During the 1930s, Niebuhr critiqued Social Gospel liberals for what he believed was their naïve faith in the power of Jesus’ love to engage the complexity of modern social problems. However, during the interwar period, many heirs of the earlier Social Gospel movement were not swayed by Niebuhr. If anything, they took the earlier social idealism of figures like Walter Rauschenbusch to heart, reflected in their commitment to see how far Jesus’ ethical teachings might be applied to a range of issues pertaining to economic justice, racial equality, antimilitarism, and the creation of a just world order rooted in a commitment to pacifism.⁸

In order to understand the origins of the religious left in the twentieth century one must interpret how aspects of an earlier Progressive Era Social Gospel idealism disseminated beyond Protestant institutional citadels. Scholars have tracked the continuation of Social Gospel influences within a number of organizations during the 1920s and 1930s, including the American Civil Liberties Union, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the Socialist Party. In addition to including many Protestant leaders steeped in the Social Gospel, these organizations often displayed antipathy toward what they saw as institutional Protestantism’s failure to sow the seeds of religious radicalism in America.⁹ At the same time, many instrumental leaders of the post-World War I political left, including Norman Thomas and A. J. Muste, continued to affirm core theological beliefs associated with the Protestant Social Gospel.

First, these leaders often used the term “sacredness of personality” to reflect how individuals needed to model Christ-like ideals in their lives. As historian Eugene McCarragher observes, the concept of personality, or personalism, “denoted the highest achievement of humanity: sensitivity of feeling, rationality of judgment, and capacity for spiritual insight, all

nurtured in a supportive community setting.”¹⁰ Protestant social gospelers, influenced by currents of late-nineteenth-century theological liberalism, connected the moral, ethical, and psychological development of the individual to various conceptions of the historical Jesus. Rauschenbusch epitomized this worldview by observing that Jesus “taught that man was made in God’s image and that he is destined to share in the holiness and eternal life of God.”¹¹

Second, the Protestant Social Gospel fostered an idealistic belief that the chief end of Christianity involved the perfectibility, or near perfectibility, of the social structures of society. This did not mean that they dismissed the sinful nature of humanity (as Niebuhr’s caricature had it). Rather, the Social Gospel’s idealism emphasized that following Jesus required that individuals must do all they could to create a society grounded in egalitarian social ideals, practices, and structures. When Social Gospel leaders like Rauschenbusch spoke of achieving the Kingdom of God on earth, they did not see this as a myopic quest. Rather, it was rooted in a shared faith that Jesus’ teachings safeguarded individual rights while also creating the conditions for an equitable, democratic society. “Today, in the age of democracy, it has become immoral to endure private ownership of government,” Rauschenbusch noted to his college readers in 1916. “It is no longer a sufficient righteousness to live a good life in private. Christianity needs an ethic of public life.”¹²

These two themes at the core of the Protestant Social Gospel—that religion created the highest attributes of personal morality and a belief that the fulfillment of Christianity was embodied through a just, democratic society—became central for many religious activists who rose to prominence in the interwar period. Social Gospel figures, like Rauschenbusch, emphasized the importance that individuals who embraced Jesus’ social idealism were not merely committing themselves to doing good works. They were making the choice to embrace a lifestyle guided by Christ’s prophetic spirit. As Eugene Lyman, a prominent Social Gospel figure, wrote in 1914, “[Jesus] universalized the prophetic consciousness itself; that is, he opened to everyone the same sense of God’s nearness and power, the same sense of having an inspiration and a mission direct from God, which the ancient prophets had.”¹³ In other words, to be a Christian required that persons commit themselves to the task of unleashing the power of Jesus’ first-century religious radicalism upon the twentieth century.¹⁴ When one examines a range of mid-twentieth-century figures of the political left, such as David Dellinger, Myles Horton, George Houser,

Marjorie Swann, and James Dombrowski, one can easily see how this idealistic view of Jesus' social radicalism shaped their activism.¹⁵

Tracking the Social Gospel's trajectory after World War I reveals important clues for understanding the development of the religious left in the twentieth century. On one hand, many Protestant church leaders supported moderate reform efforts of the Social Gospel. Working through institutions such as the Federal (later National) Council of Churches, these Protestants wanted to balance their religious idealism with the need to stay connected to important networks within their respective denominations, ecumenical agencies, and to political leaders in the larger society.¹⁶ On the other hand, more radical iterations of the Social Gospel increasingly took root within groups on the periphery of mainline Protestantism. Although these organizations often had strong institutional connections with established Protestant leaders, they advocated a reform agenda that moved them in a more radical direction. These radicals were committed to working outside of Christian churches—even as they sought to apply their understanding of Christianity to the social fabric of the nation.

This synergy between Social Gospel liberals and Social Gospel radicals helped contribute to the rise of the religious left in the interwar period. A Protestant organization that demonstrates this synergy was the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). Emerging out of late-nineteenth-century Protestant hopes to spread Christianity worldwide, in the aftermath of World War I the YMCA played a key role in the dissemination of Social Gospel idealism in ways that influenced a disparate range of activists and groups on the left. The YMCA movement increasingly gave an emerging generation of Protestant youth opportunities to implement the religious idealism of the Social Gospel in a range of initiatives related to economic justice, antimilitarism, religious internationalism, and racial justice. In effect, it reinforced Rauschenbusch's assertion that to be a true follower of Jesus was not about doctrine; this was achieved through lived experiences of creating a just world.

THE PRE-WORLD WAR I YMCA AND THE PURSUIT OF CHRISTIAN MANHOOD

Founded by George Williams in London in 1844, the YMCA's initial mission centered on the modest goal of providing fellowship opportunities for young, predominantly urban, middle-class men. With the first American YMCA chapter founded in Boston in 1851, the organization rapidly

spread to other North American cities. Dwight Lyman Moody, the famed urban revivalist and a long-time YMCA worker in Chicago, came to embody the organization's mission to reach out to young men to serve Christ, in the church and the world.¹⁷

As the YMCA institutionally expanded, it not only embraced its present-day association with physical fitness, but increasingly focused on recruiting young men for foreign missionary service. Founded in 1877, the Intercollegiate YMCA was part of a broader late-nineteenth-century boom of Protestant foreign missions centered upon galvanizing the missionary zeal of young adults in Europe and North America. Indicative of this broader student movement was the founding in 1895 of the World Student Christian Federation, an organization that coordinated a wide range of international Protestant youth organizations, including the YMCA. At its founding, the Federation's mission was defined in a threefold manner: "a) To lead students to become disciples of Jesus Christ as only Saviour and as God. b) To deepen the spiritual life of students. c) To enlist students in the work of extending the Kingdom of Christ throughout the whole world."¹⁸ Between 1899 and 1914 approximately 3,400 of the 4,500 missionaries from North America who emerged out of the larger Protestant student movement came out of the YMCA or its sister organization, the Young Women's Christian Association.¹⁹

The central figure in the global Protestant student movement was a Methodist layperson, John R. Mott. Theologically, Mott was grounded in many of the traditional evangelical suppositions of the late nineteenth century, seeing personal conversion as the central goal of Christianity.²⁰ However, he encouraged open theological inquiry and an engagement with modern social questions, especially within the Intercollegiate YMCA movement. At the same time that the World Student Christian Federation called the world's youth to missionary service, Mott was introducing a corpus of Social Gospel literature within the Intercollegiate YMCA to supplement its curricular materials. These included works by the economist Richard Ely, whose economic theories on wealth redistribution were foundational to the rise of the Social Gospel, and Graham Taylor, a Congregational minister and pioneer of the Settlement House movement in Chicago.²¹

An engagement with social issues was still secondary to the broader mission of the YMCA at the end of the nineteenth century. However, Walter Rauschenbusch's emergence as the major figure of the Social Gospel in the early twentieth century signaled a definitive shift in the

Intercollegiate YMCA's mission. His highly influential 1907 book *Christianity and the Social Crisis* had an enormous impact on a wide range of Protestant leaders, serving as a catalyst for the formation of the Federal Council of Churches in 1908.²² Rauschenbusch also influenced an emerging generation of Protestant youth who were attracted to his vision of a radical Jesus—epitomized by works such as *The Social Principles of Jesus*.

Although Rauschenbusch's theology pushed beyond many of his predecessors in his embrace of democratic socialism, he built upon the earlier Social Gospel foundation that saw Jesus' teaching as an indication of how American democracy might be transformed at the dawn of the twentieth century. "When Jesus spoke of God as our Father, he democratized God himself," Rauschenbusch noted in 1912. "By raising the value of the human soul and its life on the one side, and by bringing God down close to us as our Father, he laid the religious foundation for modern democracy and anticipated the craving of the modern spirit."²³ Rauschenbusch saw Jesus as a man who stood up against the status quo, an individual who had little use for religion based upon "fine talk and little action; religion turned into a law and a burden, in order to hold the people in obedience to the interests of the leaders; pride and ambition exploiting religion to get honors." For Rauschenbusch, Jesus "demands democracy, humility, brotherliness."²⁴

Rauschenbusch symbolized the Social Gospel movement's stress upon how the social ideals of Jesus embodied the ethics of modern democracy, as well as an appeal to the virtues of late-nineteenth-century Victorian masculinity.²⁵ These themes permeated many of the publications of the Intercollegiate YMCA during the 1910s. A key component in the dissemination of Social Gospel beliefs within the YMCA movement was the establishment in 1911 of the Association Press. As the chief publishing arm of the YMCA, Association Press featured short books that were designed for college students. The press's titles published from its inception through the mid-1930s were dominated by Social Gospel themes and included Rauschenbusch's *Social Principles of Jesus*, as well as titles by noted Social Gospel leaders such as Francis McConnell, Harry Ward, and one of the most prominent Protestant liberals after World War I, Harry Emerson Fosdick.²⁶ These early Association Press titles often stressed the dual emphasis on masculinity and the perfectibility of American democracy. "The democracy of the Bible is an element in its favor," noted Clarence Barbour, a key Protestant leader in the YMCA. "It is for all sorts and conditions of men... A return to Christ... will be a return to the Sermon

on the Mount, as to the Cross.”²⁷ Harry Emerson Fosdick emphasized in his popular book *Manhood of the Master* how Christian masculinity went hand in hand with an ability to follow the prophetic teachings of Jesus. “*The Kingdom of God on earth, the rule of righteousness in the personal life and social relationships of all mankind was Jesus’ Cause.*” Fosdick made it clear that to be a follower of Jesus required strength, character, and personal sacrifice. “Are you really a patriot for the Cause of the Master? Can he rely on you at all costs to be loyal?”²⁸

While these authors still championed the missionary ideals of the YMCA, they also challenged readers to look for signs of the Kingdom of God beyond institutional Christianity. Edward Steiner, a professor at Grinnell College in Iowa, affirmed that “there is no more searching question in the world today, in the relation of the Church to a man’s religion, than this: Will the Church catch the spirit of rising democracy, and adjust herself to profit by it, or will she sluggishly ignore it until the time of vantage has passed?”²⁹ Writing before the outbreak of World War I, Steiner’s question to Protestant youth would become more central to the YMCA’s mission following World War I.

THE YMCA AND POSTWAR RELIGIOUS INTERNATIONALISM

The growing emphasis on Social Gospel themes in the YMCA, and other Protestant student movements prior to World War I, led to a transformation of the organization’s mission in the war’s aftermath. The key figure who facilitated the spread of Social Gospel idealism within the YMCA—and the larger Protestant student movement—was Sherwood Eddy. A close friend and associate of John R. Mott, Eddy served as the longtime International Secretary of the YMCA. In characterizing his work, Eddy proudly identified himself as a global missionary who was committed to the transformation of the world through Protestant Christianity. Yet much of his legacy relates to how he used his status in the YMCA to create networks among a disparate range of Social Gospel leaders on the religious left.

Like many Protestants, Eddy initially had supported American entry into World War I, and had been instrumental in recruiting clergy to serve as YMCA-sponsored chaplains in Western Europe during the final year of the war. While Eddy acknowledged his debt to Social Gospel leaders like Walter Rauschenbusch, his experiences during the war altered his perception of Christianity’s mission. Witnessing firsthand much of the

war's devastation in Western Europe, he shared the disappointment of many Social Gospel liberals in America's postwar failure to join the League of Nations. As a means of increasing awareness of international issues left unsolved by the war, Eddy advocated stronger connections between Protestant leaders in the United States and religious and secular leaders in Europe and Asia. Eddy's worldview embraced what he and other social gospelers called "Christian internationalism." He stressed that the suppositions of western Protestant missiology needed to be examined in light of the experiences of oppressed peoples—in developing nations and in the so-called Christian nations of the West.³⁰ In this regard, Eddy's Social Gospel worldview provided him an effective lens, by which he increasingly channeled his energies. As he reflected on the YMCA's mission after World War I, it was not just about winning souls for Christ. It was "to build a new social order and to Christianize the whole of life and all its relations, industrial, social, racial, and international. We had not only to pluck brands from the burning but to put out the fire. We had not only to relieve poverty and misery but to remove their causes."³¹

One result of Eddy's vision was the inauguration in the early 1920s of what became known as the Sherwood Eddy Seminars, in which Eddy sponsored trips for influential Protestant leaders to the war-torn regions of Western Europe—and later to the Soviet Union—to observe firsthand the political and economic consequences of the war. The participants in these seminars in the 1920s read like a who's who of the Social Gospel, including Harry F. Ward, Georgia Harkness, G. Bromley Oxnam, and a young Protestant minister who was initially attracted to Eddy's social and theological vision: Reinhold Niebuhr.³²

These travel seminars epitomized wider emphases that would become central to the YMCA's mission during the 1920s and 1930s. First, Eddy's seminars reaffirmed the longstanding Social Gospel critique of capitalism. During the 1920s, Eddy and his longtime YMCA colleague Kirby Page stressed the ways that international militarism and capitalist greed went hand in hand, making impossible the realization of a more democratic society in America. On the eve of the Great Depression in 1929, Page noted how western militarism intensified runaway economic and political forces that made future international warfare inevitable. "The growth of industrialism makes it impossible for nations to live apart, each being dependent upon other regions for raw materials and food, markets and fields of investment. Rivalry for control of the economic resources of the earth has grown keener and keener."³³

The anticapitalist tone of Eddy and Page was underscored when in 1926, Eddy led his first travel seminar to the Soviet Union. Although the majority of Social Gospel leaders condemned the Soviet Union's hostility toward religion and its suppression of civil liberties, they conceded that the Soviet desire to create an egalitarian society was consistent with the aims of Jesus. Harry Ward noted that the objectives of the Soviet Union are "clearly the creation of a state composed entirely of producers and controlled by producers. This is manifestly a Scriptural aim."³⁴ Eddy was never as exuberant about the Soviet Union as Ward, and castigated its authoritarianism and the brutal oppression under Joseph Stalin's regime in the 1930s. Yet Eddy, like other religious leaders on the left, interpreted many of the political ends of the Soviet Union in a positive light, especially the goal of a classless society. "The principle of human equality runs through the whole Soviet system," Eddy noted in 1934. "Every great revolution proclaims *liberty* for oppressed classes, centers in *equality* and aims at *fraternity*."³⁵

Eddy's critique of the Soviet Union also accentuates a second theme that characterized the YMCA's mission during the 1920s and 1930s—its insistence that if America was to become a truly democratic society it needed to be purged of the sins of racism. Despite the fact that the American YMCA practiced a policy of racial segregation on its national boards, YMCA leaders like Eddy and Page drew attention to how racism represented one of America's great moral dilemmas. Page observed that the culpability for racism largely rested within white Christian churches. "First, many white Christians hold the extreme attitude toward the inferiority of Negroes and support discriminatory measures; and, second, by silence, evasion, and neglect they permit unjust measures to be perpetuated."³⁶ Scholars have pointed out the reticence of white Social Gospel leaders like Walter Rauschenbusch to support issues of racial justice.³⁷ However, Social Gospel internationalists like Eddy used the ideal of "the sacredness of personality" to cast aspersions on the ways that many white American Christians defined their superiority through skin color—not only contrasting themselves with dark-skinned persons in the mission fields of Africa and Asia, but from persons of color in the United States. Eddy noted that the historical pattern of white Christian nations to deny the full personhood of people of color "is the same principle which is at stake today in the almost universal exploitation, injustice and humiliation of all colored peoples wherever the white man goes."³⁸

The internationalist themes of Eddy and Page had a tremendous impact not only on the Intercollegiate YMCA in the United States, but also on the direction of another organization in which both men had deep connections: the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR). Founded in Great Britain in 1914 as a pacifist organization, by the mid-1920s the American FOR was dominated by a membership that included major Protestant leaders who carried forward the mantle of the post-World War I Social Gospel. Throughout the 1920s and into the 1930s, the YMCA partnered with the FOR in sponsoring conferences and gatherings that brought together college-age youth to discuss a range of issues related to economic justice, religious internationalism, a growing commitment to Christian pacifism, and racism.

These aspects of YMCA activism not only interpreted the abuses of capitalism and racism from an international point of view, but accentuated the ideal that the true test of Christianity was not found in doctrine, but in lived experience. Benjamin Mays, who served on the national board of the YMCA in the 1920s and would go on to a distinguished career as a Protestant ecumenical leader and as president of Morehouse College in Atlanta, asserted in 1928 that religious truth “is more than creeds and more than dogmas; it is neither form nor rituals; it is more than the Bible itself, for religious experience created all these; before they were, religion was—destroy them and the meaning and place of religion in human history will remain unchanged.”³⁹ While the YMCA remained segregated on a national level until 1946, black and white YMCA student secretaries increasingly challenged the hypocrisy of racial segregation, and sought means to alleviate racism—especially in the South. Despite its segregated policies, the YMCA attracted a growing number of young African-Americans, like Benjamin Mays, into various leadership roles. Many future African-American leaders who would go on to distinguished careers as ministers, scholars, and activists began their careers serving as YMCA secretaries, including Mays, Howard Thurman, a prominent Christian mystic and also a member of the FOR, and Mordecai Wyatt Johnson, future president of Howard University (and a former student of Walter Rauschenbusch’s).⁴⁰

Finally, the YMCA’s growing internationalism brought many Americans into contact with emerging understandings of pacifism and nonviolence, embodied by the popularity in the United States of two Asian religious

leaders, Toyohiko Kagawa, a Japanese Presbyterian minister, and Indian independence leader Mohandas Gandhi. Both leaders had come to the attention of YMCA missionaries in the 1920s, and during the 1930s many American YMCA leaders, including Benjamin Mays and Howard Thurman, traveled to Asia to meet personally with Gandhi. While Kagawa was not an absolute pacifist, his antimilitarism and his stress on Social Gospel themes of cooperative economics reflected many aspects of thinkers such as Walter Rauschenbusch. Kagawa's 1936 American tour, where he visited hundreds of American churches and college campuses, was widely embraced by many Protestant leaders and student activists who saw in Kagawa's message the seeds for a new model of cooperative Christianity, centered upon nonviolence, antiracism, and heightened international understanding. Historian Robert Shaffer observed Kagawa's reception in the United States reflected how many Protestants "did not support American empire or the ideology that the United States and the West had the unquestioned right and obligation to inculcate religious truth and civilization on others."⁴¹ At the same time as Kagawa's 1936 tour, the YMCA's National Council revised its missional objectives. While echoes of an earlier emphasis on cultivating Christian manhood remained, the revised principles increasingly defined the YMCA's mission to seek alternatives to American capitalism. Building a Christian society not only required commitment to "stimulate competent, constructive, independent thinking and action" on social issues, but to "challenge men to explore the meaning of Christian principles and of the gospel and bring them to feel and understand the tension between life as it is and as it would be if the Christian ideals operated more fully in our economic, political, business, inter-racial and national affairs."⁴²

Part of the broader significance of Kagawa and Gandhi among American Protestant youth is that they not only drew attentions to the deficiencies of American capitalism, but also gave a fresh interpretation to the long-held Social Gospel belief that Jesus was a radical servant to the poor. While Kagawa and Gandhi had very different views on pacifism, each emphasized the ways that Jesus brought new meaning to society not through weapons, but through the power of Christian love. Although World War II appeared to stymie the growth of a budding Protestant radicalism, the efforts of Protestant groups like the YMCA bore fruit beyond old-line religious institutions.

RADICAL OUTCOMES

In early 1941, the Board of Education of the Methodist Church launched *motive* magazine. *motive* (intentionally lower case) quickly established itself as a major voice for the Protestant student movement.⁴³ Its lead article in the inaugural issue was written by a Methodist clergyman and Social Gospel liberal, Ernest Fremont Tittle, who challenged young Protestants not to give up on the goal of applying their religious convictions to create a just society in America.

The only way to preserve democracy... would mean to make government of the people, by the people, and for the people a reality. It would mean to maintain civil liberties and freedom of expression for minority groups. It would mean to secure just and fair treatment of all political, racial, and religious minorities. It would mean honest and persisting attempts to create economic conditions that would offer to all men equal and adequate opportunity to earn a livelihood, to educate their children, and to develop the best in themselves... It would mean the beginning of economic justice and of the association of patriotism with a lively and loyal dedication to the welfare of all the people.⁴⁴

As a church leader, Tittle was far from being a political radical. He was senior pastor of the First Methodist Church in Evanston, Illinois, one of American Methodism's largest and wealthiest congregations. However, like many other Social Gospel leaders who rose to prominence after World War I, he was active in both the YMCA and the FOR, and participated in one of Sherwood Eddy's travel seminars in the early 1920s. Like his better-known clergy colleague in New York City, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Tittle was one of several American Protestant figures on the left in the interwar period who became a committed pacifist. Despite Tittle's institutional status within predominantly white mainline Protestant churches (including serving as an important leader in the Federal Council of Churches), his embrace of racial justice, antimilitarism, and international cooperation was indicative of the seeds being planted among a younger generation of idealists who became major players in the religious left as it evolved after World War II inside and outside of churches.

Two major examples of how the Social Gospel idealism within the YMCA influenced different leaders of the Protestant left in the interwar period are Benjamin Mays and Myles Horton. Growing up poor in the rural South, Horton went to Union Theological Seminary, in New York,

in the early 1930s. He was especially influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr and Harry F. Ward. For Horton and another Ward disciple at Union, James Dombrowski, the Social Gospel vision was manifested not within institutional Christianity but through the establishment of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee in 1932. The founding of Highlander symbolized a growing proliferation of experimental communities that applied Social Gospel principles in creating alternative political and economic models of local society—especially in the Depression-era South. Over the decades, Highlander became a nerve center for teaching attendees the disciplines and methods of nonviolent direct action. Working closely with the FOR, several “graduates” of Highlander, including Rosa Parks, became key participants in the national Civil Rights Movement that was galvanized by Parks’s refusal to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama city bus in December 1955.⁴⁵

Before Horton entered Union Theological Seminary and established Highlander, he had served as a YMCA Field Secretary in rural Tennessee. Recounting this experience years later Horton noted, “I had grown up in a religious world and was trying to get beyond that to understand the broader economic, cultural, and social contexts in which things happened.” Horton’s sojourn as a YMCA secretary contributed to a religious vision that he would carry into his later career. “From Jesus and the prophets I had learned about the importance of loving people, the importance of being a revolutionary, standing up and saying that this system is unjust. Jesus to me was a person who had the vision to project a society in which people would be equally respected, in which property would be shared; he was a person who said you have to love your enemies, you have to love the people who despise you.”⁴⁶

Another person who shared Horton’s understanding of the radical nature of Jesus’ social teachings, but took that idealism in a different direction, was Benjamin Mays. Mays would be remembered by later generations as the “schoolmaster” of the Civil Rights Movement, serving as teacher and mentor to many of his Morehouse College students. Yet much of his vision as an educator and church leader came out of his early experiences with the YMCA. It was largely through his efforts in the late 1920s that black and white college students took tentative steps to create integrated student gatherings in the South.⁴⁷ Throughout his extensive public career, Mays reflected and spread the spirit of the Social Gospel—including editing a well-received volume of Walter Rauschenbusch’s writings published by the YMCA’s Association Press in 1950.⁴⁸ In an address to the

General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1954, he noted that America's racial dilemma was part of the global problem of racial inequality. Echoing the personalist idealism of the Social Gospel, Mays asserted that racism "scars not only the soul of the segregated but the soul of the segregator as well. When we build fences to keep others out, erect barriers to keep others down, deny to them the freedom which we ourselves enjoy and cherish most, we keep ourselves in, hold ourselves down, and the barriers we erect against others become prison bars to our own souls."⁴⁹ This idealism that recognized the God-given sacredness of the individual, even of one's oppressor, was a central theme for one of Mays's former Morehouse College students: Martin Luther King, Jr.

While Mays and Horton came from different contexts, their outlook on the social ramifications of Jesus' teachings harken back to Walter Rauschenbusch's words from the beginning of this chapter. Through their work—Mays, from the center of American Protestant institutional life, and Horton, who largely rejected these institutions—they symbolize how a shared religious grounding to create a society rooted in Social Gospel beliefs impacted the religious left.

CONCLUSION

During his lifetime, Walter Rauschenbusch hoped that his theological vision of Jesus' social radicalism might unite the nation's Protestant churches in a shared mission to Christianize America. In some ways Rauschenbusch succeeded, but not in a fashion that he likely would have predicted. Despite the radical implications of Rauschenbusch's theology, he took for granted that iterations of Christianity emerging out of white Protestant churches would transform the nation into a fabric of Christian brotherhood. In many ways, Rauschenbusch's vision was realized in the mid-twentieth century, but not primarily in mainline Protestant citadels of power. Rather, it came out of groups and networks that were on the margins of the mainline that served as conduits for the religion-based activism of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Writing in 1958, King cited Rauschenbusch as one of the critical sources in shaping his views of religion and social reform. "It has been my conviction ever since reading Rauschenbusch that any religion which professes to be concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be buried."⁵⁰ In understanding the wider

history of the religious left, it is not only important to affirm King's debt to Rauschenbusch. It is necessary to trace the path that Rauschenbusch's idealism traveled from the heyday of the Progressive Era Social Gospel until the time that King emerged as the primary leader of the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-1950s.

The history of the YMCA is significant not only for understanding how it evolved from a conventional vehicle of Protestant evangelicalism to one that embraced radical iterations of social reform. The YMCA served as a channel for disseminating the religious idealism of the Social Gospel in ways crucial to the blossoming of the religious left.⁵¹

The YMCA highlights how the broader history of the Social Gospel movement contributed to what Doug Rossinow calls a "left-liberal" tradition of social reform.⁵² Some heirs of the Social Gospel, such as Harry Emerson Fosdick, channeled their reform liberalism through important Protestant institutions such as Riverside Church, in New York—a church that came to symbolize the institutional prominence of Social Gospel liberalism in American Protestantism in the mid-twentieth century.⁵³ Others, including YMCA radicals, applied their religious idealism in ways that often led them away from institutional Christianity. Although these liberal and radical factions frequently were at odds with one another, they often shared the core belief that the essence of Christianity was to seek the transformation of society to more closely resemble the Kingdom of God—a society rooted in peace and social equality. As summarized by Sherwood Eddy, "we believe that all who live in more fortunate areas and circumstances have the obligation and share the privilege of making the potential world-wide Christian brotherhood a reality in world service. Spirituality and materially, all things are potentially ours; but we possess truly only as we share in this ever-widening brotherhood with all men."⁵⁴

Interpreting the broader history of the Social Gospel movement requires that one take seriously how its core theological ideas not only influenced the institutional history of American Protestantism, but inspired a generation of youth to explore the ramifications of Social Gospel thinking within an array of settings that ultimately contributed to the success of the Civil Rights Movement. The Protestant student movement, epitomized by twentieth-century developments in the YMCA, highlights how Social Gospel beliefs transformed the YMCA and helped nurture some of the most important leaders of the religious left of the mid-twentieth century. Examining the evolution of the YMCA accentuates the truth behind Rauschenbusch's conclusion in *The Social Principles of Jesus*: one does not have to be institutionally grounded in Christianity to be a follower of Jesus.

NOTES

1. Walter Rauschenbusch, *The Social Principles of Jesus* (New York: Association Press, 1916), 195.
2. For a summation of significant scholarship on the historiography of the Social Gospel, see Ralph E. Luker, "Interpreting the Social Gospel: Reflections on Two Generations of Historiography," in *Perspectives on the Social Gospel*, ed. Christopher H. Evans (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999), 1–13; and Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion: a History* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).
3. The earliest scholars of the Social Gospel, notably Charles Howard Hopkins, largely focused upon the Social Gospel's origins within theological liberalism. However, scholarship has also noted the ways early-nineteenth-century evangelical Protestant engagement with issues such as abolitionism, temperance reform, and women's rights served as a template for the subsequent development of the Social Gospel after the Civil War. See Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940); Timothy Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform* (New York: Abingdon, 1957); Luker, *The Social Gospel in Black and White: American Racial Reform, 1885–1912* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), and Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion*.
4. On the life and thought of Walter Rauschenbusch, see Paul Minus, *Walter Rauschenbusch: American Reformer* (New York: Macmillan, 1988); Gary Dorrien, *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), and Evans, *The Kingdom is Always but Coming: a Life of Walter Rauschenbusch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).
5. See, for example, William R. Hutchison (ed.), *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
6. Harry F. Ward and Richard Henry Edwards, *Christianizing Community Life* (New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1917), 108.
7. See, for example, Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Meridian, 1956).
8. For histories of the Social Gospel after World War I, see Paul Carter, *The Decline and Revival of the Social Gospel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1954); Robert Moats Miller, *American Protestantism and Social Issues, 1919–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958), and Donald Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960). For alternative interpretations of the Social Gospel in the interwar period, see William McGuire King, "The Emergence of Social Gospel Radicalism in American Methodism" (PhD diss. Harvard University, 1977), and Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion*.

9. See, for example, Murray B. Seidler, *Norman Thomas: Respectable Rebel* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1967); Patricia Appelbaum, *Kingdom to Commune: Protestant Pacifist Culture between World War I and the Vietnam Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Dan McKanan, "The Implicit Religion of Radicalism: Socialist Party Theology, 1900–1934," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78 (September 2010): 750–89; Leilah C. Danielson, *American Gandhi: A. J. Muste and the History of Radicalism in the 20th Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).
10. Eugene McCarragher, *Christian Critics: Religion and the Impasse in Modern American Social Thought* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 12.
11. Rauschenbusch, *Social Principles of Jesus*, 10.
12. Rauschenbusch, *Social Principles of Jesus*, 91.
13. Eugene Lyman, "Social Progress and Religious Faith," *Harvard Theological Review* 7 (April 1914): 149.
14. See William McGuire King, "'History as Revelation' in the Theology of the Social Gospel," *Harvard Theological Review* 76, no. 1 (1983): 109–29, and King, "An Enthusiasm for Humanity: The Social Emphasis in Religion and Its Accommodation in Protestant Theology," in *Religion and Twentieth-Century Intellectual Life*, ed. Michael J. Lacey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 49–77.
15. See, for example, James Tracy, *Direct Action: Radical Pacifism from the Union Eight to the Chicago Seven* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1–6; Appelbaum, *Kingdom to Commune*, 25–60; and Danielson, *American Gandhi*, 219–22.
16. See Hutchison, *Between the Times*, and Jill K. Gill, *Embattled Ecumenism: The National Council of Churches, the Vietnam War, and the Trials of the Protestant Left* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2011).
17. On the early history of the YMCA, see Sherwood Eddy, *A Century of Youth: a History of the YMCA from 1844 to 1944* (New York: Association Press, 1944); Charles Howard Hopkins, *History of the YMCA in North America* (New York: Association Press, 1951); and Clifford Putney, *Muscular Christianity: Manhood and Sports in Protestant America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Putney provides an especially helpful analysis on how late nineteenth-century understandings of masculinity impacted the YMCA's missionary vision.
18. Hopkins, *History of the YMCA in North America*, 633.
19. *Ibid.*, 629. The early history of the YWCA reflects a parallel history to the YMCA, especially how the Student YWCA embraced social questions. See Anna V. Rice, *A History of the World's Young Women's Christian Association* (New York: The Woman's Press, 1947).
20. See Charles Howard Hopkins, *John R. Mott: a Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).
21. Hopkins. *History of the YMCA in North America*, 397–98.

22. See Donald K. Gorrell, *The Age of Responsibility: The Social Gospel in the Progressive Era, 1900–1920* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1988), and Evans, *The Kingdom is Always but Coming*.
23. Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), 61.
24. Rauschenbusch, *Social Principles of Jesus*, 103.
25. See Evans, *The Kingdom is Always but Coming*, 181–84.
26. Both McConnell and Ward were instrumental leaders in the Methodist Federation for Social Service, a denominational caucus founded in 1907 that drafted the first “social creed” adopted by a major Protestant denomination. See Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion*, 119–27.
27. Clarence Barbour, *The Bible in the World Today* (New York: Association Press, 1911), 55.
28. Harry Emerson Fosdick, *Manhood of the Master* (New York: Association Press, 1918), 49.
29. Edward Steiner, “A Religion of Democracy,” in *A Man’s Religion*, ed. Fred B. Smith (New York: Association Press, 1913), 244.
30. For an excellent summation of this theme, see Michael G. Thompson, “Sherwood Eddy, the Missionary Enterprise, and the Rise of Christian Internationalism in 1920s America,” *Modern Intellectual History* 12, no. 1 (2015): 65–93.
31. Sherwood Eddy, *Eighty Adventurous Years: an Autobiography* (New York: Harper, 1955), 118–19.
32. Ward, Harkness, and Oxnam were Methodist leaders in the ecumenical movement and in different ways crucial to the development of the Social Gospel impulse after World War I. See David Nelson Duke, *In the Trenches with Jesus and Marx: Harry F. Ward and the Struggle for Social Justice* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003); Rosemary Skinner Keller, *Georgia Harkness: For Such a Time as This* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), and Robert Moats Miller, *G. Bromley Oxnam: Paladin of Liberal Protestantism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990).
33. Kirby Page, *Jesus or Christianity: a Study in Contrasts* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1929), 230–31.
34. Quoted in Duke, *In the Trenches with Jesus and Marx*, 102.
35. Sherwood Eddy, *Russia Today: What Can We Learn from It?* (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1934), 68.
36. Page, *Jesus or Christianity*, 248.
37. Although a critical aspect of the Social Gospel movement was rooted within the industrial North in the late nineteenth century, scholars have drawn attention to how many white Social Gospel leaders before World War I engaged questions of race and racism that emerged from African American church leaders in both the South and North. See Ralph E. Luker,

- The Social Gospel in Black and White* and Gary Dorrien, *The New Abolition: W.E.B. DuBois and the Black Social Gospel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).
38. Eddy, *Russia Today*, 74.
 39. Quoted in Randal Maurice Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays, Schoolmaster of the Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 79.
 40. On the history of African-American work in the YMCA, see Nina Mjagkij, *Light into Darkness: African Americans and the YMCA, 1852–1946* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994).
 41. Robert Shaffer, “A Missionary from the East to Western Pagans’: Kagawa Toyohiko’s 1936 U.S. Tour,” *Journal of World History* 24 (September 2013): 582.
 42. Hopkins, *History of the YMCA*, 525.
 43. On the broader impact of *motive* in liberal Protestantism, see David A. Hollinger, “After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Ecumenical Protestantism and the Modern American Encounter with Diversity,” *Journal of American History* 98 (June 2011): 21–48.
 44. Ernest Fremont Tittle, “Can Democracy Be Made to Work?,” *motive* (February 1941): 9.
 45. On Highlander’s impact on Parks, see Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), and Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015).
 46. Myles Horton, *The Long Haul: an Autobiography* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998), 26–27.
 47. See Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays*, 74–79.
 48. Benjamin E. Mays, ed., *A Gospel for the Social Awakening* (New York: Association Press, 1950).
 49. Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel* (New York: Scribner’s, 1971), 354.
 50. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper, 1958), 91.
 51. See also Doug Rossinow, “‘The Break-Through to New Life’: Christianity and the Emergence of the New Left in Austin, Texas, 1956–1964,” *American Quarterly* 46 (September 1994): 309–40; and Appelbaum, *Kingdom to Commune*, 28–31.
 52. Doug Rossinow, *Visions of Progress: The Left-Liberal Tradition in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).
 53. In addition to serving as the longtime pulpit of prominent activist clergy such as Harry Emerson Fosdick and William Sloane Coffin, it was at Riverside Church in April 1967 that Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered one of his first major addresses condemning U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War.
 54. Sherwood Eddy, *A Century With Youth*, 125.



Judaism, Yiddish Peoplehood, and American Radicalism

David Verbeeten

American Jews have long been known for a left-wing or liberal political orientation. The facts of this political tradition are “easy to demonstrate,” but not always “so easy to explain.”¹ As an urban, non-Protestant group, largely made up of recent immigrants from Eastern Europe, Jews were not unique in gravitating to the Democratic Party in the 1920s and to the New Deal in the 1930s. Catholic immigrants, among others, demonstrated similar preferences as a general counter-hegemonic thrust to bourgeois Anglo-Protestant dominance and its expression in the Republican Party. Jews were, however, distinguished by the intensity and persistence of their commitment, which outdid and outlasted the partisanship of white Catholics on the East Coast and elsewhere, and for several decades they contributed to a subculture of radicalism, especially in and around New York City.²

Various factors have been put forward to account for this ethnic political phenomenon, from antisemitism to economic hardship.³ Notwithstanding the importance of these forces, it may be pointed out that antisemitism has

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been muted in the United States,⁴ and the Jewish community was typified, even early on and often among radicals themselves, by rapid upward mobility.⁵ As such, some have looked to the possible influence of Judaism or “Judaic values” on political behavior.⁶ On the one hand, the historical record does not support a straightforward relationship between Judaism and left-wing politics, not least because orthodox Jews were almost everywhere conservative and secularization and radicalization almost always went together. On the other hand, we cannot simply dismiss the connection, because American Russian-Jewish radicals did themselves sometimes invoke their heritage as a political motivation and because, as Gerald Sorin observed, such radicals in the early twentieth century came disproportionately from the ranks of those who “were sons and daughters of rabbis, cantors, Hebrew school teachers, Talmudic scholars, or who had had rabbinical or advanced Jewish schooling.”⁷

The influence of religion need not be straightforward, orthodox, or literal. It can be derivative. For these “sons and daughters” of the great migration, strict Judaism quickly became obsolete, but certain deep inspirations remained. Michael Alexander has observed that even though these Eastern European Jewish immigrants ceased to live by traditional commandments or under rabbinical authority, they did act out a “lived religion” of secularized theological concepts of exile and covenant and sacralized legacies of persecution, above all by identifying “with people more marginalized than themselves.”⁸ In so doing, they conformed to their self-image as righteous outsiders, which in turn facilitated group cohesion against modern bourgeois pressures toward assimilation and dissolution. Whereas Jews may have shared with white Catholics and other relatively “marginalized” populations in the United States in the early twentieth century a certain defiance toward established Anglo-Protestant authority, their “lived religion” lent itself quite readily to a reinforcement of and justification for these left-wing tendencies and postures. It was often difficult to know where one left off and the other began.

The life and times of Alexander Bittelman can shed light on these dynamics between aspects of Judaism and a strong left-wing political orientation. Born in the Ukraine near the end of the nineteenth century, he was a laborer and radical activist in the Russian Empire for much of his adolescence. He emigrated to Manhattan before World War I and quickly involved himself in socialist politics there. A founding member of his new country’s Communist Party in 1919, he would act as its chief theorist for several decades thereafter.⁹ Although Bittelman was an extreme outlier

even among his notably non-conforming peers, aspects of his upbringing, resettlement overseas, and political radicalism in the United States were shared by much of his cohort. He left behind voluminous autobiographical and other self-explanatory writings, many of which suggest the importance of Jewish predicaments, feelings and semi-secularized religious tropes for his political decisions and developments.

Bittelman was born as Usher-Anshell Bittelmacher on January 9, 1890, in Berdichev to a shoemaker and an illiterate pious woman. The first decade of his life was not unduly eventful, but his early imagination was suffused with thoughts and images of the suffering and persecution of the Jewish people. This sense of oppression came less through direct experience than through the evocations of his elders, who mixed discussion of recent events, such as the pogroms of the early 1880s, in which a family member was killed, with biblical legend and messianic expectation. A beloved grandfather seems to have left the greatest mark in this regard. The old man taught his grandson about Rabbi Moses—"the hero of all my heroes"—"who liberated the Jews from Egyptian slavery" and brought them out of exile to the promised land. In this schema, Czar Alexander III was another pharaoh, whose death in 1894 was welcomed. He was "that monster of a czar" and "the murderer, enemy of Israel," who "always timed his pogroms for Passover."¹⁰ Such views were widespread throughout the Jewish Pale of Settlement, and, though not entirely accurate, allowed Jews to make sense of local events in terms that they readily understood.¹¹

Tropes of exile, slavery, and redemption were transmitted to Bittelman such that oppression, first of Jews and then of others like them, constituted a lens through which he came to see the world. The familial loathing of the czar was early translated into rebellious sentiment against gentile authority and even gentile society, with which he had little contact as a Yiddish-speaking boy. The "cruelties of Alexander III and his advisor, especially towards the Jews, was more than enough to make me hate all autocracies and tyrannies," he wrote. "I was quite definitely a republican having heard from my father of such countries, as France and America, where the people were getting along very well without Czars and without Kings and where the Jews were not oppressed and persecuted." By the age of ten, "I had already acquired a strong sense of injustice in the world: the existence of rich and poor, strong and weak, Jews and their persecutors, especially the Czar; and also an equally strong sense of identity with the poor, to which I belonged, with the weak and powerless, and with the Jews, of course."¹²

Whereas Bittelman's pious and traditional grandfather was relatively passive in the face of perceived hardship and maltreatment, Bittelman himself seems to have internalized and then secularized elements of this biblically influenced message into a mentality of active protest. He rejected meekness as the correct response to felt Jewish adversity or inferiority. "Why doesn't God do something to our enemies? Why does he let them do what they are doing to us?" he would ask his grandfather. The old man would reply: "We remain in Exile, dispersed and persecuted. The Creator sees it and does not seem to do anything about it. Why? Because of our sins and transgressions... We pray to God to have mercy on us, to shorten our sufferings." Of Zionism, the grandfather felt similarly: he "held very definite opinions. He would say: you don't come to the Creator of the World and try to prod him along."¹³

Such views were fairly typical of traditional Eastern European Jewry of Bittelman's grandfather's generation.¹⁴ For Bittelman, however, they proved insufficient. Of God, he would ask, "Why is He doing nothing to protect His people from pogroms and all other persecutions?" As a rejoinder was not forthcoming, Bittelman began to conclude "that, if You, the Creator of the World, does not [*sic*] see fit to put to right some of the wrongs in human life and relations, we shall try to do it without you. We meaning the workers and all the poor people." This tendency was reinforced when Bittelman, compelled to drop out of Hebrew school and to find work, and so apprenticed to a printer at the age of 11, successfully "participated in my first economic strike... in the summer of 1902" with the help of an older colleague, who also introduced him to the notion of class struggle and the writings of Leo Tolstoy.¹⁵

By the age of 13, Bittelman became a member of the General Jewish Workers' Union in Lithuania, Poland and Russia, commonly known as the Bund.¹⁶ It was an organic development: Bittelman was enrolled by his father's friend, Isaac, a glovemaking, who gave exhortatory speeches to small groups of men in the Bittelmachers' house. When the young Bittelman heard Isaac speak, "Naturally, I couldn't yet know or fully understand the program and theory of the Bund." Nonetheless, Isaac's words fit into Bittelman's received Jewish paradigm, enabling him to make immediate sense of Isaac's heartfelt declamations against "the injustices and brutalities of the entire existing social and political systems." "[S]ocialism, revolution and republic were to me... dream-images of some bright and joyful future, something like what would happen when the

Messiah arrived.” Bittelman was notably impressed by “the way that he [Isaac] would speak of the sufferings of the Jewish workers as Jews”:

According to him [Isaac], the Jewish workers in Czarist Russia were carrying a double burden: the burden of exploited workers which they shared with all other workers in Russia and the burden of an oppressed and discriminated and persecuted nationality. Never before had I seen the special Jewish miseries in the Czar’s empire in quite that light.¹⁷

For the young Bittelman, the Jews were oppressed as were the workers, by the same czarist regime that had persecuted his grandfather. Through this example of “outsider identification,” Bittelman’s Jewish self-perceptions of exile and alienation were projected onto members of other groups deemed to meet this definition.¹⁸ Jewishness and socialism were early fused in Bittelman’s mind. He was aware already in his adolescence that the Bund and the general Russian Social Democratic Labor Party were often at odds on the issue of Jews, but the latter’s argument in favor of Jewish assimilation as progressive, “didn’t appeal to me at all... I knew I was a Jew; I wanted to continue to be a Jew; and I wanted a Jewish national cultural life.” That such aspirations constituted “a nationalist, a reactionary, an anti-socialist proposition,” according to Vladimir Lenin and others, “was very hard to take. But what do you do about it? You continue to be a loyal member of the Bund and do your best to fight for freedom and socialism. And that was what I tried to do.”¹⁹

Bittelman remained a Bundist, even as he increasingly sympathized with the Bolsheviks due to their uncompromising revolutionary zeal. The two seemed to go together in his mind. His logic was simple:

As to the differences between the Bund and the Zionists, that didn’t interest me at all. The Bund’s answer to the Jewish problem in Russia—full equality of civil and political rights in a democratic republic coupled with national-cultural autonomy—this was to me fully satisfactory. And the way to achieve that was the revolutionary overthrow of the Czarist autocracy. Following that will be the socialist revolution which will solve *all* problems. And there will be no more a Jewish problem.²⁰

In pursuit of this vision, Bittelman acted as a Bundist activist throughout Russian Ukraine from the age of 15 to 22, spending two (rather happy and adventurous) years in exile in Siberia. But even though “my Jewishness,

my feelings of identification with and belonging to the Jewish people, was with the Jews of Russia,”²¹ and even though he viewed America as “a land of selfish, egotistic people, bent on making money,” Bittelman emigrated to New York City in 1912 in order to evade the czar’s draft.²² He made the journey in the peak decade before the outbreak of World War I, when more than one-and-a-quarter million Eastern European Jews arrived in the United States.²³

Bittelman would go on to devote his life to radical politics in the United States for many decades. In 1915, he joined the Jewish section of the Socialist Party of America (SP), which was one of the more influential foreign-language branches,²⁴ and soon became its secretary. He wrote articles for radical Yiddish-language organs, which were then in their heyday, and helped the Joint Distribution Committee to raise funds for war-torn Jewry during World War I. In 1919, he went over to the newly formed Communist Party, which split from the SP after the Russian Revolution, and he became a leading propagandist and theorist. For about ten years after 1941, he directed the Communist Party’s Yiddish-language federation. For several years in the mid-1950s, he was jailed under the Smith Act for subversion and promotion of violent revolution. In 1960, soon after his release from prison, he was expelled from the Communist Party for “revisionism.” Over this long duration, his youthful conflation of the interests of socialism (and later communism) with those of the Jews continued to inform his worldview. He suffered considerable cognitive dissonance and distress when the two diverged. In this, he resembled many of his peers.

Of course, most Eastern European Jewish immigrants were never communists, but with the possible exception of Finns they were the most consistently and persistently radical of all immigrant groups.²⁵ Most of Bittelman’s peers, however, did not import radicalism from Russia to the United States. They became radicalized in the United States. As of the 1880s, Tony Michels has written, “only a tiny number of Jews in the Russian Empire knew anything about socialist ideas before coming to America.” A radical Yiddish subculture was only solidified in the early twentieth century, “almost two decades after the Jewish labor movement arose in New York.”²⁶ Labor activist Harry Burgin described his contemporaries in New York City in 1914 as a “raw, ignorant group,” with whom “it was difficult to make contact”:

They were so ignorant that they didn't know the difference between a missionary and a socialist. At Essex Street, which was the center of the Jewish quarter, it was perilous to walk through holding a lighted cigarette (this is forbidden to the Orthodox Jews) on the Sabbath. The one who showed himself with a cigarette suffered for his lack of decorum.²⁷

Like Bittelman, Jewish immigrants became more radical as they became more secular. This process was an independent, yet parallel event in both the old and new worlds, even though conditions were very different in each place. In the United States, Jews found unprecedented if imperfect tolerance and they flourished in the country's economy. Upon his arrival in New York City, Bittelman did not pass through the Lower East Side—the famous, crowded immigrants' ghetto in Manhattan. He rented a flat in Harlem and found employment as a typesetter, quickly achieving higher wages by moving from firm to firm. Within two years he had been admitted to Cooper Union and soon thereafter had become a civil engineer. His upward mobility was especially swift but not entirely exceptional. As Arcadius Kahan observed of the economic progress of Eastern European Jewish immigrants from 1890 to 1914:

Despite their initial disabilities of language and skills, each cohort of Jewish immigrants caught up in earnings with the native American workers of the same age and in similar occupations within 10–15 years. This is a record of achievement that is all the more remarkable when we consider that the real earnings of natives were also rising during these years.²⁸

There was no direct correlation between Jewish radicalism and class or economic need. Jewish proletariats “dissolved everywhere within one generation,” and New York was no exception.²⁹ According to Daniel Soyer, the disjuncture “between the social ideals and personal goals of many Jews” eventually meant that “outside of New York and the other large manufacturing centers, the Jewish labor movement itself often consisted entirely of small businesspeople.”³⁰ There is a much better correlation between radicalism and secularization. As with Bittelman, secularization removed the affirming certainties of rigid orthodoxy and exposed young Eastern European Jews to the modernizing societies around them and to the pressures and expectations of their erstwhile Christian oppressors. “In the Roumanian village of my childhood,” Maurice Samuel recalled, “the Jew felt himself to belong, quite justly, to a higher order. In the great

modern city to which we migrated the feeling of superiority vanished. The shock was extraordinary. We were, at first, as grasshoppers in our own eyes.”³¹

Various left-wing movements and ideologies held manifold appeal for Eastern European Jewish immigrants in this new situation, for they served as both vehicle and content for ethnic assertion and self-esteem: vehicle, by criticizing bourgeois standards and conformity; content, by doing much to meet the self-image of Jews as outsiders in exile and alienation with a unique moral insight derived from this condition. In the Jewish case, the general counter-hegemonic left-wing impulse, which was shared to some extent with other “marginalized” groups, was reinforced by a “lived religion” that could be made to segue easily with socialism’s stated concern for the poor, ostracized, and oppressed. As William Berlin observed:

For Jews, the tension between old and new was probably even more complicated than it was for other immigrants. It was more acute because Judaism implied separation from the nations of the world... Jewish experience had fostered alienation from the ways of the Gentiles, but it also encouraged an awareness of a unique history and tradition... The immigrant Jew, in certain respects, may have wanted to remain a stranger.³²

Bittelman wrote candidly and with insight about these kinds of motivations in his memoirs. In his adolescence as a Bundist activist in Berdichev, he had envisioned that after a socialist revolution “in a Russia free of the Czarist autocracy there will be established special governmental institutions in charge of all cultural affairs of the Jews. Yiddish would be recognized by the state as the national language of the Jewish people.”³³ As the Soviet regime established an “affirmative action empire” in its first two decades, this anticipation was largely fulfilled. According to Terry Martin, “Russia’s new revolutionary government was the first of the old European multiethnic states to confront the rising tide of nationalism.” It responded “by systematically promoting the national consciousness of its ethnic minorities and establishing for them many of the characteristic institutional forms of the nation-state.”³⁴

The Bolsheviks suppressed Judaism and outlawed the Bund, absorbing much of its personnel during their consolidation of power. Nonetheless, they promoted a secular Yiddish-based culture as part of a broader multi-cultural policy. In the 1920s, David Shneer has written, the Soviet Union

“was the only country in the world to have state-sponsored Yiddish-language publishing houses, writers’ groups, courts, city councils, and schools.”³⁵ Bittelman was impressed by this effort and appreciated it, as did many of his peers.³⁶ In fact, Yiddish culture was “for many years the chief point” with which Jewish communists in the United States “argued the virtues of the Soviet Union with non-Communists of the immigrant generation.”³⁷

Travelling to the Soviet Union in 1922 on official business for the American Communist Party, Bittelman experienced Soviet multiculturalism directly. Like other Western radicals, who “tended to confirm their preconceptions” and “were ready to be impressed” in the Soviet Union,³⁸ Bittelman was pleased and enthused by what he saw, notwithstanding the “awfully depressing stories” of the Ukrainian famine.³⁹ Among other encounters, he met with representatives of Russian Jewish communism with whom he “had many get-togethers, chats and discussions.”⁴⁰ He would recall of these men and women:

These people looked to me very happy and proud of the great things they were doing. This mood of cheer and optimism I found prevalent in several other Jewish circles in Moscow. I was invited to a number of comradesly parties where I met Jewish writers, poets, actors and political workers, and in all of these gatherings I felt the same mood of pride and hopeful expectation.⁴¹

Bittelman was impressed, above all, by the cultural ferment of which he was told and to which he was exposed firsthand, including at Moscow’s Yiddish theater, which “proudly asserted and celebrated Jewish identity.”⁴² He reminisced that “the brightest picture of Soviet Jewish life at that time I found on the cultural front,” in Moscow, Berdichev and Kiev:

The Soviet government was obviously doing everything in its power to assist the free expression of the national cultural needs of the Jewish people. Most of these, if not all, were in Yiddish, the language of the Jewish masses, the language which was to me, too, very precious. Already in Moscow I thought I could sense the beginning of a genuine Jewish cultural renaissance in literature, poetry, art and the theatre. This, by the way, was the feeling of all the Jewish men and women with whom I came in contact.⁴³

For Bittelman and other Jewish radicals, this was the model for America and the world.⁴⁴ Socialism had overturned bourgeois expectations of Jewish integration and had used state power and bureaucracy to promote

pluralism. Into this new space, moreover, Jews were able to express a renovated, secular, Yiddish-based, ethnic identity that outgrew yet drew on an older religious orthodoxy and practice with its evocation of exile, alienation, and redemption. Bittelman deemed his fellow Jews to be especially “rich in moral and spiritual capacities for the ideals of social justice” due to their ancestral religion and historical experience,⁴⁵ but for all that a strictly orthodox identity had lost its appeal for him. The “old and traditional role of Judaism as the mainstay of Jewish survival had come to an end long ago,” he declared.⁴⁶ In its place the Jewish labor movement and its causes had become an important secular medium for the perpetuation of Jewish identity, for Judaism and “its institutions are inadequate for a full expression and development of life in the United States”:

That Judaism and its institutions are inadequate for a full expression and development of Jewish life in the United States has been recognized for a long time by many groups and social classes in the American Jewish community. The first ones to bring into being secular movements and institutions of a distinct Jewish national character were the Jewish workers, radical and Socialist-minded wage earners, men and women, mostly immigrants from Eastern Europe. With the growth of these movements and institutions came a veritable Renaissance of American Jewish culture in the Yiddish language. This was something new in Jewish history.⁴⁷

After the Comintern’s Seventh Congress in 1935, communist parties worldwide were encouraged to cooperate “with all progressive elements in the struggle against fascism.”⁴⁸ Moscow’s official line caused Bittelman, previously dismissive of the New Deal as “a sharper turn of the American bourgeoisie towards fascization and war”⁴⁹ and as an “inadequate relief,”⁵⁰ to find major opportunities for his party to join and influence the mainstream labor movement. Bittelman came to believe that the popular front offered “the road toward making a mass party out of our organization.”⁵¹ But as much as he enjoyed his contribution to “the further advance and consolidation of the forces of the People’s Front,”⁵² his intimate involvement with the Communist Party leadership did not endure, because he was perceived as “a bad team worker.”⁵³ In 1941, he was sent down to work for the party’s Yiddish-language publication, *Di frayhayt*, which he reorganized into the Morning Frayhayt Association.⁵⁴

Bittelman remained “actively and joyfully” in communist agitation as specifically geared to the Jewish community for about ten years.⁵⁵ He felt

fulfilled. The Morning Frayhayt Association proved a homecoming, a return “to my native environment and to numerous old friends and co-workers.”⁵⁶ During World War II, he argued for Jewish unity across class lines and geographic boundaries in opposition to the Nazi menace in Europe,⁵⁷ although he later came to regret that he had not done more to “arouse and organize the Jews for the survival of Jews as Jews.”⁵⁸ He did not look upon his work at the Morning Frayhayt Association as a purely practical effort to reach out to Jewish workers in their vernacular per strict Marxism-Leninism. In reflecting on this period, he emphasized that he and his colleagues “took a strong stand against what we called ‘bourgeois assimilation’. By this we meant all those currents in Jewish life which project assimilation as the solution—the desirable solution—of the Jewish question”:

We didn’t criticize individual Jews who sought assimilation as their own way out of their own problems although we took sharp exception to the refusal of some of those Jews to join the fight for equal rights and for our rights as a distinct ethnic group or “national minority.” That was it: we viewed the Jewish community in the United States and the other lands, except Palestine, as “national” minorities and on that basis we called for a united Jewish struggle for the democratic rights of that minority and for the further development of a progressive Jewish culture.⁵⁹

He came to the related realization that such resistance mediated ethnic consciousness:

Looking at the whole thing in retrospect, it is quite clear to me that our resolution [against bourgeois assimilation], and my own thinking on the Jewish question, were definitely at variance with the established Marxist attitude on the eventual disappearance of the Jewish people as a people... We were fighting for Jewish survival, not only physical against Hitler’s “final solution,” but for cultural and spiritual survival as a people. Without realizing it, we were really projecting the idea of a progressive Jewish nationalism.⁶⁰

Bittelman’s case belies the claims of historians who have interpreted Jewish radicalism as assimilationist or somehow post-Jewish, which may in part be understood as an apologetic effort to distance American Jews from communism in the embarrassing context of the Cold War. Bittelman

explicitly rejected claims made by a Jewish ex-communist, a former colleague, that he was a “semi-assimilationist.”⁶¹ Along with other radical Jews,⁶² he understood communism’s emphasis on “internationalism” as the kind of multiculturalism he witnessed in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. His understanding was and “continues to be that real internationalism is attained only through merger with one’s own people,” whether in art, sciences, politics, or statesmanship:

Internationalism means friendly, brotherly, intercourse and relations between nations and peoples on the basis of true equality. It means respect for each other’s national cultural characteristics and a sincere desire to learn from one another. *It does not mean* one people merging with another; it most certainly excludes the possibility or desirability of members of one people deserting their own and seeking merger—assimilation—with another. This was my understanding of internationalism ever since I joined the Bund in 1903 and became a Socialist.⁶³

Given the importance of socialism to Bittelman’s personal and Jewish identity and vice versa, he was devastated when he learned about Josef Stalin’s antisemitism and the state of affairs that prevailed for Jews in the Soviet Union after the Holocaust, when Yiddish culture and its most creative elements were liquidated “in violation of the humane and humanitarian impulses and values of mankind’s moral ideals which are part of Communist morality.”⁶⁴ Soviet multiculturalism—the regime’s promotion of all its minority cultures—had implicitly operated on the suppression of the Russian majority culture. By the end of the 1930s, in preparation for war against Nazi Germany, Russian nationalism was rehabilitated and reinvigorated.⁶⁵ By the end of the 1940s, the Soviet regime had turned on its former Jewish supporters, eradicating the very Yiddish culture that it had but recently done much to advance. Soviet Jews began to be subjected to forcible assimilation and Russification.⁶⁶

In February 1956, when Nikita Khrushchev made his famous revelations about Stalin’s dictatorship and personality cult, Bittelman was serving out a three-year sentence in prison for his support of the violent overthrow of the American government. Although he insisted that he and all other leading communists had known all along about famines and purges and had accepted them as a “matter of inevitable development,” Khrushchev’s public disclosures destroyed his complacency and confidence.⁶⁷ What is more, he claimed not to have known of the antisemitic persecution until those disclosures, and he was, given his belief in and

commitment to Soviet multiculturalism and the Soviet support for Jewish peoplehood in the Soviet Union, most distressed by this of all Stalin's crimes. Bittelman found himself more deeply and painfully shocked by rumors and suggestions of the "forcible liquidation of Jewish cultural life in the Soviet Union" than by the "first news of the general re-evaluation of the Stalin leadership by Khrushchev":

My mind was numbed. I simply couldn't absorb the fact that Jewish writers, poets and artists [and] great creators of Jewish culture, devoted friends and supporters of Socialism and the Soviet state and sincere lovers of their homeland; I couldn't—I refused—to understand why these people were murdered by a Communist leadership of a Socialist government. I kept on asking myself—for Heaven's sake, why? What could they have been guilty of to deserve death? ...I remember having wept bitter tears, in secret, hidden even from my own [wife]. I felt ashamed but I couldn't help it.⁶⁸

The Holocaust and the ultimate failure of Soviet socialism to accommodate Jews as a Yiddish-speaking community impelled Bittelman, after his release from an American prison in 1957, to reconsider the prospects of Jewish continuity in the diaspora. He produced a large unpublished typescript on the subject, *Jewish Survival: A Marxist Outlook*, in which he argued that Stalin's latter-day policy "of accelerated and forcible Jewish assimilation in the Soviet Union" was "wrong theoretically from the standpoint of Marxist philosophy and Marxist theory," "wrong politically," and "wrong morally."⁶⁹ According to Bittelman, Stalin and the Soviet leadership "never fully understood the active and creative role of the subjective reaction of Jews against assimilation."⁷⁰ They failed to recognize the "distinct Jewish national character" and "the potential progressive role this factor is destined to play in the life of mankind."⁷¹ Bittelman understood this potential in almost messianic terms with fellow Jews in the role of a chosen people:

If nations and national groups have social missions to perform, and history shows that this is so, then the historic mission of the Jews is to help promote the advance of mankind in this epoch *to the final realization* of the democratic ideals of social justice in the lives of all mankind.⁷²

According to the American Jewish sociologist of religion Will Herberg, messianic feeling affected "believer and unbeliever alike, even those who felt compelled to reject it as a doctrine along with the faith in which it is

grounded.”⁷³ For the famous chronicler of the radical Yiddish-speaking world of Eastern European immigrants to New York in the early twentieth century, Irving Howe, messianism was the “most urgent force in Jewish tradition.” As a “blazing secular passion appearing first as socialism, then as Zionism or the two together,”⁷⁴ it informed secular Jewishness and its manifold political, social, and cultural expressions in the new world during this time of great change and challenge in Jewish life. The ethnic impetus behind Jewish radical activity was necessarily mixed up with religious inspiration, reflecting the fused ethnic and religious dimensions of Jewish identity, neither of which were or can be isolated from the other. Jewish radicals often came out of and even continued to live in environments in which tropes of a “lived religion” were as present as Marxist dictates.

Bittelman himself came to recognize aspects of religious inspiration behind his ostensibly secular political activity, when he had time in retirement to reflect upon the nature and origins of his support for left-wing movements and ideologies. In retrospect, he concluded, his socialism was never a science, but a kind of faith, “from the very beginning, from the very time I first heard Isaac speak of it to the Berdichev shoeworkers at the memorable meetings in my father’s house.” Socialism “was a belief and a faith in an ideal. Marxism showed me how to get there. Marxism did not take away my belief and faith in the ideal.”⁷⁵ Whereas Jewish success and relative acceptance in the United States seemed to suggest a possible end to Jewish exile and alienation, the need to perfect society preserved a sense of Jewish mission and separation that met a self-image as a marginalized and persecuted people. “What my parents had done in joining the Communist Party,” David Horowitz, a red-diaper baby, recalled, was “return to the ghetto,” where “there was the same conviction of being marked for persecution and specially ordained, the sense of moral superiority toward the stronger and more numerous *goyim* outside.”⁷⁶

By the 1960s, Bittelman had been ejected from the American Communist Party for being a “revisionist” due to his newfound support for a peaceful rather than violent transition to socialism. He considered himself a communist of a more humane and mature disposition, rejecting the Bolshevik idea that ends justified means and accepting that the “use of force by Communists is not always a progressive force.”⁷⁷ What is more, the party had come to view him as insufficiently opposed to Zionism. Marxism insisted that Jews would someday disappear as a people through assimilation, but Bittelman preferred to see that day as so far in the future

that for all intents and purposes, it “doesn’t exist.” He reasoned that notwithstanding what was “bound to happen to the Jews” in a dialectical sense in the future, as long as there are Jews in the world, and especially in his immediate environment, then “there is a Jewish people in the world, even though not a nation, in the Marxist meaning.” Bittelman felt a part of that people, and as a socialist duty-bound to do his utmost for the “progress and happiness of that people.”⁷⁸

Bittelman had, from an early age, envisioned socialism as a means by which to achieve that goal, both for Jews and others, seeing in this political persuasion the fulfilment of religious and ethnic-national ideals alike. Few American Jews were committed communists, but many Eastern European Jewish immigrants to the United States in the early twentieth century did gravitate to left-wing causes. Bittelman was situated at the very far end of a spectrum of sentiment and belief that was shared by many of his peers. For Bittelman, a future revolutionary society would establish a multicultural utopia, in which a renovated Jewishness and even Judaism could be fully expressed. For a brief period, he thought this outcome had taken shape in the early Soviet Union. He was later disabused by communism’s failure and Stalin’s destruction of Yiddish culture, but he continued to see in socialism in general and the Jewish labor movement in particular a vector for a renovated Jewish identity in the modern world that encompassed and gave expression to its ethnic and even religious elements.

The inspiration for Bittelman’s worldview emerged out of a childhood in which religious tropes were very much a part of the home environment, notwithstanding a secularization in lifestyles. The young Bittelman understood his early initiation into union activism not in terms of political ideology, but of biblical stories that he had been told by his elders about the Jews’ exile, alienation, national suffering, and hope for messianic redemption. He identified with the proletariat not simply out of a sense class solidarity, but as fellow outsiders, who, like Jews, were oppressed by hostile political authority, not unlike a pharaoh. Throughout his radical career as an immigrant in the United States, he remained committed to the Jewish masses and to the promotion of a Jewish, specifically a Yiddish culture, in which ethnic and religious elements of identity were fused. For Bittelman, socialism involved faith, which drew upon and moved beyond the traditional orthodoxy of his ancestors yet which in key respects recreated the collective separation and mission that had defined it.

NOTES

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Dorothy Day, Religion, and the Left

Nicholas Rademacher

Dorothy Day stood at a crossroads in 1932 as she observed protestors move “through the tree-flanked streets of Washington,” carrying their banners and chanting their demands for economic justice. Two decades later, she still recalled the feelings of “joy and pride” mixed with “bitterness” that she experienced that day. She did not feel it would be appropriate to step into the street and march with the protestors as she had done countless times before, in the years leading up to her conversion to Catholicism. She felt at that moment as if a gulf stood between her and the workers whom she loved and whose cause she wholeheartedly endorsed. Her radical commitments and actions seemed jeopardized by her membership in the Catholic Church.¹

Day despaired about the prospects of joining the throng of workers who were protesting in the streets because “fundamental philosophical differences” precluded cooperation. While she acknowledged that, in certain quarters, the Church engaged in various forms of social justice related advocacy, she wondered about the diminished role that it played in “the actual works of mercy that the comrades had always made part of their technique in reaching the workers.” As Day grew into this religious

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81

tradition, however, her understanding of the relationship between Catholicism and social justice deepened. She learned that the two elements were not necessarily mutually exclusive but could be mutually informing and enriching.²

In many respects, this oft-quoted moment in Dorothy Day's development represents an ideal starting point for a conversation about the relationship between religion and the left, insofar as she strove to integrate dimensions of the two communities in her own life and through the Catholic Worker movement that she co-founded with Peter Maurin. Day found that achieving this integration was not easy. Many of her counterparts on the left and those among her Catholic coreligionists distrusted the Catholic Worker movement; they could not fathom how religious faith and leftist politics could work together. Yet, as Day discovered, these two perspectives shared more in common than many realized. As Robert Coles observed after hours of conversations with Day and an intensive study of her life, "her conversion was a newly sanctioned continuation of her way of thinking rather than a dramatic turning away from a former viewpoint." Likewise, as Dan McKanan affirms based on his study of the American religious left, "though Dorothy Day's orthodox Catholic piety was far removed from the dogmatic materialism of the Communist Party, it is not possible to draw a line that neatly separates religious from secular radicals." Day's complex combination of affirmation and critique within these two communities points to the creative synthesis to which she invited her contemporaries, whatever their religious, political, or economic commitments.³

Dorothy Day's Catholic anarchism as expressed through the Catholic Worker movement complicated the view of those on the nonreligious left who did not believe religion and politics could mix. Likewise, her anarchistic politics challenged the view of her Catholic coreligionists who did not think that the Catholic Worker, a decentralized movement committed to radical politics and run by a lay woman, belonged in their tradition. Skeptics notwithstanding, Day founded a religious movement within which people of varying backgrounds—religious and nonreligious alike—could collaborate in fashioning a community that offered an alternative to the regnant communist, fascist, and exploitative capitalist systems of the day. For her, and for those who shared her religious outlook, the Catholic Worker was a way to encounter God in direct service to those who were exploited politically and economically. She sought to restore full, conscious, and active participation to their shared work of building the common good.

By emphasizing the role of Catholic anarchism in Dorothy Day's efforts at détente—reconciling religion and the left—this chapter draws on the work of a number of scholars who have explored the meaning and significance of anarchism in Day's Catholic Worker leadership. Mel Piehl, for example, argues that by combining the anarchism of Day's youth with the personalism of Peter Maurin, the Catholic Worker came to emphasize the primacy of conscience and personal responsibility over reliance on political or institutional means as the source of social transformation. Fred Boehrer identifies subsidiarity (the idea that decisions should be made by the smallest, lowest, or least centralized body possible) and the primacy of conscience as the means by which the Catholic Worker linked anarchism and Roman Catholicism. Both Boehrer and Anne Klejment observe that Day sometimes struggled to balance the primacy of conscience with the considerable influence she could and would wield with respect to imprinting her own particular views, such as those on nonviolence, on the whole community. Dan McKanan, more recently, identifies the works of mercy as the central practice of a movement that brought together multiple views and voices, including diverse perspectives on even the type of anarchism that the Catholic Worker espoused. This chapter builds on and adds to the work of these scholars by highlighting how Day synthesized her radical and religious commitments across her lifetime to create a context—the Catholic Worker movement as an anarchist community—within which religious pluralism and interfaith cooperation could thrive.⁴

The focus here is on Dorothy Day's ongoing endeavor to join elements of the radical politics she shared with her nonreligious counterparts on the left with the religious devotion and faith-inspired social justice activism that she adopted after her conversion to Catholicism. The first part of this chapter traces Day's journey through the American left to the Roman Catholic Church. Here, the similarities and differences between Day and her counterparts on the American left are explored. Even before her initiation into the church, she sought to harmonize her radical social justice commitments with the persistent attraction that drew her toward religion in the first place. The second part of this chapter addresses Day's interaction with Roman Catholicism, identifying areas of common ground and difference, most notably her critique of "bourgeois religion" and her fashioning of an integrated synthesis of her pursuit of social justice and the Christian tradition. The third section considers the anarchist dimension of the Catholic Worker movement, with an emphasis on the roles of freedom of conscience and the works of mercy. In this context, Day offered her

coreligionists and nonreligious counterparts on the American left an opportunity to collaborate in the liberation of themselves and others. Ultimately, Day's contribution to both Roman Catholicism in the U.S. and the American left was the creation of a context within which people of various faiths and persuasions could collaborate in building the common good.

MOVING BEYOND RADICAL OR RELIGIOUS TO RADICAL AND RELIGIOUS

From roughly 1913 until her conversion in 1927, Dorothy Day was immersed in what historian of the American left John Patrick Diggins classifies as the "Lyrical Left." The left, broadly conceived, has spanned generational iterations, but in each case "articulated a new historical vision, a new sense of reality and possibility that transcended the given state of things, a new consciousness of the negating ideal—that which *ought* to exist, but does not." Various generations of the left, he explains, are distinguished by their particular "shared perspective on common historical problems and a similar strategy of action taken as a result of that perspective."⁵

Members of the Lyrical Left, which dated from the early decades of the twentieth century to the Great Depression, saw themselves as fashioning "a revolutionary culture that aimed to break down the dualism between contemplative life and active life" through a fusion of politics and art. Many members of the Lyrical Left, explains Diggins, rejected their religious upbringing but retained "a certain sense of orthodox values and a vague spiritual hunger." They channeled these principles and yearnings in other directions as they sought "meaning and fulfillment in culture, sex, or politics—in many cases all three." Authors like Jack London and Upton Sinclair appealed to them. They were drawn to socialism. The Industrial Workers of the World attracted them because the organization preached and practiced solidarity. The *New Review* and the *Masses* were their preferred mastheads.⁶

Dorothy Day was no exception to her peers in this movement. As she recounted in various autobiographical accounts across the decades, she was influenced by writers like London and Sinclair from an early age. At the University of Illinois, her passion to fuse art and politics crystallized. She left campus after two years and traveled to New York City to become a writer. She wrote for the socialist newspapers the *Call* and the *Masses*, and covered topics related to labor, poverty, and the events leading to the

First World War. She observed small anarchist groups around New York City and was deeply influenced by Peter Kropotkin's writings on anarchism. She was arrested during protests for women's suffrage. She was affiliated with the IWW. She entered into a number of sexual liaisons, one of which led to a pregnancy and subsequent abortion.⁷

While Day's life to this point reflected the general temperament and behavior of the "Lyrical Left," she differed from many of her contemporaries in at least one important way. Their ultimate concern and "radical hope" was centered on this world. Day's spiritual hunger, on the other hand, was not sated by a horizon so limited. While many of her contemporary American radical counterparts "were seduced into various forms of state-oriented Marxism in the 1920s and 1930s," she sought something more. Keith Morton and John Saltmarsh succinctly summarize Day's condition as she walked away from her community among the left: "her political dreams were destroyed by the war, her community of idealists had proven false, she had chased after a relationship with a man that was destined to fail, and she had found no outlet for her religious sensibilities." They acutely observe, "Her life demanded a drastic reordering."⁸

A distinctive religious sensibility persisted within her even during periods when she ignored and neglected it. On the occasion of the birth of her daughter Tamar in 1926, Day resolved to baptize her child and follow her into the church. Day's conversion to Catholicism created a rift between herself and her family and many friends on the left. In her private journals and published work, she reflected on and responded to the criticism she received from those closest to her. Her brother, John, complained that Catholicism was morbid and cannibalistic. He questioned how an omniscient and benevolent God could permit evil. Her common-law husband, Forster Batterham, was a fervid materialist who could not tolerate the supernatural dimensions of her new-found passion for religion. Batterham would disappear for days on end when arguments on religion broke out between them. He left for good once Day and Tamar became members of the church. Day experienced similar opposition from her friends. Like Batterham, they accused the church of hypocrisy on social justice matters. They thought she should see a psychiatrist, that she was being brain-washed, or even that she had been drugged into accepting religion.⁹

Day was her own harshest critic at the time of her religious conversion. She scrutinized her motives for the slightest hint of insincerity. She accused herself of self-doping, applying the Marxist canard, "religion is the opiate of the people." Nevertheless, she became Catholic. And in spite of mutual

misunderstanding, a decisive break between Day and her counterparts on the left did not occur. Day's "practice of friendship," explains McKanan, made for a welcoming and inclusive movement; she engaged with others who practiced the works of mercy, "as friends rather than as rivals," through dialogue and collaboration.¹⁰

Even after her initiation into the church, Day continued to lament the church's social justice failures. Day shared with her friends on the left her misgivings about the social justice commitments of the church. Her visits to humble Sister Aloysius for catechetical instruction at the imposing estate bequeathed to the sisters by the industrial tycoon, Charles Schwab, stretched her sensibilities to the limit. Day had not forgotten Schwab's role in union busting, and made note of his contributions to economic inequality in her early autobiography, *From Union Square to Rome*. She described the gift he had given to the women religious as "tainted money" stolen from the workers.¹¹

There were obvious areas of continuity and discontinuity with her life before and after conversion. Dorothy Day shared with her counterparts on the left "a critique of *bourgeois* religion," that, as Michael Baxter explains, "conforms to norms established by the social relations of capitalist production, religion that is designed to legitimate the workings of the state and market." In a way that differed from her leftist counterparts, however, Day's pursuit of social justice had become explicitly religious. The Catholic Worker movement that she co-founded with Peter Maurin emerged from a vision of Christianity "founded on a Lord who preached love of enemies and good news to the poor, who healed the sick and welcomed the outcast, who made the rulers of this world tremble, and who bestows upon His followers the power to do the same." Day observed a fault line that challenged both groups: she recognized among both her nonreligious leftist counterparts and her Catholic coreligionists a similar temptation to forgo personal responsibility by submitting uncritically to external authority.¹²

ASSUMING PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY THROUGH CONSCIOUS PARTICIPATION IN SOCIAL ACTION

The freedom and commitment to follow her conscience was central to Day's outlook. In a compelling moment of candor, Dorothy Day recalled a conversation she once had with a priest in confession. She had disclosed to the priest her struggle and frequent failure to remain conscious of God in everything that she did. "I'm afraid I'll be

going through the motions—that I won't be thinking, or be *myself* praying—that I'll be half conscious, daydreaming. I'm in the church seeking the sacred, but I go there as a secular person. I feel split, try as I might not to be!" The priest, she reported, advised her against being "self-conscious" as a Catholic. Day demurred. She did not want to be what the priest called a "natural Catholic" if it meant forgetting God. She was motivated in part to avoid the affliction suffered by her "dear friends who became Communists [in the 1930s]" and subsequently "seemed to lose all their independence" by succumbing to the authoritarianism of the party.

I'm talking about believing something, the faith that you must take your orders in what you say or do, that you aren't really responsible for anything on your own, but only as part of something larger, called Communism, and your life is to be put on the line for that [ideology], in a matter that others decide, and you're in a holding pattern: you wait for those others to tell you what to do.

She recognized that religious people, whatever their tradition, ran the same risk of "los[ing] all sense of who we are—our minds no longer belong to us." In other words, for Day, this forgetting of self was an equal opportunity hazard for all people, regardless of one's religious, political, or economic commitments. She wished to resist the tendency to forgo freedom and personal responsibility.¹³

Dorothy Day's private and public records are filled with examples of the kind of "forgetting" that she feared. In addition to her observations about herself and her friends on the left, Day observed the distance that existed between the church and the poor. Here, a bourgeois religion seemed to becloud some believers' ability to perceive and pursue the justice that she believed lay at the heart of the Gospel. On visiting a friend who was in prison, for example, Day learned about and lamented the absence of priests in ministry at the facility. There was no Mass on Sunday at the jail where her friend was incarcerated. A priest, she learned, visited only once every two weeks to deliver a sermon. She recorded in her journal that her friend, though he had been there for ninety days, had not had the opportunity for confession or communion, let alone the common courtesy of even a brief visit from a priest.

On her way home, Day observed that there seemed to be no shortage of priests in the area who could minister to her friend and the others who were in that jail.

As I came down the street afterward a well dressed priest drove by in a big car. Then I passed another—also well dressed, comfortable... Then still another out in front of a most luxurious mansion, the parish house, playing with a dog on a leash. All of them well fed, well housed, comfortable, caring for the safe people like themselves. And where are the priests for the poor, the down and out, the sick in city hospitals, in jails? It is the little of God's children who do not get cared for. God help them and God help the priest who is caught in the bourgeois system and cannot get out.

As much as she lamented the failure of certain priests who did not attend to the works of mercy, she was encouraged by those who supported her work. She frequently mentioned the important contributions of priests such as Fr. Paul Hanly Furfey and Fr. Pacifique Roy. She prayed that their fellow clergy would take up the work, too.¹⁴

Of course, there were priests and lay people engaged in social justice advocacy before and during this time, though they may have taken different approaches. Long before Day struggled with how her newly adopted Catholic identity and social justice convictions could combine, John A. Ryan, a priest of the Archdiocese of St. Paul, Minnesota, a teacher at Catholic University of America, and leader of the Social Action Department of the National Catholic Welfare Conference in Washington, DC, had been working diligently on proposals to bring about a minimum wage, social insurance, and workers' compensation, among other such reforms. In his written work, including *A Living Wage: Its Ethical and Economic Aspects* and *Distributive Justice: The Right and Wrong of our Present Distribution of Wealth*, Ryan provided detailed prescriptions for economic and political policy that he believed would create a more just society. He was trying to secure the ends demanded by the hunger marchers whom Day, with joy and pride in her heart, had watched from the sidelines that sunny day in Washington in 1932. Day, in other words, was not alone.¹⁵

Nevertheless, while Ryan and Day were both equally committed to the goal of social justice, their approaches differed in significant ways. Ryan worked within a hierarchal institution, the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC), attempting to reform the democratic capitalist system through social legislation. The NCWC was a consultative body formed in 1919. Directed by the United States bishops, the NCWC coordinated the Catholic Church's public efforts through various departments, including the Education Department, Press Department, Legal Department,

Department of Lay Activities, and the Social Action Department of which Ryan was the head. While the leadership was largely male and clerical, the NCWC provided an opportunity for women to serve the church at the national level through the National Council of Catholic Women (NCCW), a division of the Department of Lay Activities. The results were mixed. As historian Debra Campbell explains, “although the NCCW represents the church’s official acknowledgement of women’s ability to serve church and society in the public arena and even a hierarchical mandate for Catholic women’s work as social reformers, activists, and occasionally lobbyists, its institutional ties appear to have inhibited its independent Christian witness.” In other words, Campbell suggests that women’s ties to the institutional church diluted any unique contribution women might have made to the church’s teaching and advocacy on behalf of Catholics in the United States. This approach to social reform sharply contrasted with Day’s commitment to radical politics, her focus on decentralization, and her recognized leadership of the Catholic Worker movement as an independent Catholic social action initiative.¹⁶

Beyond context and process, Day and Ryan also differed with regards to the role of religion in their work. Ryan’s writings included very little theology or even what might be considered inspiration for the long haul of social justice advocacy. He perpetuated what Joseph Chinnici calls a “fractured inheritance” by separating the spiritual life from social justice. “Paradoxically, this position, which separated the Catholic and American identities and was designed to protect the structures and truth of Catholicism, promoted at the same time the secularization of thought and the accommodation of the church to the practical, worldly values of society.” Ryan understood the spiritual life more in juridical and legalistic than mystical terms, which is to say, he emphasized one’s moral obligations within the church over direct encounter with God, though he did discuss the significance of the believer’s encounter with Jesus in the Eucharist. In any event, Chinnici explains, “the intrinsic relationship between the spiritual life and justice was established through the mediation of law and authority.” This approach inculcated in American Catholics what Day sought to overcome, namely the secular mind, according to which, by following both ecclesiastical and civil laws and authorities, believers could participate in an economic and political system that supported poverty, racism, and violence without taking personal responsibility for serving one another. From Day’s perspective, enacting policy change while ignoring

fundamental structural problems and the motivations of the human heart was an inadequate response to human suffering.¹⁷

Day, on the other hand, “searched for convergence and unity” as she “acknowledged the role of the individual conscience, the operation of grace in nature, and God’s love in everything.” She “dissolved the fractured inheritance of Catholicism and social reform” by bringing them together in her own life and in the radical program of the Catholic Worker. In contrast to the hierarchical and clerical approach of the United States bishops’ conference, Day modeled a democratization of the Christian life and pursued it within the Catholic Worker movement, where everyone was welcome and enjoined to follow their conscience in service of their neighbor. Everyone who came to the Catholic Worker was invited to full, conscious, and active participation in the works of mercy; for Christians it was a way to encounter God, a continuation of their full, conscious, and active participation in the liturgy. Rather than tinker with the current political and economic arrangements through position papers and lobbying, Day sought a fundamental restructuring of the social order and pursued it through the Catholic Worker community.¹⁸

RELIGION AND THE LEFT COALESCE IN CATHOLIC WORKER ANARCHISM

Dorothy Day used the word “anarchism” to describe the Catholic Worker’s approach. In her diaries, correspondence, and published work, Day acknowledged the confusion wrought by the term “anarchism” itself. “Blast the word,” she once exclaimed in her diary, even as she insisted on using it. She preferred the term “anarchism” to its alternatives because it “best brings to mind the tension always existing between the concept of authority and freedom which torments man to this day.” Day sought to provide a context within which people could choose in freedom to love one another without falling prey to religious, political, or economic authoritarianism.¹⁹

Day’s Christian anarchism was one way she synthesized the radicalism of the left with her religious commitment. In her autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, Day reflected on the various implications of the term, going back to her pre-conversion days when she worked at the *Call*. As she recalled, she was deeply influenced by Peter Kropotkin and Leo Tolstoy, both “modern proponents of anarchism” who were also “sincere and peaceful men.” Peter Maurin, too, was versed in Kropotkin’s work even

before arriving in North America. Day favored Kropotkin's view of the social order, which she likened to distributism, "where man has sufficient of this world's goods to enable him to lead a good life." Day explained, "Kropotkin looked back to the guilds and cities of the Middle Ages, and thought of the new society as made up of federated associations, co-operating in the same way as the railway companies of Europe or the postal departments of various countries co-operate now." Ultimately, she explained, she used the term "to shock serious students into looking into the possibility of another society, an order made up of associations, guilds, unions, communes, parishes—voluntary associations of men, on regional vs. national lines, where there is a possibility of liberty and responsibility for all men." The Catholic Worker was one such voluntary association within which one could follow one's conscience in practicing the works of mercy in order to fulfill one's responsibility to care for one's neighbor.²⁰

The primacy of conscience, the principle of subsidiarity, and the works of mercy are among the essential elements of Catholic Worker anarchism. Subsidiarity, a key concept in Catholic social teaching, helped the Catholic Worker explain its adherence to anarchism. The principle of subsidiarity asserts that central authority should yield to local decision-making and activities. At the local level, each individual has the responsibility to properly form her conscience in conversation with the tradition and her community. Day and Maurin followed Thomas Aquinas and John Henry Newman in affirming the primacy of conscience. According to their understanding of this tradition, each individual is expected to act upon their conscience, which "has the force of a divine precept" even "when it is contrary to the precept of a prelate." Put another way, for Day, anarchism involved freely choosing to serve the poor out of love rather than obligation, according to the demands of the circumstances, even if this choice led to confrontation with ecclesiastical and civil officials. Catholic Worker anarchism, then, was a combination of freedom and responsibility, not "anything goes" but "the assumption of personal responsibility and love" in community. "In theory," Anne Klejment elaborates, "each Catholic Worker member was free to follow conscience while the community defined its practices and goals." Rather than blindly follow law and authority, Day believed that an emphasis on conscience restored responsibility to the individual living in community.²¹

Christians, Day counseled, should abide Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and practice the works of mercy. Houses of hospitality were one way that the Catholic Worker provided opportunities for and a context within

which Christians, along with all people of goodwill, could treat one another like family. The works of mercy, which were foundational to Day's vision for the Catholic Worker movement, made it possible for the movement to remain rooted in the biblical injunction to love one another while simultaneously providing a basis on which the Catholic Worker could thrive and endure in a church and society characterized by pluralism. According to Day, the corporal works of mercy (feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, ransoming the captive, providing shelter to those experiencing homelessness, burying the dead) and the spiritual works of mercy (admonishing the sinner, instructing the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, comforting the sorrowful, bearing wrongs patiently, forgiving injuries, and praying for the living and the dead) could be undertaken by anyone.

In her history of the Catholic Worker movement, *Loaves and Fishes*, Day reprinted one of Peter Maurin's "easy essays" that described what a Christian anarchist approach looked like: round-table discussions to which everyone was invited, an opportunity for trained and "untrained" minds to have conversations about social conditions; houses of hospitality for rich and poor to meet and which allowed the people of God, from bishops to laypeople, to interact with one another; and agronomic universities so that the unemployed might have a place to eat, sleep, and acquire employable skills. Additionally, Day and Maurin printed the *Catholic Worker* newspaper in order to communicate their points of view on theology, the church, and current events, and to provide opportunities for clarification of thought.²²

Day likened the Catholic Worker program to a family. While she celebrated efforts that improved the lives of the working class and those experiencing unemployment and homelessness, Day could not abide the impersonal dimension of the modern welfare state. Day envisioned a radically de-centralized state, a society centered on the concept of community life as family life. She described the large institutions, "municipal shelters, mental hospitals, old age homes, the poor farm, hospitals on Welfare Island," to which society sent the impoverished as "huge, cold institutions that break the spirit and the heart." She believed that the Catholic Worker was the only place many people could survive because it was a family. She wrote, "some of our family could be put on the relief rolls and be given furnished rooms and money for meals—that I knew—but many could only survive in a family such as ours." This appeal was not

a veiled defense of *laissez-faire* capitalism, but a call to personal responsibility on everyone's part.²³

Her vision for a decentralized society let no one off the hook; rather, each individual was really responsible for his or her neighbor.

It seems to me that in the future the family—the ideal family—will always try to care for one more. If every family that professed to follow Scriptural teaching whether Jew, Protestant, or Catholic, were to do this, there would be no need for huge institutions, houses of dead storage where human beings waste away in loneliness and despair. Responsibility must return to the parish with a hospice and a center for mutual aid, to the group, to the family, to the individual.

For Day, this kind of commitment answered the deepest longing of the human heart. She believed, “the only answer in this life, to the loneliness we are all bound to feel, is community. The living together, working together, sharing together, loving God and loving our brother, and living close to him in community so we can show our love for Him [Jesus].”²⁴

The particular genius of the Catholic Worker was that anyone could participate. Day's religious devotion did not preclude nonreligious or non-Catholic individuals from participating in the movement. This inclusive approach was rare. Robert Coles admired Day's “refusal to retreat into the confines of a particular world” as he listened to her reject the distinction “between a secular idealism and an idealism in the service of God.” She spoke from her own experience. “I'm not sure that my idealism, back then, was secular; and I'm not so sure that my idealism now is only a religious kind of interest in helping others who are in a bad jam.” She elaborated by saying that she believed God could be at work in non-religious people, and so welcomed anyone who came to the Catholic Worker to help. She reiterated what she would say to those who came to the New York house of hospitality and reported that they wanted to help, but were not religious. “I say that we are not asking people to fill out membership cards here, and we're not interested in declarations of religious affiliation. I tell them that we are here to feed the hungry and offer any help we can to anyone who comes to us.” The works of mercy made this inclusive work possible; as McKanan aptly puts it, they were “the peculiarly unifying genius of the Catholic Worker” because “everyone can practice the works of mercy.”²⁵

ACKNOWLEDGING THE LIMITATIONS AND AFFIRMING THE ADVANTAGES OF ANARCHISM

For Day and Maurin, the *Catholic Worker* was committed to clarification of thought through round-table discussions and through correspondence in the pages of their newspaper. Anarchism was a topic that required quite a bit of clarification because it fostered misunderstanding from all quarters. On economic matters, leftists accused them of being in league with capitalists who favored decentralization so that they could maximize profits. “But, anarchists that we are,” Day explained, “we want to decentralize everything and delegate to smaller bodies and groups what can be done far more humanly and responsibly through mutual aid, as well as charity, through Blue Cross, Red Cross, union cooperation, parish cooperation.” Others mistakenly thought that Day opposed the state not because she was a capitalist, but because she had aligned herself with communism, socialism, or some type of subversive political group that sought to wield violence in order to bring down the existing political and economic system. Yet the *Catholic Worker* sought the transformation of society, political and economic, not through violence, but through love and compassion in the practice of the works of mercy, according to the dictates of conscience.²⁶

Day had to defend her project against challenges even from her closest allies in the radical Catholic movement. One such person, Catherine de Hueck, was a Russian émigré to North America who founded a radical social justice community, Friendship House, in Toronto at the same time that Day founded the *Catholic Worker* in New York. De Hueck was uncertain about the value of *Catholic Worker* anarchism; she preferred a more organized approach such as the one she used to operate Friendship House. De Hueck suggested that Day implement a clear chain of command, explaining to her that such hierarchical structure would lend itself to more efficient work and, in turn, more wholesome conduct among the workers. She recommended that Day curb the enthusiasm of her “Communist friends” who were “continually expounding their doctrines at the *Catholic Worker*.” She was concerned about the influence of their perspectives on younger, more impressionable members of the community. De Hueck suggested that were Day to implement these changes, the atmosphere of the *Catholic Worker* would improve, there would be fewer contradictions in Christian teaching, and volunteers would be more efficient in their work.²⁷

Day welcomed de Hueck's friendly suggestions and no doubt recognized their limitations; nevertheless, in her response, Day made clear that her technique was no accident. She proclaimed, "I do know exactly what I am doing." She acknowledged that the Catholic Worker lacked structure, but vowed to "go straight ahead, doing the best I can with the very poor human material God sends." She affirmed, "we simply have to leave things in God's hands." Day's affirmation of individual conscience and reliance on God's providence were more important to her than organizational efficiency.²⁸

Intentionally or not, De Hueck's criticism of Catholic Worker anarchism touched on what was simultaneously one of the greatest achievements and one of the most significant limitations of the anarchism practiced at the original Catholic Worker House of Hospitality in New York City. The environment could be chaotic. "The frequent lack of rules and clearly defined expectations created an environment which permitted some individuals to freely express their own views—sometimes consistent, other times incompatible with the views of other community members." The insistence on "Christian freedom" did "create situations that might have been avoided in a structured organization." Likewise, in spite of the professed freedom, at those times when Day "chose to exert leadership vigorously" some of the Catholic Workers "thought that she violated their freedom of conscience." It is generally acknowledged by scholars of the Catholic Worker movement that Day acted as a "benevolent dictator of an anarchist movement" at certain critical junctures, such as when she proclaimed pacifism as a "clearly defined policy for the whole Catholic Worker movement" when the United States prepared to enter World War II. The atmosphere, in other words, was unruly but not leaderless.²⁹

At the same time, the Catholic Worker "tolerated considerable diversity on the question of how to apply [their] ideals [e.g., the evangelical counsels of perfection] to broad social issues and institutions." Through the Catholic Worker, Day and Maurin diversified the tradition of Catholic social thought and practice by emphasizing a number of practices, including an emphasis on women's leadership, pacifism, and a radical critique of capitalism that went far beyond what mainstream Catholic social teaching entertained. They lived the gospel by practicing the works of mercy. "From this perspective," explains Mel Piehl, "the unambiguously religious task of serving the poor, directly inspired by the gospel itself, has guaranteed that Christian faith and values would remain central to the Catholic Worker outlook, and that it would not slip into the pursuit of mere ordinary

politics, however righteous or idealistic.” All the while, the practice of the works of mercy made it possible for multiple views and voices to mix and even coalesce under one roof, in one movement. In this way, Day not only linked her leftist and religious commitments to each other, but also created a context within which nonreligious and religious social justice activists could collaborate.³⁰

CONCLUSION

In her personal life and public work, Dorothy Day complicated the thinking of both her counterparts on the nonreligious left and her Catholic coreligionists by demonstrating that she could bring together elements of both the American left and the Catholic Church. Day initially despaired over whether or not she could pursue her political vision from within the church. Undaunted by the challenge, Day worked to integrate essential dimensions of the religious and leftist traditions with which she was affiliated.

Indeed, there was significant continuity across her life. As she had done as a member of the Lyrical Left, Day continued to create what Diggins calls “a revolutionary culture that aimed to break down the dualism between contemplative life and active life,” only now she sought to do so on religious terms. As she pursued this revolutionary culture that joined spirituality with social action within her adopted religious tradition, Day crafted an alternative to the fractured inheritance that was ascendant in U.S. Catholic social thought and practice at the time. She offered a spirituality of convergence and unity, according to which God could be found in the practice of the works of mercy undertaken out of love rather than obligation.

In the anarchistic Catholic Worker movement, Day challenged the “automatic” participation that many people settled for, whether religious or nonreligious. Reflecting on her own struggle in this regard, Robert Coles observed, “she wanted to be a believer whose *will* was part of her faith; whose *intellect* was also part of her faith; whose *passions* even, were part of her faith.” The balance she sought between independence and obedience to institutional authority and her own self-awareness about and self-possession of what she was doing “was a real tightrope she was walking, but one she very much wanted (willed, contemplated) to walk.” The Catholic Worker community, as an anarchist community based on the practice of the works of mercy and the primacy of conscience, provided a

context within which she and those who chose to join the movement could strive for this delicate balance.³¹

Of course, Day was not always consistent in the latitude that she allowed members of the community. Her emphasis on freedom of conscience and an unstructured community life sometimes brought her into conflict with ecclesiastical and civil authorities, and even close allies within the radical Catholic community such as Catherine de Hueck. Nevertheless, Day insisted on promoting a style of community life within which people could choose to love and serve their neighbor, unconstrained by authoritarianism. Contrary to those who believed religion and the left could not be yoked, Day encountered God in her pursuit of a radical vision for a renewed social order that was true to her longstanding leftist commitments. Her emphasis on the works of mercy and practice of friendship opened a wide and inclusive space for people of different backgrounds to strive for clarification of thought while serving one another. To this end, Day promoted a decentralized society where responsibility for caring for one another would be undertaken by the parish, family, and individual. Ultimately, for Day, the practice was part of her religious journey according to which she believed that “only the madness of love, deep, profound” and as “profligate” as God’s love for the prodigal son would suffice to change the world.³²

NOTES

1. Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* (1952; repr., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 165.
2. Ibid. Peter Maurin, an immigrant to North America from France, was an itinerant laborer who adopted a life of poverty. He combined his knowledge of Catholicism with his experience as a manual worker to fashion a unique vision for Catholic social thought and practice. He shared this vision with Day, and they subsequently formed the Catholic Worker.
3. Robert Coles, *Dorothy Day: A Radical Devotion* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1987), 59–60; Dan McKanan, *Prophetic Encounters: Religion and the American Radical Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 4.
4. Mel Piehl, “The Politics of Free Obedience,” *A Revolution of the Heart: Essays on the Catholic Worker*, ed. Patrick G. Coy (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 177–216; Fred Boehrer, “Diversity, Plurality, and Ambiguity: Anarchism in the Catholic Worker Movement,” in *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker: Centenary Essays*, ed., William Thorn, Phillip Runkel, and Susan Mountin (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press,

- 2001), 95–127; Anne Klejment, “War Resistance and Property Destruction: The Catonsville Nine Draft Board Raid and Catholic Worker Pacifism,” in Coy, *Revolution of the Heart*, 272–312; McKanan, *Prophetic Encounters*.
5. John Patrick Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1992), 201, 43, 44.
 6. See *ibid.*, 93–113, for a general overview of the “Lyrical Left.” The quotes in this paragraph can be found on 94 and 98, respectively.
 7. The general contours of Day’s life are recounted frequently in her autobiographical writing and histories written about her and the Catholic Worker movement.
 8. McKanan, *Prophetic Encounters*, 8; Piehl, “The Politics of Free Obedience,” 179; Keith Morton and John Saltmarsh, “Cultural Context for Understanding Dorothy Day’s Social & Political Thought,” in *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker: Centenary Essays*, ed. William Thorn, Phillip Runkel, and Susan Mountin (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2001), 244.
 9. See Dorothy Day, *Duties of Delight: The Diaries of Dorothy Day* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 2008), 7, entry from May 18, 1934; and Day, *From Union Square to Rome* (Silver Spring, MD: Preservation of the Faith Press, 1938; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 156–177. Citations are to the Orbis edition. Coles, *A Radical Devotion*, 52–54.
 10. Day, *From Union Square to Rome*, 126; Dan McKanan, *The Catholic Worker After Dorothy: Practicing the Works of Mercy in a New Generation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 22–23.
 11. Day, *From Union Square to Rome*, 137.
 12. Michael Baxter, “Blowing the Dynamite of the Church’: Catholic Radicalism from a Catholic Radicalist Perspective” in Thorn, Runkel, and Mountin, *Dorothy Day*, 93.
 13. Robert Coles, *The Secular Mind* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 162 (emphasis in the original), 163, 164.
 14. Dorothy Day, *Duty of Delight*, 33–34, entry from September 10, 1938.
 15. See John A. Ryan, *A Living Wage: Its Ethical and Economic Aspects* (New York: Macmillan, 1906) and his *Distributive Justice: The Right and Wrong of our Present Distribution of Wealth* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).
 16. Debra Campbell, “Reformers and Activists,” in *American Catholic Women: A Historical Exploration*, ed. Karen Kennelly, 152–181 (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 175.
 17. Joseph P. Chinnici, *Living Stones: The History and Structure of Catholic Spiritual Life in the United States* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 145, 144, 145.
 18. *Ibid.*, 189, 190–191, 193. See also James T. Fisher, *The Catholic Counterculture in America, 1933–1962* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 51.

19. Day, *Duty of Delight*, 212, entry from 22 June 1956; Day, *Long Loneliness*, 55–56.
20. See Mark and Louise Zwick, *The Catholic Worker Movement: Intellectual and Spiritual Origins* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 157–160; Day, *Long Loneliness*, 55; Day, “The Case of Father Duffy,” *Catholic Worker* (December 1949): 1, 4; cited in Zwick, 158. See also Boehrer, “Diversity, Plurality, and Ambiguity,” 96–97.
21. Boehrer, “Diversity, Plurality, and Ambiguity,” 98, 98–99; Zwick, *The Catholic Worker Movement*, 91–92. See also Piehl, “Politics of Free Obedience,” 210; Klejment, “War Resistance and Property Destruction,” 294. By taking this approach, Day did enter into disagreements with church authorities over matters related to Catholic social teaching just as she was arrested on numerous occasions for acts of civil disobedience.
22. Day, *Loaves and Fishes* (1963; repr., Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1997), 23–25. Peter Maurin authored numerous “easy essays,” short compositions that typically addressed a particular social problem in response to which he would recommend a specific Christian course of action to address it.
23. *Ibid.*, 198, 188–189.
24. *Ibid.*, 198; Day, *The Long Loneliness*, 243.
25. Robert Coles, *A Radical Devotion*, 25, 29, 30–31; McKanan, *The Catholic Worker after Dorothy*, 11.
26. Day, “The Scandal of the Works of Mercy,” in *Dorothy Day: Writings from Commonweal*, ed. Patrick Jordan (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 104. Originally published in *Commonweal*, November 4, 1949.
27. Catherine De Hueck to Dorothy Day, May 18, 1936, in *Comrades Stumbling Along: The Friendship of Catherine de Hueck Doherty and Dorothy Day as Revealed through Their Letters*, ed., Robert Wild (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 2009), 38, 37. Fuller detail on this episode can be found in Nicholas K. Rademacher, “‘Allow me to disappear... in the fetid slums’: Catherine de Hueck, Catholic Action, and the Growing End of Catholic Radicalism,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 32:3 (Summer 2014): 71–100.
28. Day to de Hueck, August 9, 1936, in *ibid.*, 46.
29. Boehrer, 104; Zwick, 92; Klejment, 294. See Boehrer, 105.
30. Piehl, 201, 211. For women’s leadership see: *Ibid.*, 208–209; on the radical critique of capitalism see: *Ibid.*, 199–200.
31. Coles, *Secular Mind*, 165.
32. Day, *Duty of Delight*, 165–166. Diary entry August 13, 1951.



“Saints for this Age”: Religion and Radicalism in the American Century

Leilah Danielson

Around mid-century there was a fundamental shift in the history of the American left from a Marxist framework rooted in working-class organization and mobilization toward existentialism and direct action by marginalized groups. This essay focuses on A. J. Muste, one of the most important radicals of the twentieth century, to show that religion was an important factor in this transition.¹ Muste had been a central figure in the labor-left throughout the 1920s and 1930s, but in 1936, in a story that historians have retold many times, he experienced a dramatic reconversion to Christianity, became a pacifist, and subsequently assumed the leadership of the postwar peace movement. This essay does not dispute the authenticity of Muste’s conversion experience, but maintains that the oft-repeated story obscures the wider context in which it occurred, and its significance for the history of the left in the mid-twentieth century. On the left, Muste was part of a growing group of anti-Stalinists, many of whom became disenchanted with Marxism more broadly, and increasingly emphasized the importance of morality and religion as a framework for political

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engagement.² Within the church, he was part of a larger group of Protestant internationalists who viewed their faith as radically opposed to modern capitalism, nationalism, and racism.³ By 1940, he had synthesized these strands into a theory and practice of Christian nonviolence that would help to shape the contours of postwar radical politics through the 1960s and beyond.

Historians generally offer two, interrelated explanations for the collapse of the Old Left and the rise of a New Left. First, they show how the Old Left was internally divided into anti-Stalinists, on the one hand, and Communists and fellow travelers, on the other. The former reached a rapprochement with liberal democracy, while postwar anti-communist hysteria finished off the Communists and made fellow travelers *personae non grata*.⁴ With the left fatally divided and weakened, and a labor movement aligned with the Democratic Party and the Cold War state, a new generation of radicals drew upon other, more contemporary sources for inspiration—hence the second explanation for the birth of a New Left in the 1960s. Historians emphasize the importance of 1950s social thought, particularly that of C. Wright Mills, which indicted mass politics and the “organization man” and, implicitly or explicitly, suggested that change would have to come from society’s margins. They also point to existential philosophy as an important element in the New Left’s emphasis on pre-figurative politics and authenticity. The emergence of the Civil Rights Movement in the mid-1950s proved most inspirational of all, as southern African Americans confronted the cultural and structural foundations of white supremacy by working outside mainstream politics and taking religiously-infused direct action. College students synthesized these strands into a “new left” that sought to “break through” the alienation and oppression of organized society and power politics through direct action and participatory democracy; Marxist shibboleths about labor and the working class were dismissed, as was the Old Left’s absorption with the Communist Party and the Soviet Union.⁵

This essay offers a more nuanced assessment, suggesting that religion was an important part of this transition in left politics.⁶ With the fascist triumphs of the late 1930s, international socialism, world Christianity, and modern pacifism entered a period of profound crisis. Some Marxists began to question historical materialism and to appreciate the value of the spiritual as a defense against the all-encompassing demands of the party and the state. Liberal Protestants, meanwhile, moved to the left, embracing the vision of a supranational church that would transcend and indeed

serve in opposition to nationalism, unrestrained capitalism, and empire. For their part, pacifists confronted the ineffectiveness of their creed as a response to the economic and international crisis of the 1930s, and increasingly turned to other models of nonviolent action, particularly Gandhian *satyagraha*. Muste embodied all of these trends simultaneously and indeed drew upon them to build a small yet distinctive movement of nonviolent Christian revolutionaries that would have an outsize influence on postwar radicalism.

Muste's revolutionary career began during World War I. A minister who had embraced pacifism and socialism, he lost his pulpit in the repressive atmosphere that swept the country at that time. Mortified by the attacks on civil liberties and the mistreatment of conscientious objectors, he joined his pacifist comrades in founding the American Civil Liberties Union to defend the rights of individuals against the state and dissenters against majority opinion. He also participated in alternative networks that posited a Christian community and witness that transcended the nation, thus serving a vanguard role in the creation of interwar Christian internationalism. Among them was the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a transnational organization whose members pledged to build “a world-order based on Love” by following the example of “the life and death of Jesus Christ.”⁷ The FOR's influence spread after the war because of widespread disillusionment with Wilson's “war to save democracy.” These “Christian internationalists” identified nationalism, racism, and capitalism as the causes of war, and posited a transnational Christian universalism inspired by the ethics of Jesus as its “cure.” Heavily influenced by evangelical culture, their main method was what historian Kip Kosek has called a “propaganda of truth” in which the example of Jesus was counterpoised to the facts of greed and exploitation.⁸

Muste fit somewhat uneasily within the Christian-pacifist-internationalist paradigm of the 1920s. On the one hand, his radical politics drew inspiration from the life and teachings of Jesus and the Hebrew prophets. On the other hand, his leadership of the Lawrence Textile Strike of 1919 and the short-lived Amalgamated Textile Workers of America had taught him that the “evangelical” method was not enough; only through working-class internationalism, organization, and power would a new world be born. These views placed him on the far left of the FOR, which held that strikes were coercive and thereby a form of violence.⁹ The churches, meanwhile, were far too “identified with the status quo” for his taste. It now seemed to him that the revolutionary left “was the true church. Here was the fellowship drawn

together and drawn forward by the Judeo-Christian prophetic vision of “a new earth in which righteousness dwelleth.” Leftists were, moreover, “truly religious” in Muste’s view, insofar as they “were virtually completely committed, they were betting their lives on the cause they embraced.”¹⁰

Muste’s direct involvement in the labor movement deepened and intensified with the onset of the Great Depression, and he became a leading figure in the labor struggles of the “Red Decade.” The working-class militants who made up the “Musteite” rank and file stood out on the Old Left for their emphasis on praxis as a means of organizing and mobilizing workers, of turning the American working class into a class for itself, and of fostering a revolutionary consciousness. This approach attracted radical intellectuals like V.F. Calverton, Sidney Hook, James Rorty, and others committed to fusing pragmatism and Marxism, Americanism and internationalism. In the end, however, the Musteite movement was undermined by the decision to redefine itself as the revolutionary vanguard and to merge with the Trotskyists to form the Workers’ Party USA. As the new party’s national secretary, Muste apparently believed he would be able to reform the doctrinaire Trotskyists, but he was quickly disabused of that notion. By the end of 1935, his movement was in shambles and Muste himself was broken in body and spirit by the tactics his opponents had used against him, which he believed violated “working-class ethics.”¹¹

A mystical experience saved Muste from a sense of impasse and impotence. Friends had raised funds to send him on a European vacation in the summer of 1936. After years of non-stop political activity and emotional strain, he gave himself up to rest, leisure, and self-reflection. Then, one August day, while sightseeing in Paris, he walked into the Church of St. Sulpice, “sat down on a little bench near the front and looked at the cross,” and an inner voice told him, “This is where you belong... I felt as if the hand of God had drawn me up out of those ‘titanic glooms of chasmed fears; of which Francis Thompson sings.” As this quote suggests, Muste interpreted his experience in evangelical terms, but it also had the convenient outcome of allowing him to leave the revolutionary left, where he found himself compromised and marginalized, and to chart a new path.¹²

The meaning Muste derived from his reconversion to Christianity was refracted through three contemporary movements. The first was the anti-Stalinist left, which emerged from within the Communist Party as various critics of Stalin’s policies formed opposition parties; Trotskyists, for example, criticized Stalin’s nationalism and suppression of party democracy, and

charged that the USSR was degenerating into a bureaucratic-class state. Some anti-Stalinists clung tighter to their particular interpretation of Marxist-Leninism, a position that consigned them to sectarianism and marginality. Others developed a critique of Marxism as a teleological system that suppressed human freedom, and began to draw connections between fascism and communism as similarly “totalitarian” systems that subjugated the individual, the one to the state and the other to the party. Many of them ultimately “chose the West,” first to oppose fascism during World War II, and then against Communism in the postwar years.¹³

Historians of the anti-Stalinist left (and, more broadly, the anti-Communist left) largely tell a secular and declensionist narrative. Religion is largely absent in the account offered by Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps in their recent overview of the post-1945 U.S. left, where they conclude that “while [anti-Stalinist] critics honored the left’s long-held belief in democratic culture, they also tended, over time, toward simple approval of U.S. Cold War policy. Their objections to Communism reveal little of the residual socialist principles they claimed to hold, thus signaling a trend toward deradicalization...”¹⁴ This neglect of religion is true of other recent scholarship; the most recent edition of *The God that Failed*, a collection of writings by disillusioned ex-Communists like Arthur Koestler, Andre Gide, and Ignazio Silone, treats the book exclusively as providing the intellectual foundations of the Cold War. Yet religion was a central theme in the thought of the anti-Stalinists in two ways: first, in their claim that Bolshevism functioned as a substitute religion that offered redemption through faith in its orthodoxies, and, second, in their emphasis on individual conscience as a bulwark against the all-encompassing demands of the party, which for many of them had a religious or mystical dimension.¹⁵

Muste’s biography highlights the spiritual dimensions of anti-Stalinist thought, and shows that not all of them retreated from radical politics and became Cold Warriors.¹⁶ As we have seen, Muste had long been concerned about the relationship between means and ends, and about the coercive dimensions of the modern state, both before and after he became a Marxist-Leninist. And, like many of his comrades, he came to see his experiences on the secular left as a parable for the limitations of Marxism, the labor movement, and, to some degree, the humanist project as a whole. As he would argue, the Enlightenment’s emphasis on reason, science, and historical progress marginalized precisely the values of love, empathy, and cooperation that revolutionaries claimed would predominate

in a socialist society. The “proletarian movement” had been “right in prophesying that men cannot live the good life under a ‘bad system,’” but they had erred in assuming that a “good system” would automatically create “good men.” Questions of ethics and morality, of the relationship between means and ends, had to be faced if radicals hoped to build a genuinely cooperative and peaceful world. Ultimately, the root of the problem was “moral and spiritual,” not primarily political, economic, or organizational, and could only be resolved through affirmation of the “central truth” apprehended by Jesus Christ: that “God is love, love is of God. Love is the central thing in the universe. Mankind is one in an ultimate spiritual reality.”¹⁷

Still, Muste was concerned that his fellow anti-Stalinists seemed unable to conceive of “what is to be done,” as he put it. In affirming liberal values of freedom and pluralism, they had begun to idealize Western democracy, overlooking its complicity in class privilege, racism, imperialism, and war. It was imperative, Muste informed his dear friend, V.F. Calverton, “to be concrete about what we mean by some form of ‘democracy’ being superior to any brand of totalitarianism.” Otherwise, “this recent talk about democracy as the genuine and realistic alternative to fascism and communism” would become “mere camouflage” for power politics and American nationalism.¹⁸ Thus he insisted on the imperative of formulating a philosophy of life, a program for action, and a method for its achievement. For these, he turned to his fellow Christians and pacifists.

Muste placed his hopes in “the church” because it had recently undergone a major transformation in theology and practice. Since the end of World War I, the idea of an ecumenical, transnational fellowship of Christians had slowly expanded beyond alternative networks like the FOR to include the institutions of global Christianity, such as the International Missionary Council, the Faith and Order movement, and the Life and Work movement. These developments came together in 1937 at the Oxford Life and Work Conference, a massive undertaking that aimed to find a basis for Christian unity and action in the face of fascism and other “forces which constitute a challenge to [Christian] principles and even a menace to its life.”¹⁹ Crucially, as Michael Thompson has recently argued, the ethos of the Oxford Conference was distinctly post-liberal. Influenced by the dialectical approach of figures like Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr, liberal notions that conflated God’s kingdom with human progress, salvation, and social service were soundly rejected in favor of a more transcendent God and salvation through Christ alone.

Positively, the Oxford Conference called upon Christians “to engage in redemptive action and witness” through building up a supranational and supra-racial universal church, that “would finally be, at the end of history, united in Christ.” As Thompson puts it, their vision was “at once universalist and particularist”—and, we might add, strikingly presumptuous.²⁰

Muste was deeply influenced by these trends. Although Donald Meyer famously described him as having “the pure, unmixed, unadulterated soul of the Social Gospel,” Muste had always been uncomfortable within the world of liberal-modernist Protestantism.²¹ It was too compromising and complacent for his taste, and lapsed into sentimentality on the question of how to build the Kingdom of God on earth. But, aside from invoking the prophetic tradition, Muste’s theology remained undeveloped. Oxford thus offered him a language for articulating his dissatisfaction with liberalism and for his longstanding internationalism and radicalism. Liberals and modernists had rightly condemned orthodoxy for its entanglement with “Caesar,” he observed, but in the process they had neglected the good news; “the gospel in their hands was no longer the authentic revelation of God, springing out of the unique and decisive intervention of God in history through Christ.” Most importantly, until Oxford, the church itself “failed ‘to be the Church’... a fellowship transcending lines of nation, race, and color.” If Christianity hoped to be relevant in the modern world, Muste believed, it should appeal to the masses as “concrete human beings, total personalities... who require a philosophy of life and an integrating sense of belonging to something greater than themselves.”²²

Despite these similarities, there were important differences between Muste and the “crisis” theologians that are best captured by his ongoing debate with Reinhold Niebuhr. The leading popularizer of Oxford in the United States, Niebuhr chastised liberals and pacifists for being insufficiently “realistic” about the realities of sin and power, and called for compromise with the coercion and violence that characterized relations between social classes and nation-states. He did not, however, condone this reality, but rather hoped that prophets (such as himself) would act as society’s conscience and curb its excesses.²³ Muste sharply disagreed. The problem of the immorality of group behavior was indeed real, he argued, but the very “tension” Niebuhr and other “Christian realists” emphasized “exists only if the impossible demand of the Gospel is laid upon them. Otherwise, as Nils Ehrenstrom [a leader in the world ecumenical movement] has well said, ‘the relationship between the Kingdom of Christ and the political sphere’ becomes ‘a tension of static parallelism’ and not ‘a

tension of dynamic transformation.” Indeed, in calling for compromise with human limitations, they had actually renounced the prophetic tradition that they claimed was their inspiration. Without a vision and without a goal, Muste predicted, realism would serve as an apology for nationalism and war.²⁴

Thus, in contrast to Niebuhr, Muste believed that the role of the prophet was to invoke not only God’s judgment but also His mercy and the possibility of redemption. Justice and love were not mutually exclusive; the cross was not for Christ alone, but was the yardstick of history. In ontological terms, human time was open to messianic time. Here we see the existential theme that would become the predominant characteristic of radical activism in the postwar era. Quoting Paul Tillich’s *Interpretation of History*, Muste asserted that “In every power is an element of renunciation of power, *and the power lives on this element.*” “A true ‘church,’ Professor Tillich continues, is a group ‘unified by the free decision to have power only in the paradoxical form of renunciation of power.’” Should the “unexpected historical moment” arise and a “true church” emerged, “it would be one of the great turning-points in human history; it would perhaps create “mankind.” Within this framework, *kairos* was, indeed, on the horizon; Muste pointed to the contrasting rise of extreme nationalism and the nature of modern warfare on the one hand, and the Oxford Conference on the other, as evidence that a nonviolent fellowship of Christian martyrs could bring the Kingdom of God on earth.²⁵

These differences between Muste and Niebuhr would play out in the postwar era. During World War II, pacifists and realists managed to find common ground in the ecumenical movement’s efforts to institutionalize Oxford (in 1948, it would be formally organized as the World Council of Churches). Muste eagerly accepted invitations from major denominations, seminaries, Protestant leaders, and the Federal Council of Churches to draft statements and lead discussions on topics such as the church and labor and the church and race.²⁶ The debate over American intervention temporarily hindered these collaborations, but, as David Hollinger has observed, they resumed after Pearl Harbor in the Commission for a Just and Durable Peace, an effort by the Federal Council of Churches to map a Christian blueprint for the world once the Axis had been defeated. Chaired by John Foster Dulles and supported by Niebuhr, the Commission was dominated by realists, but pacifists like Muste had an outside impact because of their overrepresentation on the influential Committee of Direction. Reflecting their influence, the Commission asserted that “a just

and durable peace” was contingent upon labor rights and social democracy; a rejection of imperialism, nationalism, and racism; human rights and international cooperation. As Hollinger has noted, Muste’s influence was particularly “decisive” in the Commission’s “striking” resolutions on race and its criticism of Big Three dominance in the Dumbarton Oaks proposal for the United Nations.²⁷

As historian Michael Thompson has shown, the legacy of Christian internationalism was profound. It transformed liberal Protestants into a critically engaged foreign policy public, but it was also coopted and Americanized. Its two most influential figures, Reinhold Niebuhr and John Foster Dulles, “aided the containment of the movement’s critical power.” Niebuhr continued to inveigh against American exceptionalism, while at the same time moving closer to the state and supporting U.S. foreign policy. Rather than posit a counter-hegemonic church against the sins of race and nationalism, he called upon the “Anglo-Saxon community” to take a strong stance first against the Axis powers and then against the Soviet Union. Dulles “gave way on both emphases,” equating the United States with Christianity and the church. “Both, ultimately, in different ways, made imperialism safer for American Protestants.”²⁸

Thompson does not discuss a third, more radical outcome of the movement represented by A.J. Muste, whose encounter with Christian realism and the crisis-ridden Old Left deepened his commitment to a radical prophetic politics. In contrast to Niebuhr and the Christian realists, Muste retained the antistatist tendencies of prewar Christian internationalism and found cause for concern when the Federal Council of Churches began to collaborate with policymakers on plans for the postwar peace. Thus, even as he participated in the Commission for a Just and Durable Peace, he sought to create a true church of his own that would prophetically and unequivocally oppose race, nation, and war. As it happened, the pacifist movement offered fertile ground. Eager to prove their radicalism and relevancy in a world beset by injustice and violence, pacifist leftists had begun to explore Gandhian *satyagraha* as a militant and effective method of non-violent action.²⁹

Muste was the ideal figure for moving the peace movement in this new direction. Not only did he have impeccable radical credentials, he had played a central role in these early conversations about and experiments with *satyagraha*. Thus, when the FOR hired him as national secretary of the organization in 1941, he immediately set about transforming it into a vehicle for building a mass “nonviolent direct action” movement that

reached out to “oppressed and minority groups such as Negroes, sharecroppers, industrial workers... as Gandhi did in the India National Congress.”³⁰ In countless forums, Muste called on pacifists to become revolutionaries, to adopt the discipline, commitment, and spirit of self-sacrifice that had characterized the early Christians and, more contemporaneously, the Communist Party. He encouraged members to form “cells,” a term clearly borrowed from his days as a Bolshevik, in which small fellowships of like-minded people would worship together, study nonviolence, develop a common “discipline,” and put their ideals into action. His idea, in essence, was to “weld the pacifist movement in the western world into a true church.”³¹

These efforts led to a renaissance in American pacifism. Indeed, the World War II era was the “golden age of the FOR.” Its staff and the executive board were “composed of giants” like Bayard Rustin, Glenn Smiley, James Farmer, and George Houser. Muste “towered” over all of them. The shock troops of the movement were younger pacifists who had come of age in the Student Christian Movement of the interwar years, which, as Christopher Evans’ essay shows, emphasized the importance of peace, racial justice, and internationalism. As the movement’s leaders turned to realism and support for the war, however, these younger activists became alienated from the mainline and looked for other ways to make their Christian pacifism politically relevant.³²

The main target of their early experiments with nonviolence was American racial discrimination and segregation. Muste had immediately recognized *satyagraha*’s implications for the black struggle for freedom, and made the case in numerous forums that Christians should “refuse to cooperate” with Jim Crow institutions and practices. In so doing, there would “be suffering... When we are ready for that, God himself will give us victory.” In 1943, Muste organized a symposium of Protestant liberals, including Niebuhr, on the question of whether civil disobedience was the “answer to Jim Crow.” Niebuhr was dubious, and called for a gradualist approach to civil rights, while Muste maintained that gradualism degraded the humanity of blacks and whites alike.³³

With Muste at the helm, pacifists had some notable achievements during this period. They formed the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1942, which would become one of the most important organizations of the civil rights era. They also provided critical support for A. Philip Randolph’s 1943 March on Washington Movement and organized the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, which tested compliance with a recent Supreme

Court decision declaring segregation in interstate travel illegal, and which ultimately served as the model for the 1961 Freedom Rides. Significantly, pacifists emphasized the spiritual dimensions of changing racist practice. CORE, for example, required its members to personally exhibit the values of nonviolence in their personal lives and as citizens. Chapters were intended to provide vehicles for organizing direct action campaigns, as well as opportunities to practice interracial fellowship. Conversion of opponents was considered as important—if not more important—than changing racist practice.³⁴

Muste and his pacifist comrades were also deeply concerned about the expansion of state power during the war, which they viewed as a sign of creeping authoritarianism. They pointed to the passage of the Selective Service Act of 1940 (which established the nation’s first peace-time draft), the War Powers Act of 1941 (which gave the president the authority to censor all news and information, limit civil liberties, and seize property owned by foreign nationals), and Japanese internment.³⁵ The transformation of the economy into an “arsenal of democracy,” as President Roosevelt called it, further worried pacifists. “We are asked to believe,” Muste opined, “that somehow when the war is over... we shall scrap our armaments.” More likely the “armament economy” would appeal to policymakers as a solution to the problem of unemployment and become a “Super-Arsenal” that would serve an adjunct of American “neo-imperialism.” At home, he predicted, “the nation will be militarized” and “reactionary and demagogic elements” will make “scapegoats” of radicals and minority groups.³⁶

The explosion of two atomic bombs in August 1945 confirmed Muste’s worst fears about the deleterious effects of modern warfare on democratic institutions and practices. If he suspected that modern warfare had rendered the just war tradition of the Christian Church obsolete, now he was certain. If he thought “western civilization” was in crisis, now he knew for sure. Now really was the moment of *kairos*, the last opportunity for Americans, already burdened by their history of racial subjugation and economic exploitation, to repent and renounce their power by opposing militarism and war. Was it not time, Muste asked in his 1947 book, *Not by Might, Christianity: The Way to Human Decency*, “for Americans to develop a modicum of objectivity and humility and stop thinking that we and our preponderant might constitute an exception among all nations and in all history... That, in other words, we are the master race, the *Herrenvolk*, the supremacy all men will, and must, hail with delight?”³⁷

In numerous forums from 1945 to 1947, Muste tried to convert anti-Stalinist leftists and liberal Protestants to his point of view, but failed in his efforts as both groups increasingly accepted the U.S. monopoly on atomic weapons as a way to contain the Soviet Union. Despite the fact that he shared their view of the Soviet Union as an expansionist, authoritarian regime, Muste recognized early on that the politics of anti-Communism served as a justification for the expansion of American military and economic power and the suppression of civil liberties. As a pacifist and a devout Christian, moreover, he was deeply troubled by the tendency of his fellow Protestants to identify the fate of Christianity with the nation-state and U.S. foreign policy. It seemed to him that the United States, like the Soviet Union, was guilty of excessive secularism and materialism, manifest most alarmingly in the twin evils of atomic weaponry and conscription.³⁸

Muste thus explicitly shunned political “realism” and immediate political effectiveness in favor of a long-term campaign designed to appeal to the moral conscience of his fellow Americans. While “common sense and realism” were important, they were not “our first and greatest need,” he wrote in an open letter to Niebuhr. For Christian realists to pronounce judgment and doom on Americans for their atomic hubris without also calling on them to “repent, act and so flee from that judgment” allowed socialists and Christians to make their peace with war. The role of a prophet was not only to invoke a realization of God’s judgment, but also to offer the possibility of escape from that judgment through repentance. Instead of realism, he argued, what the world desperately needed was “faith and hope” that it was possible “to build a just and durable peace.”³⁹

In pursuit of that vision, Muste and other radical pacifists met in April 1948 to found the Peacemakers, a group dedicated to “holy Disobedience against the war-making and conscripting State.” Reflecting their essentially Christian worldview, Peacemakers believed that by taking suffering upon themselves in individual and collective acts of disobedience, they would cut through the conformist culture of the Cold War and awaken their fellow Americans to their responsibility for the atomic and international crisis. They would, as they put it, take “personal responsibility” for the contemporary crisis by cutting themselves off as much as possible from the “war-making state.” One of their first “actions” was a protest against the Selective Service Act of 1948, which required compulsory military service. Arguing that the act represented “the same turning-point in American development as was the advent of Hitler to power in Germany,”

they called for “total rejection and all-out resistance.” By October, some 1,500 men had gone on record indicating their refusal to register for the draft.⁴⁰

Notably, the social critic Dwight Macdonald was one of the Peacemakers’ founding members. Like Muste, Macdonald had roots in the Trotskyist movement and had long been suspicious of bureaucratic, state-centered politics. But it was the mass violence of World War II that turned him decisively against Marxist teleology and, indeed, the entire Enlightenment project. In his famous article “The Root is Man,” he suggested that radicals dispense with mass parties and mass action, and instead focus on “symbolic individual action, based on one person’s insistence on his own values.” These values included pacifism, which was imperative in a world in which war was no longer a rational means to an end, and decentralism, which was necessary in a world that had become increasingly centralized and undemocratic. Rather than look to some future moment in time when these values would be realized, Macdonald asserted that radicals should gather themselves into small groups, where they would attempt to act on those values in the here and now. They should serve as “prophets” who “put forward ideas which the majority of men of their time think nonsense or worse – and yet which these same men also feel are true.”⁴¹

Macdonald has received enormous attention from scholars as signaling an important transition in the history of American radicalism from the laborite and statist politics of the Old Left toward a New Left. Yet, as we have seen, Muste had long been developing a similar understanding of the nature and workings of power in a highly militarized state like the United States, and had maintained that prophetic action was a revolutionary tool in this context. Macdonald himself acknowledged the influence of radical pacifists on his own thinking when he celebrated those “anarchists, conscientious objectors, and renegade Marxists like myself... who reject the concept of Progress, who judge things by their present meaning and effect, who think the ability of science to guide us in human affairs has been overrated.” But whereas Macdonald would soon thereafter retreat from political action, radical pacifists like Muste would continue to put these ideas into action throughout the Cold War era.⁴²

Indeed, radical pacifism as an organized political force would profoundly shape the political culture of postwar dissent. Although the Peacemakers dwindled to a tiny core of true believers at the height of the Cold War consensus, pacifists regrouped in the mid-1950s with the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement, concerns about nuclear testing, and

Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin's crimes. In 1956, Muste, Bayard Rustin, Dave Dellinger, and Charles Walker founded *Liberation* magazine, which became an important organ of the emerging New Left. Its lead editorial began by reiterating the radical pacifist critique of liberalism and Marxism, and called for a new radicalism based upon the "Judeo-Christian prophet tradition" and Gandhian nonviolence. As they explained, in the context of an overly militarized, bureaucratized, and centralized society, the most radical politics consisted of taking direct action, both through individual acts of resistance and "collective effort and struggle." They hoped that their utopianism would help to break through the Cold War stalemate and open up the possibility for building a "third camp" across national boundaries that would nonviolently oppose the Cold War.⁴³

Reenergized, pacifists sought to channel concerns over hydrogen bomb tests into support for disarmament. Their efforts led to the formation of the more moderate National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (a.k.a. SANE) and the more radical Committee for Nonviolent Action, which engaged in civil disobedience campaigns to oppose nuclear testing and the arms race. Muste served as chairman of the latter group, and also as co-chairman of the World Peace Brigade, an international "peace army" that opposed war preparations and assisted anticolonial struggles through nonviolent protest. Both groups exemplified the prophetic, existential style of political activism he had pioneered in the 1940s. Their dramatic, often transnational campaigns had him crisscrossing the globe, engaging in dialogue and building relationships with European and Asian peace activists and clergy that would help lay the foundations for the international anti-nuclear movement of the 1960s.⁴⁴

Pacifists also provided crucial support for the civil rights struggle and the movement against the war in Vietnam. Of course, the black freedom movement emerged from the bottom up, but Muste, Rustin, Smiley, and other pacifists offered training in nonviolence and institutional support and publicity; countless more joined civil rights activists in their protests against white supremacy. Martin Luther King Jr. acknowledged this influence when he stated that "The current emphasis on nonviolent direct action in the race relations field is due more to A.J. than to anyone else in the country."⁴⁵ Radical pacifists collaborated with the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in drafting the Declaration of Conscience against the Vietnam War, which was delivered to the White House in August 1965 in one of the first demonstrations against

the war. Significantly, Muste, along with Catholic radical Dorothy Day, often oversaw the draft card burnings that accompanied many of these antiwar protests. Muste was the central figure in building the diverse coalition that became known as the Spring Mobilization Committee against the War in Vietnam (MOBE), which he chaired until his death in February 1967.⁴⁶

In 1962, Muste observed, not without regret, that he increasingly found himself “among those who are regarded as unbelievers,” but the truth was that he influenced the church more than he realized.⁴⁷ Even as he publicly broke with Niebuhr, he never gave up hope that realism would lose its hegemonic position within Protestant liberalism. In 1950, he founded and led the Church Peace Mission, an ecumenical effort to more effectively bring the Christian pacifist witness to bear on contemporary problems and to the attention of “Christian people.” In that capacity, he attended World Council of Churches meetings and met with leading theologians like Martin Niemöller and Karl Barth to press his case.⁴⁸ As a result of efforts such as these, Christian pacifism managed to survive the early years of the Cold War and would gain traction as the armaments race proceeded apace. By the end of the 1950s, Muste had managed to convince John C. Bennett, editor of Niebuhr’s *Christianity and Crisis* magazine, to rethink his views on nuclear deterrence and to sign a petition calling for a moratorium on nuclear testing. Within a few years, Bennett, along with many others in the magazine’s inner circle, moved away from deterrence and began to support the notion of “peaceful coexistence” and an end to nuclear testing, positions that represented a move to the left for Christian realists. In 1966, with the intensification of the war in Vietnam, virtually all of the *Christianity and Crisis* insiders turned against the war, in the process questioning many of the tenets of realism. Muste must have felt some satisfaction as he watched these developments unfold.⁴⁹

Muste and his band of Christian dissenters thus helped birth the political culture of 1960s dissent. First, their politics were “pre-figurative”; they stressed the importance of embodying their ideals as well as fighting for them. Second, they prioritized race over class, and looked to marginalized groups such as conscientious objectors and African Americans as agents of social transformation. Economic democracy and collective bargaining were fundamentally important, but with labor aligned with the Cold War state, the working class no longer seemed historically destined to realize “Christian and prophetic ideals of justice, social righteousness and brotherhood.”⁵⁰ Third, they were existentialists who emphasized the importance of “putting their bodies on the line.” “The unity or the organic nature of

life is fundamental in our philosophy,” they stated at a 1945 conference. Without equal rights for all, “division is created, that is, community broken.” The way to repair these divisions—to build the “beloved community”—was to take direct action. In so doing, they would create and reaffirm the existence of a moral universe and thereby inspire others to do the same.⁵¹

Finally, they anticipated the New Left in viewing the rise of the modern, bureaucratic state as a threat to human freedom. Historians have typically pointed to social critics C. Wright Mills and Herbert Marcuse as harbingers of the 1960s’ radical democratic politics and spontaneous protest style. Attention to Muste and the movement he built in the 1940s shows that the New Left also emerged out of religious history and had spiritual dimensions. As we have seen, during the 1930s, ecumenical Protestants problematized their relationship to the modern state and asserted the primacy of their faith over and against it. This stance became equivocal over the course of World War II and the Cold War as leaders of the Federal Council of Churches increasingly identified the fate of Christianity and democracy with U.S. foreign policy. Pacifists, however, stayed true to Oxford in their repudiation of American militarism and mission. They hoped that their “acts of conscience” would “cut through the mazes of a compartmentalized society” and break the superpower stalemate.⁵² As Muste explained, the world needed its “saints” to show that the “age” in which they lived was ultimately “not permanent, not real. It is a house built on sand.” Like Christ, they would be “deemed foolish, weak, defeated, dead,” but therein lay their power and, indeed, their wisdom. Their suffering love would provide the leaven for the world to break “loose” from its attachment to power politics, nuclear weapons, and war, and to open itself to “change,” to “possibility.”⁵³

NOTES

1. For more on A.J. Muste, see Leilah Danielson, *American Gandhi: A.J. Muste and the History of Radicalism in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014); Jo Ann Oiman Robinson, *Abraham Went Out: A Biography of A.J. Muste* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1981); and Nat Hentoff, *Peace Agitator: The Story of A.J. Muste* (New York: Macmillan, 1963). This essay elaborates on several key arguments made in *American Gandhi*.

2. There is an extensive literature on the anti-Stalinist left. See, for example, Ann Douglas, “The Failure of the New York Intellectuals,” *Raritan* 17 (1998): 1–23; Harvey Teres, *Renewing the Left: Politics, Imagination, and the New York Intellectuals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Michael Denning, “New York Intellectuals,” *Socialist Review* 88, no. 1 (January–March 1988): 136–47; Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987); and Richard H. Pells, *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985).
3. See especially Michael G. Thompson, *For God and Globe: Christian Internationalism in the United States between the Great War and the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).
4. For a synthesis of this historiography, see Howard Brick and Christopher Phelps, *Radicals in America: The U.S. Left since the Second World War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015) and Michael Kazin, *American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011).
5. For the origins of the New Left, see Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Daniel Geary, *Radical Ambition: C. Wright Mills, the Left, and American Social Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Nelson Lichtenstein, ed., *American Capitalism: Social Thought and Political Economy in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007); James J. Farrell, *The Spirit of the Sixties: The Making of Postwar Radicalism* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993); and Wini Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962–1968: The Great Refusal* (New York: Praeger, 1982).
6. Doug Rossinow’s *The Politics of Authenticity* is one of the only books to similarly highlight Christianity in making the New Left, though his focus is on the postwar era whereas this essay looks at the 1930s and 1940s.
7. “Minutes of the Garden City Conference on the Fellowship of Reconciliation,” Garden City, Long Island, November 11–12, 1915, Records of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore, PA (hereafter FOR), Box 1, folder 3. For inter-war Christian pacifism and internationalism, see especially Thompson, *For God and Globe*; Kip Kosek, *Acts of Conscience: Christian Nonviolence and Modern American Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press,

- 2007); Danielson, *American Gandhi*; and Charles Chatfield, *For Peace and Justice: Pacifism in America, 1914–41* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1971). On pacifists, the ACLU, and the politics of modern citizenship, see especially Christopher Capozzola, *Uncle Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).
8. Kosek, *Acts of Conscience*, 60. The Christian-pacifist magazine *The World Tomorrow* challenged its readers, would Jesus be an imperialist, “uphold capitalism,” or “discriminate against other races”? See Thompson, *For God and Globe*, 34.
 9. For a detailed discussion of Muste’s involvement in the labor movement, see Danielson, *American Gandhi*. The FOR held that “true reconciliation” only occurred when both sides of dispute admitted their faults and found common ground. See “FOR: A Constructive Policy,” circa 1915, FOR, Box 1, folder 3. See also Henry Cadbury, “The Strike: An Unethical Means of Coercion,” *The World Tomorrow*, 3, no. 5 (May 1920): 131–32. Muste’s criticism of this position can be found in Muste, “Pacifism and Class War” (1928), in Nat Hentoff (ed.), *The Essays of A.J. Muste* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967): 176–82 and Muste, “Fellowship and Class Struggle,” FOR, box 5, folder 1.
 10. Muste, “Sketches for Autobiography” [1957–1960], reprinted in Hentoff (ed.), *The Essays of A.J. Muste*, 134–35.
 11. For more on the Musteite movement, see *American Gandhi*, chapters 5, 6, and 7. See also Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture* (London: Verso, 1997), especially 102, 430–32; Leonard Wilcox V.F. Calverton: *Radical in the American Grain* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); and Christopher Phelps, *Young Sidney Hook: Marxist and Pragmatist* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997). For Muste’s conviction that the Trotskyists violated “working-class ethics,” see especially “Interview with Mr. A.J. Muste,” Socialist Movement Project, May 31, 1965, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, 11 and Muste, “My Experiences in Labor and Radical Struggles of the Thirties,” in Rita Simon (ed.), *As We Saw the Thirties: Essays on Social and Political Movements of a Decade* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1967): 147.
 12. Muste, “The True International,” 210.
 13. On the Trotskyist critique of the Soviet Union, see, for example, James P. Cannon, *History of American Trotskyism* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), 64–68. The quote “chose the West” comes from New York intellectual Dwight Macdonald, quoted in Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 48. See also their discussion on pages 23–25 and 62–63.
 14. Brick and Phelps, *Radicals in America*, 62.

15. See David C. Engerman foreword to *The God that Failed* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001; original edition, 1950). On page xxv, Engerman describes it “as a how-to manual for transforming interwar radicals into Cold War liberals.”
16. Intriguingly, historians rarely include Muste in their discussions of the anti-Stalinist left, and instead focus on his pacifism. In fact, he had been deeply engaged in anti-Stalinist thought both before *and* after he returned to the church. He was particularly fond of Eugene Lyons, *Assignment in Utopia: An Autobiography* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1937); Arthur Koestler, *Darkness at Noon* (New York: Macmillan, 1941); Arthur Koestler, *The Yogi and the Commissar and Other Essays* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1946); Ignazio Silone, *Bread and Wine*, translated by Gwenda David and Eric Mosbacher (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1937); Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1932; 1946), among others. See A.J. Muste, *Nonviolence in an Aggressive World* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1940): 90–91. See also Muste, “Beyond Marxism,” *Fellowship* 3, no. 1 (October 1937): 9, 13.
17. These quotes are from Muste, “Return to Pacifism,” 199–201 and Muste, *Nonviolence in an Aggressive World*, 3–5.
18. Muste, *Nonviolence in an Aggressive World*, 96; Muste to V.F. Calverton, October 24, 1938, V.F. Calverton Papers, 1923–1941, Research Collection, New York Public Library, box 11. See also Muste, “Remarks on Personalist Democracy,” circa 1939, Abraham Johannes Muste Papers, 1920–1967 (microfilm edition), Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Swarthmore College (hereafter Muste Papers), Reel 5.
19. The Message of the Oxford Conference, quoted W.A. Visser ‘T Hooft, *The Genesis and Formation of the World Council of Churches* (Geneva, Switzerland: World Council of Churches, 1982), 43–44.
20. Thompson, *For God and Globe*, 122. Thompson’s book is the best account of the making of Christian internationalism. See also John Nurser, *For All Peoples and All Nations: Christian Churches and Human Rights* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2005) and Heather A. Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order: Reinhold Niebuhr and the Christian Realists, 1920–1948* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
21. See Donald Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919–1941* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1960): 369.
22. Muste, *Nonviolence in an Aggressive World*, 189; 190–92; Muste, “Evangelism and the Industrial Workers” [circa 1937–39], reprinted in Jeffrey D. Meyers, *The Way of Peace: A.J. Muste’s Writings for the Church* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 81, 79. In making this argument, Muste explicitly drew upon W.A. Visser ‘T Hooft’s and J.H. Oldham’s *The Church and its Function in Society* a.k.a. the “Oxford Conference Book” (Willett, Clark & Co., 1937).

23. See, for example, Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's and Sons, 1932; reprint 1948) and Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). There is a vast literature on Niebuhr, the Christian realists, and their criticism of pacifism. See, for example, Warren, *Theologians of a New World Order*; Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985; reprint 1996); and Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism*.
24. Muste, *Nonviolence in an Aggressive World*, 33–34 and Muste, “Theology of Despair,” 302–07.
25. Muste, *Nonviolence in an Aggressive World*, 197, 200–01. Muste's existentialist framework can also be seen in his admiration for Kierkegaard. See, for example, Muste, typescript, “S. Kierkegaard on the Relation between Ends and Means”, February 1950, Ernest and Marion Bromley Papers, 1920–1997 (EMBP), unprocessed private collection, Voluntown, Connecticut (now at Swarthmore College Peace Collection); and James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Arbor House, 1985), 102.
26. Despite their differences with realists, pacifists appreciated the fact that Oxford had legitimated pacifism as a valid expression of Christian witness, and welcomed its critique of race, nation, and empire. See, for example, Muste, *Nonviolence in an Aggressive World*, 190–91. Evidence of Muste's involvement with the Federal Council of Churches and its leaders such as Henry Van Dusen, James Myers, Cameron P. Hall, among others, can be found in Muste Papers, Reel 6.
27. David Hollinger, “The Realist-Pacifist Summit Meeting of March 1942 and the Political Reorientation of American Protestantism,” *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 79, no. 3 (September 2010): 665.
28. Thompson, *For God and Globe*, 200, 189. On Niebuhr, Dulles, and the Cold War, see also Jason W. Stevens, *God Fearing and Free: A Spiritual History of America's Cold War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Campbell Craig, *Glimmer of a New Leviathan: Total War in the Realism of Niebuhr, Morgenthau, and Waltz* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); and Richard Immerman, *John Foster Dulles: Piety, Pragmatism, and Power in U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998).
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Resisting Jim Crow Colonialism: Black Christianity and the International Roots of the Civil Rights Movement

Sarah Azaransky

The U.S. civil rights movement was part of a global wave of anticolonial and independence movements. From the 1930s to the 1950s, a network of black Christian intellectuals and activists looked abroad, and to other religious traditions, for ideas and practices that could transform American democracy. As they elaborated manifold visions of black Christianity that ranged from early protests of enslavement to Quaker experiments with civil disobedience, these black Christians embraced American democratic ideals and Christian egalitarian visions, even as they recognized that neither American politics nor American churches had put them into practice. Indeed, these black intellectuals and activists were at a religious vanguard—identifying a variety of black American Christian traditions, and initiating interreligious exchanges that modified their Christian theological stances. They forwarded a “transformative concept of social progress” they hoped would enable American democracy and American Christianity to embody the racial egalitarianism they believed each promised.¹

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125

This network included professors and public intellectuals such as Howard Thurman, Benjamin Mays, and William Stuart Nelson, each of whom met with Mohandas Gandhi in India; ecumenical movement leaders; and pioneers of African-American Christian nonviolence James Farmer, Pauli Murray, and Bayard Rustin. They all believed that black social Christianity, nourished by international and interreligious resources, could fuel a movement for racial justice in the United States.

These intellectuals and activists knew each other and exchanged ideas. At the American YMCA and YWCA, they worked on interracialism, learned about movement building, and took advantage of opportunities to travel and live abroad. They transformed Howard University's School of Religion into the intellectual center of African American religion and black church studies, thirty years before the advent of black liberation theology. They served on the boards of and worked for majority-white organizations like the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), where they developed and practiced nonviolent tactics that would later galvanize a nationwide movement. They became mentors and advisors to and coworkers with Martin Luther King Jr., thus they became living links between Gandhi, who was killed in 1948, and King, who became a national figure in 1956. These intellectuals and activists developed religious perspectives, methods of moral reasoning, and dimensions of black social Christianity that served as theological blueprints for what Rustin later called the "classical" phase of the Civil Rights Movement.²

This chapter examines three episodes of this larger history: Howard Thurman's visit to South Asia in 1935–1936; Pauli Murray's use of *satyagraha* to protest her arrest on a bus during Easter weekend in 1940; and Bayard Rustin's engagement with nonviolence and anticolonialism in West Africa in the early 1950s. Their contributions to the American religious left should be understood as emerging importantly from black internationalism and within in the context of the history of the category of "religion" itself.

VARIETIES OF BLACK INTERNATIONALISM

These mid-century black Christian activists and intellectuals were part of an international turn in black political thought that followed World War I, when hundreds of thousands of African Americans migrated North and West. The early 1920s heralded a "flurry of new black political activity,"

facilitated by diverse black populations in urban centers.³ Harlem became the heart of black America, a meeting place of blacks from all over the United States and throughout the African diaspora. Shaped by connections between racism in the United States with racism and imperial oppression in other parts of the world, black internationalism underscored how black Americans' struggles for citizenship rights were part of a global resistance movement that included the struggles of blacks and Indians in South Africa, as well as Hindus and Muslims in India, and Aboriginal peoples in Australia, among others.

Two leading figures of early black internationalism were W. E. B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey. Often described as two poles of black internationalist thinking, the two men nevertheless shared a conviction that "the world beyond the United States was especially important for blacks at home because it presented the possibility of wider publics—indeed a global majority—who had been denied historical protections and benefits of nationality."⁴

Du Bois was one of the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century, a towering intellectual, who wrote landmark works in sociology, history, and philosophy over a period of fifty years, and who always understood black Americans' experiences within a global frame. Representative of Du Bois's international commitments was his leadership of a series of Pan-African conferences between 1919 and 1945—these were international gatherings of black people, many of whom would become leaders of anti-colonial movements in the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa. As founding editor of *The Crisis*, the NAACP's journal of politics and ideas, Du Bois prioritized international reporting about freedom struggles around the world, a focus that came to characterize the rest of the black press.

Jamaican Marcus Garvey similarly connected the political interests of black Americans with black people around the world. As Garvey advocated for Jamaica's independence from British colonial rule, he developed a diasporic political program around an explicitly international black identity. He founded the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Kingston with the ambition of uniting politically all of Africa and its diaspora. In 1916, he moved the UNIA headquarters to the U.S., to Harlem, the de facto capital of the black world. Garvey acquitted himself nobly of his grand ambition; by 1920, the UNIA had more than 1,900 chapters in over forty countries and colonies, including Cuba, India, the Gold Coast (later Ghana), Ecuador, and the United Kingdom.⁵ Garvey prioritized racial identification as having political meaning for people of African

descent across the globe; he proposed that blacks throughout the diaspora return to Africa, and he promoted the idea of an African empire.

The black press was instrumental in fostering this internationalist perspective, most clearly manifested in its decades-long interest in the Indian independence movement. Mohandas Gandhi's campaigns became a *cause célèbre* for black Americans. Beginning in earnest with Gandhi's noncooperation campaign in 1921, African American newspapers and journals weighed in on the significance of Gandhi's methods and political vision for black resistance to white racism. For the black press, he was an important example of a person of color leading a freedom struggle against an entrenched, racist, colonial power.

Gandhi's blending of religious and political ideals notably caught the attention of a key group of African American Christian intellectuals. In a 1930 speech, Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University and a renowned Baptist minister, asserted that "Gandhi is conducting today the most significant religious movement in the world, in his endeavor to inject religion into questions of economics and politics."⁶ Johnson recruited Benjamin Mays, Howard Thurman, and William Stuart Nelson to join him at Howard, itself a critical institution to the American left, where they "sensed earlier than most that engagement with India could be mutually beneficial, striking a blow against white supremacy globally, which would have a decided impact locally."⁷

Johnson's gathering of these religious intellectuals and his support for their international travels were preconditions for the theological innovation and interreligious critique that influenced a subsequent generation of Christian activists. Historian Dennis Dickerson compares the community at Howard to an earlier group of writers in Harlem: just as the 1920s was a period of growth in black arts and literature, the 1930s and 1940s was a watershed period of black religious development, when black scholars attained important academic positions and undertook serious studies of the black church and black religion.⁸ Mays, Thurman, and Nelson laid foundations of black theology and wrote landmark texts in black religion. Each met with Gandhi, who served as a catalyst for questions about Christianity's connection to imperialism and whether nonviolence could be effective in the American context. Each man would later be influential in how King understood and employed

lessons from the Indian independence movement.⁹ They were part of a network of scholars and activists who innovated another kind of black internationalism.

These Howard theologians became leading exponents of a black Christian internationalism that drew from international and interreligious sources to stimulate a religiously-inspired American racial justice movement. They were certainly aware of radical black internationalist politics, epitomized by Garvey and Du Bois, but additional religious sources inspired their international outlook—a history of Christian missions and contemporary work with international ecumenical organizations, especially the YMCA. Mays's biographer Randal Jelks has distinguished a black internationalism "rooted in political radicalism" from one that grew out of black Protestant missions to the Caribbean and West Africa.¹⁰ It was from the latter, in part, that this group of religious thinkers drew.

For more than a century, transatlantic exchanges fostered a sense of the black international for black American Christians.¹¹ Black missionaries' work in the nineteenth and early twentieth century to found American-style schools had repercussions in the twentieth century's independence era, when many West Africans enrolled at U.S. historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Kwame Nkrumah of the Gold Coast (later Ghana) and Nnamdi Azikiwe of Nigeria studied at HBCUs in the 1920s and 1930s. These two would become the first post-independence elected heads of state of their respective countries, and were among Rustin's international contacts. These transatlantic exchanges contributed to freedom movements in all three countries.

The international Christian ecumenical movement opened additional international channels for black Christians. In South Asia, West Africa, and Europe, travel under the auspices of the YMCA enabled black American Christians to meet and build alliances with Christians of color from around the world. Such travel also afforded opportunities to investigate the color line internationally, draw firsthand comparisons between colonialism and Jim Crow and meet with world-renowned anticolonial leaders. Upon their return from Asia or Africa, black Christian American intellectuals and activists toured the country and shared lessons from freedom campaigns in other parts of the world. Black Americans were not alone, they taught, in struggling against white supremacy and in building a movement for racial justice.

THE HISTORY OF “RELIGION”

To examine the international roots of the Civil Rights Movement in light of the history of the American religious left requires not only rethinking the history of civil rights, but also attending to the history of the category of religion. Thurman and Mays were ordained Baptist ministers and professors of theology and ethics and used the category “religion” in their comparative study of Indian religions. The previous sentence is freighted with terms that beg clarification: what is religion? how do or should Christian theologians undertake comparative religious study? and what is the particular history of Western study of Indian religions? Underlying these questions are further historiographical and epistemological challenges raised by the period and the people this chapter examines. For the sake of defining my terms, I want to dwell for a moment on the conceptual challenge presented by the category “religion,” but I also want to signpost how the approaches that this group of activists and intellectuals developed in the 1930s and 1940s can help to address current questions. Contemporary scholars of religion do not agree about just what it is we study. From an expansive academic discussion, I pull three threads to indicate what may be at stake when I use “religion.”

The category of “religion” is a product of Christian understanding and priorities, particularly the priorities of white Europeans and North American Christians. The field of “religious studies” started when a group of mostly Christian academics who, in developing the category of religion, gave more weight to kinds and ways of belief and practices that they knew, so what came to count as religion looks a lot like a particular kind of Christianity, i.e., religion is theistic, concerned with doctrines, and describes individual or privatized belief. So if “religion” is a product of Christian understanding, then, as Talal Asad has argued “there are dangers in employing religion” when analyzing non-Christian traditions.¹²

A related issue is how religious studies—the academic discipline—grew up entangled with European colonialism. Colonialism made available materials and religious artifacts to study, and religious studies tended to endorse colonial projects by promoting misunderstandings of non-Western traditions. As one scholar of Sikhism has put it, religious studies has depicted non-Western traditions, particular Indian religions, “as static, frozen objects, namely as phenomena to be known and studied by conceptually more advanced cultures.”¹³

This group of activists and intellectuals offers a compelling historical case of Christians who studied Indian religions as living traditions that might have lessons for their own lives and contexts. That is, these American Christian men and women attempted to make concepts from Indians traditions into resources for their own constructive theological reflection.¹⁴ Correlated to the controversy over “religion” is a lively conversation about whether and how Christian theologians can undertake interreligious learning to further a constructive, comparative Christian theology.¹⁵ These black Christian theologians have done what contemporary theologians are calling for, and their identities challenge a clear distinction between the West and the rest. They were indeed Western, American Christians; they were also African-descended people who were subject to colonial conditions of Jim Crow. As they were developing sophisticated accounts of black religion, black religion was often denigrated as underdeveloped and irrational, as ahistorical and emotional—the same way religious studies has othered non-Western traditions.¹⁶

LEARNING FROM GANDHI

Howard Thurman’s visit to South Asia in 1935–1936 exemplifies a Christian black internationalism that was integral to the American religious left. Thurman was a great twentieth-century American theologian and social critic who had been marked as a theological prodigy from his earliest years. Beginning in the mid-1920s, he kept a punishing schedule of public talks about race relations across the country. In part because of his renown, in 1935 he was invited to lead a black American Christian delegation on a “Pilgrimage of Friendship” to South Asia, sponsored by the Student Christian Movement, a joint project of the international YMCA and YWCA. As a member and leader of this delegation, Thurman traveled the length and breadth of what is now Sri Lanka, Burma, Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan.

Near the end of the trip, the delegation met Mohandas Gandhi. Thurman was eager to ask Gandhi about tactics that African Americans could use in their resistance to Jim Crow. But Gandhi had his own pressing questions: how could Thurman be a Christian when Christianity was associated with segregation and colonialism the world over? Why wasn’t Thurman a Muslim instead, for Islam asserted there is no color line?¹⁷ This exchange was not the first time Thurman was asked why he was Christian.

The exchange that had the greatest effect on him came early in the trip, while he was giving a lecture in Colombo, at the law school. Thurman wrote about the encounter a number of times, including in the first chapter of his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. In that version of the story, Thurman recalls how the principal of a law college asked him sharply how he could be a Christian when Christianity was integral to America's history of racism, from the Middle Passage to lynching to segregation. "Here you are in my country, standing deep within the Christian faith and tradition," Thurman quoted the principal as saying. "I do not want to seem rude to you. But, sir, I think you are a traitor to all the darker peoples of the earth. I am wondering what you, an intelligent man, can say in defense of your position."¹⁸

Jesus and the Disinherited set out to answer the law professor's probing question: how could Thurman call himself a Christian and not be a traitor? To answer, Thurman started by rereading the gospels, and when he did, Thurman saw what he always knew but encountered it in a new way: Jesus was a poor Jew who lived in Palestine under Roman occupation without citizenship status. Thurman used the Christian story to analyze American conditions. In texts about the first century, Thurman perceived an existential and political crisis similar to what black Americans suffered in the twentieth century under Jim Crow. Thurman wrote; "the striking similarity between the social position of Jesus in Palestine and that of the vast majority of American Negroes is obvious to anyone who tarries long over the facts."¹⁹ Thurman's radical message was that Jesus had suffered indignities similar to those endured by blacks Americans.

Instead of justifying oppressive racial politics, the Bible offers strategies to resist imperialism, racism, and injustice. By lifting up Jesus' resistance against Roman occupation, Thurman showed how the religion of Jesus could provide techniques for confronting Jim Crow. Thurman prioritized concrete, practical action—repeatedly he emphasized that the Gospels depict people not merely changing their hearts, but taking action. He wrote: "there cannot be too great insistence on the point we are here dealing with a discipline, a method, a technique, as over against some form of wishful thinking or simple desiring."²⁰

Jesus and the Disinherited also contains moral lessons from Gandhi's movement in India. It refers to Gandhi by name on only one occasion; Thurman quoted a letter between Gandhi and an activist in which Gandhi advises to speak the truth, no matter the consequences.²¹ But more than

this singular reference, the book contains Gandhi's teaching in an elemental, if perhaps less obvious, way. The book has Gandhian bones. Its table of contents reflects Gandhi's program: the middle chapters are titled "Fear," "Deception," and "Hate." These are antitheses of what Gandhi described as cardinal principles of nonviolence—fearlessness, truth, and love. Thurman's final chapter is love. Thurman employed Gandhi's terms in Thurman's own theological construction, to demonstrate, in the first three instances, what Jesus overcame, and then what Jesus promises. In other words, Thurman's signal contribution to Christian theology relied on a Gandhian outlook that drew on Hinduism, among other moral traditions.

Jesus and the Disinherited grew in importance when it became a primary text of the later Civil Rights Movement. People who traveled with King said that he took two books with him almost everywhere. One was the Bible; the other was *Jesus and the Disinherited*. King carried with him a book that emerged, in part, out of international travel and a very direct challenge for Thurman to see his religious tradition in a new light. In it, Thurman outlined fearlessness, reverence for personality, how to free white people from what he called "white necessity" that became mainstays of King's activism and of King's great intellectual contributions to democratic theory and Christian theology.

Just as Thurman took seriously hard questions directed at him, he never shied away from asking difficult questions of others, and he was able to learn from a person whose moral vision was limited, a crucial skill as he looked for moral and intellectual resources to address social and political crises. Mohandas Gandhi is an example of someone with a limited moral vision. Recently there has been important reevaluation of Gandhi's work, prompted by questions like: why did Gandhi exclude black South Africans from his movement there? Could Gandhi reconcile his service in the Boer War with his later anti-imperialism? Why did Gandhi oppose untouchability, but not caste? These questions suggest that Gandhi's program was not as nonviolent as he insisted it was.

In 1936, Thurman and Benjamin Mays asked these Gandhi these precise questions. Thurman and Mays were good friends and colleagues at Howard University's School of Religion. Thurman went to India first, and interviewed Gandhi in March; Mays went to India later the same year, to attend a YMCA conference, and made arrangements to meet Gandhi. The black American Christians were well informed about Indian politics,

Indian religions, and the history of Gandhi's organizing in India as well as in South Africa. They were well prepared, then, to ask difficult questions. Thurman asked the Mahatma about noncooperation and how to train people in nonviolence. Mays probed the moral sources of nonviolence, which included Hinduism, Jainism, and close readings of Thoreau and Tolstoy. Gandhi himself was influenced by ethical streams from across the globe.

Black Americans also criticized aspects of Gandhi's program. Howard Thurman noticed that Gandhi would not collaborate with black South Africans, when, earlier in his career, Gandhi led protests against excessive taxation and free movement between South African states. Mays wondered why Gandhi worked to end untouchability, but not caste, what Mays felt was an exploitative system that ensnared millions in poverty.

When they returned from India, Thurman and Mays taught about what they had learned in India at Howard's School of Religion and lectured widely throughout the country. Mays wrote about Gandhi and the Indian independence movement in a series of articles in the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, a regional black newspaper with a wide readership. How Mays wrote about the religious context of Gandhi's nonviolence is notable, because Mays did not collapse Gandhi's practices and motivations into Christian terms, a common habit of Western observers of Indian religions. Instead Mays, the religious studies scholar, tried to understand Gandhi's work on its own terms and in its own context. Interested at the potential translatability of Gandhi's tactics for the American scene, Mays understood that thoughtful interpretation would necessarily precede any American application. And Mays did all this in 700-word columns and in straightforward language, thus making the information accessible to the newspaper's readers.

CONFRONTING JIM CROW WITH *SATTYAGRAHA*

Thurman, Mays, and others were laying the intellectual groundwork; the next step was to test it in an American context. Drawing lessons from international anticolonial activists and African American religious intellectuals, a group of black Christian activists experimented with nonviolent direct action in the 1940s. Pauli Murray, Bayard Rustin, and James Farmer were three such activists, who applied international and interreligious resources in the American context through individual and group protests.

Their activist projects in the 1940s, including sit-ins, freedom rides, and multicity marches, became mainstays of the later Civil Rights Movement.

Protesting Jim Crow was nothing new. For decades, black Americans had employed a number of direct action strategies, including boycotts, pickets, and lobbying.²² A new generation believed this tradition would be strengthened if it were “consistently conceptualized or anchored in serious theological and religious reflection.”²³ They developed what Farmer called “the race logic of pacifism,” the idea that pacifism was inherently about racial justice because racism was the root of much of American violence.²⁴ In the midst of a majority-white Christian peace movement, these three black activists devised a radical religious pacifism that was also distinctly black.

The activism of Murray, Farmer, and Rustin confirmed how Thurman and Mays had hoped religion would inspire a movement for racial justice in the United States. The three had each come of age theologically during the Social Gospel movement and had embraced its demand for Christians to work for justice in the here and now. They also had important and direct connections to Thurman and Mays. Farmer graduated from Howard’s School of Religion, where he took classes with both professors. Thurman, then the only black board member of FOR, had recommended Farmer for a position with the organization, and he knew Rustin through his work on the staff.²⁵ Murray, herself a member of FOR, would have known about Thurman’s work even before she was a law student at Howard in the early 1940s and sought advice from him when she organized sit-ins to desegregate local restaurants. Murray, Rustin, and Farmer were connected, then, to a black Christian intellectual network that enabled a particular kind of theological reflection on social issues.

Pauli Murray’s arrest in Petersburg, Virginia, for sitting in the front section of a bus during Easter weekend of 1940 provides a good example of this dynamic at work. Murray remembered saying to the driver, “‘You haven’t learned a thing in two thousand years.’ I could not forget that it was Easter Even.”²⁶ She later wrote to a friend: “We did not plan our arrest intentionally. The situation developed and, having developed, we applied what we knew of *satyagraha* on the spot,” including petitioning the warden for courteous treatment, explaining what they were doing and why, and talking with fellow prisoners about their strategy.²⁷

A black Christian pacifist and civil rights activist, Murray had studied Gandhian nonviolence and looked for opportunities to apply it in the

United States. When she admonished the bus driver that he hadn't learned a thing in two thousand years, she was comparing Jim Crow to Roman occupation. In Murray's mind, the bus driver who enforced segregation law was akin to the Roman imperial authorities who had arrested and executed Jesus. Twentieth-century Jim Crow was, she believed, morally analogous to the Roman occupation of Palestine two millennia ago. As a Christian pacifist, however, Murray took heart in Jesus's example that resistance to occupation was what God required. She made a Christian claim, but she also characterized her response in terms of *satyagraha*, Gandhi's neologism to describe his nonviolent campaigns. A combination of *satya* (truth) and *agraha* (insistence), the term has variously been translated as "truth force" and "soul force." It was anchored in a Gandhian context, tied to nonviolent efforts in South Africa and India. When Murray used it to respond to her arrest, she also juxtaposed it to Christianity and put it in an American context. The arrest was an opportunity for her to work out how to employ these traditions in complementary ways to confront Jim Crow.

In her Petersburg arrest, Murray coupled Gandhian tactics and the Christian story. She made an astute theological comparison between Jim Crow and the oppressive rule of the Roman empire. Because the Gospels depicted how God opposed imperial rule in the ancient world, Murray asserted that God also opposed white supremacist practices in the United States. On Easter weekend, which memorializes the climax of the Christian story, Murray situated herself and others who resisted Jim Crow as sharing solidarity with Jesus.

To give direction and moral force to her resistance, Murray employed "what she knew of *satyagraha*." On its face, she used the steps of Gandhian nonviolence in a utilitarian fashion—when the opportunity arose and it suited her. Yet, upon closer inspection, her use of *satyagraha* had implications for her Christian witness. It provided the method and means to resist Jim Crow in light of how she connected American racism with Jesus's experiences of imperial Rome. *Satyagraha* was part of what enabled her to reflect Gospel realities—to enact a Christian practice of resisting unjust authority. Her arrest shows how multiple moral traditions could inspire action: the method of *satyagraha* helped her act as she believed a Christian should. In this case, it seems, *satyagraha* enabled Christian practice.

POWER AND JUSTICE IN WEST AFRICA

Despite young activists' innovating new kinds of activism, American pacifism lost ground, and even a sense of purpose, after World War II. By late 1950, Bayard Rustin—one of the great democratic thinkers and doers of the twentieth century, and central organizer of the 1963 March on Washington—felt that “the members of the Fellowship of Reconciliation have never, according to my view, been more confused than they are at present.” He had encountered in many FOR members “an actual lack of faith in a pacifist way any longer.”²⁸ Rustin's career as an activist began in the late 1930s, and continued through the 1940s and 1950s with leadership positions in the FOR and the War Resisters League, flagship organizations of the American left. Rustin was a key figure in American religious left activism for peace, racial justice, and civil rights.

Like Thurman, Mays, Murray, and many others, Rustin understood black Americans' efforts to resist Jim Crow as part of an international movement to resist white supremacy and colonialism. In 1948, after Indian independence and Gandhi's assassination, Rustin traveled to India to learn from people who had worked with the Mahatma. As opportunities for mass nonviolent action and significant social change dissipated in the United States in the early 1950s, Rustin believed there was potential for nonviolence to bring democratic revolution to West Africa. Conversations with activist colleagues Bill Sutherland and George Houser yielded a new focus for pacifist energies. All three became interested in anticolonial movements in sub-Saharan Africa. Houser and Rustin agreed with Sutherland that in the United States “the possibilities of progressive social change looked rare and more remote, but in Africa it seemed that there was a real possibility” for mass nonviolent direct action.²⁹ In 1953, Sutherland moved to Ghana, where he started a family and worked with Kwame Nkrumah's party for independence. The same year, Houser founded the American Committee on Africa and he devoted much of the rest of his life to African political freedom and economic development. But Rustin was the first of the three to visit Africa. In 1952, he traveled to the Gold Coast and Nigeria to learn about how Kwame Nkrumah and Nnamdi Azikiwe were employing nonviolence in their contexts.

In West Africa, Rustin saw that nonviolence was essential to political and economic independence. In a report he wrote from the Gold Coast, Rustin predicted that “Africa may reach independence, but miss freedom.”³⁰ If new nations merely substituted exploitative white leaders with

exploitative black leaders, he argued, they may meet bare requirements of independence but not experience freedom, what Rustin called a “power method that works for justice for all.”³¹ Power was not just for white colonial rulers, or for black rulers who might take their place; rather, power should be reimagined as a social vehicle for providing justice for the entire community. Violence was inevitable, for “suffering, imprisonment and death are inevitable,” regardless of the approach independence leaders used. But nonviolence, Rustin asserted, would cultivate a spiritual power that “does not require compromises with non-progressive forces as violence does.”³² The ends of nonviolence could not be known, for “the end cannot be known.” Yet, Rustin maintained, “if the means are good the end will be good.”³³ An American professional pacifist for two decades, Rustin looked to West Africa for cutting-edge nonviolent thinking and practice. He returned to a free Ghana in 1959, to work with Bill Sutherland on the Sahara Project, an international, anticolonial, pacifist protest of French nuclear testing in the Sahara.³⁴

When he returned from West Africa, Rustin convinced the FOR, the predominately white peace organization for which he had been working for a decade, to sponsor a project on nonviolence that he would lead in Nigeria and the Gold Coast. Less than ten days after the FOR board approved the project, Rustin was arrested on a so-called morals charge, when Pasadena police found him in a parked car with two other men. The FOR fired him and the American Friends Service Committee, for which he was on speaking tour at the time, severed their ties with him. Rustin never undertook the project he envisioned in West Africa, but what he witnessed in the Gold Coast and Nigeria further underscored Rustin’s faith in the potential for nonviolent action in the American context.

Regardless that Rustin was fired by the FOR and AFSC, his Quaker colleagues recognized him as an important religious thinker. And though he left a stunning collection of Quaker moral and theological writings, historians and religious studies scholars have been reluctant to analyze his writing as Quaker or even religious.³⁵ Throughout his activism and writing, Rustin exhibited a Quaker sense that “theological reasoning is primarily enacted; interpretation is primarily interpretation-in-practice.”³⁶ Quaker moral reasons and categories, like the spark, how the Spirit moves in community, and the dangers of separation, permeate his writings. Thus, despite his expulsion from his political home base, two years later, both FOR and the AFSC sought Rustin’s expertise and

invited him to be part of a group of leading Quaker thinkers who gathered to conceive a moral vision to confront rising American militarism.

Speak Truth to Power, published by the American Friends Service Committee in 1955, was an effort to persuade policymakers of a different approach to U.S.–Soviet relations; the AFSC sent a copy to every member of Congress and it was reviewed widely. Rustin’s theological fingerprints are evident throughout, particularly in the document’s theory of how power works and people’s role in generating “constructive good will,” which resonated with what Rustin had written from West Africa about a power method that works for justice for all people.³⁷ Rustin was able to take insight from West African anticolonial movements about how to create new kinds of social and political power to formulate creative ways forward in the United States.

Rustin appears to be the primary author of a section devoted to social experiments that Quakers had undertaken in previous centuries.³⁸ He laid out historical cases—treatment of Native Americans, black freedom, care of mentally ill persons, rights of women, and prison reform—in which Quakers innovated approaches that were “violently rejected at one time,” but which later became “wholeheartedly accepted” and mainstream, effective approaches.³⁹ Rustin wrote, “we have attempted to apply our limited insight to the community around us. But like others we have failed. We are convinced that such failures spring not from any inherent deficiencies in the faith itself, but rather from our unreadiness to live boldly the faith we hold.”⁴⁰ Rustin admitted that there would be disparities between faith and practice, but that the key historical lesson was formulating workable trials.

As Rustin outlined Quaker social experiments that affirmed the humanity of people who had, at one time, been considered not fully human, a contemporary reader infers poignancy in Rustin’s participation in the group.⁴¹ His sexuality was illegal, his sexual practices had been condemned, and the very people with whom he worked to construct a theological vision about creative goodwill had rejected him. When Rustin and his co-authors insisted on the capacity of thinking differently about social issues, his co-authors nevertheless censored his name as an author of the document.⁴²

Rustin understood, and suffered as a result of, moral and critical limitations of the FOR, AFSC, and the larger, predominantly white peace movement, yet he pushed the FOR, AFSC, and War Resisters League to see

connections between American racism, colonialism, and predatory capitalism and commit their efforts to resisting them in the United States. He always understood American movements in a global context. In spite of the limitations of organizations for which he worked, Rustin was able to produce what he called “workable trials.”

GLOBAL ROOTS OF A LATER MOVEMENT

The Christian writing and practice of Rustin, Murray, and Thurman confirm how the foundations of the post-1955 civil rights struggle were laid decades earlier, during a period of important discoveries when African American Christian intellectuals and activists were initially engaging internationally. Howard Thurman’s *Jesus and the Disinherited* shows how innovative American Christian theological reflection emerged from exchanges with people from other parts of the world, many of whom were non-Christian. Thurman’s book-length response to the question of how he was not a traitor shows international and interreligious learning could sharpen American Christians’ theological perspectives. Later a favorite of Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurman’s text exemplifies moral dynamism that emerged from interreligious and international encounters.

Murray’s use of *satyagraha* to respond to her arrest on a bus on Easter weekend anticipated how protest strategies from the Indian independence movement were integral to the post-1955 civil rights movement. Murray’s thoughtful blending of Gandhian strategies and Christian theological reflection underscore how interreligious learning and practice infused Christian internationalism of this early period, and inspired later generations of black activists during the height of the movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Bayard Rustin’s engagement with West Africa showed how black American Christian pacifists gleaned insight from around the world. Rustin’s moral reflections about how West African movements were reconstituting social power became important to his work to create what he called workable trials to expand democracy in the United States.

Rustin, Murray, and Thurman believed that American democracy and the Christian gospel both promised racial egalitarianism, even as neither yet had existing institutions to support this ideal. Their decades of international exchanges and political and theological reflections helped to inaugurate ways of thinking and kinds of practice that became instrumental to the Civil Rights Movement, the greatest American social movement of the twentieth century.

NOTES

1. Douglas Rossinow, *Visions of Progress: The Left-Liberal Tradition in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 4.
2. Referring to the “decade spanned by the 1954 Supreme Court decision on school desegregation and the Civil Rights Act of 1964,” Bayard Rustin wrote that “the term ‘classical’ appears especially apt for this phase of the civil rights movement” in Bayard Rustin, “From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement,” *Commentary* (February 1964), 25.
3. Nikhil Pal Singh, *Black is a Country: Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 64.
4. Singh, *Black is a Country*, 53.
5. Frederick D. Opie, “Africans in the Caribbean and Latin America: The Post-Emancipation Diaspora,” in *A Companion to African American History*, ed. Alton Hornsby, Jr. (New York: Blackwell, 2005), 78–9.
6. Johnson quoted in Sudarshan Kapur, *Raising up a Prophet: The African-American Encounter with Gandhi* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 86.
7. Gerald Horne, *The End of Empires: African Americans and India* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), 97; Horne characterizes Thurman in this way, but it certainly applies to all four men.
8. Dennis Dickerson, “African American Religious Intellectuals and the Theological Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement,” *Church History* 74, no. 2 (June 2005), 219.
9. Dickerson, “African American Religious Intellectuals and the Theological Foundations of the Civil Rights Movement,” 219. See also, Zachery Williams, “Prophets of Black Progress: Benjamin E. Mays and Howard W. Thurman, Pioneering Black Religious Intellectuals,” *Journal of African American Men* 5 (Spring 2001), 28.
10. Randal Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays: Schoolmaster of the Movement A Biography* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 112.
11. Jeannine DeLombard, “Sisters, Servants, or Saviors? National Baptist Women Missionaries in Liberia in the 1920s,” *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 23, no. 2 (1991), 323–347; and Walter L. Williams, *Black Americans and the Evangelization of Africa, 1877–1900* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982).
12. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 1.
13. Arvind Mandair, “The Repetition of Past Imperialisms: Hegel, Historical Difference, and the Theorization of Indic Religions,” in *Difference in Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Philip Goodchild (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 293.

14. The black Christian intellectuals discussed in this chapter approached Indian religions in a way not typical for Western and/or Christian scholars. For example, Mandair feels that “few if any social scientists working in the history of religion would ever try to make concepts of these traditions into resources for contemporary critical theory” in “The Repetition of Past Imperialisms: Hegel, Historical Difference, and the Theorization of Indic Religions,” 278.
15. A thorough account of the discussion is Paul Knitter’s *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002).
16. Curtis J. Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 206.
17. Howard Thurman, *With Head and Heart: The Autobiography of Howard Thurman* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1979), 132. Thurman would have encountered similar questions about Islam in the United States. There was, of course, a diverse and longstanding community of black American Muslims. Richard Brent Turner has documented how “African Muslim slaves preserved their Islamic identities by refusing to internalize the Christian racist significations that justified the system of exploitation” in *Islam in the African-American Experience* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 24. In the 1860s and 1870s, Edward Wilmot Blyden believed that “Islam might be a preferable religion for African Americans” and “a focal point for an internationalist perspective” (52). In the wake of the failure of Reconstruction, Turner asserts that “black bitterness toward racism in Christianity was another important element in the creation of the new American Islam at the turn of the century” (59).
18. Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, with a forward by Vincent Harding (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 15.
19. *Ibid.*, 34.
20. *Ibid.*, 101.
21. *Ibid.*, 70.
22. August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, “The Origins of Nonviolent Direct Action in Afro-American Protest: A Note on Historical Discontinuities,” in *Along the Color Line: Explorations in the Black Experience*, eds. August Meier and Elliot Rudwick (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1976), 308–44.
23. Dennis Dickerson, “Rooted in India: William Stuart Nelson and the Religious Origins of the Civil Rights Movement,” James M. Lawson Jr. Chair Inaugural Lecture, Vanderbilt University, March 26, 2007, available at: <http://sitemason.vanderbilt.edu/newspub/bjfTyg/2007/3/26/lecture-rooted-in-india-william-stuart-nelson-and-the-religious-origins-of-the-civil-rights-movement>

24. James L. Farmer, Jr., "The Race Logic of Pacifism," *Fellowship* 8, no. 2 (February 1942), 25.
25. Howard Thurman, "My Dear Nevin," December 15, 1939 in *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman: Volume II*, 239–40.
26. Pauli Murray, *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 142.
27. *Ibid.*, 144.
28. Bayard Rustin, memo to A. J. Muste, John Swomley, Nevin Sayre, George Houser, and Al Hassler, November 9, 1950, ser. A, box 14, folder John Nevin Sayre–Rustin, Bayard, 1943–1953, 1964, Sayre Papers.
29. Bill Sutherland quoted in Bill Sutherland and Matt Meyer, *Guns and Gandhi in Africa: Pan African Insights on Nonviolence, Armed Struggle, and Liberation in Africa* (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc.), 10. See also George Houser, *No One Can Stop the Rain: Glimpses of Africa's Liberation Struggle* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1989), 10.
30. Bayard Rustin, "Revolution Reaches Africa" (FOR-U.S. Papers, Swarthmore College Peace Collection), 6.
31. *Ibid.*
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, 7.
34. For more on Rustin's and the American Christian left engagement with anticolonial movements in Africa, see Jean Allman, "Nuclear Imperialism and the Pan-African Struggle for Peace and Freedom, Ghana, 1959–1962," in *Transnational Blackness: Navigating the Global Color Line*, ed. Manning Marable and Vanessa Agard-Jones (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 333–354 and Leilah Danielson, *American Gandhi: A.J. Muste and the History of Radicalism in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 261–262; 280–284; 291–295; 299.
35. David Chappell even calls Rustin a "former Quaker," but Rustin was a member of Fifteenth Street monthly meeting in Manhattan for more than forty years, and I see no ebb in the Quakerliness of his writings throughout his life, see David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and The Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 55.
36. Rachel Muers, *Testimony: Quakerism and Theological Ethics* (London: SCM Press, 2015), 15.
37. *Speak Truth to Power: A Quaker Search for an Alternative to Violence* (a study of international conflict prepared by the American Friends Service Committee; available at https://www.afsc.org/sites/afsc.civicactions.net/files/documents/Speak_Truth_to_Power.pdf), 11.

38. A draft of the fourth section of *Speak Truth to Power*, with Rustin's name on the first page, is filed in a collection of Rustin's writings in the Fellowship of Reconciliation-U.S. Papers, Series B, Box 18 in a folder titled "1962: Corr. with Bayard Rustin."
39. *Speak Truth to Power*, 4.
40. *Ibid.*, 39.
41. *Ibid.*, 37.
42. Forty-five years later, in September 2010, the AFSC board restored his name as one of the authors. A "historical note" following the text explains how, "following objections to the inclusion of Bayard Rustin's name in the list of authors..., his name was deleted from the document." Later the short note seems to quote Rustin, that it was "his 'final and considered judgment' to have his name removed for 'largely personal' reasons," see "Historical Note about Bayard Rustin," available at <https://www.afsc.org/document/speak-truth-power>. Curator of Swarthmore College's Peace Collection Wendy Chmielewski has uncovered this was not the case; instead Rustin believed "his name should appear on the pamphlet and that over several weeks he negotiated with the AFSC to make this happen" in Wendy Chmielewski, "Speak Truth to Power: Religion, Race, and Sexuality, and Politics During the Cold War" an unpublished paper, 14.



To Save the Soul of the Nation: Martin Luther King, Jr., Christian America, and the Religious Left

Douglas E. Thompson

With the rise of the religious right in the 1970s and 1980s, the “culture wars” advanced a key concept that pitted religion against the secular (political) left. The object of religious influence in this strategy was to reassert Christianity’s rightful place in relationship to government.¹ In their parlance, the religious right fought for the soul of the nation.² In an interesting twist, Martin Luther King, Jr. had used similar phrasing in the late 1950s into the 1960s to describe the fight against Jim Crow segregation and then America’s growing military presence in the world. King’s rhetoric suggested that he placed the emphasis on a different strand of biblical hermeneutics. Rather than reaching back to a time when the nation was God’s chosen people, King’s orientation to the idea meant the nation had not yet lived up to its true calling. He tapped a long line of African American pastors who sensed that because of racism white Christians failed to understand fully the gospel’s command to love one another.

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This chapter examines King's understanding of a Christian America to suggest we need to situate his prophetic vision within the context of opposition to oppressive state power. Even as the political left gained ground on issues like civil rights and voting rights, King turned his attention to economic and human rights. President Lyndon B. Johnson's "war on poverty" and the real war in Vietnam highlighted for King how far the nation really was from God's kingdom. King became uncomfortable with the federal government in the aftermath of the successes of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act. He began to criticize its leaders, who talked of justice but did little to bring it about. This chapter therefore serves not as an exhaustive examination of the topic but rather suggests that we might better understand the complex nature of the religious left by paying attention to how African American religious leaders maintained a critical distance from governmental power. This approach to the federal government developed over time and was related to the question of how willing government leaders were to embrace the concerns King articulated to them. By the mid-1960s, in a phase of radicalizing that occurred after significant civil rights victories, King's prophetic stance called into question national policies that could not see the need for economic remedies for the poor. America could not be a Christian nation if it failed to look after the "least of these."

In the period between 1961 and 1967, King appears radical to white Americans. Within the movement, however, others saw him as a conservative preacher. As Kelly Miller had outlined almost fifty years before King's public appearance, African American leaders were all radical in their understanding that American racism had to be confronted but their "tactics" to defeat it took many forms. Miller, a Howard University mathematician turned sociologist, opens his "Radicals and Conservatives" essay with a "distinguished Russian" laughing when told that some black Americans were "radical and some conservative." "What on earth have they to conserve?" he inquired.³ The essay explored how African Americans negotiated the racial landscape of America and highlighted how radicalism would affect African American leaders' relationships to one another. Miller lived at a time of great angst for black Americans as the specter of white supremacy reared its power in response to emancipation gains. The essay examined the tactics used by black leaders to confront racism. Miller was a spectator to the Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois debate over racial uplift. The essay revealed the critical nature Miller took toward both men. He was exceptionally uneasy with the role William Monroe Trotter

played in grooming Du Bois and the “Niagara Movement” and the later formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). He thought Du Bois had a brilliant mind but sought out easy targets like Washington because of Trotter’s influence. Washington, on the other hand, had been too naïve in his rhetorical concession that black southerners would prove their worth and earn their civil rights.⁴ Miller argued that black Americans, whether conservative or radical, take as the rule that America’s racist assumptions have to be confronted, but the “tactics” differ based on relationships to power. Throughout his public ministry, King struggled with a similar problem: when he spoke out against Jim Crow customs in Montgomery he could appear radical to a white audience, but in the face of student Freedom Rides students interpreted his actions as conservative.

Regarding racial oppression, African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century affirmed that the federal government was necessary to protect their citizenship rights. In many cases this approach stemmed from the long history of individual states’ interpreting the Tenth Amendment to circumvent citizenship rights found in the U.S. Constitution. The Reconstruction amendments, specifically the Fourteenth Amendment, allowed redress for any abridgement of rights by individual states through due process. As it had been in the abolition of slavery, the federal government became the force through which African Americans could gain a fair shot at the American dream. In an essay on religion, Kelly Miller framed the issue as follows: “The Negro church has stood, and still in large measure stands, for the home, the school, and the State.”⁵

There is a need to untangle the legal/constitutional sense of justice and the moral/theological underpinnings of God’s divine plan in African American theological rhetoric from the political goals of freedom. The NAACP eschewed moral arguments to focus on challenging the legality of the infamous “separate but equal” doctrine of racial segregation and securing the power of the vote through voter registration programs. The radical nature of the NAACP in the early part of the twentieth century involved its leadership’s ability to see an America of promise and potential in the Constitution. The problem for the organization was that radicalization in the 1920s and 1930s raised the possibility of aligning too closely with the radical left in the form of the Communist Party. At the moment of its most concentrated effort to address Jim Crow in public education, the NAACP would reject any attempt to radicalize the organization politically.⁶ The legal dismantling of Jim Crow statutes remained the primary focus of the

NAACP's Legal Defense Fund. When individuals like Du Bois grew weary of the use of the federal government to bring about change, particularly as he became a target of that same government for his political views, others wanted to stay the course. Until the late 1950s, this legal approach dominated civil rights tactics. There were, however, other possibilities afloat.

The early 1950s were a period of wider mobilization of protests attacking Jim Crow customs and laws. These efforts often found expression in activities like bus boycotts. African American religious leaders pointed the way. Three years before the Montgomery bus boycott, African Americans in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, successfully carried out an eight-day boycott of the city bus lines. City officials had raised bus fares. Local African American leaders, including Rev. Theodore J. (T. J.) Jemison, protested the price hike. Rather than focus strictly on the hike, they extended their complaint to the unfair practice of reserving so many seats for white passengers who did not ride the bus line. The city council agreed to adjust the segregated seating arrangement without outlawing segregation. The city bus drivers protested the council's decision and the resulting strike brought the governor of Louisiana into the conflict. The attorney general of Louisiana announced the city's ordinance unconstitutional under state law. Jemison and other ministers organized black congregations into ride-sharing programs and boycotted the bus line. Within eight days, the city council conceded to boycott demands by limiting segregation to the two rows in the front and back of the buses with the remaining seats open on a "first-come-first-served" basis.⁷ In Baton Rouge, there was a blueprint for organizing a large-scale protest through black congregations. Jemison's actions also spoke to a new generation of African American preachers ready to tackle racial oppression in local settings beyond the legal strategy of the NAACP.⁸

When Rosa Parks refused to leave her seat in the black section of the Montgomery bus to make room for a white man, the institutional framework for rallying Montgomery's African Americans was in place. E. D. Nixon, along with an extensive network of women's groups, jumped into action, calling for an immediate boycott of the bus company throughout Montgomery. Ralph Abernathy suggested that some ministers in Montgomery wanted to establish an ad hoc organization outside the channels of NAACP oversight.⁹ The Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) formed to act as a buffer against the NAACP factions who would disapprove of a prolonged boycott. MIA allowed for the boycott to be organized and carried out by a different leadership group. In

this case, a group of pastors rallied to the cause, including the fairly new arrival Martin King. Nixon encouraged King's nomination as the president of MIA.¹⁰

The Montgomery campaign was not part of the American political left nor was King acting upon some political theory. Like the Baton Rouge bus boycott three years earlier, the campaign focused on specific, limited goals of attaining concessions from the bus company using the African American community's economic clout as the key. A separate legal victory, however, would bring an end to intrastate segregated public transportation. We often associate the civil rights gains of the late 1950s and early 1960s as part of a wider political move by the nation to a more liberal position on racial segregation. The bus boycotts reveal how well Kelly Miller's argument works. No African American southerner of the era would have thought that segregation was acceptable, but their approaches to making changes differed. Standing up to segregation was not radical from within the African American community. The emboldened influence of the ministers, however, created a space for a more radical position. King spent most of his remaining years figuring out ways to exert that moral influence. It might look like a radical political agenda—particularly on poverty—but it came from a different place than the political left. The prophetic voice in this form rested not on a political liberalism but a theological conviction about the image of God in humanity.

In light of the boycott's success and partly as a result of King's growing national prominence, a group of ministers who were mostly in their twenties and thirties formed an organization that would allow them to work together to elevate direct action protests to confront the Jim Crow customs. While the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) allowed for a broader ecumenical reach across denominational lines, the primary purpose of the organization generated greater autonomy outside the purview of denominational leadership or the narrow focus of the NAACP. SCLC became a regional/national version of MIA, working on specific goals without interference from leadership that might grow weary of confrontation. In relationship to national denominational bodies, SCLC was the radical faction among African American organizations in the American South. It also began to see itself playing a significant role in national politics, realizing what other groups had before: that only the federal government held the power to enforce civil rights for black citizens in southern states.

The fallout over King's success after Montgomery has skewed how we understand that moment in American history. The terms of the movement appear political in the sense that segregation's legal basis required political redress. As problematic as *Stride Toward Freedom* is in the actual recounting of events in Montgomery and centering movement activity on King, the rhetorical work found in the Montgomery bus boycott indicates a significant focus on King's theological understanding of the events. Like Jemison in Baton Rouge, the black ministers in Montgomery had staked out a space for social engagement.

King, like the other ministers, sensed God's work in their midst and framed the struggle in religious terms. The final chapter of the book, which shares a title with a later book of the same name, "Where Do We Go From Here?," reflects on the ability of the church to bring about change in the American context. King attached the meaning of the success in Montgomery to the rise of the "new Negro in the South." He believed in the words "all men are created equal," but knew that creed had not been borne out in the experience of black Americans. "The reality of segregation, like slavery," he noted, "has always had to confront the ideals of democracy and Christianity."¹¹

After suggesting the role that the federal government should play in bringing about change, King acknowledged that it could not compel a change of the heart—which was a standard refrain of moderate or even conservative politics at that time. He turned to northern liberals, southern white moderates, labor unions, and churches in successive order to highlight their roles in the necessary changes. The now-famous quip borrowed from Liston Pope condemns segregation in churches: "the most segregated hour in Christian America is eleven o'clock on Sunday morning ..."¹² One could interpret King's use of Christian America simply to emphasize that churches in the nation remained segregated. A second plausible understanding of the phrase is to situate it in the rapid expansion of American Christianity in the 1950s so that King understands the nation as a Christian nation. Later in the section, King framed the nation's place in history in Christian terms. It is a light on the hill, but one that has shown dimly because of racism and its practical applications in slavery and segregation. He concludes the section on churches with a rallying call that would become familiar thirty years later to Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority or the Christian Coalition. "Here, then," King concludes, "is the hard challenge and the sublime opportunity: to let the spirit of Christ work toward fashioning a truly great Christian nation. If the church accepts the

challenge with devotion and valor, the day will be speeded when men everywhere will recognize that they ‘are all one in Christ Jesus.’”¹³ King highlights the nature of the nation’s founding, but shifts the focus to its abiding place in human history. To be a beacon of freedom in the world requires that Americans recognize how far they have fallen short of God’s vision. “History,” he writes, “has thrust upon our generation an indescribably important destiny—to complete a process of democratization which our nation has too long developed too slowly, but which is our most powerful weapon for world respect and emulation.”¹⁴ His thinking does not look back to a lost past, but stresses the need to push forward to the promise so long delayed. King’s prophetic model was Amos. Righteousness, in the mind of the eighth-century BCE prophet, created an openness to the marginalized in society.

The success of Baton Rouge and Montgomery allowed black ministers across the region to sense a new dawn for widespread change rather than piecemeal and local reforms. The tactic also allowed the ministers to work in parallel ways with the NAACP’s successful legal campaigns. With Martin Luther King, Jr. at the head, the organizational home for this movement resided in the SCLC. Focused on empowering black ministers to agitate for change, SCLC oriented itself to persuasion rather than legal battles and used direct action protest to highlight the hypocrisy of granting African Americans purchasing power, but not equal access. Restaurants did not deny food to black southerners but humiliated them in their ability to access the food. Shop owners were happy to take money from a black woman for a dress, but humiliated her by not allowing her to return it if the dress did not fit. Bus lines were happy to take a black patron’s money, but then drive off without the passenger. It was the moral challenge of the 1950s and 1960s that caught the SCLC’s attention. The balance between the state protection and private intervention was built into the fabric of the movement. “We must,” King notes, “depend on religion and education to alter the errors of the heart and mind; but meanwhile it is an immoral act to compel a man to accept injustice until another man’s heart is set straight.”¹⁵ It would be this form of work that King and other ministers did best in the years between 1953 and 1965.

As Miller had noted, however, there were no limited number of tactics that African Americans could use to attain some form of dignity and civil rights. In 1960, black college students decided that the slow approach of the NAACP’s legal strategy did little to change the ways of white southerners. Meeting at Shaw University under the direction of Ella Baker, students

pledged to carry the practice of nonviolent direct action to eating establishments. The move was important and not without some legal difficulties. Unlike the bus boycott, in which staying off the bus is not a crime, the sit-ins occurred on private property. The business owner had legal recourse to address the trespass. The student movement, however, risked imprisonment to show the moral implications of Jim Crow customs. From the start, and because of Ella Baker's presence, SCLC endorsed the student movement that would become the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).¹⁶

The students brought an energy and a willingness to confront power directly. When their sit-in protests began and then spread across the region in 1960, they presented a moral quandary for the nation. Stepping foot into a private restaurant and failing to submit to the demands of a private property owner, the students willingly broke the law. This testament to facing the consequences of one's actions to highlight the immoral nature of segregation overwhelmed the nation's imagination. While white commentators focused on breaking the law, Martin Luther King, Jr. emphasized how the students revealed the importance of natural law over segregation laws. Two days after Thanksgiving 1960, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) aired a live television debate between King and James J. Kilpatrick. Billed as a discussion about "The Nation's Future," the public-debate-styled event engaged the legal and moral issues surrounding the burgeoning student sit-in movement. Kilpatrick, a newspaper editor from Richmond, Virginia, had risen to national prominence by creating an intellectual case for massive resistance to the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*. He had wanted to debate King on the legal and constitutional merits of the sit-ins rather than any moral questions raised by the protests. The thirty-minute program was a success for Kilpatrick.

Within the civil rights movement, the debate, if addressed at all, highlighted what appeared to be King's failure to defend the students in the face of the charge that they had broken private property laws. In newly formed SNCC offices in Atlanta, Baker and SNCC workers turned off the debate, even before the thirty-minute segment ended.¹⁷ For all the despair, there were two lasting legacies from that night. Material from the debate would be redrafted in "Letter from Birmingham Jail." He would also cast the civil rights movement in the language of a culture war.

In many ways, King was unprepared for the debate. Kilpatrick had been on a similar program earlier in the year and felt like he had been publicly

abused by the four-person panel and its host. He wanted a one-on-one debate. Kilpatrick had not been the original choice, but he was up to the task.¹⁸ Given King's remarkable oratorical skills, few would have thought Kilpatrick would gain the upper hand. Anyone doubting Kilpatrick's ability to debate these issues, however, had not been paying attention to his nearly decade-long defense of segregation in Richmond and his editorial position at the *Richmond News Leader* regarding the student protests. His public pronouncements were built on a particular reading of the Constitution and its nearly two-hundred-year protection of white supremacy. Where King wanted to use moral arguments about natural, or universal, rights granted from beyond the Constitution, Kilpatrick argued that rights were derived from the state and located in a specific understanding of the Bill of Rights, not natural law. Kilpatrick loved this kind of stage where he could engage in what appeared to be a legal debate—Kilpatrick wanted all debates about civil rights to be about constitutional rights and not about race—where the opponent had to admit that his or her position involved something beyond the words of the Constitution.¹⁹ King's strategy to focus on the natural rights found in the Constitution played into Kilpatrick's hands. While Kilpatrick focused solely on the rights of the property owners, King reoriented the Constitution toward natural rights, which the students' protests exposed. They were willing to take the penalty of jail to show the moral failure of segregation. He did not defend the students directly, but the line of argument aligned the laws of the nation to natural law.

Kilpatrick articulated a doctrine of strict construction before it existed in academic, legal, or popular imagination. By placing rights into a narrow frame of individual rights against the power and will of the state, he could champion the store owners' right to private property over the broader arguments about human dignity or the state's ability to interfere in the rights of individuals.²⁰ In Kilpatrick's hands, the protestors violated the right of the store owner to serve whomever he pleased on property he owned. "I want to ask Mr. King," Kilpatrick demanded, "if he would direct some comment to this question: Whence come the right that he asserts in these southern states on the part of the Negroes to eat in privately-owned lunch counters and department stores?"²¹ For Kilpatrick, individual liberties overrode all other claims, but unlike the later religious right Kilpatrick wanted theological arguments left out of the discussion.

King's participation that night, however, suggests that the culture war battle lines were drawn, and that the antagonist on the left, insurgent side

of this conflict—that is, King—was the one who was able to mobilize culturally conservative arguments about natural and God-given law for his purposes. Such claims, at that time, were far from being monopolized by the Christian right. For King, the soul of the nation was at stake because the nation had yet to live up to its ideals. Built in part on the creative energies of the Social Gospel movement from earlier in the century, the idea that sin and moral failure had a systematic quality found expression in seminaries and divinity schools across the nation. King encountered versions of the Social Gospel at Morehouse College, Crozer Theological Seminary, and Boston University. Since some scholars have focused on King's relationship with Reinhold Niebuhr, the working assumption is that King's theological orientation runs counter to the Social Gospel because Niebuhr spent so much time engaging its theological failings.²² King admitted that he found Niebuhr's emphasis on the moral failure of humanity attractive. He, however, continued to think the progressive work of kingdom building occurred here on earth, something Niebuhr's theological construction did not affirm.²³ His logic rested in interpretations of the Torah found in the prophets like Amos. It is the calling out of state authority that becomes important for understanding King's use of a divine plan in the nation's history.

This orientation, which Social Gospel advocates had used throughout much of the early part of the twentieth century, sees the state as an appropriate agent of progressive/positive change. By working for a just society, the nation becomes closer to the kingdom of heaven on earth. African Americans had, since the era of slavery, particularly after 1858 and the rise of the Republican Party, seen the unfolding of divine history in the agency of a strong federal government to overthrow slavery and establish emancipation.²⁴ In light of the Reconstruction era and the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, a federal government that could supersede individual states' authority and address violations of civil rights at the local level became synonymous with African American political identity. The legal victories established by precedent through the U.S. Supreme Court rulings from the 1910s onward only helped reinforce this understanding of building a more perfect union through federal legislation and court challenges.

The debate highlighted the nature of personal rights when Kilpatrick asserted the right of a business owner to discriminate on private property. King's argument revealed a separation from classic liberalism (a point where Kilpatrick kept his focus) and an assertion of the priority of a moral

claim in efforts to undo social injustice. In his opening remarks, King asserted that the students had the “highest respect for law” because “they want to see all laws just and in line with the moral law of the universe.” King used a line that appeared again in “Letter” to suggest the protesters “send us back to the deep wells of democracy that were dug by the Founding Fathers of our nation in formulating the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.” King’s theological orientation rested not simply in those deep wells, but in the cosmic movement of the universe and the conviction that the very nature of the United States’ destiny was at stake. “It [the sit-in movement] is not based,” he stated, “on seeking merely rights for Negroes or seeking to secure those things that would apply only to one minority group, but they are seeking to save the soul of America.”²⁵

King, however, makes an unexpected turn in his argument. “Letter” appears to follow a long trend in classical liberalism by asserting a rhetorical claim for personal rights. Indeed, the very context for the piece comes after a challenge about King and SCLC’s “right” to be in Birmingham because they were outsiders. The oft-quoted sentence—“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”—highlighted the interconnected nature of rights within this strategy. If black citizens of Birmingham were mistreated, it did not matter who stepped forward to defend them.²⁶ Rights in this way take on a universal quality and so King’s argument has been understood to be an extension of liberal Protestant influence on the political left in American politics. The paragraph that precedes that famous line, however, reveals a different emphasis.

Writing directly to the charge of his presence in Birmingham, King begins by pointing out that the injustice in Birmingham requires that he come to the city. The Baptist preacher does not launch into an exposition of rights but the nature of a calling. “Just as the prophets of the eight century B.C.,” he affirmed, “left their villages and carried their ‘thus saith the Lord’ far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town.”²⁷ God stands at the center of King’s presence in Birmingham. It may be that King’s rhetorical strategy helped religious moderates understand the nature of their own callings since the letter addressed the seven clergy of Birmingham and, more broadly, ministers across the nation who were silent in the face of southern segregation and the black freedom struggle.

Another possible way, however, to understand this emphasis on God's calling King and SCLC to Birmingham might cause some discomfort concerning King and his public ministry. We like to see him as the valiant crusader for African American freedoms, which he was. We also see him attached to a progressive political agenda, which he was. We are less inclined in our discussions about the political left to see his rhetoric as undergirding the idea of a Christian America.

At the end of his litany of American history with the recurring "we were here," King makes an important assertion into his argument that unfolding events will lead America to a better place, a more whole vision of its promise. "We will win our freedom," he claims, "because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands."²⁸ He reiterated this idea after praising the sit-ins, James Meredith's attempt to desegregate the University of Mississippi, and Rosa Parks, actions and persons white moderates had either dismissed or vilified, by identifying the true nature of the protest movement and its relationship to American democracy. "One day the South will know," he wrote, "that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby, bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence."²⁹ For King, the nation had not lived up to its promise of God's calling, the source for the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. The rights rest in the very nature of God, and God's demand for justice.

King, in his work after 1965, appeared to struggle to find his footing. Or at least that is how the popular version of the Civil Rights Movement functions. However, reorienting our view of King around his understanding of the divine injunction laid on his country helps us see how he became critical of the very things that required American exceptionalism. In light of the civil rights victory in 1964, King believed that President Johnson's 1964 State of the Union address and his emphasis on the war on poverty would clear the way for addressing the most pressing issue facing African Americans: the ability to participate fully in the economy now that they had protected access to public spaces. Neither King nor Johnson could envision the events that would soon unfold. Events in Vietnam and urban unrest across the nation would heighten King's misgivings about state

power even as he entered what scholars consider his most radical, left-wing phase of political engagement.

First, the Gulf of Tonkin incident in early August 1964 followed a summer of extended debate on Johnson's budget for the war on poverty. In the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, Congress granted the president full authority to take all measures necessary to maintain American interests in Southeast Asia, basically a blank check for the buildup. As King noted in his SCLC annual address less than a month later, the prolonged debate in Congress on the war on poverty resulted in less than \$24 per person annually for the poor.³⁰ Second, it had become clear to civil rights activists in the South, including King, that civil rights without voting rights meant that the promise of full citizenship remained beyond black southerners' grasp. After events in Mississippi—the killing of three civil rights activists—and the march for voting rights from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, the Voting Rights Act became a national priority, but it also strained King's access to the Johnson Administration. The military buildup in Vietnam threatened to break not only King's relationship with Johnson, but also with the civil rights establishment, including others in SCLC.

King had developed a threefold mantra to note how America's commitment to racism, materialism, and militarism threatened to undermine its primacy among nations and its work for democratic freedom. Concerning both poverty and Vietnam, his prophetic witness emphasized the strand in the biblical prophets like Amos who focused on God's justice seen through the nation's treatment of those on the margins. This critical distance from the state allowed King to question national policies that worried more about material gain through colonial suppression abroad than taking care of those within the nation's midst. King did not fail to find an outlet for civil rights work after 1965. The nation had grown tired of the messenger. He moved forward on poverty in a nation that sees the impoverished as devoid of personal responsibility. King argued, to a nation keen of maintaining its superiority in the world, that the use of military force failed to persuade others we were their ally. He called the nation forward to a different vision of itself. King's death in Memphis while marching for picketing sanitation workers who demanded a living wage means we need to spend more time focused on his post-1965 work and vision and the theological orientation that drove him.³¹ His vision of a Christian nation rejected the imperial nature of American foreign policy in the 1960s, particularly as it related to Vietnam and the rest of Southeast Asia. A nation that pursued

war in the face of the growing plight of the poor at home and abroad had lost any claim to be a Christian state that works toward God's justice.

In the face of civil rights gains by African Americans, conservative religious and political forces in the 1970s and 1980s coalesced around the perception that the federal government had lost its way, but their examples highlighted a fall from God's grace. The past held the key to the nation's greatness and a simple return to key values would return the nation to its divine appointment. The creation of a religious right allowed for a new characterization of the Christian state. In this case, the prophetic voice shifted to a language of purity like that of the post-exilic prophets of the Old Testament. The nation's return to greatness required following the correct set of values. Whether people pointed to *Engel v. Vitale*, the famous school-prayer case from 1962, or *Roe v. Wade*, or the Internal Revenue Service's challenge to Bob Jones University's tax-exempt status, religious conservatives in the 1980s advanced an argument that the nation, in order to be a Christian nation, had to return to its roots. The conflicts over social issues like promiscuous sex, abortion, war, and rights became enmeshed in theological language of a falling away from some earlier path where the nation was right with God. Oddly, the culture wars narrative never includes the civil rights movement. King's dedication, including how he understood his condemnation of the Vietnam War, to the idea that God's blessing on the nation should be understood in direct relationship to how it treated the least of these meant that he too had carved out the battle lines of the culture wars. King, however, did not see the past as a glorious moment of God's divine favor, but a failure to abide by God's commands. African American preachers had been disseminating this vision for more than a century. His theological orientation suggests that we could benefit from understanding how different factions have used this idea of a Christian nation. The religious left, through the rhetorical lens of Martin Luther King, Jr., appears to have a lexicon for the nation's divine destiny. The focus, however, emphasizes how the nation falls short of that claim in its treatment of the poor and outcast.

NOTES

1. The historiography of the Religious Right would suggest a more complicated understanding than I state here. Bob Jones University for example gave up on influencing the nation from its early formation and in fact fought a bitter battle with the Internal Revenue Service over its tax-exempt status and its policies on interracial dating.

2. Andrew Hartman, *A War for the Soul of America: A History of the Culture Wars* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).
3. Kelly Miller, "Radicals and Conservatives," in *Radicals & Conservatives and Other Essays on the Negro in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 25.
4. *Ibid.*, 2–27, 40.
5. Kelly Miller, "Religion as a Solvent," in *Radicals & Conservatives and Other Essays on the Negro in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 153.
6. Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). More recently, Anderson has emphasized that the NAACP did retain a leftist position on anticolonialism, even if its leaders did not associate the organization to larger currents of the radical left in the form of W.E.B. Du Bois's communist sympathies. See Carol Anderson, *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation, 1941–1960* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
7. Adam Fairclough, "The Preachers and the People: The Origins and Early Years of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1955–1959," *The Journal of Southern History* 52, no. 3 (1986): 410.
8. See David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).
9. Ralph David Abernathy, *And The Walls Came Tumbling Down: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1989), 144, 147–149; for a broader understanding of Montgomery see Adam Fairclough, "The Preachers and the People".
10. The origin story of MIA has taken on a mythical nature. Considering that all parties had a vested interest in being heroes in the Montgomery story, I have used Abernathy's telling since he gained the less from events. It is clear that he envisioned how the organization would work and the goals to be negotiated but received almost no credit for any of it at the time.
11. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986), 190.
12. *Ibid.*, 207.
13. *Ibid.*, 210–211.
14. *Ibid.*, 196–197.
15. *Ibid.*, 198.
16. Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Struggle: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 239–241; David P. Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution: The Student Interracial Ministry, Liberal Christianity, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), viii.

17. "Debate with James J. Kilpatrick on 'The Nation's Future' [New York, NY] November 26, 1960," *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. V: *Threshold of a New Decade, January 1959–December 1960*, ed. Clayborne Carson et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), footnote 3, 556.
18. William P. Hustwit, *James J. Kilpatrick: Salesman for Segregation* (University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 110–112.
19. Douglas E. Thompson, *Richmond's Priest and Prophets: Race, Religion, and Social Change in the Civil Rights Era* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2017), 103.
20. This approach is not all that different from the recent Hobby Lobby case (*Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.* 2014) where the assertion made by Hobby Lobby is that the owners' religious beliefs, protected under the First Amendment free exercise clause, prohibited their ability to provide payment under the Affordable Care Act for contraceptives to their women employees.
21. "Debate with James J. Kilpatrick," 559–560.
22. Of note here is theologian James H. Cone. He argues that Niebuhr's influence on King to modify the latter's understanding of sin and fallen nature of humanity meant "Niebuhr was unquestionably the theologian who shaped King's ideas regarding sin and its relations to group power." James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or A Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 30. See also David Garrow, "The Intellectual Development of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Influences and Commentaries," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 40, no. 4 (1986): 5–20.
23. Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr" June 1954, in *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. II: *Rediscovering Precious Values, July 1951–November 1955*, ed. Clayborne Carson et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 278–279.
24. Matthew Harper, *The End of Days: African American Religion and Politics in the Age of Emancipation* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 16–17; also Chap. 2 does a good job of explaining how the role of the federal government fit into theological orientations for African Americans.
25. "Debate with James J. Kilpatrick," 558.
26. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Mentor [Penguin Books], 1964), 77.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, 93.
29. *Ibid.*, 94.

30. "8th Annual Conventional: 'Annual Report Delivered at the Eighth Annual Conventional of SCLC,'" August 29, 1964/October 2, 1964. *The Morehouse College Martin Luther King, Jr. Collection at the Robert W. Woodruff Library of the Atlanta University Center, Inc.* Series 6: Southern Christian Leadership Conference Organizational Records (1957–1971) 6.1.0.480.017.
31. Highly significant contributions toward the study of King's later career include Thomas F. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Last Campaign* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007); and Martin Luther King, Jr., "All Labor Has Dignity", ed. Michael Honey (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2011).



The Catholic Interracial Council and Mexican American Civil Rights in Davenport, Iowa, 1952–1974

Felipe Hinojosa

For Latina/o immigrants in Iowa, living a dignified life has been rooted in the coalitions, movements, and organizations that have historically contested the everyday practices of anti-Mexican racism throughout much of the twentieth century. In the 1960s, for example, immigration sweeps in which workers were literally grabbed from the Blackhawk Foundry in Davenport, Iowa, were a regular occurrence. In one case, a Mexican worker was picked up at the foundry and deported with no chance to say goodbye to his family or even put on a shirt. The local chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC Council 10) in Davenport documented multiple cases like this in the 1960s, including one of a 12-year old boy pulled off his bike and questioned about his citizenship status. Immigration sweeps mobilized LULAC and their allies—white Catholics and the African American community leaders—to organize on behalf of the immigrants, workers, and communities of color who

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suffered racial discrimination in the city. This unlikely alliance across race and religious affiliation dated back to the early 1950s when the newly organized League for Social Justice (later known as the Catholic Interracial Council, or CIC) brought together a mix of Catholic clergy, community leaders, families, and students to fight for civil rights in postwar Iowa.¹

This essay traces the rise of Mexican American activism in the years after World War II and situates it within the long and historic work of the Catholic Interracial Council (CIC) in Davenport, Iowa. I argue that the work of the CIC in the 1950s helped pave the way for a cadre of Mexican Americans to fight against police brutality, residential segregation, and racial discrimination in Davenport and across the state of Iowa. While the CIC started as a movement to address the discrimination faced by African Americans, it did not take long for CIC leaders to recognize that in Davenport, “Negroes and Latin Americans do not share in the benefits of citizenship afforded to other citizens.”²

Much of the scholarship on Mexican American and Latina/o politics and activism is rooted in the regions where Latina/os have had historically large populations: the Southwest and Northeast. In recent years, however, scholars have turned their attention to the Midwest. In an effort to move “beyond Aztlán,” this new scholarship is focused on the long history of community formation and activism that has characterized Latina/o life in the Midwest throughout much of the twentieth century. A focus on the unique challenges and experiences of Latina/os in the Midwest is more than an important historiographic point; it is exactly what Mexican American activists like Ernesto Rodríguez envisioned in the 1960s and 1970s when he asserted that “geography doesn’t make Aztlán or a social cause, people do.” An important facet of this work focuses on religion and religious activism in rural and semi-rural settings in the Midwest. For Latina/os in the Midwest, religion was not only an important connecting point in helping new families adapt to the region, it also opened spaces for activism and organizing that in some cases resulted in interethnic coalition building.³

That Latina/os are the engine of demographic growth in Iowa and the Midwest is not an overstatement. Between 2000 and 2014 the state of Iowa saw a 110.5 percent increase in the Latina/o population, an overwhelming majority of whom are of Mexican origin. Latina/os are not only the largest minority group in the state of Iowa, they are also a young population with a median age of twenty-three. This demographic revolution requires a new focus on the Midwest that investigates how Latina/os

have forged community, organized for civil rights, and adapted to life in the region. While much of the literature on Latina/o religious activism highlights how the Chicana/o Movement—the civil rights movement led by Mexican Americans in the 1960s and 1970s—brought in religious participants, the case of the CIC in Iowa counters this narrative and shows us that what started as religious activism laid the groundwork for Mexican American activism. The works of Janet Weaver, Theresa Delgadillo, Sergio González, and my own work have addressed these points along with the importance of religious celebrations and festivals in forging community in the isolating, frigid, and often-discriminatory milieu of the Midwest.⁴

This essay follows in that tradition and sets forth a way to conceptualize the important role of religion in Mexican American civil rights activism by showing how in the Midwest—a region where Mexicans have lived since the early twentieth century—religion served as a motivating factor in shaping how and with whom Mexican Americans organized for social change. Religion, and specifically the work of the CIC in Iowa, I contend, does more than provide a spiritual reference point; religion and religious devotion also provided an “orientation,” a way to make sense of the world—of new surroundings—and as a catalyst to the forms of resistance and adaptation that have defined the Latina/o experience in the Midwest.⁵ The moment represented a continuity of the Catholic Church’s historic role in labor unions, and settlement houses, and public health campaigns, but a break in that new players, previously marginalized, took center stage. Latina/os and African Americans worked in step with the activist Catholic clergy and women religious to respond to racial discrimination and socio-economic inequality. Here, then, is the importance and relevance of the Chicana/o Movement for the religious left in the years immediately after World War II. It changed the color of the church and forced it to deal with its racial exclusions in ways it had never done prior. The fact that this was happening in the Midwest, in a mostly rural context, is reflective of the diverse places where Latina/o civil rights activism took place.⁶

LABOR, DISPLACEMENT, AND THE ORIGINS OF THE CATHOLIC INTERRACIAL COUNCIL

The first Mexicans to settle in Iowa did so in the years after World War I. Labor recruiters brought them to work in the railroad industry, in the foundries, and as agricultural laborers harvesting tomatoes and onions in southeast Iowa and sugar beets and asparagus in north central Iowa. They

came “orphaned of religious leadership,” as Catholic journalist Moises Sandoval argues, and with a strong tradition of anticlericalism that often put them at odds with institutional forms of religion.⁷ For many, the frigid cold and gray skies of the Midwest represented a temporary stop; a place to earn some money and quickly return home to Mexico. Some followed this pattern and some did not. When the Bettendorf foundry closed in 1932, for example, some Mexicans returned but others remained or moved to other parts of the Quad-Cities region of southeastern Iowa and northwestern Illinois (Davenport, Moline, East Moline, Rock Island). In Davenport, where residential segregation was the norm in the 1920s, Mexican families were limited to an unincorporated neighborhood in the southwest of the city known as Cook’s Point. The predominantly Mexican neighborhood included some 270 families and a little over 50 housing units. Cook’s Point, however, lacked most city services, paved roads, indoor plumbing, and clean drinking water. According to one report, the housing at Cook’s Point was “not fit for human beings...”⁸ The decrepit living conditions of Mexican families in Iowa were not unique. In 1951 President Truman’s commission on Migrant Labor found that Mexican migrant families have an “above average child mortality rate” along with the high rates of tuberculosis, stillbirths, and rheumatic fever, much of it a result of poor working and living conditions. During the middle part of the twentieth century it was quite evident that for Mexican Americans, like other communities of color, “more than desegregation was at stake.”⁹

The state of Iowa did try to put some housing regulations in place in the 1950s. The Iowa Agriculture Labor camp inspection program, for example, was instituted to assure safe and adequate housing for migrant families. But several problems existed. For starters, owners were only required to attain a permit for occupancy six days before a migrant family was to move in to the property. If at the time of occupancy the building was found to be deficient, the owner could petition for a provisional permit for 30–60 days. This would allow a family to move in even if the structure was deemed faulty. The system of checks and balances, then, was heavily in the owner’s favor. Even with the supposed protections provided by the state, Mexican families continued to be at risk as a result of substandard housing.¹⁰

But poor living conditions at Cook’s Point did nothing to deter the sense of community and support that many families had in the neighborhood. Former resident Basalisa Herrera remembered the “dances, baptisms, funerals, if someone was sick everyone would go visit them. We all

lived united. We would help one another.” Women especially played an important role in looking out for the community’s welfare, including as negotiators between employers and Cook’s Point residents. The mothers of Henry Vargas and John Terronez—both of whom would later be central to the work of the CIC and LULAC—handled much of the bargaining with growers in the area in an effort to garner fair wages and better working conditions. Ernesto Rodriguez, the son of a Mexican father (Norberto Rodriguez) and an African American mother from Alabama (Muggie Belva Rodriguez), was raised in Cook’s Point and attributed his rise as a Mexican American activist to growing up in a neighborhood where people looked out for each other. Rodriguez was born in 1928 in Bettendorf, Iowa, and lived in a boxcar that was converted into a housing unit located in the barrio of Holy City. He spent two years in the army (1951–53), became chairman of the American GI Forum (1968), served on the advisory committee for the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in the State of Iowa, and was a key organizer for LULAC.¹¹

So you can imagine the trauma and disruption that came in 1950 when the owners of the land, the Uchtorff Company, Inc., advised all residents at Cook’s Point that they needed to find another place to live because the land was going to be developed for other purposes. Between 1950 and 1952, displaced families confronted real challenges in trying to find affordable and decent housing in segregated Davenport. The Olvera family, for example, found this out when they rented a home in a white neighborhood and soon after began receiving “anonymous” complaints that they were no longer welcome in the neighborhood. City leaders were negligent as well. Rather than listening to their concerns, Davenport city leaders cited Mexican families for not taking action to leave Cook’s Point fast enough and blamed them for preferring to “live in squalor.”¹²

That’s when members from the League for Social Justice from nearby St. Ambrose College stepped in to help newly displaced families. In the years before Cook’s Point families were forced out, groups like the “Catholic Labor Alliance” and “Friendship House” in nearby Chicago were major influences on the progressive politics that emerged on the campus of St. Ambrose College in Davenport in the late 1940s. Founded in 1882 by John McMullen, the first bishop of Davenport, St. Ambrose College trained young Catholics to engage the world and “integrate Catholic principles into all facets of their lives.” Those ideals provided the religious and philosophical framework for the college’s engagement with the politics of race and labor throughout the first half of the twentieth

century. Faculty such as Father Bill O'Connor, who incorporated lessons on social justice into the sociology courses he taught, was a key figure in organizing students to become involved in addressing the social needs in the community. In the years before the CIC, Fr. O'Connor started the "Inter-Racial Club" on campus whose main mission was to document the economic inequality and racial discrimination that African Americans suffered in the Quad Cities. In 1949 faculty and students at St. Ambrose organized a conference on "Social Responsibility" that attracted young Catholics and clergy from across the Midwest. The conference highlighted the mission and overall philosophy that guided and influenced the faithful at St. Ambrose: they were committed Catholics and they believed in the social justice teachings of the Catholic Church.¹³

Not long afterward students and others associated with St. Ambrose and the work of Fr. O'Connor came together to organize the Catholic League for Social Action (later changed to League for Social Justice) in 1951. A year later, the group put the "spotlight onto the Negro situation in Davenport" with the publication of *Citizen 2nd Class: Negro Segregation and Discrimination in Davenport*. The small booklet exposed housing discrimination, educational disparities, and lack of access to healthcare that African Americans experienced in Davenport. Residential segregation forced African Americans to live primarily in two areas of the city: on the eastside and in central Davenport between 8th and 11th streets. While *Citizen 2nd Class* did not include how residential segregation affected Mexican Americans, an unpublished survey conducted in 1949 by the Industrial and Human Relations Club at St. Ambrose (led by Fr. O'Connor) arrived at many of the same conclusions about Mexican Americans that *Citizen 2nd Class* had revealed about African American life. Poor housing, limited access to health care, de facto residential segregation, low wages and dangerous working conditions, and businesses like barbershops and bars that refused them service were only some of the issues that, like African Americans, Mexican Americans suffered in the Quad-Cities. The only difference, however, was that for the most part the plight of Mexican Americans was not well known.¹⁴

That changed in the early 1950s when the displacement of Mexican American families from Cook's Point and their subsequent inability to find affordable housing in segregated Davenport raised the ire of League members. It was clear that progressive Catholic leaders cared about dismantling racism and economic exploitation in the city. In fact, when the activism on behalf of Cook's Point residents floundered a bit, they joined African

American and Mexican American activists in proposing a communal living plan for black and brown folks whose housing possibilities were severely limited in Davenport. While this interracial utopian vision never came to pass, it did forge friendships and partnerships between Mexican Americans, African Americans, and white Catholics that shaped Iowa's civil rights history in the late 1950s and 1960s.¹⁵

Nowhere was this coalition more important than in the work of Charles and Ann Toney, both prominent African American leaders of the Davenport chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), good friends with Fr. Bill O'Connor, and members of the League for Social Justice. The Toney family forged lasting relationships with emerging Mexican American leaders such as Henry Vargas, who, as it turned out, worked at John Deere Plow with Charles Toney. Ann Toney became close with many of the Mexican families through her door-to-door survey work at Cook's Point on behalf of the League in the early 1950s, where she learned of their housing needs, struggles, and hopes for a better life in Iowa. The relationships built between African Americans and Mexican Americans formalized in the late 1950s and early 1960s as Henry Vargas, Ernesto Rodriguez, and others joined Charles Toney (who in the early 1960s served as CIC president) and Bill Cribbs (Davenport NAACP president) at a barbershop in Davenport's black district to organize and strategize against the issues that negatively affected both communities.¹⁶

The visions and politics that emerged in Iowa resembled much of the Catholic activism happening across the country during the era that some scholars call the "heyday" of Catholic Action in the 1950s. The years after World War II proved to be active years for progressive Catholics who "reevaluated their roles in contemporary society, the national focus on racial issues and urban poverty provided a mechanism for engagement with the world." Not only had the Catholic Church become a player in social movements in the postwar years, but it had also "articulated a new Catholic racial progressivism" that emerged out of the philosophies of Catholic Action.¹⁷

The result in Iowa was an interethnic coalition committed to addressing the racism that girded the lives of Mexican Americans and African Americans. While some scholars have argued that Latina/o and African American civil rights organizations in the 1950s rarely, if ever worked together or collaborated, the coalition that formed in Iowa upends this notion. Interethnic coalitions were not only a Midwestern phenomenon;

blacks and Latina/os also have a long history of coalition building in Texas and California, as Laura Pulido, Gaye Theresa Johnson, Carlos Blanton, and Max Krochmal have demonstrated. But how did this happen in the heart of America's Corn Belt? Well, it involves more than regional specifics. The uniqueness here is tied to religious organizing—specifically Catholic Action—that brought families together by supporting each other's struggles and making public the discriminatory circumstances that governed the lives of Mexican Americans and African Americans in Davenport.¹⁸

CATHOLIC ACTION AND RACE IN POSTWAR IOWA

Under the banner of “Catholic Action,” Catholic activism emerged out of a series of social encyclicals by Pope Leo XIII (*Rerum Novarum*) in 1891 and later Pope Pius XI in (*Quadragesimo Anno*) in 1931. Teachings on social engagement emerged at critical moments of the industrial revolution and during economic downturns. Both of the encyclicals aligned the church to the mostly ethnic white labor movement and solidified the Catholic Church “as one of labor’s major allies.” The move to recognize the plight of workers and to ecumenical engagement, however, had been tempered by the xenophobia and anti-labor sentiment that many white Catholics in the pews carried. The years after World War I were marked by increased conservatism that for the most part limited the impact of *Rerum Novarum*. That changed with President Roosevelt’s New Deal reforms and a renewed commitment by the Catholic Church to regain a foothold within the labor movement. But even before Roosevelt’s New Deal, concerns over losing the faithful to Protestantism prompted the church to increase its efforts with Spanish-speaking communities.¹⁹

In the 1920s, for example, the ecumenical Council of Women on Home Missions organized summer programs for Mexican American farm laborers in California. Although deeply colored by racial paternalism, summer programs like this one reveal the early connections and efforts by the church to reach out to Spanish-speaking Catholics. If ignoring racial discrimination was a national practice, the same was not true at the local and grassroots level. In 1929, for example, Bishop Cantwell of Los Angeles appointed then Fr. Robert Lucey as director of the Bureau of Catholic Charities. Soon after, Lucey started five diocesan community centers with medical clinics and recreation areas in predominantly Mexican American

neighborhoods. Catholics did have a few settlement houses in the Midwest, but nothing that came close to the work of Protestants in this area.²⁰

The relationship between Mexican Americans and the Catholic Church continued to evolve in the years after World War II. In 1945, the newly formed Bishop's Committee for the Spanish-speaking organized councils that were tasked with investigating and responding to healthcare concerns, housing needs, and infant mortality rates of Mexican Americans, all of which had a catastrophic effect on community health. Much of this work was led by Lucey, now archbishop, who in 1944 organized a seminar for the Spanish-speaking in San Antonio as a way to get the conversation started on Mexican American issues. Fifty delegates attended the meeting in San Antonio, which was followed up by another seminar in Denver later that year.

In addition to reaching out and meeting the social needs of the community, the councils provided religious education for Mexican American children. Motivated at least in part by a fear that Protestants were making inroads into the community, Catholics set up a religious infrastructure to stall the supposed progress that Jehovah's Witnesses and other Protestant missionaries were making in Catholic communities. One of the first actions was to circulate the "*Somos Católicos*" stickers to all Mexican American Catholic families for them to stick on their front doors to dissuade eager proselytizers. These efforts were at least successful in connecting the institutional church to a new and growing Mexican American constituency in the Midwest. By the early 1960s seventy diocesan representatives worked with the Bishop's Committee for the Spanish-speaking in places such as New York, Miami, Cleveland, Denver, Madison, and Baker, Oregon, where working with migrant farmworkers was the central concern.²¹

In 1965 Catholic leaders in South Bend, Indiana, pushed for a Midwestern regional office that reached out more intentionally to Mexican American communities in the Midwest, especially in areas outside of the Chicago hub where an office for the Cardinal's Committee on Spanish-speaking already existed. An office was finally established in 1967 in Lansing, Michigan, that served Latina/o communities in Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, and North Dakota, and was operated by the diocese in each of the states that it served. The most significant move came when the Office of the Spanish-speaking moved to Washington DC and when Patricio Flores became the first Mexican American bishop in the United States in 1970.²²

But problems persisted. Even as Mexican Americans represented 27 percent of the U.S. Catholic population in 1970, Mexican American priests were almost non-existent. The battle to educate and train Mexican American and Latino priests who spoke Spanish and understood the culture was an outgrowth of the dynamic changes brought on by Vatican II and later the Chicana/o Movement. Vatican II (1962–1965) moved the church away from its fortress-like presence to one that vowed to engage the world and initiate a dialogue across faith traditions and practices—the revolution spoke of the whole people of God. Out of this movement emerged liberation theology, most notably with the writings of the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez, which stressed that empathy for the poor included a movement for fundamental political and structural changes. Poverty and economic injustice were no longer simply economic conditions, but now labeled as “sin” by liberation theologians. In Iowa, the best example of this were the three Mexican American activist nuns and biological sisters Irene, Molly, and Lucinda Muñoz, who organized migrant farmworkers in Davenport and Muscatine and were known as “trouble-shooters on the front lines.” Inspired by Vatican II, they helped organize a medical clinic for migrant farmworkers that eventually became the Muscatine Migrant Clinic in 1973. The clinic served over 2,500 migrant workers a year in 32 labor camps across the state of Iowa. These “rabble rousers,” as some Iowa farmers called them, had several confrontations with farmers as they listened to farmworkers’ needs, inspected labor camps, and reported housing violations to Iowa authorities. The work of these sisters reflected the rise of activist Catholics in the wake of Vatican II and the ways in which changes in theology opened the door for activist women religious and clergy to engage the injustice around them.²³

THE CATHOLIC INTERRACIAL COUNCIL AND THE RISE OF LULAC IN IOWA

These national trends also carried significant implications for the interracial work of the CIC in Davenport. When the work of the CIC started in New York City in 1934 it was the first to insert the language of race and racism into the conversation on Catholic Action, which until then was non-existent. No one was more important in this work than Rev. John Lafarge (SJ), who was one of the key thinkers in extending Catholic Action to include antiracism education. By 1954, there were 24 CIC chapters

across the country, including the chapter started out of St. Ambrose College in 1957. By 1962 the CIC had organized a “Brotherhood Mass” which attracted 1,000 people of all faiths and nationalities; they partnered with the local chapters of the NAACP and LULAC to pass a city ordinance for fair employment practices, and they worked to establish a “Fair Employment Practices Commission” in Davenport. But that was only the beginning. The CIC was involved in employment campaigns that urged business owners not to discriminate based on race, religion, or nationality, and in 1969—with the close collaboration of LULAC—they managed to convince the bishop of Davenport to support the grape boycott organized by Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers.²⁴

Part of what made the CIC in Davenport so successful was how they coupled political action with educational events. CIC organizers brought nationally known leaders to give lectures on race in America, distributed literature preaching antiracist principles, and organized workshops on dismantling racism. Mexican Americans played a central role in much of this work. Henry Vargas, longtime community activist and former Cook’s Point resident, served on the executive board of the CIC, and others, like Augustine Olvera, took what they learned as a member of the CIC to establish the first Iowa chapter of LULAC in Fort Madison, Iowa, in 1957, and later the American GI Forum in Davenport in 1958. But the two most important moves by the CIC came in the early 1960s when they joined other civil rights organizations in putting together a march on the Davenport levee five days before the March on Washington in 1963. The following year they established the Pacem in Terris Peace and Freedom Award. Winners of that award included John Howard Griffin, Martin Luther King, Jr., A. Philip Randolph, and Saul Alinsky. Those two moves gave the CIC national notoriety as well as brought national leaders to Davenport as they accepted their Pacem in Terris Peace and Freedom awards.²⁵

The CIC’s role in the development of Latina/o civil rights organizations in Iowa cannot be overstated. But it should be clear that this had little to do with the particularities of Catholic Action in Iowa and more to do with the activist and networking space that the CIC created. The CIC brought together black and brown communities and facilitated a conversation between two marginalized communities working to find their way in an overwhelmingly white and racist state. Religious spaces, especially in rural areas where communities of color are in the extreme minority, thus

created possibilities for interethnic and interreligious collaboration that continue to this day. “We seen [*sic*] what the NAACP could do,” commented Henry Vargas, “and we struggled to find an organization, a national organization, that would represent us.” That frustration eventually turned to jubilee as Mexican Americans started a LULAC chapter in the 1950s just as the organization expanded to the Midwest with the help of then President Felix Tijerina. In the late 1960s, the collaboration of LULAC and the NAACP formalized itself into a group called the “MIN-CO” (Minority Coalition). MIN-CO brought “together the NAACP and LULAC whose aims are to work for the betterment of the black and Chicano communities, welfare rights organizations, and Catholic Social Action...” While the organization was short-lived, it points to the deep connections made by both communities over the years. In the press especially, where the mainstream newspapers often ignored Mexican Americans, African American newspapers like *The New Times: The Only Quad-Cities Newspaper with Soul* stepped in and provided coverage for the Mexican American community.²⁶

By 1959 LULAC Councils had been founded in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. Interestingly enough, this new cadre of second-generation Mexican Americans, children of Mexican immigrants, had either been born or raised at Cook’s Point and mentored by the CIC and the NAACP. With a strong group of local leaders and support from the CIC, LULAC got to work right away in the 1960s. They addressed discrimination against Mexican American business owners, helped to implement bilingual education programs, and cooperated with the NAACP in lobbying for a director of the Civil Rights Commission in Davenport. By the late 1960s, when LULAC’s leadership in the Southwest was seriously challenged by a new cadre of young Chicanos and Chicanas, they remained quite strong in Iowa as the engine of Mexican American civil rights activism. By 1964 the CIC had 900 members, and by 1968, when they presented the city with its third proposal for a city ordinance for fair housing, its work with the NAACP and LULAC was well known.²⁷

As their membership grew, they expanded their educational outreach by providing a series of workshops that brought the police into conversation with Black and Latina/o communities in Davenport. “Racism,” as one report noted, “was recognized as an underlying factor working in the emotions, attitudes, and practices of police personnel.” Despite their efforts, however, city leaders rejected calls for the police department to hire Mexican Americans, use Spanish-language translators, and begin

printing literature in Spanish. This only increased criticism of the police. In particular, Mexican Americans and the CIC accused police officers of being more aggressive with Mexican Americans, of “arbitrary discrimination, harassment and abuse, and of being heard on more than one occasion saying that ‘all of them Mexican Americans are the same.’” They also maintained that there was very real “obliviousness” in the Midwest “to the recognition that other languages exist.” Things heated up in 1968 when over thirty Mexican Americans gathered to call on the U.S. Department of Justice to investigate police brutality against Mexican Americans and other minority groups in the area. Among a list of offenses, the group highlighted an incident where officers used their police dogs to attack a group of Mexican Americans after a minor scuffle broke out at *La Fiesta Tavern* in East Moline, Illinois, on November 23, 1968. Members of LULAC, CIC, and others gathered to protest. As one activist stated, the “use of dogs and police tactics... are being used and I believe the Spanish-speaking people in this area have been taken advantage of.”²⁸

These problems were amplified by the fact that there were no Mexican Americans on the police force in Davenport. Some, including Henry Vargas, believed that the lack of Mexican Americans on the force had to do with discriminatory “height and weight requirements.” In addition, LULAC and CIC members pointed out the number of patrol cars that gathered around the church when meetings were held that included a predominantly Latina/o or African American group. Common stereotypes and misperceptions plagued Mexican Americans in Iowa. “A lot of Anglos think we wear big hats, are fat, and drink tequila all day,” commented John Rocha. “What rankles the leaders the most is the census classification of ‘others’ for persons who are neither white or black... we’re tired of being others, but it’s hard to fight the state of Iowa.”²⁹

By the late 1960s, LULAC had become the center of support for the Mexican American and undocumented immigrants in Iowa. Citing work raids, deportations, and harassment of workers by federal immigration officials, LULAC became the primary voice for the undocumented community. They highlighted the contradictions of people with “light skin” who were allowed to overstay their visas, such as European immigrants or Canadians, while Mexican immigrants were constantly under surveillance. LULAC’s lead role in Iowa advocating for immigrant rights was several years ahead of national LULAC, which did not change its position on undocumented immigration until the early 1970s. As historian David Gutierrez has correctly pointed out, “LULAC and similar Mexican

American advocacy organizations previously had based much of their civil rights programs on their constituencies' American citizenship and had consistently attempted to emphasize the distinctions separating Mexican Americans from Mexican nationals." Gutierrez goes on to argue that LULAC's position on undocumented immigrants and their place in American society began to change in the early 1970s due in large part to the advocacy of Mexican American militant activists of the late 1960s. But in Iowa this was LULAC's position; they had found that it was impossible to separate the politics of citizenship from the politics of civil rights in a region where there were so few Mexican Americans and where the abuse seemed to fall most heavily on the undocumented community.³⁰

This became an even greater concern as the Mexican American population in Iowa began to grow—with estimates of between 17,000 and 30,000 in 1970. Another important organization formed in the early 1970s that called itself "The Area Board of Migrants." This was a tri-diocesan organization that started in the Quad-Cities region with a \$10,000 grant from the Human Development Fund of the CIC. The Area Board for Migrants served about 5,000 migratory laborers who worked annually in the tomato fields alongside the Mississippi river near Muscatine on the Iowa side and Illinois City and Edgington on the Illinois side.³¹

CHICANA/O CRITIQUES OF THE CHURCH AND A NEW THEOLOGY

As pivotal as the work of the CIC was in postwar Iowa, the intersection of religion and social movements, and the politics of what scholars call the religious left, are tricky engagements. Activists like Ernest Rodriguez and Henry Vargas never took anything for granted or assumed the CIC would always support their activism, especially as they developed their own separate organizations. Both continually and without reservation called on the Catholic Church to hire organizers, offer scholarships to Mexican American students, and develop more "Raza Priests" in Iowa.³² Certainly, cases in which Catholic leaders and religious organizations were as closely tied to the Chicana/o movement were not unique to Iowa or the Midwest. In places such as Milwaukee, Houston, Chicago, and Los Angeles—Catholics and Protestants—lay leaders, priests and nuns, joined the movement without hesitation or ambivalence. They did so out of a profound belief that the Chicana/o Movement aligned with the biblical calls for

justice and peace. For the most part, however, Latina/o historians have left out religion or essentialized it to cultural forms and devotional practices. In other words, the political place of religion in Mexican American and Latina/o history remains unexamined. This ignorance has hindered our understanding of how, as historian Gina Marie Pitti has correctly argued, “religion would prove central to the expression of Mexican American protest” in the years during but especially leading up to the civil rights movement.³³

Still, the institutional Catholic Church often lagged behind in its support of labor, educational, and political rights for Mexican Americans, and cringed at the political engagements of clergy and lay leadership. This helps to account for the fact that Mexican American activists across the Southwest, and in regions outside of the Midwest, often viewed the Catholic Church as being “the enemy of the people” or a “powerful patron.” For Mexican American and Latina/o communities especially, Catholic and Protestant churches were rarely incubators of progressive politics. Armando Rendón, in his important work *A Chicano Manifesto*, wrote that “churches, especially the Catholic Church, have helped the Anglo American to rob us of our pride.” Rendón goes on to note that “church bureaucrats can no longer operate their fiefs without regard for the needs of the poor.”³⁴ Indeed, most Chicana/o activists saw the church as void of idealism, of imagination, and as lazy in its support of social justice movements. Rather than imagine new possibilities for social change, the institutional Church placed more emphasis on penance, suffering, and political apathy. The most imaginative and creative work to emerge came out as a result of Latina/o theologians who started a conversation focused on a “Theology of the Americas” and a “Chicano theology.” These hemispheric conversations reflected the realities of war, poverty, racism, immigration, and a deep desire to better contextualize theological training. The Catholic Church “alternately resisted and embraced the cause for Mexican American equality” as it struggled to develop an institutional response that met the demands of its parishioners.³⁵

If the 1960s transformed the Catholic Church from the inside out through the reforms of Vatican II, the 1970s saw Latina/o clergy and laity work to implement those reforms. The 1970s were a period of theological exile, a moment when Latina/o Christians and theologians, stepped back or were forced out of their theological homes to reflect on their marginal position in society. They put pen to paper and produced a theology that

reflected their immigrant pasts, their political movements, their position as mestizos—Indigenous, European, and African—and in the process identified with the Jesus in the Gospels and pointed for strength to *la Virgen de Guadalupe*, the patron saint of Mexican Catholicism. This theology has served as the backbone for Latina/o religious politics and as the religious arm of the Chicana/o and Puerto Rican activism.³⁶

CONCLUSION

The Catholic Interracial Council in Davenport, Iowa, brought together progressive white Catholics, African Americans, and Mexican Americans who together organized programs that addressed issues around housing, education, labor, and police brutality. The movement was a contested one that did not grow out of some essentialized view of community, but rather out of a merging of Catholic Action's pointed antiracist critique and the agency of marginalized peoples. Here in the heart of the American Midwest, with its "high rates of religious adherence," the CIC stood to "blot out the sin and heresy of racism." For Mexican Americans who were new to the Midwest, the CIC helped forge an activist impulse that led to the development of several councils of the League of United Latin American Citizens and the American GI Forum across the state of Iowa in the 1950s and 1960s.³⁷

While it might not seem odd that a Catholic organization would be working on behalf of Mexican Americans—a significant constituency within the church—the CIC's work in places such as New York, Detroit, and St. Louis focused primarily on white racism and the plight of African Americans. But in Iowa of all places, where cornfields and open space abounds, a small but powerful interracial religious movement laid the groundwork for Mexican American activism specifically—and interracial coalition politics more generally.³⁸ The history of the CIC and LULAC in Davenport, Iowa, thus offers fresh stories and new possibilities that broaden our understanding of Mexican American freedom struggles. It also provides new topics and perspectives that, when linked together, provide a narrative thread with which to weave a relational Chicana/o and Latina/o civil rights history—one that takes into account the specific and complex spatial politics of Latina/o neighborhoods and places them in the broad network of black and brown religious activism that radically redefined the Catholic Church's stance on Latina/o civil rights. Although severely understudied, religion played an important part of the struggle

for Latina/o civil rights. In the case of the CIC in Davenport, radical clergy and laity created a space where activists could find moral fortitude, a place to meet, and a way to plan and organize broader organizations like LULAC. While some scholars continue to overlook the role of faith in social movements, we can take a lesson or two from the activists who saw the church as a space of possibility, as a space to build a movement that rested on community involvement, and as a space where the tenets of Chicana/o Power could blend with social Christianity. The lament that has emerged as of late on the failure of progressive religious movements in America only stands if Latina/o social and political movements are ignored. Moreover, to talk about Latina/o religious politics requires, I think, that we reorient our frame of reference for where and how politics take place. For Latina/o Christians, the Church holds an important place not only as an institutional presence, but also as a place for rituals that affirm cultural practices and a community that offers physical and spiritual healing. Latina/o religious beliefs, in other words, can rarely be so squarely defined.

The same can be said about Latina/o religious politics, defined as the religious values, beliefs, and culture that drive social and political action in community life. There is no clear genealogy or DNA structure; instead they represent the historic interaction between popular and institutional religion. The popular is often used as a motivation to respond to labor injustice or anti-Mexican racism. There are many examples of this throughout the twentieth century as Latina/o Catholics have participated in broader social movements as labor leaders and civil rights activists—much of it as an extension of their faith, as they saw the inequities faced by Mexicans in the Southwest as a betrayal of the gospel message. Of course, the church was not immune to racist practices. During the period between 1848 and 1960, the church effectively functioned as a partner in the U.S.'s colonization process by helping to maintain the racial and capitalist order in the Southwest. Latina/o Catholics faced daily indignities at the hands of white religious leaders who, in some cases, forced them sit on the floor to save the pews for Anglos and, as was the case in public schools, punished them for speaking Spanish. Latina/o religion, that is the religious beliefs (both institutional and popular) of people of Latin American descent in the United States, is rooted in a hemispheric history of conquest and survival. It is out of this struggle that Latina/os transformed the tenets of a European faith to reflect their own culture as a mestizo people, a Brown race.

Today, the church's political involvement, both Catholic and Protestant, in the immigrant rights movement across the country is an extension of the political tradition of resistance to religious hierarchy that was born during the middle part of the twentieth century. From the CIC in the 1950s to the Chicana/o movement in the 1960s and 1970s to the Sanctuary movement in the 1980s and now the contemporary immigrant rights movement, the church's involvement has been both cautious and prophetic. Telling these stories introduces us to new characters and new themes, both of which promise to reorient our long held assumptions about the place of religion in postwar America. If, as some scholars argue, "the Midwest shows every sign of remaining a good barometer of the national mood, and perhaps for providing the model for religion in American public life in the twenty-first century," then there are many lessons to be learned from the interethnic and religious politics that built a vibrant civil rights movement in Iowa. These are important possibilities as we collectively imagine and craft new narratives of those pivotal moments when Mexican Americans in the Midwest forged important and lasting coalitions with African Americans and white ethnic Catholics. They remind us that anti-Mexican sentiment has a long history in Iowa. Even so, there has been an equally long and storied history of resistance.³⁹

NOTES

1. "Minutes of Operation Jobs Sweep Meeting," folder: "Immigration and Employment, 1975–1982," Box 4, LULAC Council 10 Records, Iowa Women's Archives, The University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City (hereafter IWA). LULAC originally started in South Texas in 1929 and is the oldest Latina/o civil rights organization in the U.S. For this history and politics of LULAC see, Benjamin Márquez, *LULAC: The Evolution of a Mexican American Political Organization* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993); Craig Kaplowitz, *LULAC, Mexican Americans and National Policy* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2005); Michael Olivas (ed.), *In Defense of My People: Alonso S. Perales and the Development of Mexican American Public Intellectuals* (Houston: Arte Público Press, 2013); and Carlos K. Blanton, *George I. Sánchez: The Long Fight for Mexican American Integration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).
2. Janet Weaver, "From Barrio to ¡Boicoteo!: The Emergence of Mexican American Activism in Davenport, 1917–1970," *The Annals of Iowa* 68 (Summer 2009), 233; Discrimination Investigation, City of Davenport, March 11, 1959, organized at the request of Mayor Don A. Petrucci,

- folder: CIC, Box 8, John S. Smith Collection, Archives and Special Collections, St. Ambrose University, Davenport, Iowa.
3. Lilia Fernandez, "Moving Beyond Aztlán: Disrupting Nationalism and Geographic Essentialism in Chicana/o History," in Carlos K. Blanton (ed.), *A Promising Problem: The New Chicana/o History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 59–82. See also Marc Rodriguez, *The Tejano Diaspora: Mexican Americans and Ethnic Politics in Texas and Wisconsin* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011). For the Rodriguez quote, see Ernesto Rodriguez, "The Chicano and Racism in the Midwest," undated, folder: "Writings (Impressions)," Box 1, Ernest Rodriguez Papers, IWA.
 4. "Latinos in Iowa: 2016," Iowa Data Center Publications, www.iowadata-center.org. See Janet Weaver, "From Barrio to ¡Boicoteo!"; Theresa Delgadillo, *Latina Lives in Milwaukee* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Sergio González, "I Was a Stranger and You Welcomed Me": Latino Immigration, Religion, and Community Formation in Milwaukee, 1920–1990" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2017); Felipe Hinojosa, *Latino Mennonites: Civil Rights, Faith, and Evangelical Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).
 5. Thomas Tweed argues that religions function as "watch and compass" that help to locate "devotees in a religious-nationalist historical narrative and situating them in social space and the natural landscape." From there, religious devotees "map, construct, and inhabit ever-widening spaces: the body, the home, the homeland, and the cosmos." Thomas Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 81–84. The notion of religion as "orientation" can be seen in Tomas Summer Sandoval's work on the role of Guadalupe Church in San Francisco during the late nineteenth and much of the twentieth century. Tomas Summers Sandoval, Jr., *Latinos at the Golden Gate: Creating Community and Identity in San Francisco* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).
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 8. "Migrants and Police, 1969," Four Reports from 1969, The Iowa Civil Rights Commission, folder: Re: Mexican Americans, Box 4, John L. Schneiders Collection, Putnam Museum Archives, Davenport, Iowa (hereafter PMA).

9. Felipe Hinojosa, "Medicina Sí, Muerte No!: Race, Public Health, and the 'Long War on Poverty' in Mathis, Texas, 1948–1971," *Western Historical Quarterly* 44 (Winter 2013), 443; Laurie B. Green, "Saving Babies in Memphis: The Politics of Race, Health, and Hunger during the War on Poverty" in *The War on Poverty: A New Grassroots History, 1964–1980*, eds. Annelise Orleck and Lisa Gayle Hazirjian (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2011), 141.
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11. "Cook's Point, Davenport," <http://migration.lib.uiowa.edu/exhibits/show/barrio-settlements/cooks-point--davenport>; Weaver, "From Barrio to ¡Boicoteo!" 220; "Migration is Beautiful" <http://migration.lib.uiowa.edu/exhibits/show/barrio-settlements/holy-city--bettendorf>, which indicates that the barrio was situated on land owned by the Bettendorf Company in Bettendorf, Iowa; and "Iowa LULAC History 1957–1972," folder: General 1959–1979, Box 1, LULAC Council 10 Records, IWA.
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Black Power/Black Faith: Rethinking the “De-Christianization” of the Black Freedom Struggle

Angela D. Dillard

The *Black Manifesto*, one of the most curious documents produced from within the U.S. Black Power movement, was first presented during an evening session of the National Black Economic Development Conference (NBEDC) held in Detroit on April 25–27, 1969. Addressed to “The White Christian Churches and the Jewish Synagogues [*sic*] in the United States of America and All Other Racist Institutions,” it calls for relatively moderate ecclesiastical reparations—\$500,000,000 for aiding, abetting, and profiting from the exploitation and oppression of Black peoples—and articulates a program through which the monies will be put to productive use. With stern phrasing and staccato delivery, the *Manifesto* envisions the establishment of a southern land bank, a National Labor Strike Fund, funding for four major publishing and printing industries in cities across the country, training centers, and support for the multifaceted work of the International Black Appeal—an attempt to establish an independent fund for addressing the needs of unemployed workers—among other initiatives

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devised to serve the cause of self-determination and community control of institutions.¹

The *Manifesto* is also a document that represents, perhaps better than any other, points of confluence, tension, rupture, antagonism, and synergy among the era's secular, religious, and antireligious activists. As a result, the *Manifesto* and its historical context provide an ideal space in which to consider the somewhat contentious relationship between religion, specifically Christianity, and the Black Power movement. The constitutive role of religion and faith remain nettlesome issues in the study of modern Black political activism and social movements, and this seems particularly true of more radical political configurations. Because the *Manifesto* was delivered publicly by James Forman, a Black radical figure with a notoriously anti-clerical bent, it has been easy to overlook the degree to which the document is rooted in Black religious and theological traditions.

Forman, who was then international affairs director for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), was the principal, though not the sole, author of both the preamble, which incorporates a quasi-Marxist framework for revolution, and the main body of the *Manifesto* proper. The program from the Conference held at Detroit's Wayne State University lists Forman as the "Dinner Speaker" for the evening of April 26, and the title of his talk as "Total Control as the Only Solution for the Economic Needs of Black People."² When he mounted the platform to set the *Manifesto* before the assembly on that second evening of the gathering, he knew that his actual presentation, which tendered the *Manifesto* as a major resolution to be voted on and collectively adopted, was not what most of those in attendance were expecting.

Nor was it a total surprise, or a brazen attempt by a radical outsider to capture the Conference.³ Many of the NBEDC's key facilitators knew of Forman's intentions and approved. He was, moreover, championed by a range of Black nationalist figures in attendance, including Milton Henry, vice president of the separatist Republic of New Africa; as well as the Reverend Lucius Walker, the executive director of the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO), which provided the bulk of the funding for the NBEDC. In addition, one of the conference's primary conveners, brought onto the IFCO staff by Reverend Walker, was Lorenzo "Renny" (sometimes also written as "Rennie") Freeman, a Detroit activist with ties to the community-based, Saul Alinsky-style West Central Organization, from which he resigned in 1968 on the grounds

that a racially integrated organization could not hope to be effective in Black ghettos. “What was radical two years ago,” he insisted, “isn’t radical today ...and it takes radicals to bring about social change.”⁴ With this political and intellectual pedigree, the *Black Manifesto* represents the sharp edge of radical Black nationalist thought in northern urban industrial centers such as Detroit at the end of the 1960s. And this sharpness was enhanced by the *Manifesto*’s and the Conference’s shared rejection of “black capitalism,” especially the brand endorsed by the Nixon Administration, as a possible solution to the compounded problems of poverty and racism.⁵

The *Manifesto* was also a radical, *religious* document. Indeed, the central argument I want to develop in this essay and about the *Manifesto* grows out of my criticism of one dominant strain within studies of “the long civil rights movement” in twentieth-century America. There is a troubling dichotomy that depicts the postwar, southern-based Civil Rights Movement as primarily, even aggressively, religious—from its leadership in and around the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) to the hundreds of mass meetings and gatherings in local churches where the spirit moved the congregants in song and prayer—while the northern-based, post-1966 Black Power movement is viewed as primarily, even aggressively, secular and anticlerical. My contribution calls for critical reflection on the ways in which the religious/secular divide has been inadequately and inaccurately invoked.

I want to insist that the story was also much more complex, especially in terms of the supposed de-Christianization of the Black Power movement. For instance, the *Reverend* Martin Luther King, Jr. had a counterpart in *Minister* Malcolm X. Both were men of the cloth who used their faith to inform and justify their political positions. Both were clerical organizers and activists. King’s success is nearly unintelligible without reference to his acumen as a Black political minister and much the same can be said of Malcolm X, whose power and appeal—he brought thousands of bodies and souls into the fold of the Nation of Islam—cannot be fully realized without reference to his religious orientation.⁶ Moreover, the “secular” Black Power movement that gave rise to Black consciousness and Black arts also helped to generate a Black theology that would force a reexamination of notions of sin, salvation, and God and of liberation, both spiritual and political. As was the case with the old progressive Social Gospel, and with more recent versions of Marxist liberation theology, salvation (rendered as

a form of liberation) is decidedly collective in nature. The ability to read salvation/liberation as at once spiritual and temporal, along with a shared *critique* of the failings of mainstream Christianity and the old “Negro” Church, probably did the most to erect a bridge between Black Power and this incarnation of Black faith.

Despite the contributions of a range of religious individuals and organizations, most histories of the Black Power movement are insistently secular or at least not attuned to the movement’s religious aspects.⁷ Most notable for the degree to which it brings together a negative evaluation of the Black Power movement and an argument about the de-Christianization of Black radical politics is Charles Marsh’s *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice from Civil Rights to Today*. Marsh affirms the moral vision of the southern Civil Rights Movement, and bemoans its abandonment and betrayal in the wake of Black Power. “The story of the civil rights movement in America concludes,” Marsh writes, “with this final period [after 1968] of fragmentation and disillusionment.” A religiously informed movement for social justice and the concomitant desire for “redemption, reconciliation and the creation of a beloved community” is not revived, according to Marsh, until well after the Black Power era has given way to the post-civil rights period of the 1980s and 1990s.⁸

A different story can be told from the vantage point of the religious men and women who were well represented among the roughly 600 delegates at the National Black Economic Development Conference in Detroit.⁹ Some within the Christian contingent were also members of the recently founded National Conference of Black Churchmen: a group of Black ministers and theologians who had already caused a stir with their “Statement on Black Power,” published in the *New York Times* in July 1966. “As black men who were long ago forced out of the white church to create and to wield ‘black power,’” that statement read, “we fail to understand the emotional quality of the outcry of some clergy against the use of the term today.

It is not enough to answer that ‘integration’ is the solution. For it is precisely the nature of the operation of power under some forms of integration which is being challenged. The Negro church was created as a result of the refusal to submit to the indignities of a false kind of ‘integration’ in which all power was in the hands of white people. A more equal sharing of power is precisely what is required as the precondition of authentic human interaction.¹⁰

While serving as a spirited, yet not quite radical, defense of Black Power, the Churchmen’s statement also emphasized the need for human interaction, a vision of a common humanity, and a call for all Americans to work together to “rebuild our cities.”

The men and women of IFCO and the Black Churchmen were certainly distributed between those who ratified the *Manifesto* (by a vote of 187), those who rejected the *Manifesto* (63 votes), and the majority who apparently preferred to abstain or who were not in attendance at the evening session. The Reverend Walker claimed a three to one ratio of assent, but that was an instance of fuzzy and misleading political calculation.¹¹ Regardless of the actual count, the presence of religious activists can also be felt in the fine line the document walks between a critique of “white Christianity” and a wholesale rejection of *all* religious tendencies. White Christians and Jews were advised to immediately comply with the *Manifesto*’s demands and to work under the leadership of Blacks to implement its goals. While urging the religious to practice the dictates of “patience, tolerance, understanding and nonviolence” long preached towards Blacks, the *Manifesto* also threatens to go “to war” against white institutions that prove recalcitrant.¹²

A similar kind of ambiguity is exuded in the document’s attitude toward Black Christians. The *Manifesto* assures this part of its audience that “[w]e do not intend to abuse our black brothers and sisters in black churches who have uncritically accepted Christianity,” and that an attack on their religious beliefs is not “our major objective.” To this already backhanded gesture, they added: “even though we know that we were not Christians when we were brought to this country, but that Christianity was used to enslave us.”¹³ The existence of larger numbers of Black Christians and the realities of the Afro-Christian faith sit as a set of unresolved tensions within the broader context of the document; but even as it challenges Black Christians it does not exclude them. That is what made the difference.

THE BLACK MANIFESTO, IFCO AND THE BEDC: BUILDING A RADICAL-RELIGIOUS COALITION

Despite the *Manifesto*’s ambiguity regarding Christians, the call for reparations, coupled with the call for unity among Black peoples, is what ultimately allowed the increasingly radicalized NCBC to endorse the *Manifesto* notwithstanding its mixed reception in Detroit and beyond.¹⁴ The

document was also re-ratified by the organization that subsequently took the name Black Economic Development Conference, or BEDC.¹⁵ While ostensibly secular, the short-lived BEDC would struggle to concretize an emergent, potentially potent, and religiously-inflected alliance with the National Conference of Black Churchmen, the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, sharing resources and at points overlapping membership.

In the fall of 1967, for instance, Charles S. Spivey, Jr., of the National Council of Churches of Christ's Department of Social Justice, issued an "imperative" and "immediate" call for increased coalition building to Walker (IFCO), Metz Rollins (NCBC), Calvin Marshall (BEDC) and Hosea Williams (SCLC). At the very top of his proposed agenda was "further discussion and joint action" with regard to the interrelationship of these groups and their collective relationships to white churches, foundations and agencies. "The extended delay in coming together," he concluded, "will work to the disadvantage of all."¹⁶ Work in coalition was nothing new for IFCO. The organization had worked in conjunction with the Black Churchmen on previous occasions, including a request from the NCBC to conduct workshops on the basic tenets of community organizing at their national gathering in St. Louis in 1968. One session in particular, on "Black Churchmen and Community Organization," featured Walter Breman, chairman of the Los Angeles-based Black Congress, as well as Ron Karenga of the US Organization. Both groups, the former an umbrella organization embracing the concept of "operational unity," the later one of the chief progenitors of 1960s-era cultural nationalism, received ample funding from IFCO. Also on the program was a joint session on "Black Churchmen and Economic Development in the Black Community" with religious and secular activists from Harlem, Detroit, Chicago, and Los Angeles.¹⁷

For the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization, the *Black Manifesto* caused some internal friction within its board and problems with the national churches that provided the bulk of IFCO's funding. But the document itself was less a challenge than an affirmation. As one IFCO report put it, "It [the *Manifesto*] takes a 'hard line,' uses frank language which will not make it pleasant reading for Whites, but includes many excellent ideas for economic development of the Black community."¹⁸ Indeed, stripped of its overtly Marxist framework (but not its rejection of Black capitalism), the *Manifesto* embodied many of the stated goals of IFCO and the majority of its board members. Founded in 1967

with pooled funding from one non-church agency and nine religious bodies—Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish—IFCO’s primary mission was to act as a “bridge or broker” between predominantly white churches and minority communities. Embracing the operative concept of self-determination as expressed in the community organizing movement, this experiment in functional ecumenism sought to provide “the necessary technical, financial, moral and physical resources for minority empowerment.”¹⁹

Guided by the Reverend Lucius Walker, the executive director of the group from its inception, IFCO was also rooted in the realization of the limitations of the public sector, the state, in dealing with poverty, racism, and the “development of effective institutional forms in poor and minority communities.” Walker, an ordained Baptist minister who once pastored a nearly all-white congregation in Milwaukee, was well aware of the paradoxes incumbent in promoting internal self-determination in African American, Latinx, and Native American communities by deploying external resources. To compensate he insisted that IFCO funds be virtually unconditional and free from excessive bureaucratic regulation beyond the initial vetting process and some periodic review of progress. Walker also led the diversification of the organization’s Board of Directors, expanding the number to thirty-nine with twenty African Americans, eighteen white representatives of religious and community organizations, and one Mexican American member. By the early 1970s the board would also come to include Native American representatives and would achieve, by design, a nonwhite majority; becoming the largest minority-controlled foundation in the country and, in terms of total grants, among the top two hundred foundations in the United States.

IFCO’s working methodology emerged experientially on a case-by-case basis, with a commitment to training indigenous activists and to fostering a resource base inside of communities. Partly, this goal is expressed in the *Manifesto*’s proposed International Black Appeal (“charged with producing more capital for the establishment of cooperative businesses in the United States and in Africa, our Motherland”) as well as in IFCO’s own subsequent plans for a Black United Appeal designed to raise monies directly from within Black communities themselves.²⁰ At the center of this mission was a vision of cooperative economics with community control, involvement, and, ideally, community self-funding. “IFCO is neither all black or all white or all anything,” Walker explained:

It is clearly committed to minority self-determination programs. It is clearly black controlled. The majority of its resources have been committed to programs which fall with a broad nationalist category. These efforts, however, have been sanctioned and administered through a coalition of blacks, whites, Indians and Chicanos.²¹

The National Black Economic Development Conference, the resulting BEDC, and even the *Black Manifesto* should all be seen in this light.

Plans for what would become the NBEDC commenced in the fall of 1968, some five months after the assassination of Reverend Martin L. King, Jr., and nearly coterminous with the logistical and ideological malaise, not to mention the rain and the mud, hampering the SCLC's Poor People's Campaign in the nation's capital.²² From September 1967, when it first began to distribute grant money, until April 1969, on the eve of the Detroit conference, IFCO had committed \$1,143,000 in 871 grants to specific organizations, including over \$137,000 to the National Welfare Rights Organization; \$5,800 to Los Angeles's Black Congress; \$7,000 to Detroit's West Central Organization; and \$20,000 to the Chicago-based Interreligious Council on Urban Affairs. An additional \$33,483 was committed to a variety of training grants, with another \$79,267 in the "special grants" category, including \$50,000 allocated to the National Black Economic Development Conference.²³ Although IFCO would be publicly accused of funding a range of "dangerous" revolutionaries such as the Black Panther Party, La Raza Unida and eventually the American Indian Movement (AIM), no IFCO-funded project was as controversial as the NBEDC with its *Black Manifesto*.²⁴ As a politically and ideologically charged focal point for the efforts of a number of overlapping organizations, the *Manifesto* offers an unusually rich site for exploring the relationships between Black Power and Black faith at a time when the meaning of civil rights and the course of the Black freedom struggle were being reconfigured in light of the movement's cumulative successes and failures.

THE *BLACK MANIFESTO*, THE BLACK CHURCH, AND THE RISE OF A BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

It was also a time, not coincidentally, when black religious activists and theologians were striving to make the Black Church²⁵ more relevant to the political, spiritual, and economic lives of black communities. The southern wing of the Civil Rights Movement, in which the SCLC, along with

individual black congregations, played such a commanding role, had demonstrated the vast potential of the Black Church to mobilize people and to force fundamental social and political change. And other Black clergy were ready to continue to push the struggle and the church itself in more radical directions—beyond civil rights and into the realm of liberation, complete with its own theological blueprint. Traveling in this direction meant passing through a critique of the old “Negro Church” as ineffectual and overly accommodating to social, political, and religious structures of exclusion. For many, the aim was to reflect on the history of Afro-Christianity, to learn from both its strengths and weakness, and ultimately to surpass and supplant the old church with a new, more activist and more radical, one. The Reverend Albert B. Cleage, Jr., a member of the IFCO Board, an attendee at the Detroit Conference and a leading figure in Black theological circles, was brutal and incisive in his critique. He argued that the “Negro church has prospered poorly in the North because it has been unable to relate the gospel of Jesus Christ meaningfully to the everyday problems of underprivileged people in urban industrial communities” and because it has lost touch with the authenticity of “the folk.”²⁶

For Cleage, the only way forward was to reject what he called “the traditional concept of church,” and to replace it with “a Black Liberation movement which derives its basic religious insights from African spirituality, its character from African communalism, and its revolutionary direction from Jesus, the Black Messiah.”²⁷ Moreover, this institutional reorientation must be mirrored by an individual transformation. In order to fully embrace the Black Church as the foundation for a new Black Nation, Cleage expected that the guilty and sinful would reorient their lives and recreate themselves in acts of atonement. They must declare, Cleage sermonized,

I have been an Uncle Tom and I repent. I have served the interests of my white oppressor all my life because in ignorance I identified with him and wanted to be like him, to be accepted by him, to integrate with him. I loved my oppressor more than I loved myself. I have betrayed my Black brothers and sisters to serve the interests of the oppressor...²⁸

While other critiques were less trenchant, there was a widely shared sense that a new Black theology and a new attitude toward African American churches and their religious expression was required to meet the needs

and demands of congregants, especially those in disadvantaged and marginalized communities.

A 1969 official statement of the National Conference of Black Churchmen defined Black theology as “a theology of liberation... [that] seeks to plumb the black condition in light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity.” As a “theology of blackness,” it affirms black humanity in a way that “emancipates black people from white racism” and thereby provides an authentic form of freedom for blacks and, in due course, for whites as well.²⁹ The brand of freedom presupposed was not only the freedom of worship, but also self-determination in terms of culture, politics, social life, and economics in a union of the spiritual with the material.

Because most renderings of Black Theology from this period are embedded in notions of political struggle, it is far from surprising that some of the key figures associated with the early years of Black Theology, particularly members of the National Conference of Black Churchmen, were present, or at least invoked, at the Detroit gathering in April 1969. On the slate of people put forth for the future leadership of the Conference were local Black radicals like John Watson, and Luke Tripp, as well as national civil rights figures such as Fannie Lou Hamer and Julian Bond, along with religious activists including Vincent Harding, who would go on to compose his own eloquent defense of “The Religion of Black Power.” In that seminal essay, which dovetails with the NCBC’s definition, Harding contends that Black Power holds “a healthy possibility for the coming of true religious community.” A bit further on he continues:

If one follows this invaluable line of thought, it is obvious that Black Power has within it the possibility of setting black men in an entirely new light—the light of their Creator. They are called upon to see themselves as they were meant to be. This glorification has the potential of setting them at peace with themselves—and with the creative purposes of the universe; they no longer need to curse God and die. For their blackness is now—like the rest of their createdness—a sign of His love and not His anger.³⁰

The relationship between this emergent strain of Black liberation theology and the *Black Manifesto* is complex, but even if such a thing were deemed desirable, it is not even *possible* to de-Christianize the document.

The National Black Economic Development Conference that produced this searing denunciation of the racism of white Christians (and the complacency of some Black ones as well) was funded by a predominantly white Christian organization, IFCO, with several active and militant African American and Latinx members. One of them, the Reverend Cleage, had been long been a controversial figure in Detroit. On Easter Sunday, 1967, he unveiled an 18-foot painting of the Black Madonna and Child and subsequently re-christened his church as the Shrine of the Black Madonna. In the aftermath of the massive urban rebellion later that year, Cleage became one of the central figures in the local political scene and was known to boast that his church was a hub of Black nationalist activity in Detroit. “This morning’s paper has an article listing all the Black Nationalist groups in the city,” Cleage opened one Sunday sermon, “saying that for all or most of them the Shrine of the Black Madonna is their spiritual home.”³¹

In striving to create a sense of cooperation and dialogue among the various factions of Black nationalism in Detroit, the Reverend Cleage was also cognizant of the growing rift between some militant activists and the organized church. In another stirring sermon he insisted that “The Black Church must recapture the loyalty of black youth if it is to be significant in the black revolution.”³² Entitled, “An Epistle to Stokely,” the sermon also spoke directly to the alienated younger activists:

To Stokely and the young men in SNICK [*sic*], I would just say briefly that the Christian religion you are rejecting, that you are so opposed to, is a slave Christianity that has no roots in the teachings of the Black Messiah. You could be ordained in *this* church as civil rights workers if we could somehow do away with the distinctions which exist in people’s minds between what’s religious and what’s not religious. To ordain civil rights workers for civil rights work would declare that the Christian Church believes that this is what Christianity is all about, that individuals who give their lives in the struggle for human freedom are Christian and that the Movement is not only Christian, but that the Movement is the Church.³³

In this sermon he prefigures the *Manifesto*’s criticism of Christianity as a religion imposed on African slaves by white masters, but insists that an authentic Afro-Christianity has its foundations elsewhere—in what scholars would come to identify as indigenous slave practices such as the ring shout, the establishment of autonomous spaces for worship and collective

self-expression in “hush harbors,” and in other modes of resistance to the religion of their oppressors. As articulated in his critique of the old Negro Church, a truly Black religion in Cleage’s view need not be non-Christian. It need only be true to its own historically Black roots.³⁴

Reverend Cleage was hardly alone in his understanding of the practical and the symbolic importance of churches as both sites of internal community organizing and as sites of contestation. While sidestepping the former function of religious institutions, the *Black Manifesto* embraced the latter. In the section of the document that acknowledges the need for “massive support,” the authors summoned Black people “to commence the disruption of the racist churches and synagogues [*sic*] throughout the United States” on May 4, 1969 or a date thereafter, “depending on local conditions.” Heeding his own call, on Sunday morning, May 4, a determined James Forman strode down the aisle of the historic Riverside Church in New York City, disrupted services, and seized the pulpit. Black theologian and historian Gayraud Wilmore describes Forman at Riverside, “bearded and brandishing his staff like an Old Testament prophet,” and it was a dramatic action directed toward a historically significant target. Riverside’s Gothic cathedral housed a noted interdenominational and interracial congregation that had frequently opened its doors and coffers to Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights advocates. On April 4, 1967, “in this magnificent house of worship,” King delivered his “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break Silence” sermon, urging a widespread rejection of the Vietnam War on moral grounds. Two years and one month later, King was dead and Forman was in the pulpit.³⁵

The confrontation could have been avoided. Forman met with Dr. Ernest Campbell, the head pastor of the church, on the Saturday evening prior to the next morning’s Communion Sunday. Reverend Campbell insisted that Forman not present the full text of the *Manifesto*, but, rather, a two-page synopsis addressed more specifically to Riverside. Forman categorically refused. One half-hour before services, Campbell stood on the steps of the church and announced that if Forman entered the sanctuary, services would be canceled. Forman did, and Campbell acted on his threat; some five minutes into Forman’s usurpation Campbell and a large body of the faithful walked out as Forman’s booming voice reverberated from the stone walls and slate floor.³⁶ “Ernest Campbell... trembles now at the sight of a black revolutionary standing in his church,” Forman subsequently reflected. “He tries to speak. I try to speak. He calls off the services and

walks out of the church. I stand quietly, hatred of the West and its ‘Christianity’ and its controls giving me strength and determination.”³⁷ While Forman was certainly disruptive, it is less clear (and not very convincing) that his actions constituted an actual desecration, as some would later claim. And yet Forman’s actions would prove to be counterproductive precisely because they attracted so much negative judgment. His actions, branded as “rash,” “radical” “unseemly” and “blasphemous,” would become part of the justification for not taking the demands for reparations seriously, even among those inclined to respond to their moral flavor.³⁸

THE *BLACK MANIFESTO* AND CRITIQUES OF (WHITE) CHRISTIANITY

If Albert Cleage represents one side of the relationship between Black Power and Black faith, between religion and politics, then Forman represents the other. Whereas the Reverend Cleage called for an erasure between “what’s religious and what’s not religious” and attempted to redefine Christianity as the religion of a Black Jesus who was a Black Revolutionary and founder of a Black Nation, Forman was overtly hostile to all religion, particularly its institutional manifestations in “white” Christianity. In a talk given at the National Black Theatre in July 1969, he counted the “dogma and practice of the white Christian churches” among the “approximately thirty major control factors operating upon us,” factors that manufactured and compelled consent to an oppressive system. After the “hypocritical” concept of citizenship, the educational process, and the mass media and communications system, Forman ranked religion as “one of the most consistent and effective control mechanisms” of Black peoples. Locating the roots of the problem in the history of slavery, he rejects the very suggestion of Christianity and presumably any version thereof (including Cleage’s), as a potentially liberating tool. He continues,

Now I don’t take the position—and this is something we have to argue about—that the Christian church was in fact a survival element for black people. That’s just a hypothetical argument. We have no way of proving it, but I do know that the ideology, practices and involvement with the Christian church, helped to control us and made us submit more and more to the tyranny of this country.³⁹

There is only, here, a racist Christian ideology in which the terms “racist” and “Christian” are nearly interchangeable.

Yet Forman’s voice was merely one among many and there was no real agreement—and quite a lot of the argument that Forman calls for—about the historical and the contemporary place of religion in African American political culture. This is not to suggest that Christianity was viewed uncritically even by the defenders of the faith. As Eddie Glaude, Jr., notes, “Christian piety was not a ready resource for [the] revolution” that a new generation of Black Power activists envisaged; traditional “piety” is quite different from what these activists had in mind.⁴⁰ The National Committee of Black Churchmen, for instance, was founded on the realization of the abject *failings* of Christian congregations, and many of its members participated in the generative critique of the Negro Church. Drawn primarily from within predominantly white denominations—the United Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Methodists, Congregationalists, and Unitarian-Universalists—they served as internal critics and gadflies. Theirs was not an exercise in apologetics but a call to arms, repentance, and reform.

The series of disagreements that can be encapsulated in the differences between Forman and the Black Churchmen were also refracted in the less than unanimous endorsement of the *Black Manifesto*. It was the preamble, which lays out a basic theory or framework for revolution and a dedication to “building a socialist society inside the United States,” that raised the most reservations and detractions. The issue of reparations was a close second. Lucius Walker denounced his ecclesiastical colleagues’ rejection of reparations as a vivid portrayal of the “duplicity in which we engage... [after] all the churches’ rhetoric about Love and Brotherhood and Justice in our society.”⁴¹ The fairly harsh critique of Christianity was not a major source of contention, however, and even on the question of reparations reactions were mixed. In his missive from Riverside Church, Reverend Campbell cautions against the hypocrisy of complaining about a disrupted church service when so many pews are half-empty on Sundays and so few Christians are willing to truly practice the dictates of Christ. Moreover in his address, given on the evening of May 10 in a WRVR radio broadcast, he affirmed that “the shame” was not that a worship service was interrupted, “indefensible as that action was.” Rather, for Campbell, the shame “centers in the fact that within the population of this most prosperous nation there are people who feel, rightly or wrongly, that they have to use such tactics to draw attention to their grievances.”⁴²

Reverend Campbell, the trustees and deacons of Riverside responded, first, by obtaining a Civil Restraining Order against any individual interfering with church worship. Second, they acknowledged the realities of Black exploitation and victimization—in neighborhoods, cities, schools, jails, and in Vietnam—and damned the church for its silence: “By its silence it has blessed these arrangements and given an aura of divine approval.”⁴³ Whether termed restitution, reparations, or redress, Campbell also categorized the principle as a deeply Christian one, with restitution as an essential aspect of penitence. While Riverside declined to endow the BEDC with funds, they did set aside a fixed percentage of their annual budget as a fund for “the rapid improvement of all disadvantaged people in the country.” Other churches and religious institutions struggled to determine an appropriate response to the *Manifesto*’s challenges. Some, like Riverside, heeded the call in their own fashion and generally with a less specifically Black and more universal appeal to alleviating poverty. Some, such as IFCO’s lone Jewish member organization, rejected the principles of reparations altogether and, along with the Synagogue Council of America and the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council, turned their backs on the entire critique.⁴⁴ Some gave funds to IFCO, or to similar organizations, pointedly refusing to work with the BEDC. Few gave funding directly to the BEDC.

Reactions from within African American communities and churches were equally varied. As Gayraud Wilmore notes, the generally radical Harlem-based *Amsterdam News* was scandalized by Forman’s behavior at Riverside and recoiled from the *Manifesto*’s demands. Historic Black churches and denominations such as the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church tended to keep the document and the controversy it generated at arm’s length. And yet, as Wilmore is quick to note, there is evidence of similar confrontations, in the spirit of Forman at Riverside, in various parts of the United States, and overseas. For instance, a group of Black European expatriates exacted a hearing at a meeting of the World Council of Churches in England. The group presented a Declaration of Revolution (on May 23, 1969) demanding £500,000 to establish a defense fund for political prisoners in South Africa and the “Panther 21” in the United States. The action resulted in the WCC’s Programme to Combat Racism, which allocated over \$1 million to liberation movements and racial justice programs.⁴⁵ Perhaps more important, grassroots activists heeded Forman’s call and embarked on their own efforts to pressure white religious institutions. Students occupied offices at Union Theological

Seminary; there were occupations of offices of various denominational organizations, and copies of the *Manifesto* were distributed, read and debated in churches across the country.⁴⁶

Detroit, where the *Manifesto* was “born,” was no exception. The BEDC launched interruptions of Sunday services and occupations of church properties.⁴⁷ The controversies also proved to be a fertile source of insight for those most closely involved. Penning his own response as a member of IFCO’s board and a member of the BEDC, the Reverend Albert Cleage insisted that the moral foundation for the case in favor of reparations is clear and directly entered the debate over *what kind* of organization should be funded by churches. *How* the funds should be used, he chided, is completely irrelevant from the standpoint of “the renewal of the white churches.” It is the Black community that should “by rights, determine the use of the funds.” “White” money was fine, but Black control was essential. This was consistent with Cleage’s advocacy of Black Power and self-determination, whether read through his theological writings or through his commitment to institutions such as IFCO. It was also consistent with IFCO’s hands-off approach to community organizing. But Cleage also took the question of white religious renewal seriously. “What would the precipitous raising of \$500 million mean for the white churches,” he asks rhetorically, “it could mean the possibility of renewal, if indeed reparation is seen as tied to concerns about unity, faith, and order. The call for reparation provides a rallying point that is ecumenical, since it is to white churches that the plea is addressed.”⁴⁸

The *Black Manifesto* is radical but not alien. Configured as a document about white Christian guilt and white Christian renewal, the *Manifesto*, along with some of its more thoughtful responses, stands at the foot of a long tradition of social and religious criticism highlighted by texts such as Frederick Douglass’s masterful “What to a Slave is the Fourth of July” and King’s eloquent “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” In his Fourth of July oration Douglass takes white Christians to task for their complicity with the slave regime. In no uncertain or hesitant terms, Douglass declares the American church guilty of not only indifference but also active complicity with enslavement of fellow human beings. Prominent ministers and church fathers justify the practice of slavery with reference to the Bible, thus teaching that “man may, properly, be a slave; that the relation of master and slave is ordained by God.” And, in the process: “They strip the love of God of its beauty, and leave the throng of religion a huge, horrible, repulsive form.”⁴⁹

Correspondingly, in his letter, addressed to “My Dear Fellow Clergymen,” King pierces the hypocrisy of gradualism and moderation in the face of injustice and the inadequacy of supporting an unjust law merely because it is the law. “I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion,” he laments, “that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice...”⁵⁰ Both jeremiads damn those Christians who betray the faith—and betray God—by defending a status quo clearly at odds with the dictates of justice and human rights. Both end on a note of hope for redemption. The *Manifesto*, too, for all of James Forman’s anger, has not completely given up on the religiously inflected notion of redemption. While lacking Douglass’ poetry and King’s command of prose, Forman shares their righteous anger and, arguably one can hear the faint chords of hope just underneath the bombastic surface of the series of boldfaced slogans that close the text:

ALL ROADS MUST LEAD TO REVOLUTION
 UNITE WITH WHOMEVER YOU CAN UNITE
 NEUTRALIZE WHEREVER POSSIBLE
 FIGHT OUR ENEMIES RELENTLESSLY
 VICTORY TO THE PEOPLE
 LIFE AND GOOD HEALTH TO MANKIND
 RESISTENANCE TO DOMINATION BY THE WHITE CHIRSTIAN
 CHURCHES AND THE JEWISH SYNAGOGUES
 REVOLUTIONARY BLACK POWER
 WE SHALL WIN WITHOUT A DOUBT⁵¹

BLACK THEOLOGY AND THE LEGACIES OF THE *BLACK MANIFESTO*

Black Theology is a theology of black liberation... The message of liberation is the revelation of God as revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Freedom IS the gospel. Jesus is the Liberator. (Wilmore and Cone, *Black Theology*)

Throughout all the debates and controversy that have long surrounded the *Black Manifesto* and the eventual fate of the BEDC, it remains clear, as Wilmore and Cone have argued, that it fueled the final booster stage for

the development of theological renewal, which had already been signaled by the 1966 “Statement on Black Power.” And the place where a critical engagement with the *Manifesto* continues to thrive is within theological and religious studies circles as opposed to historical and political ones—despite the fact that the document does not present its critique in classically theological terms.

Black theology as we know it today was a long time in coming. At its conceptual center stands the “Blackness of God,” as James Cone writes in his groundbreaking volume *A Black Theology of Liberation*. It harks back to Bishop Henry McNeal Turner’s early insistence that Black people had as much right to believe that “God is a Negro” as whites had to portray him in their own likeness, and to the concept’s more systematized induction into Marcus Garvey’s Pan-African Orthodox Church. The idea of a Black God and a Black Christ has also found expression in the works of writers and poets, visual artists, in stained glass windows (the “Wales Window for Alabama” at the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, for example) and in the portraits and depictions that now hang on the walls of Black churches across the nation.⁵² By the late 1960s and early 1970s, these efforts were commanding national attention.

Ebony magazine ran a cover article on “The Quest for a Black Christ” in 1969, and the *New York Times* ran a profile of Cleage and his recently published *The Black Messiah* under the heading: “Color God Black.”⁵³ A 1971 feature article entitled “Black Religion Seeks Own Theology” profiled, among others, the work of the Reverend Lawrence Lucas, a Roman Catholic priest in Harlem, who claimed to have more in common with non-Catholic black clergymen than with most white ones. Author of *Black Priest, White Church*, Lucas spoke for many of his colleagues in taking a strong stand against the notion of a “colorless Christ” who is the savior of all mankind. “And the more they said this,” Lucas continued, “the harder they fed black people a lily-white Jesus, concerned only with white interests, who could justify anything done by white people, who was displeased with whatever black people did apart from what white people told them to do.”⁵⁴

One major weakness of the *New York Times* profile, which also included the work of the National Committee of Black Churchmen, Cleage’s Black Christian Nationalism movement, and the writings of theologians such as James Cone, was its exclusive focus on men. But these efforts did not emanate exclusively from the world of priests and male theologians and ministers. In one of the few works emerging from the new studies of the

Black Power movement to give sustained attention to religion and faith, Rhonda Y. Williams writes of black nuns such as Sister Mary Paraclete Young and Sister Mary Roger Thibodeaux, who “did not see Black Power as contradictory to their spiritual vision.” These women, and others like them, actively participated in communities and local movements working to bring the Black church and Black theology in line with Black Power. Capturing their stories and experiences and understanding the ways in which they helped to shape later developments in Womanist theology, which would come to speculate on Christ as a Black woman, should be given special attention as we continue to explore this history.⁵⁵

From the early 1970s onward Black theology, and subsequently Black Womanist theology, has continued to thrive in academic and ecclesiastical circles. The work of James Cone, J. Deotis Roberts, Gayraud Wilmore, Delores Williams, Kelly Brown Douglas, and others are well regarded and seriously debated. In general, the union of Black theology and Black Power in political terms has not survived in as clear a fashion, though one of its legacies is surely the array of Black Christian organizations and caucuses, from the National Conference of Black Christians (which grew out of the older NCBC), to the National Black Catholic Congress, to the United Black Christians, who operate within the United Church of Christ, along with the social justice organizations within the seven historically Black denominations. The 1970s-era amalgamation of Black Power and Black theology, that is to say, encouraged and justified the creation of Black organizations within white religious institutions and strengthened the impetus toward the militant self-determination in historically Black ones as well.

Only a vision of the Black Power movement that totally marginalized its religious dimension could fail to take into account the relative success of Black theology, particularly the more radical version propounded by Cleage and his followers. Indeed, one could reasonably argue that Black theology, in various forms and manifestations, was *the most successful* part of the Black Power movement, or at least the most enduring—within the higher realms of theological speculation and in on the ground struggles within impoverished black communities. From this perspective, the vision of a de-Christianized understanding of Black Power—even one that utterly fails to survive the internal and external ravages of the early 1970s—feels particularly myopic.

The legacies of the early, radical years of Black theology would have to include the contributions to the field of theology itself, as that field was forced to confront the challenges and implications of Black, womanist,

feminist, and Third World liberationist theologies; as well as the subsequent developments within organizations like IFCO. The Reverend Lucius Walker would continue to serve as executive director for decades, working to build a United Black Appeal and supporting, as ever, indigenous organizations in African American communities and, increasingly as time wore on, in Native American, Latino, Latin American, and African ones as well. To this extent, IFCO came to function as the institutional arm of not only Black theology but also Third World liberationist theology, with all of its messy politics. Early struggles with and over the BEDC and the *Black Manifesto* shaped IFCO's entire subsequent history, even as the foundation began to branch out in different and more international directions.

In less structured and much more diffuse ways Black theology as a form of Black Power also helped to transform the practices of Afro-Christianity and the cultures of Black faith. Congregations across the country removed pictures of the white Jesus and introduced Black cultural practices into liturgies and services. As a result, the landscape of Black religious life was transformed in both overt and subtle ways. At the same time, and over the same decades, the idea of reparations has become more mainstream within Black religious and secular organizations. With the debate over reparations very much back in our public discourse in general—with Ta-Nehisi Coates's "A Case for Reparations" and the critical response it has received—it is not difficult to predict a resurgence of attention to the *Black Manifesto* and the political-religious landscape it helped to build.⁵⁶ Reclaiming the *Manifesto* as a significant part of American and especially African American religious history and as a part of the Black Power movement would go a long way toward giving us a better, richer fuller sense of all three of these interconnected historical traditions. In the end we may come to agree with James Forman who, years later, would suggest that forging an "alliance between black churchmen and revolutionaries" was among the most successful outcomes of the *Manifesto*.⁵⁷

NOTES

1. The complete text of the *Manifesto* can be found in James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (eds.), *Black Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 27–36.
2. "Order of Proceedings of the National Black Economic Development Conference," James and Grace Lee Boggs Papers, Archives of Labor History and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University, [cited hereafter as ALHUA], Box 3, Folder 7: "NBEDC."

3. As Forman tells the story, his initial contact with the black radical community in Detroit was Mike Hamlin, who introduced him to other members of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. He was visiting Detroit in the days before the conference (and had been invited to address the group by SNCC’s Dorothy Dewberry). He writes, “And we decided that the only way to make this conference relevant was to take it over completely and then make sure that an organizational framework was created to carry out the programs formulated by the meeting... Our demands—to be called ‘the Black Manifesto’—would not merely involve money [reparations] but would be a call for revolutionary action, a Manifesto that spoke of the human misery of black people under capitalism and imperialism, and pointed the way to ending those conditions.” Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Washington, DC: Open Hand Publishing, 1985), 544–45. The book was originally published in 1972. See also Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying: A Study in Urban Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1998).
4. Freeman quoted in *Detroit Free Press*, September 8, 1969. Freeman joined the IFCO staff in September 1968 and is listed in staff reports as having “field duties,” including the planning for the NBEDC. *IFCO News Notes* (Nov., 1968), IFCO Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library, Box 5, folder 16; “Staff Meeting Agenda,” October 21, 1968, *ibid.*, Box 5, folder 4.
5. Richard Nixon promised to pursue a policy of “black capitalism” during his election campaign, floating the idea of special loans and other aid for African Americans to start their own businesses. “To the extent that programs of ‘black capitalism’ are successful,” Nixon said, “the ghetto will gradually disappear.” Even *Time* magazine expressed the suspicion that this was little more than “smooth honky talk.” “Black Capitalism: A Disappointing Start,” *Time* (August 15, 1969).
6. James H. Cone’s *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991) is especially useful for underscoring this point.
7. There are, however, good reasons to believe that this is changing among younger scholars. See, for example, the excellent dissertation by Kerry Louise Pimblott, “Soul Power: The Black Church and the Black Power Movement in Cairo, Illinois, 1969–74,” University of Illinois-Champaign, 2012; as well as recent blog posts by Trevor Burrows, “The ‘Black Manifesto’ in Twentieth-Century American Religious History” (<http://usreligion.blogspot.com/2014/08/the-black-manifesto-in-twentieth.html>); Matthew Cressler, “Black Religion and Black Power” (<http://usreligion.blogspot.com/2014/05/black-religion-and-black-power.html>), and “Violence, ‘The Religious,’ and Black Power” (<http://usreligion.blogspot.com/2014/07/violence-religious-and-black-power.html>)—all from the Religion in American History Blog, retrieved April 2017.

8. Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 4.
9. The exact number of delegates and participants is almost impossible to declare with any authority. Walker reports that more than 500 people registered for the Conference with attendance throughout estimated at seven to eight hundred. Walker, "IFCO and American Society" (May 17, 1969); reprinted in Lecky and Wright (eds.), *Black Manifesto: Religion, Racism and Reparations* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), Appendix 3, 137.
10. "Statement by the National Committee of Negro Churchmen," *New York Times*, July 31, 1966. The organization changed its name from the National Committee of Negro Churchman to the National Committee of Black Churchmen in 1967 and in 1972 to the National Conference of Black Churchmen. In an attempt to rectify the gendered exclusion, the group subsequently became the National Conference of Black Christians. To avoid confusion, throughout this essay I use the National Committee of Black Churchmen, or simply NCBC. The text of the statement is also included in the wonderful resource: *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966–1979*, edited by Gayraud S. Wilmore, one of the original signatories of the statement, and James H. Cone.
11. Walker, "IFCO and the Crisis of American Society," 138.
12. "The *Black Manifesto*," 33–34.
13. *Ibid.*, 35.
14. See the NCBC's official response to the *Manifesto* reprinted in Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology*, 90–92.
15. Among the most comprehensive treatments of the BEDC's history is Lecky and Wright, *Reparations Now? An Introduction*, which has a very useful "Chronology" in Appendix 8.
16. Spivey to Walker, November 20, 1969, cc'd to Rollins, Marshall and Williams, IFCO Papers, Box 3, folder 2.
17. "IFCO to Participate in NCNC Convention," *IFCO News Notes* (November 1968), IFCO Papers, Box 5, folder 16. *Time* magazine captured some of the flavor of the NCBC's gathering at the Gateway Hotel in St. Louis in an otherwise disparaging article that featured Karenga complaining of churches "foisting 'spookism' on his soul brothers," and Dr. Nathan Wright, Jr.'s critique of the "honkified God" that must be rejected by Blacks. "Churches: Is God Black?," *Time* (November 15, 1968). On the Black Congress and the US Organization in general, see Scot Brown, "The Politics of Culture: The US Organization and the Quest for Black Unity," in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940–1980*, ed. Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 223–53.

18. “IFCO, the National Black Economic Development Conference, and the A.C.U.: A Report and Evaluation by Fathers Murdock and Zadig” [n.d.], IFCO Papers, Box 8, folder 5, p. 2.
19. “IFCO News Release,” December 3, 1970, IFCO Papers, Box 5, folder 16. On IFCO’s history, see also James F. Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle: The National Council of Churches and the Black Freedom Movement, 1950–1970* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 188–90 and Chapter 7, passim; as well as Walker, “Mass-Based Organization: A Style for Christian Mission” [n.d.], IFCO Papers, Box 3, folder 7.
20. “The Black Manifesto,” 32. On the United Black Appeal, see “Executive Director’s Report to Board of Directors,” March 11, 1970, IFCO Papers, Box 3, folder 1; as well as Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*. As they report, the idea of a Black Appeal was always embraced by the members of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and their ancillary groups as an essential path to self-determination.
21. “Summary of Executive Director’s Report to the IFCO Board,” December 9, 1970, IFCO papers, Box 3, folder 1; “IFCO Status report,” December 1968,” *ibid.*, Box 6, folder 8; “A Brief History of IFCO,” IFCO website: <http://www.ifconews.org/node/356> (accessed May 2016).
22. For the history of the campaign, see the superb website: <http://poorpeoplescampaignppc.org/HISTORY.html> (accessed June 2017).
23. “Projected Funding By The Interrreligious Foundation for Community Organization, September 1967–April 1969,” IFCO Papers, Box 8, folder 5.
24. See, for instance, “A Necessary Look at IFCO,” *The Christian Challenge* (February 1972), which also complains of funding being given to the Mexican–American Unity Council, a “front group” for La Raza Unida; and the Malcolm X Liberation University, founded by Howard Fuller, in Durham, NC.
25. In this context the “Black Church” refers not only to the seven major historically black denominations (such as the AME Church, the National Baptist Convention, Inc. and the Church of God in Christ), but also predominantly Black congregations within predominantly white ecclesiastical organizations. Think, for example, of the Trinity Church, founded and until 2008 led by Reverend Jeremiah Wright, which is part of the United Church of Christ. The motto of Trinity is: “Unashamedly Black, Unapologetically Christian.”
26. Cleage, “The Negro in Detroit” (Chapter Five), *Illustrated News*, January 1, 1962; quoted in Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 253. On the concept of “the folk,” see also Joseph Washington, *The Politics of God* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967).

27. Cleage, *Black Christian Nationalism*, 16.
28. Cleage, *Ibid.*, 75.
29. "Black Theology: A Statement by the National Association of Black Churchmen, June 13, 1969," in Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology*, 90–92.
30. Harding's "The Religion of Black Power" first appeared in Donald R. Cutler (ed.), *The Religious Situation: 1968* (New York: Beacon Press, 1968). A frequently reprinted and anthologized essay, it can be found in Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. (eds.), *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 715–45; the quote is on page 728. On Harding, see also the interview done with him in MARHO, The Radical Historians Organization, *Visions of History* (NY: Pantheon, 1976), 219–44.
31. Cleage, "A Sense of Urgency," *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), 22.
32. Cleage, *Ibid.*, 22.
33. Cleage, "An Epistle to Stokely," *Black Messiah*, 46. Cleage also proposes the ordination of young, black civil rights workers as a means to keep them out of service in Vietnam.
34. On the indigenous religious practices of slaves, see Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Cleage had the further distinction of reading this history through the prism of the literal blackness of the biblical nation of Israel and the prophets, from Abraham to Jesus. See his *Black Christian Nationalism*; as well as the discussion in Kelly Brown Douglass, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 55–58.
35. On King's controversial sermon, see Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: American in the King Years 1965–68* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), chapter 34: "Riverside."
36. Meeting recorded in the Chronology included in Wright and Lecky, *Black Manifesto*, 157; also Lucius Walker, "A Case for Reparations to Black America" [1969], IFCO Papers, Box 3, folder 8, 8–9.
37. Forman, *Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 548.
38. On negative assessments of Forman's actions at Riverside, see Murray Kempton's disparaging review of *The Black Manifesto* in *The New York Review of Books*, 13, no. 1 (July 10, 1969). On reactions in general: Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle*, chapter 7.
39. Forman, "Control, Conflict and Change: The Underlying Concepts of the *Black Manifesto*" (Detroit, MI: Black Workers Congress, n.d. [ca. 1971]), also excerpted in in Lecky and Wright (eds.), *Black Manifesto*, 50–51.

40. Glaude, *Is It Nation Time? Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 6.
41. Walker, “A Case For Reparations To Black America,” 9. Walker was particularly keen to lay out the religious justifications for reparations, and at least publicly his support of the BEDC did not waiver. See also Walker, “IFCO and the Crisis of American Society.”
42. The text of Ernest Campbell’s radio address is included in the Appendix 2 of the Lecky and Wright volume, *Black Manifesto*, 127–131.
43. *Ibid.*, 130.
44. “A Policy Statement by the Synagogue Council of America and the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council,” is included in Lecky and Wright, *Black Manifesto*, Appendix 4; as is the official response of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York (Appendix 5). The authors/editors also provide a very thorough overview of the range of responses to the *Manifesto* in their “Reparations Now?: An Introduction.” Indeed, the *reactions* to the *Manifesto* have been given as much if not more attention than the document itself. See also, Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 202–213.
45. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 205–206 and 206n18. On the WCC and the Programme to Combat Racism, see John Vincent, *The Race Race* (New York: Friendship Press, 1970), 42–48; and *The Programme to Combat Racism of the World Council of Churches*, published in 1974 by the British Council of Churches.
46. Burrows, “The ‘Black Manifesto’ in Twentieth-Century American Religious History.”
47. On the Manifesto and BEDC in Detroit, see Keith Dye, “The Black Manifesto for Reparations in Detroit: Challenge and Response, 1969,” *Michigan Historical Review* 35, no. 2 (Fall 2009): 53–83.
48. Cleage, “Reparations Now! A Response to the *Black Manifesto*” [draft version], Cleage Papers, Roll 8, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor, MI; also “Rev. Cleage on the ‘*Manifesto*,’” *Black Nation News* [Shrine of the Black Madonna], 1, no. 2 (June 17, 1969).
49. A copy of the full text, from July 5, 1852, can be found at the Teaching American History website: <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=162> (accessed June 2017).
50. A full version of the text, from April 16, 1963, can be found at the Teaching American History website: <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/index.asp?document=943> (accessed June 2017).
51. “The *Black Manifesto*,” 36.
52. I write a bit about these developments in my *Faith in the City*, 287–293. For a fuller explication, see Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ*. She quotes Bishop Turner on pages 31–32. On Garveyism and the AOC: Randall

- Burkett, *Garveyism as a Religious Movement: The Institutionalization of a Black Civil Religion* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1978) remains the best source, especially chapter 2: “Garvey as Black Theologian.”
53. Alex Poinsett, “The Quest for a Black Christ,” *Ebony* (March 1969), 170–178; also, “Artists Portray a Black Christ,” *Ebony* (April 1971), 177–180. Edward B. Fiske, “Color God Black,” *New York Times* [Religion Section], November 10, 1968.
 54. Thomas A. Johnson, “Black Religion Seeks Own Theology,” *New York Times*, January 30, 1971, 29.
 55. Williams, “Black Women, Urban Politics, and Engendering Black Power,” in Joseph (ed.), *The Black Power Movement*, 79–103. On the emergence of Womanist theology and its relationship to Black theology in general, see Douglas, *The Black Christ*, 92–113.
 56. Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic* (June 2014); also: <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/> (accessed September 2017).
 57. Foreman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 549–550.



“Pray to God; She Will Hear Us”: Women Reimagining Religion and Politics in the 1970s

Lilian Calles Barger

In the fall of 2002 over three hundred attendees, primarily women, gathered for the Religion and the Feminist Movement Conference. The hallowed halls of Harvard Divinity School, a place where many radical breaks in religion had occurred, was an apt location for a gathering of this who’s who of feminist theology. Filling the program was a group of provocative panelists who had identified the religious and political ideologies that they considered to lay at the heart of contemporary sexism. Among the 25 speakers were the controversial philosopher and theologian Mary Daly, the Catholic feminist scholar Rosemary Radford Ruether, the feminist spirituality founder Carol P. Christ, the Jewish theologian Judith Plaskow, and a slew of Protestant thinkers and organizational leaders. Women of color in the group included womanist Delores Williams and *mujerista* Ada María Isasi-Díaz. In the last decades of the twentieth century,

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211

these women had ushered in a feminist political theology that left its mark on churches, seminaries, national organizations, and among many laypeople.

The event was sponsored by the Women's Studies in Religion Program, established in 1973 as part of an initial wave of interest in women that swept the academy, was itself historic. It demonstrated both the antagonistic and the sympathetic relationship between feminism and religion, and it retraced the steps of a fundamental shift in many women's religious attitudes. In the 1960s and 70s, as many women took on new roles in American society, politics, and culture, these activists and intellectuals represented the most revolutionary ideas then reverberating through the religious and political worlds. Many of them began as participants in the New Left, fighting for racial and economic equality, and found themselves unable to resist the radicalizing tide of Women's Liberation. What kept their feminist politics and religion together was the belief that religion stripped of sexism offered a meaningful contribution to social change. By raising questions regarding the religious role of women and the language, rituals, and institutional hierarchies that defined their place, these women led the way in identifying new political possibilities within religion.¹

Their story and how they built new religious knowledge for social change has heretofore remained unexamined by historians. The historiography of radical feminism, which includes Sara Evans' now classic *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (1979), Alice Echols' *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America* (1989), and Jane Gerhard's *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Rewriting of American Sexual Thought, 1920–1982* (2001), has historically displayed a dearth of evidence regarding religion. More recently, attention to radical minority women, including black and Chicana, is enriching the narrative even as the movement as a whole remains understudied. All such studies offer meager, if any, treatment of religion. As a result, feminist theologians and their theo-political intervention, a product of radical feminist history, have received no analytical historical attention.²

The absence of religion in the written history of radical feminism is due, in part, to the focus on a limited number of sources. Expanding the scope to include the intellectual production of theologians and ordinary women participating in feminist religion changes the story by illuminating both the religious currents within Women's Liberation and the political project for radical social change shared by both religious and secular feminists.

Published and unpublished primary sources are abundant in the form of theological analysis, memoirs, fiction, poetry, letters, event programs, and institutional records. Copious critique from both within and without religious communities displays the hazards of constructing a feminist religion. Attending to these sources offers a more nuanced and deeper understanding of both the drive undergirding the women’s movement and religious change affected by the political left in the late twentieth century.

Engaged in the work of social transformation, feminist theologians embodied Paul Tillich’s “Protestant Principle,” the continued dialectic between faith and doubt that gave way to self-criticism within the community of faith. They concluded that politics and religion closely intertwined provided the ideological justification for sexism. Ideas about the divine granted ultimate vindication for any politic and the aims of sex equality demanded a reworking of long-held theological categories. Their embrace of feminism represented the outgrowth of a spiritual quest for a sustainable theo-politics in which ideas about the divine were not a distractions but essential to political work. In their search for personal and cultural transformation, they carried into the Women’s Liberation movement an inherited religious vitalism that precipitated a reimagining of theology and religion. The result was a permanent feminist imprint on the relationship between religion and politics.³

Understanding the emergence of feminist theology requires placing it within the history of the 1960s women’s movement and its more radical currents. Liberal feminism as the most influential wing of movement sought inclusion and political rights by recognition of sexual equality before the law. As a dissenting group, feminist radicals, a loose multiethnic and multiclass coalition, concluded that the liberal middle-class women’s rights agenda fell short of a wholesale attack on male-dominated society—the patriarchy. As a total social and ideological system, the patriarchy controlled women’s bodies, their lived experiences, and the imaginative horizon against which liberal political solutions proved ineffective. Radicals rejected inclusion in an unjust sexist system and sought a wholesale destruction of the structures of oppression.⁴

The women’s movement in the 1960s drew a significant number of religiously motivated participants in addition to the more well-known secular activists, although their contribution has been largely overlooked. Historian Ann D. Braude, who gathered pioneering feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s heirs together at Harvard Divinity School to “bear witness to watershed events that changed the practice of many religions

forever,” offered an initial historiographical intervention. Her 2004 article, “A Religious Feminist—Who Can Find Her? Historiographical Challenges from the National Organization for Women,” focused attention on the liberal wing of the women’s movement and drew attention to the relative scarcity of religion in the historiography of “second-wave feminism.” Braude challenged the secular understanding of the women’s movement by demonstrating the presence of religious women in the founding of the National Organization for Women (NOW), such as Catholic Sister Joel Read and the African American and future Episcopalian priest Pauli Murray, both of whom joined the secular Betty Friedan in the struggle for equality. NOW’s agenda included the reform of religious institutions and the establishment of the ecumenical Women and Religion task force. A national initiative for liberal reform that was as ambitious as NOW’s, and that hoped to mobilize a great number of women, could not ignore the role that thousands of local churches and synagogues played in women’s lives.⁵

One could argue that the inclusion of religion in the founding of NOW that Braude uncovered reflected a practical strategy congruent with liberal politics, rather than any real investment in religion. The New Left’s radical break from liberalism appeared to make religion, which activists largely viewed as a conservative cultural force, a tough fit for the Women’s Liberation wing of the movement. Radical women who grew impatient with NOW and the male-dominated New Left began questioning the gender power asymmetry that ran through both liberal and radical politics. Religion appeared to offer legitimation to inequality.⁶

Working from this framework, it’s not surprising that the often-cited Women’s Liberation literature makes little mention of religion. Robin Morgan’s 1970 classic *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, a collection of essays, poems, and manifestos, addressed every conceivable concern: motherhood, marriage, work, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and institutional racism. Daly’s essay “Women and the Catholic Church,” which railed against the exclusion of women from the priesthood, stands alone in addressing religion as a whole. Here the Catholic Church symbolizes all male-centered religion, and in telling the story of radical feminism Daly became the standard-bearer for the opposition to religion. Alternatively, the “Witch Manifesto” portrays religion as part of the unredeemable “spiritual repression of the Imperialist Phallic Society.” These critical presentations of religion are of the institutional kind with all the trappings of clerical hierarchies, dogma,

and misogynistic traditions. Looking at these sources alone suggest that the role of religion in Women’s Liberation was either small or negative.⁷

One need not go far to expand the view and find harbingers of the emerging feminist theology within the ranks of Women’s Liberation: among women engaged as activists in the civil rights, antiwar, and Black Power movements, as well as those participating in the evangelical and Catholic left. The contradiction of sexism within the egalitarian politics of the New Left highlighted sexism everywhere, including in religion. Alone, this realization was not sufficient for a full-orbed feminist theology to emerge. Additional factors contributed to a religious revolt: the resonance of a religious sensibility within Women’s Liberation, particularly in the practice of consciousness raising, openness to new ideas within established women’s religious institutions, the flooding of women into theological schools and religious departments, and a crisis within a male-dominated liberal theological establishment that was in disarray over Vietnam, social unrest, and radical theologies. As black and Latin American liberation theologians challenged the established orthodoxy with critiques of racial and class oppression, women found an opportunity to include sex oppression in their own feminist political theology. With the liberal center not holding but split by radicalization and neo-conservatism, feminists had an opening to redirect the conversation.⁸

The shift from the emphasis on equality before the law and inclusion championed by NOW to the personal politics of Women’s Liberation accentuated the problematics of religion. The liberal wing of the women’s movement had made great strides within mainline denominations, moving to ordain women and opening the doors to divinity schools. Feeling the radical effects of Women’s Liberation, many who took up the study of religion and theology concluded that the problem was greater than gaining entry into ecclesial hierarchy as they discovered a masculinist theology operating as a “silent partner” in sexism. Within a few short years of the early 1970s, small gatherings were taking place across America where women came to “theologize” their new feminist consciousness and create essential support networks. Organizations such as Church Women United, whose platform included the support of civil rights, the Equal Rights Amendment, and abortion rights, provided funding for women to explore theology outside the male purview.⁹

The 1970s were the years of creativity and risk taking as women constructed a theology from the perspective of a feminist politic and gained widespread attention. *Time* magazine noted that women were “desexing

the bible” and taunting sexism in the churches with the line “Pray to God, she will hear us.” A *New York Times* article observed the political ramifications as a few dozen women theologians in America dismantled the masculine Godhead, symbols, and ethics that perpetuated the subordination of women. At the same time, opposition gathered; the *Times* quoted religion scholar James Hitchcock, who protested that feminist theology was an unacceptable strategy to “redefine theological terms and categories to serve political ends.” The feminist magazine *Off Our Backs* expressed ambivalence toward the emphasis on spirituality in some quarters of the movement. Commending the positive affirmation of the whole person and sense of community that functioned as a guard against political burn-out, the editors nevertheless feared that spirituality presented an “escapist fantasy [that] can, however, become a substitute for real power” and “distracts people from political work.” Detractors and sympathizers missed the point: the feminist theological project was a political one from start to finish. It was neither a marginalization of substantive social change nor an attempt to retain old religious categories that supported the status quo. It instead began with the assumption of the politically laden nature of all theology. As religious feminists made clear, theology had never been neutral, but carried with it the ideological commitments of those who espoused it.¹⁰

Feminist theology gained traction thanks to the combination of a religious heritage women carried into the women’s movement and experiences in what Morgan referred to as “consciousness-raising” or “bitch” sessions that began to take place in the late 1960s. These informal women-only groups on college campus and in communities were familiar, even akin to a religious gathering. They began with “personal testimonies” as each woman told her experience of sexism followed by cross-examination by others. Participants were encouraged to face the “awful truth” against their attempts at denial and excuses. Women began to see themselves as divided against their authentic selves by having identified with masculinist expectations. The point of consciousness raising was to gain understanding of sexist oppression, raise awareness of each woman’s power to instigate social change, and organize for direct action. It was also the basis for feminist innovation in hermeneutics. Feminist began to approach the biblical text through the lens of women’s experience and to regard the abundance of memoirs, fiction, poetry and self-reflective essays of oppression and liberation produced by the movement as new forms of sacred texts.¹¹

In 1973, feminist philosopher Sheila Ruth responded to the derision of critics who saw the proliferation of women’s groups as self-indulgent sessions in the “marginally relevant,” dwelling on the “inequities of dishwashing” rather than the real work of sociopolitical reform. Friedan, in an example of the divide between liberal and radical feminist, expressed impatience with the “navel-gazing” of consciousness-raising groups that quickly deteriorated into “whining and wallowing.” Substantive change, she argued, demanded political action. In contrast, radical feminism came to view personal transformation as part of a sustainable politics. Ruth asserted the political importance of women confronting roles defined by “Küche, Kinder, Kirche”: the home, reproduction, and religion. The goal of consciousness raising was “an alteration of the psychic, emotional, and phenomenal stance of the woman vis-à-vis her environment and her experiences” by which real social change could take place. It was an attempt to heal the breach between the expectations of tradition, religion, and society and the new experiences of the educated, middle-class, career-bound woman. Consciousness raising was a move in which “liberation is freedom from spiritual slavery, from demeaning of one’s person, one’s self-hood.” Gaining “substantive personhood,” Ruth asserted, was a “spiritual affair, a matter of spirit.” Dealing with the deep-seated disquietude plaguing women’s lives was the first step necessary for risking sociopolitical change.¹²

Frequent references within the movement to a feminist “conversion,” with its persistently spiritualized language, followed the contours that William James identified in the study of religion. James defined religion as “a man’s total reaction upon life” in which the religious feeling “gives him a new sphere of power.” The transformation and reorientation of the self through a conversion attempted to heal what James called the “divided self,” a self in whom there was a “wrong correspondence of one’s life with the environment.” A religious conversion was a threshold “point at which one state of mind passes into another,” a point of deliverance from one life to another. For Women’s Liberation, conversion was the birth of a feminist self and the bonding of sisterhood. It brought with it the need to redefine relations of power: power that was embroiled in both the political and the religious, fostering confrontation with the images and language for the divine that were seen as justifying inequality.¹³

The move toward a full-orbed theological challenge began in the nineteenth century as women deployed a positive reading of the Bible in their arguments for political equality. Late in the century, Elizabeth Cady Stanton expressed a nascent feminist theology that not only reinterpreted

but also questioned the biblical text itself as a product of men's drive for domination. Frustrated by the slow pace of women's political advancement, she and her revising committee offered *The Woman's Bible* (1895), a rewriting and reinterpretation of male-centered religion. Stanton came to view the Christian religion as the ideological basis for denying women political rights. As she argued, it was through the "perversion of her religious sentiments that she has been so long held in a condition of slavery. All religions thus far have taught the headship and superiority of man, the inferiority and subordination of woman." However, this spirit of resistance toward the male-dominated religious establishment and its political significance remained dormant until the 1960s and '70s, when theologically trained women considered once again the questions raised by Stanton.¹⁴

In the 1960s, the theological student Valerie Saiving Goldstein experienced the equivalent of James' divided self. Her 1960 paper "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," published in the *Journal of Religion*, signaled a reawakening to the possibility of a woman-centered theology. Goldstein asserted that her sexual identity and experience as a woman shaped her theological views; this was an invisible perspective in the male-dominated discipline. While male theologians focused on a "hypermasculine culture" with its sin of pride, as Reinhold Niebuhr asserted, Goldstein identified women's chief sin as "underdevelopment or negation of the self." The theological establishment largely ignored Goldstein's article, featured in a *Time* magazine piece "Male and Female Theology." Working its way through informal women's networks, Goldstein's paper survived to receive serious attention in the 1970s. Goldstein's essay, however, was deeply personal, reflecting a privatized feminine religion. Still lacking for a feminist theology was the ideological role of theology and its political constitution.¹⁵

Daly and Ruether, both Catholic theologians, became the standard bearers for the future of an ecumenical feminist religion. While the Second Vatican Council was in session, a disquieted Daly was studying theology at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland and working to obtain a second doctorate in theology recognized by the Catholic Church. After a month of observing the men of Vatican II debating the expansion of the role of women, she left Rome with the new conviction that women were second-class citizens in the church. The first task in creating change was to take up the challenge set out by existential philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, who identified the paradoxical relationship between women and Christianity.

In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir argued that Christianity “proclaimed, on a certain plane, the equality of man and woman” while at the same time held, “woman, you are the devil’s doorway.” Following de Beauvoir’s indictment of the misogyny in Western religion, Daly’s *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968) demanded recognition of women’s full humanity, an opening up of all offices of the church to women, including ordination, and the end of proscriptions against contraception. A negative reception from the Catholic hierarchy drove Daly out of the church, a departure which she marked in a 1971 exodus sermon at Harvard’s Memorial Church. Her sermon charged that, “the entire symbolization and conceptualization of theology was developed by men under the conditions of patriarchy... It is not good enough for women to be tokens, singing sexist hymns to a male God who tells us we do not exist, that we are not.” Daly had spoken the previously unspeakable. Thus began a new phase of a radical questioning of religious language and symbols, not only in the Catholic Church but also among many Protestants and Jews.¹⁶

Daly’s second major work, *Beyond God the Father* (1973), embraced a post-Christian, post-monotheistic feminist spirituality. Deploying Herbert Marcuse’s critical theory, she tore apart the entire edifice of Western philosophy and theology that maintained, through mystification, a male-dominated society: “If God in ‘his’ heaven is a father ruling ‘his’ people, then it is in the ‘nature’ of things and according to the divine plan and the order of the universe that society be male-dominated.” A patriarchal God was the first and final cause of women’s subordination, leading to the “Most Unholy Trinity: rape, genocide, and war.” The “sisterhood of man,” the “antichurch,” was bringing forth a new world through renaming and reimagining.¹⁷

Ruether, unlike Daly, stayed within monotheism to forward a radical reformation of Christian theology. As a civil rights and graduate student activist in the 1960s, she had gained a firsthand view of entrenched racism from participating in the Mississippi Delta Ministry and, subsequently, serving as a community volunteer in Watts working alongside militant black and white clergy engaged in nonviolent resistance. After earning a PhD from Claremont Graduate University in 1965, Ruether took a position at Howard University teaching religion, and added antiwar activism to her political resume. At the height of Black Power and with the publication of James Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power* in 1969, she was defending Black Power theology among conservative African-Americans.

As early as 1967, and following nineteenth-century radicals, Ruether compared the situation of African Americans to that of women. She saw both blacks and women rejecting the images of themselves created by white men to assert an independent identity. For Ruether, as Women's Liberation gained momentum, the link between racial oppression at home, neocolonial oppression abroad, and sexism became obvious.¹⁸

Ruether quickly developed a feminist theology and became a prolific writer, her work appearing often in the religious press. She articulated a political theology in *The Radical Kingdom* (1970), laying a historical foundation for a theology of revolutionary change. She traced a wide swath of religious protest from the Radical Reformation's attempt to "restitute" the Church rather than reform it, to the New Left as an expression of the true Church. Ruether firmly rooted her theology in the Social Gospel idea of "social sin." In her hands, the meaning of sin and salvation expanded to include overturning the hierarchies of race and sex. She came to see the liberation of all people as depending on the liberation of women, the "first and final proletariat." As a politic, she argued, "the liberation of women is the most profound of all liberation movements, the most far-reaching revolution, because it gets to the roots of the impulse of domination." Aware of the intersectionality of oppression, Ruether was critical of the liberal currents in the women's movement that she viewed as having fought for equality and economic rights largely by playing up their middle-class status to the exclusion of working-class and black women.¹⁹

Ruether's *Liberation Theology: Human Hope Confronts Christian History and American Power* (1972) tied war, racism, ecological disaster, the problems of industrial capitalism, and Western domination of the Third World to the subordination of women and an ideology of power sanctioned by an incorrect view of God. Drawing from Marx, Freud, and New Left intellectual currents, Ruether defined human liberation as holistic freedom against "the individualistic concept of sin [that] ignores the social-cosmic dimensions of evil." For the oppressed, she asserted, "liberation is a violent exorcism of the demons of self-hatred and self-destruction which have possessed them and the resurrection of autonomy and self-esteem, as well as the discovery of a new power and possibility in community." Ruether sought to overcome the impasse between the oppressor/oppressed model of power relations dominant among radicals to provide a vision of a new integrated and nonhierarchical humanity. A new politic called for the overthrow of a segregated sacred sphere, i.e., religion, that would lead to a holistic communitarianism. The community of the New

Left, a model of a new church, stood in dialectical relationship to “conventional society” and as a prophetic witness that “exist[ed] for the sake of the ‘salvation of the world.’”²⁰

Through the 1970s, Ruether was a leading theologian attempting to heal the fissures resulting from sex, race, and class division. Her political theological vision cumulated in a major work, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (1983), in which she traversed the dividing language and symbols by offering the neologism “God/ess.” By interrogating the biblical text through a feminist hermeneutic and appropriating its “prophetic-liberating” traditions, she denounced the idolatry of “patriarchal ideology.” Patriarchal ideology meant “the subordination of females to males... the whole structure of Father-ruled society: aristocrats over serfs, masters over slave, king over subjects, racial overlords over colonized people.” By redefining the divine as both male and female, male privilege gave way to an inclusive divinity. Ruether reimagined God/ess as the “Matrix, as source and ground of our being,” that would lead to harmony between self and the world.²¹

Daly’s exit from monotheism and Ruether’s decision to remain split the future of feminist religion. Both had begun as reformers and had sought to find a place within the Catholic Church as theologians and intellectuals. Short of substantial institutional change, they achieved unprecedented influence over the direction of theology that reached beyond their Catholic origins. They provided intellectual nurture to two streams of feminist religion and represented the revolutionaries and reformers who addressed the same set of theological issues they believed perpetuated gender injustice and stood in the way of women’s equality. By identifying the male perspective in theology and questioning the nature of God, no dogma or practice was sacrosanct in escaping feminist analysis. The result was not a homogeneous feminist religious perspective but rather a kaleidoscope of stances toward what religion offered women in the form of political empowerment. The two streams of emerging feminist religion supported and debated each other; drawing from different ideational sources, they called for a change in the symbolic core of Western religion. The two streams of thought shared a holism that viewed the religious and political position of women as being of the same cloth.²²

Christ and Plaskow, part of a younger cohort moving through the ranks in the 1970s, were both Religious Studies graduate students at Yale. Together they read Daly’s *The Church and the Second Sex*, invited Ruether to campus, and mined Goldstein’s essay. Christ, raised a Protestant, had

studied religion as an undergraduate at Stanford University under Robert McAfee Brown and Michael Novak, both involved in the New Left politics. She arrived at Yale committed to advancing civil rights and ending poverty and the Vietnam War. She wrote, “I believed that my values commitments were called for by the Christian faith of my childhood and college studies.” As a woman studying Hebrew scripture at Yale, Christ received a cold reception from the male faculty and students, which led her to a feminist conversion. She became active in the New Haven Women’s Liberation movement and the Yale Women’s Alliance, participating in “feminist guerrilla theater acts.” Christ was attracted to Yale’s Roman Catholic folk mass and the spirit generated by Vatican II. Writing her dissertation on Elie Wiesel, she confronted Christian antisemitism and became increasingly uncomfortable with the Catholic liturgy and the imagery of the wrathful male God of Hebrew scripture. She found neither the Hebrew nor the Christian God satisfying. Her distress led her to commit to finding a God who shared in, not stood against, the suffering of the world: “I would seek a God who was a woman like myself.” Meeting Naomi Goldberg and Starhawk, the emerging leaders of a new Goddess spirituality, at a 1975 workshop led to Christ’s second conversion—out of Christianity, but not out of a deep sense of connection to an immanent transcendence and in tandem with her continuing political commitment.²³

In her 1975 essay, “Spiritual Quest and Women’s Experience,” Christ, who founded the Women’s Caucus of the American Academy of Religion in 1971, identified consciousness-raising groups as essential in spiritual transformation. She argued that as each woman engaged in the process of discovering her own experience, she would also “experience a deepened and deepening alienation from the traditional stories.” Facing a dark abyss of “nothingness, the experience of being without an adequate image of the self,” a spiritual transformation or experience of being “born again” was crucial in reconstituting a new sense of self. A transformation of consciousness yielded new sacred stories and new ways of being in the world, presenting the necessity of the divine feminine—the imagining of a divine being identifying with the needs and desires of women.²⁴

The spiritual journey carried political as well as psychological significance. Drawing from Daly’s and Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion, in an essay titled “Why Women Need the Goddess” Christ argued that, “[r]eligion centered on the worship of a male God to create ‘moods’ and ‘motivations’ that keep women in a state of psychological dependence on men and male authority, while at the same legitimating the *political* and

social authority of fathers and sons in the institutions of society.” Responding to resistance to spirituality among secular feminists, she asserted the necessary vitalism of religion, writing, “an enduring politic must be built on mysticism—otherwise it will dissipate in disillusionment after a series of failures.” Spirituality was not an escape from politics; rather, it was fundamental to feminist political action.²⁵

Christ’s classmate Plaskow, raised in Reform Judaism, embraced the social justice vision of the Hebrew prophets. At 16, she participated in the 1963 March on Washington and committed herself to fighting for racial equality. Becoming a feminist she joined the Yale Feminist Alliance and decided on the unusual move of writing a dissertation applying feminist analysis to the Christian theology of Niebuhr and Tillich. She had a growing feminist sensibility and had experienced exclusion from the *minyan*, the quorum of ten men necessary for public worship; she asked, can a woman be a Jew? Plaskow spent the 1970s exploring, with other feminist theologians, the language, symbols, and rituals of monotheistic religions.²⁶

In a 1972 essay, “The Coming of Lilith: Toward a Feminist Theology,” Plaskow identified the need for a theology arising from the consciousness-raising experience. By entering into the community of “sisterhood,” women moved out of isolation and questioned their own lives. They entered into what she called a “yeah, yeah experience” of mutual recognition of “*our* oppression.” Plaskow described this recognition as “walls tumbling down” and filled with great emotion: “anger, fear, rage, joy, celebration, rejoicing, bursting forth, pregnant with newness, pregnant with possibilities, hearing, wholeness.” In sum, “the experience of grace can also become the experience of conversion,” one that necessitated new language and symbols. Looking for an alternative emotive language that included nonreligious sisters, Plaskow concluded, “we did feel this was a valid way of looking at our experiences in the women’s movement, a way that could enrich our understanding of both these experiences and of religious experience itself.” The outgrowth of the bonding of sisterhood, she argued, was expressed in a “communal sense of mission... that feels the need to move outward” into social transformation. Having explored the far reaches of a feminist theology, Christ and Plaskow co-edited the anthology *Womanspirit Rising* (1979), a collaboration that reflected the two broad streams of feminist religion and displayed the fruits of consciousness raising.²⁷

Religious feminists as intellectuals did not remain within the walls of the academy, but busily engaged in political action and institution building.

Virginia Ramey Mollenkott doggedly stayed within a reinterpreted Christian faith, believing that the women's movement provided an opportunity for churches to "root out sexism in their own ranks and to oppose sexism in modern society." A founding member of the Evangelical Women's Caucus (EWC), formed in 1974 as an outgrowth of Evangelicals for Social Action, Mollenkott grew up in a fundamentalist Plymouth Brethren community, which gave her both a deep knowledge of the Bible and a debilitating sense of her own depravity. Studies in literature at New York University taught her textual analysis and stirred a growing feminist awareness. She wrote, "I refused to walk away from the Bible, refused to 'trash it,' learned to read it through the lens of liberation, and found myself transformed by those ancient texts." She identified the "cognitive dissonance" experienced by many in evangelical circles over the emphasis on female subordination that reified an unjust God and a "sinful social order." Deploying a "hermeneutics of suspicion," Mollenkott was "radicalized by the Bible," finding within it a mandate for gender justice in an "androgynous Trinity." Using a feminist reinterpretation of scripture, Mollenkott wrote and advocated for gender justice, reproductive choice, and LGBTQ rights through the EWC, and thus shaped its unfolding vision in the late twentieth century. Rather than leave religion and its institutions, Mollenkott stayed to change them from within and saw these efforts as part of political work.²⁸

For Christ, Plaskow, and Mollenkott, feminist conversion led back to religion and an expansive spirituality even as it profoundly challenged religion; for others, feminism resulted in an exit from a religion that they felt was personally and politically unworkable. Charlotte Bunch, who founded the Center for Women's Global Leadership in 1989, moved toward feminism in the community of the Methodist Student Movement (MSM) and YWCA of the early 1960s. The spiritual vision of the MSM supported political action through voting rights campaigns, antiwar picketing, and the support of international movements for social justice. It was at the YWCA in the summer of 1963 that she and other students read Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. After graduation, Bunch's experience on the national council of the MSM opened opportunities with several national and international activist groups. When she encountered a glass ceiling in a male-dominated world of political activism, she felt a moral outrage that pushed her into involvement with Women's Liberation. She organized the first national conference of Women's Liberation in 1968 and persuaded *motive* magazine, a radical Methodist student publication, to cover the

event. Increased discomfort with the recognition that her lesbianism and the church were at odds brought her to a point of crisis. In her last act within the United Methodist Church, she contributed to the two final issues of the defunded *motive* magazine dedicated to lesbian and gay rights. Bunch broke with the church and became a founding member of the Furies Collective, a short-lived lesbian separatist community in Washington, DC, and became a leading advocate of consciousness raising as an “unending process” necessary for social action.²⁹

This institutional break did not mean that Bunch left her religious sensibility behind. Rather, she reflected, “a strong background in religion has been a source of personal strength for me in secular movements. I think it gives me—I don’t even have the right words for it—but I feel that it gives me a depth and ability to continue struggling and to see my work as part of a broader picture.” For Bunch, the religious values-based politics of her youth continued to infuse her international women’s rights activism, even after she had broken with religious institutions. Feminism, like religion, she argued, was “an approach to every possible issue,” a reorientation toward the world and self. Religion and feminism shared an impulse toward personal and social transformation.³⁰

The 1980s and ’90s brought further advancements by feminist theology that addressed the intersectionality of race, sex, and class that had divided the women’s movement; this found its most forceful expression in the work of black women theologians. Jacquelyn Grant challenged her mentor, liberationist James Cone, for constructing a theology of Black Power as masculinist as the white theology he attacked. Delores S. Williams, who found her feminism at Union Theological Seminar in the 1970s and went on to teach there, forged a womanist theology drawing from the black feminism of Alice Walker and Audre Lorde and the feminist theology of Ruether and Beverly Harrison. Grant and Williams intervened in the construction of both feminist and black liberation theologies that had threatened to erase black women.³¹

The 1990s showed the enduring reach of feminist theology. On the heels of the Christian Right, the first of a series of multiracial ecumenical RE-Imagining conferences convened in 1993, becoming one of the top “Christian political” stories of the year, according to *Christian Century*. Through three-and-a-half politically charged days of speakers, emotive art, and new rituals, the organizers brought together more than two thousand theologians, clergy, and activists to do theo-political work that began with women’s experience. Reinventing and reimagining Christian symbols and

metaphors, the invocation of “Sophia” sounded as a more suitable name for the divine. The effervescent gathering emphasized creativity, immanence, the connectedness of all things, and the healing of the world. Expressing feelings of exile from their own traditions, participants were encouraged to “tell the truth” about themselves, including their sexual orientation, involvement in subversive activity, and plans to “trouble the waters” on the patriarchal, homophobic, racist, capitalist system. News of the conference sent convulsions through mainline Protestant churches and the World Council of Churches, which had provided funding and initial sanctioning, and produced outrage in conservative quarters over what leaders charged was “reckless” goddess worship, heresy, and legitimation of lesbianism.³²

The size and effect of these gatherings at the end of the century made evident that feminism had not freed itself from religion, but rather had profoundly remade it. RE-Imagining felt like a revolution to many, but it was not. Its roots were deep in a century of anticipation and three decades of feminist theologizing. It reflected a refusal to keep the political and the religious separate by blurring the modern lines between the sacred and the secular, the deeply personal and public life.

In anticipation of the new millennium, the imprint of feminist religion on politics was on display at the 1999 “Core Connections: Women, Religion, and Public Policy” symposium co-sponsored by the JFK School of Government and the Harvard Divinity School. Two hundred academics, policy experts, and activists gathered to consider how to harness the vitalism of religion for social change. The eclectic gathering, which included a small group of conservative women, agreed that women in religious institutions played an essential role in social change. Children’s Defense Fund founder Marian Wright Edelman gave the keynote, “Whatever Made That Harmony: Religion and Women’s Movement in the U.S.” She traced the history of women’s suffrage to its religious foundations, emphasizing the role of faith in the lives of Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Mary McLeod Bethune. Characterizing women as “guardians of ethics and morals,” she encouraged greater political engagement: “It is time for women of faith to stand up and create a powerful voice: to bring new messages and new values.” At this point, the conference could have been mistaken for another example of the mobilization strategy of liberal politics. Yet the evident changes were more profound.³³

Among the speakers was a converted mystic, Gloria Steinem, displaying how far feminist religion had gone. One of the foremost secular leaders of

political mobilization in the 1970s, who had expressed an ambivalent relationship with her own complex religious heritage, Steinem a few years earlier had asked in her book *A Revolution from Within*, “Why should we worship a male-only god who makes women feel ungodly and men feel they must be godlike?” Introduced as a contemporary “Joan of Arc,” she preached to a spellbound audience on the role religion played in both the oppression and the liberation of women. After indicting “patriarchal religion” for sins as varied as environmental destruction and child abuse, Steinem offered the audience a blend of Gnosticism, Goddess spirituality, and feminist politics. This was not “old-time religion” or a reformed liberal version, but rather a new mix of a religion that had gone through a radical feminist revolution. Steinem expressed a feminist faith that had come of age in the movement and demonstrated the continuing entanglement of religion and feminist politics.³⁴

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“The 1900-Year Crisis”: Arthur Waskow, the Question of Israel/Palestine, and the Effort to Form a Jewish Religious Left in America, 1967–1974

Doug Rossinow

Few things about the American left are more widely understood than its heavy Jewish overrepresentation. However, American Jews were virtually never involved in the radical left as religious Jews in the first seventy years of the twentieth century. Many Jewish leftists in that long period maintained a strong ethnic Jewish identity; others did not, although they remain part of what David Hollinger aptly calls a dispersionist Jewish history.¹ Nonetheless, their political activism bore few traces of open religious inspiration. This started to change in the late 1960s, when some American Jews, amid an identitarian surge in Jewish activism, tried to organize what would be the first religious Jewish left in U.S. history. The content, direction, and mixed fortunes of this emergent left-wing movement during the tumultuous post-1967 years owed much specifically to the issue of Israel and Palestine. Jewish leftists who wished to be

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233

leftists-as-Jews could not avoid this issue. They found themselves on a narrow path, hemmed in by critics on all sides.

The prime figure in the effort to form a religious Jewish left was Arthur Waskow, a prominent liberal-left activist in the 1960s who turned to religion at the end of that decade. Waskow wanted a Jewish left to become part of a broader “multi-particularist” coalition.² He developed a compromise position on Israel/Palestine, feeling his way toward an accommodation with Zionism and seeking to ground his stance on *halacha*, or Jewish law. However, both theological clarity and political traction proved elusive. The attempted synthesis of Judaism, leftist politics, and internationalist efforts to promote peace and justice foundered on the figurative rocks of Israel and Palestine.

Waskow’s early career reflected a shifting balance between elite and insurgent strategies for improving society and between the priorities of peace and social change. A Baltimore native, he earned a PhD in American history in 1963 from the University of Wisconsin, a center of “progressive” historical interpretation, and the early 1960s found him working (even as he completed his studies) as a congressional aide in Washington, DC. Waskow was in on the ground floor of the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS) when other dissatisfied Washington policy hands secured funding, in 1963, to establish this left-wing “think-tank.” Waskow’s prime intellectual concern was peace and disarmament; as IPS started up he also was a key mover in forming the Conference on Research in Peace History and at IPS he produced a steady flow of publications criticizing U.S. foreign policy as dangerously aggressive. Clearly moved by the era’s black freedom movement, Waskow counseled the interracial Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party as it challenged (unsuccessfully) the credentials of that state’s all-white apartheid delegation to the Democratic Party’s national convention in Atlantic City in 1964.³

While at IPS Waskow added substantially to his dissertation, on white violence against African Americans during the infamous “red summer” of 1919, and published (in 1966) *From Race Riot to Sit-In, 1919 to the 1960s*, a work whose discrepant first and second halves enacted a tilt away from a concern with managing “racial conflict” and toward an overt sympathy with African Americans challenging the status quo nonviolently. Like other peace activists, Waskow came early to protest against the U.S.–Vietnam War, and was one of the speakers at the first “teach-in” on the war at the University of Michigan in 1965. He and his IPS colleague Marcus Raskin achieved wider renown in 1967 as authors of “A Call to Resist Illegitimate

Authority,” a statement advocating political support for young men who refused to cooperate with the U.S. Selective Service System.⁴

Waskow also served on the executive committee for the National Conference for New Politics (NCNP), whose August/September 1967 convention in Chicago was widely remembered as a political disaster that did much to reveal the difficulties of interracial left-liberal coalition-building in the late 1960s. The meeting adopted a list of far-reaching demands from the assembly’s Black Caucus, in order to prevent a walkout by Caucus members. These events led to widespread ridicule of the proceedings, and neither white nor black activists showed much interest in taking the NCNP further. Waskow was dismayed over the events in Chicago, although not as bitter as some. One of the Caucus demands, a call for opposition to what the statement termed Israel’s “imperialist Zionist war” of June 1967, provoked outrage, particularly among Jewish participants. (Major funding for the convention had come from Anne Farnsworth and Martin Peretz, progressive supporters of Israel.) In this “Six-Day War,” Israel had attacked Syria, Egypt, and Jordan—contending that these Arab states were massing for a devastating onslaught against Israel—and, with astonishing speed, seized large territories, including Jerusalem’s “Old City” and the West Bank of the Jordan River. Now the politics of the Middle East was intersecting with the expansion and ongoing transformation of the radical left. This intersection would send Waskow, and others, in new directions.⁵

Matthew Frye Jacobson may exaggerate in saying that in the NCNP “identity politics was born,” but the Chicago meeting did condense what were proving irresolvable tensions within the left. In the late 1960s, white leftists were powerfully drawn to any group identity that could help them elude the now-dreaded status of generically white, middle-class radicals. The emerging doctrine of the American left was that a legitimate radicalism meant fighting for one’s own freedom, and this meant that one needed to be oppressed; otherwise, one was vulnerable to sharp critique. Students argued that they were oppressed, white women turned to feminism, and gay liberation was infused by white leftists. Both this general climate on the left and the 1967 war helped to spark an eruption of Jewish identity radicalism in America.⁶

“Jewish alternative newspapers sprouted like psilocybin mushrooms,” and young Jews started Jewish organizations and formed *havurot*—small-scale do-it-yourself prayer and life communities. This radicalism was

heterogeneous—alternately religious and ethnic, left and right. It was an insurgency against what everyone suddenly called the “Jewish establishment.” In one notorious incident in 1969, Jews for Urban Justice (JUU), an early Jewish leftist group in Washington, DC, accosted guests who were boarding a bus to take them to the gala opening of a local Jewish Community Center. The activists brandished leaflets calling it a “BUS TO AUSCHWITZ.” They were saying that the Jewish establishment was not Jewish enough; it was hastening cultural genocide against Jews by promoting a deracinated middle-class lifestyle. At the same time, the Jewish Defense League organized in New York to promote a right-wing agenda. The common element in all the new Jewish organizations was the preoccupation with Jewish identity as the explicit basis for a new politics and culture. The Brooklyn Bridge Collective stated that “we want to be full human beings, not assimilated nonentities,” and added, “We will not sacrifice our own aims or struggle to fight for someone else’s freedom. No longer will we efface our Jewishness...”⁷

This phenomenon was pervaded by a rejuvenated affirmation of Zionist commitment to the State of Israel. This new Zionism drew on the preexisting American Jewish belief, galvanized by the memory of the Shoah, that Israel was needed as a refuge for Jews facing persecution anywhere in the world. However, as something new and dynamic, it was really based on the contemporary leftist approval of armed struggle by national liberation movements of historically oppressed peoples. Those casting Zionism in such terms routinely mentioned the example of the black movement and the priority of anti-assimilationism. As Bill Novak, an important journalist in the new Jewish radical orbit, rendered the lesson of black power doctrine: “In effect, black people told their white counterparts, and Jews in particular, that the struggle was more particular than universal... The lesson was, ironically, a Jewish lesson—identify with your own people.” The activist M. Jay Rosenberg wrote, “We are radicals. We actively oppose the war in Viet Nam. We support the black liberation movement as we endorse all genuine movements of liberation. And thus, first and foremost, we support our own.” He rejected leftists who contended “that they are ‘anti-Zionist but not anti-Semitic.’ If they can reconcile themselves to the existence of every nation on the planet but Israel, if they call for revolution in every country but only death for Israel, then they are clearly against the Jewish people.” One representative young writer scorned Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver’s “appearance in Algiers with Al Fatah dignitaries, declaring his fraternal solidarity with their cause and mouthing

their bullshit about Israel being an American ‘puppet and pawn’ and a usurper of the land.”⁸

Some of the “new Jews,” as James Sleeper and Alan Mintz called the identity radicals, broached the issue of the Palestinian experience and did so in a rhetoric of evenhandedness. Sleeper wrote, “We have had to grant a measure of truth to the argument that the creation of the state caused human suffering as well as alleviating it; that in this century a powerful Jewish myth came alive along with an equally powerful movement for Arab renaissance and liberation from colonial abuse.” This was new within American Zionist writing, although it would not prove sufficient for an international left that increasingly viewed Israel and Zionism as mechanisms of colonialism, not liberation.⁹

Beginning one year after the NCNP debacle, Waskow—from a rather minimally observant Jewish liberal family—got religion. In 1968, after Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered, Washington’s Jewish Community Center agreed, after initially refusing, to provide shower facilities to activists in the capital for the Poor People’s March, which King had planned before his death. The Center’s leadership had relented after a colleague threatened “to *davven* Maariv in the lobby”—referring to the daily evening Jewish prayer service—if they did not. Witnessing this “shattered *me*,” Waskow recalled. “That this crazy piece of Jewish tradition, boiling up out of the unconscious and the irrational, could fuse itself with the politics I understood... this stunned me. Or unstunned me.” He found a vision of an integrated life of protest politics and faith. In 1969 Waskow, as a member of the steering committee of the New Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam, played a key role in helping JUJ organize a specifically Jewish component of the “New Mobe.” One JUJ statement described a picture of a unified life. “The most important fact about being Jewish is that Jews ought not to *separate* religious and ethical commitments, on the one hand, from politics or everyday life on the other,” it read. “*Jewishness at its best is a whole life process...*” When Waskow appeared as a witness for the defense in the trial of the “Chicago Eight,” a group of antiwar movement leaders and activists, in the winter of 1969/1970, he debuted as a religious Jew, wearing a *kippah* or Jewish skullcap. Soon Waskow was setting himself up as a radical rabbi, based on an evidently intense program of self-study.¹⁰

The event that marked Waskow’s arrival as a new religious leader was the Freedom Seder on April 4, 1969, for which he wrote a “Radical Haggadah,” whose publication in the glossy radical magazine *Ramparts*

had been prearranged. This Pesach celebration, occurring one year to the day after King's murder and led by the liberal Reform rabbi Balfour Brickner—a bridge between the Jewish establishment and the insurgents—drew some 800 people, including numerous writers for Jewish publications, to the Lincoln Temple, an African American church in Washington. The new Haggadah presented the biblical Exodus story as a universal metaphor for liberation struggles against oppression throughout human history, emphasizing the black movement. It was filled with tributes to radical sages and prophets from diverse traditions, including Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Buber, and Henry David Thoreau, as well as, more controversially, John Brown, Nat Turner, and Eldridge Cleaver. The specific honor accorded the African American struggle was closely tied to Waskow's defense of violence under sufficiently oppressive circumstances. The concept of an insurgent Seder spread rapidly. Waskow presided over a massive reenactment at Cornell University the following spring, one featuring a surprise appearance by the fugitive radical priest Daniel Berrigan. Soon after, Waskow wrote, "I crossed the frontier from being a committed Jewish radical, to being a committed radical Jew."¹¹

Attacks on the Freedom Seder eventually came, most notably in 1971 from Robert Alter, a literature professor at the University of California, in *Commentary* magazine, a publication sponsored by the American Jewish Committee (AJC). In light of *Commentary's* emerging profile as the foremost intellectual home of neoconservatism, Alter's distaste for what he termed the Radical Haggadah's "self-effacement before black militancy" was unsurprising. Perhaps more cuttingly, in view of Waskow's new authority as a counterculture rabbi, Alter accused Waskow of displaying "nearly total lack of discrimination about language, values, ideas, and historical experience." Alter noted, in more neutral tones, "the discovery in the light of the new irrationalism that Judaism, as a vivid body of myth invested with the spiritual authority of three millennia, provides rich resources for dissent from the technological flatness and bureaucratic impersonality of a detested 'Amerika.'" Yet he evidently thought someone in Waskow's role ought to moderate, not encourage, the temptation among young Jewish radicals to ransack Judaism for decontextualized elements that might appear to buttress contemporary leftist commitments. Alter excoriated Waskow's work as "a document of self-loathing and self-abasement" tied to a "wavering sense of identity" and scorned what Alter deemed Waskow's inadequate Zionism. He noted that Waskow rendered the traditional Seder incantation of messianic hope, "Next year in

Jerusalem,” as a metaphoric statement of belief in freedom everywhere, and decried this as an effort “to assure us that he is not a Zionist white colonizer preparing to move into the territory of a Third-World people.” Alter lamented, “For other ‘progressive’ peoples, nationalism is an unquestioned birthright, but the Jew is obliged to be, first and last, a universalist.”¹²

Waskow, outraged, sent to the leaders of the AJC the manuscript for an article expounding his general views and demanded (to no avail) that *Commentary* run it. Here Waskow clarified where his religious-political quest stood. He stated that his vision of an adequate “‘radical’ response” to the contemporary world would be “a vital, holistic Jewish People which pursues the basic principle of Halacha”—again, the traditional term for Jewish law—“that life is a Path, a Way, [indivisible], in which politics, religion, economics, culture, the family are fused.” Waskow argued that for American Jews specifically, a true understanding of the historic moment they faced meant grasping the reality of “three simultaneous linked crises, enclosed like envelopes each within the other.” These were “the 80-year crisis,” “the 1900-year crisis,” and “the 3500-year crisis.” The first was the crack-up of the American assimilationist dream, so readily affirmed by the “new Jews.” The second was Zionism’s success in confronting Jews everywhere with urgent hopes for messianic redemption. The third was the existential awareness of genocide and civilizational extinction, the prospect of an end to organized life itself, crystallized in “Auschwitz” and “Hiroshima.” This exposition emphatically rebutted Alter’s charge that Waskow was a pure universalist. The predicament Waskow outlined was partly universal in nature, but it was largely Jewish in particular.¹³

In discussing “the 1900-year crisis,” Waskow’s described his position on Israel and Zionism. Previously he had told a perplexed Israeli that “perhaps I was a ‘Diasporanist’ as he was a ‘Zionist.’” There is reason to think that Waskow had, at least briefly, associated himself with the category of non-Zionism. He, like others in his circle, was aware of Uri Avnery’s 1968 book, *Israel without Zionists*, which offered a kind of manifesto for an Israeli nationalism that would reflect Israeli society’s diversity and would not be merely a Middle Eastern center of Jewish nationalism, and he and others took to the pages of the liberal Israeli newspaper *Ha’aretz* to defend the political liberties of a far more radical group in Israel, the avowedly anti-Zionist Matzpen. Later he would say that he was “searching my way toward a Jewish world-view that would incorporate parts of both Zionism and Diaspora Jewish nationalism.” By 1971 he was making his peace with

Zionism, under certain conditions—whether out of conviction and a sense of Jewish peoplehood, because he understood that Zionism was the *sine qua non* of the organized Jewish community in which he wanted to spread his ideas, or due to a combination of these factors.¹⁴

In his message to the AJC he combined loyalty with critique, political with cultural Zionism, and he embraced both Israel and the Jewish Diaspora as valuable realities. Recent events had brought the American Jewish relationship with Israel to a new, higher pitch. Waskow wrote that

...in 1967, if not before, the Jewish community in Israel proved to be in some sense “ours.” But secondly, by 1970 if not before, Israel turned out to be not truly “Zion,”—that is, not the Hill, the Center from which the Teaching was going forth. No, Israel as well as the Diaspora lived in galut: galut was indeed spiritual, not geographic.

Galut, the Jewish exile from Eretz Yisrael, was a degraded existence in the eyes of many, if not all, Zionist ideologues. Most American Jews had always recoiled from that position, seeing no reason to invalidate their American experience. Waskow pushed into this breach in the walls of pro-Israel polemics, justifying what he called a newly emboldened “belief in the Diaspora as a positive good.” After 1967, he stated, “to be Jewish in the Diaspora... could not mean dismissing, disregarding Israel,” but at the same time, “It could not mean the total, uncritical acceptance of Israel as Zion.” To live in Eretz Yisrael was not to elude the alienation of *galut*. Jews in and outside of Israel alike needed to struggle to reach the true, spiritual homeland of holiness and righteousness.¹⁵

Waskow also tried to link his position on Israel/Palestine to his religious doctrines. At this time, his key theological ideas were a new *halacha* and a new messianism, which would perfect that *halacha*. Waskow’s messianism was a kind of postmillennialism (to use the Christian term) in which humans worked to open a new age of justice and peace. “*As Jews*,” he wrote, “we must work to bring the Messianic Age,” which he described as “the end of the alienation of nation from nation, of men from women, of men and women from their work, of body from mind and action from ideas, of human beings from nature, of God from the Shechinah, the very Presence of God.” He did not appear to use the messianic redemption of history as a metaphor. Instead, he imagined the redemption as an historical restoration of conditions he associated with Eden before the Fall, ones that matched modern perfectionism neatly: the new age would be feminist,

ecologist, perhaps vegetarian. Waskow also rejected the kingly leader that was an essential feature of traditional Jewish messianism, suggesting that the State of Israel would wither away, rather than revive ancient glories. Thus, if anything, his version of messianism appeared to qualify enthusiasm for Israel. However, Waskow did not press this point.¹⁶

In fact, the connection between Waskow's theology and his Middle East politics was not strong. An embrace of traditional Jewish messianism likely would have dictated either an aggressive territorial Zionism or an insistence that only God could intervene in history to restore David's kingdom. These were the familiar positions into which highly Orthodox Jews were polarized. The drastic revision of messianism that Waskow proposed might have implied an anarchist position of some kind. The two-state solution that Waskow embraced politically, however, was not specifically tied to his messianic and halachic thought. The main difficulties besetting Waskow's project were political. However, the problems with his ideas surely did not make it any easier for him to synthesize faith and politics in the way he desired.

Up to this point, Waskow had not spoken out publicly about the issue of Israel/Palestine. The issue's presence in the Radical Haggadah had been oblique. In the summer of 1969, after his triumph with the Freedom Seder, he had journeyed to the Middle East, spending time in both Israel and the Occupied Territories. However this experience may have affected him, he offered no public opinions about the Occupation or the general Israeli-Arab conflict immediately afterward. His correspondence shows that he was thinking about the issue, but he only gradually began to indicate his views on the subject. His reticence allowed others also interested in advancing a Jewish presence for peace and justice to move ahead of him in grappling with this question. Waskow then would have to catch up with them and refresh his own claim to be a leader of the religious left.¹⁷

In 1970, other Jewish peace activists and anti-imperialists began to organize a Jewish peace effort that would focus on Israel/Palestine. The lead individual in this work was Allan Solomonow of the Jewish Peace Fellowship (JPF), and the group he formed, in 1970, was the Committee for New Alternatives in the Middle East (CONAME). JPF had existed since 1941, advising American Jews who, because of religious objections to war, wished to refuse to perform military service. As of 1970 it was affiliated with the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a venerable pacifist group. Yet JPF had no Middle East programming. Solomonow resolved that Jews who advocated peace no longer could neglect Israel/Palestine.

As he wrote in an early statement for the new group, “The Middle East is that special burden each Jew must carry while examining his role in the peace movement and his dedication to pacifism. And it is for and despite that reason that the Middle East is that arena of the world wherein Jews shall make it known what it means to be a Jew...” He did not claim to have a brilliant insight or a definitive analysis to offer and he disavowed dogmatism. Yet he concluded:

The ignorant man does not know nor does the fool understand; yet he who remains silent in the face of tragedy is both by Jewish law and the law of humanity the one who most sustains evil acts... If that great commitment of Judaism to humanity cannot speak in a spirit of justice to the solution of rising hate in the Middle East, then we shall never be able to speak to our sons and daughters of a Judaism that is meaningful in that panoply of problems we are placing in their hands.¹⁸

Solomonow received a modest grant from the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), and CONAME listed a set of sponsoring organizations that were established peace outfits, including the FOR, the War Resisters League, and others. Solomonow established CONAME not as a religious group nor a formally Jewish group at all. One can speculate as to the basis for this choice. Possibly he wanted Jewish participation—as his remarks quoted above suggest—and his best options came from among nonreligious Jews. While CONAME was not limited to Jews, many of its steering committee members were Jewish, including Noam Chomsky, Irene Gendzier, and Richard Falk—scholars who would become stern critics of Israel—as well as the international lawyer Peter Weiss (the chair of the IPS board and son-in-law to a major benefactor, Samuel Rubin) and the psychiatrist and writer Robert Jay Lifton. The only rabbi was Everett Gendler. CONAME took what now appears a rather tentative line on Israel/Palestine. It confined itself to disseminating information from international sources, including both Israeli Jewish dissidents and Palestinians, and to advocating mutual recognition by Jews and Palestinians of each group’s rights and humanity. Yet this orientation placed CONAME far outside the mainstream of organized American Jewish life in the early 1970s. Waskow communicated with Solomonow, and would say that he “worked closely” with the group. Yet Waskow never joined the group’s steering committee, which is to say he really was not a part of the organization—although, by the fall of 1972, he had joined a list of “sponsors.”

Waskow’s absence from active participation was notable, since he had had real connections, in the 1960s, to the very peace activist environment that produced CONAME.¹⁹

Waskow worked toward an engagement with the question of Israel/Palestine on his own terms between 1969 and 1971, with JUJ and IPS his bases of operation. For at least a year, from late 1969 to late 1970, JUJ worked to produce a position on Israel. Its eventual statement, “Peace and Justice in the Middle East,” urged the State of Israel to recognize the existence of “a Palestinian people living on the East and West Banks of the Jordan and in Gaza,” and called on “the leadership of the Palestinian people, including the P.L.O.” (the Palestine Liberation Organization), to recognize the existence of “an Israeli people.” It asserted that both peoples were “entitled to national self-determination and full independence,” and demanded negotiations between the two national leaderships for peaceful coexistence.²⁰

The force of the JUJ statement came from its twinning of Israel and Palestine as two nations, but JUJ did not see the two peoples as having exactly equal obligations in the quest for peace. Its statement put Israel’s burden first, stating that the Palestinians should likewise reach out, “If the Israeli government takes the steps we propose.” A similar asymmetry marked “The Liberation of Palestine and Israel,” the statement that Waskow, with his frequent collaborator Paul Jacobs, wrote and circulated, and which the *New York Review of Books* published in July 1971. This “Liberation” statement was by far Waskow’s most visible intervention on the issue up until then, and it signaled he had composed his views on the matter after a period of rumination. Waskow and Jacobs, like JUJ, framed the basic structure of the problem as one of two nations—once again, Israelis and Palestinians—with rights in conflict. However, they observed that Israel was far the stronger party, and argued that “the first steps toward change must come from the militarily more powerful partner.” The key passage continued:

Today Israel occupies a great deal of the territory in which Palestinians live; no Israelis live under alien rule. *Therefore, we call on Israel to announce at once that she accepts the full right of the Palestinian people to a state of their own where they now live, including the East and West Banks and Gaza, that she is prepared to negotiate with the whole range of Palestinian leadership on how to withdraw Israeli troops from the West Bank and Gaza, and that she will not intervene in Jordan against any effort by the Palestinian majority there to topple the monarch so as to reunite East and West Banks under Palestinian rule.*²¹

The statement considered the problem as a puzzle in conflict resolution and sought to solve the puzzle without discussing the problem's historical roots. The authors wrote that "history is less important to human justice than is present human reality. Whatever should have happened in the Middle East 2,000 years ago, 200 years ago, 20 years ago, or 2 years ago, now both an Israeli people and a Palestinian people do exist." Their references to these highly discrepant time spans indicated that they were addressing the historical claims made by both Jews and Palestinians to be the rightful owners of all of historic Palestine/Eretz Yisrael. Their approach, with its emphasis on power relations, reflected the particular radical milieu of which they were a part. Theirs was different from the specifically Christian radicalism preached by Martin Luther King, Jr., who had emphasized "that the forgiving act must always be initiated by the person who has been wronged, the victim of some great hurt, the recipient of some tortuous injustice, the absorber of some terrible act of oppression." This was, he taught, the only way to disrupt the "chain reaction of evil—hate begetting hate, wars producing more wars."²²

However, Waskow and Jacobs felt compelled to sever their general radicalism from at least one element in contemporary left analysis of the Israel/Palestine question. They rejected the charge that Israel was an imperialist state, directing their own anti-imperialism at the United States. The closing paragraph of the "Liberation" statement called on Americans "*to expose and organize against the imperial adventures of their own government and huge corporations in the Middle East*" and condemned the United States and the Soviet Union for fueling "a Middle East arms race." Earlier in the statement they contended that "the Palestinians cannot simply treat Israel as an extension of Western imperialism, for although the Israeli government *has* allied itself with the Western Empires, an Israeli people exists and it will not disappear, except through genocide." This argument was not particularly logical. Even if Waskow and Jacobs were justified in raising the specter of genocide—a basic theme in pro-Israel rhetoric, and one surely encouraged by intermittent statements by Arab leaders that they envisioned violently undoing Israel's creation as a state—neither that threat nor the existence of a new Israeli people was germane to the question of whether Israel was a tool of U.S. empire. But, in order to square their leftist commitments with support for Israel's existence, the authors apparently felt they needed to discredit this charge, familiar at least since

the NCNP. They added, seeking further to undermine the linkage between radical politics and hostility to Israel, “It is not ‘revolutionary’ to force a people to abandon self-determination.” They planted their flag in the soil of nationalism, aiming to appeal broadly to progressive forces.²³

The “Liberation” statement had 33 signers. Communications with other activists, most of them Jewish, before and after the statement’s publication, give a sense of the challenges facing any effort to rally broad support—even among Jewish leftists and peace activists, let alone among others on the left—for a consensus position on Israel/Palestine at this time. Two of those on CONAME’s steering committee, Chomsky and Everett Gendler, expressed similar criticisms; Gendler declined to sign, whereas Chomsky told Waskow, “I’ll sign the statement, but I’m not entirely happy with it.” He wrote that to assert “that the Palestinians have a right to a state on both the East and West banks seems to me too far-reaching. One could make a case that the Bedouins of Jordan have a right to self-determination.” For him, the logic of nationalism ought not to sweep all else—including the prerogatives of ethnic or cultural minorities—before it. He wondered “why take such a specific stand on this question [of a future Palestinian state’s location], anyway.” Gendler, a Conservative rabbi, wrote an essay for a 1971 collection produced by JPF, *Roots of Jewish Nonviolence*, in which he argued that Jewish religious teaching, contrary to popular understanding, imposed a virtually absolute prohibition on killing. In his letter to Waskow he made points similar to Chomsky’s, drawing on an analogy to the peace movement’s basic approach to the politics of Southeast Asia.

I don’t think it fair to advocate support of the attempt of the Pal. majority in Jordan to topple the monarch and reunite E. & W. Banks under Palestinian rule. Why place that preference for Palestin[i]ans over Bedouins? That degree of internal adjudication I find inappropriate, just as I find support for NLF [National Liberation Front, the southern branch of the Vietnamese revolution] over Buddhist neutralists inappropriate for U. S. [peace]niks in relation to Vietnam. That’s their business, not ours. We have the right & duty to get out of there; we have the right and duty to say, hands off Hussein & the Palestinians; but to take sides? Why?²⁴

For other Jews who might have been identified as potential supporters of the “Liberation” statement, elements in the document clearly cut

athwart their Zionist commitments. Sol Stern, a left-wing San Francisco Bay area journalist who wrote for *Ramparts*, in the summer of 1971 authored a forceful essay in that magazine in which he took the contemporary left to task for its intensifying anti-Zionism. Stern depicted the New Left (at least in Berkeley) as besotted with Palestinian nationalism and intolerant of its Jewish counterpart. He defended Israel against charges of colonialism and imperialism and lamented the current tendency to use “Zionist” as an “epithet” that dismissed views like his rather than engaging them rationally. Waskow praised the essay, but found Stern’s rebuke to the left too sweeping. The two men differed on the issue of imperialism. “You wrote as if the Yishuv and Zionism were a wholly anti-imperialist community and movement,” wrote Waskow, “whereas I think it’s obvious that... there has been a sharp political struggle within Zionism—like that within any national self-determination upheaval (Ireland, South African Boers, USA, Nigeria, for instance).” He went on to explain that he found it urgent “to make clear to the left that there were and are contradictions, that there is a left as well as a pro-imperial Israel,” but that there was “no special reason to find Israel an illegitimate state.” If nationalism per se was not objectionable, and if left and right tendencies were typical in nationalist movements, then Zionism might be normalized for some of those inclined to question its validity. However, Waskow’s inclusion of Afrikaner nationalism in his list of analogies may have boded ill for the fate of this line of argument within the international left of the 1970s.²⁵

Bill Novak gave a plainspoken explanation for his dissent from the “Liberation” document, whose authors had stated that they had “an equal stake” in the freedom of the Israeli and Palestinian nations. “I, unfortunately, do not have ‘an equal stake in the survival and liberation of the Palestinian people,” Novak said. “In other words, I do not and cannot pretend to be neutral.” Waskow and Jacobs might have responded that a perception of moral equivalence between two sides in a conflict is not the same as neutrality in that conflict. Surely, they personally identified with Israel’s cause, not with Palestine’s; they stated they were invested in Palestinian self-determination precisely because they believed Israel’s security ultimately hung on satisfying that imperative. But no matter. Novak expressed a widespread gut-level feeling among Jews when he implied, in effect, that the controlling question in all political analysis and prescription regarding the Israel/Palestine conflict must be, “Which side are you on?”²⁶

Within the internationalist left, on the other hand, as of 1971 the “Liberation” statement seemed soft on Israel. That left, which was

experiencing rapid growth but also displaying worsening sectarian tendencies, was multiracial and multireligious. The “new Jews” succeeded in creating all-Jewish radical environments (of a kind) within the United States, but they needed to maintain these enclaves as institutionally separate from the rest of the left. On the socialist or anarchist left not defined by ethnicity or religion, there was not much space for a distinctly Jewish radicalism. The expanding Protestant and Catholic lefts could with greater ease link themselves to the nonethnic left. The reason the Jewish left could not do so was Israel, since a commitment to Israel was fundamental for Jewish radicals but it was not—to say the least—for the left as a whole. In this connection, the difficulty was not criticism of Israel; Waskow, for one, was willing to express and contend with serious criticisms of the Jewish state. There were limits to the criticisms he would consider seriously, no doubt. However, the real problem, as his exchanges with others on the (non-Jewish) left revealed, was the growing tendency of leftists to question the very constitution of that state and of Zionist ideology. It was, to use a Zionist refrain, a question of Israel’s “right to exist,” or at least to exist in its current form.

“I don’t think states have a priori rights to exist,” Sharon Rose wrote to Waskow. To her, “people have such rights.” Rose was one of three women who had signed on to the *New York Review* statement, but she asked Waskow afterward to excise her name from any further dissemination. She explained her thinking to him:

When I signed the statement over six months ago I was still thinking of myself as some kind of a hotshot organizer for the “radical Jewish movement”; and I was frightened and smarting under the vituperative attacks of those who called me such “epithets” as “Fedayeen lover” and “Jewess”. I felt I needed to try to reestablish credibility amongst Jews, and, though I had reservations even then, I signed the statement because it was the best statement ever signed by well known Jews and because I did agree with alot of it.

Now, however, she had turned to a more conventional or traditional radical left position, and was not searching for “credibility amongst Jews” in particular. She thought a Palestinian state “would be dominated economically by the capitalist forces of Israel and Jordan.” Stating her bottom line, she wrote, “Yes, I believe in self-determination for people. But I also believe in revolution, class struggle, struggles against racism and imperialism.” She embraced the Palestinian armed struggle, saying that the

fedayeen were “fighting all of their oppressors,” meaning “the Israeli ruling class, the U.S. ruling class, and the Jordanian ruling class.” The Israeli left, in contrast, she found unimpressive, with, as she saw it, “its insistence on Zionism as the *sine qua non* of any negotiations, its total lack of understanding of institutional racism, its elitism and need to defend the privileged economic status of its membership.” Waskow replied to what he called “your letter exculpating yourself from the LPI [Liberation of Palestine and Israel] statement.” He cited reports that Rose had made remarks at the Arab Information Center in Washington that advocated “effective military support for the Palestinian movement against the [Jordanian] regime and against the racist Zionist state.” Waskow was “horrified,” calling this a “formula for genocide.”²⁷

Of all the critical replies Waskow collected to the LPI statement, the most far-reaching was a furious, lengthy missive titled “A Joint Arab–Jewish Statement in Answer to the Ad Hoc Committee for the Liberation of Palestine and Israel.” The group that this document—seven Arab Americans and six American Jews from Seattle, topped by Selma Waldman, a politically-concerned visual artist—did not fail to observe that “there is significantly not one Palestinian co-signer” to the Waskow/Jacobs statement, which purported to outline a plan for the liberation of Palestine. In general, the “Arab–Jewish Statement” deemed the *New York Review* document “characteristic of the strained ambiguity of Jewish-American intellectuals on the issue of Middle East Liberation.” Calling Israel “a settlers’ state” like South Africa and a henchman of U.S. empire, they denied Zionism standing as a liberation movement. “You have attempted to place on an equal footing as equally oppressed, the Jewish people who are colonizers (the oppressor nationality) and the native Palestinians (the oppressed nationality) who once lived in Israel, but who are now dispersed and in exile in their Palestinian Galuth.” The group insisted that the Jewish left had a fractured position on national liberation that was unsustainable. “You have boxed yourselves into a painful intellectual quandary,” they charged: “either to resolutely oppose Israeli sub-imperialism, and range yourself wholeheartedly on the side of the Palestinians, or to slowly abandon your left-liberal views on liberation.” They called on “the Jewish left in the U.S.” to “struggle unequivocally against Zionism in all its characteristic forms.” Here was the voice of the international left in the decade to come. It was very hard to see how Waskow and the Jewish radicalism he envisioned could come to terms with a critique like this one. The legitimacy of Zionism, and of Israel, was at stake.²⁸

Leftists, both Jews and non-Jews, were becoming more openly critical about Israel/Palestine, notably within the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), which began publishing a periodical *Report* in 1971. Waskow continued to tangle with this nonethnic left. In 1973, following the murder of a group of Israeli Olympic athletes by Palestinian nationalists in Munich the previous year—an act that much of the world found ghastly and frightening, but that some supporters of Palestinian armed struggle justified as necessary to win the world’s attention for their cause—Waskow wrote angrily to MERIP to castigate it for rationalizing the massacre as a “command action.” *MERIP Report* published his letter and responded with a partial retraction, but maintained coolly, “We do not approach the question of terrorism as pacifists”—as, of course, neither did Waskow—and insisted, “The violence of the oppressed must be distinguished from the violence of the oppressor.” Waskow complained to another activist, Deborah Hertz, “MERIP’s position is bitterly anti-existence-of-the-State-of-Israel, a position I don’t regard as radical or socialist at all.” He had met with Hertz, and he recalled “that you asked me how to organize in the Jewish community around your Middle East position, I probed to find out what your position was, discovered it was basically a P.L.O. ‘secular democratic Palestine’ position + said there is no way to organize among serious Jews for that position.”²⁹

Waskow also had a heated exchange with Maxim Ghilan, who published, in Paris, a journal titled *Israel & Palestine*. Ghilan accused Waskow of wishing to silence non-Jewish voices on the issue, a contention Waskow rejected. He thought Ghilan and his publication were derisive toward Judaism. He explained, “I... believe in world Jewish peoplehood and the creation of a Jewish movement of Jewishly-committed socialists. Such a movement cannot be created by non-Jews, any more than non-Blacks can create a Black socialist movement...” The logic of parallel national identities, so attractive in the late 1960s within the arena of American ethnicity—where it had cultural and political content but did not denote state power, real or imaginary—was not working very well as a balm to the Israel/Palestine conflict in the early 1970s.³⁰

In the 1970s Waskow’s desired synthesis of Judaism and radical politics was not gaining cohesion, and it was specifically the Israel issue that disrupted the search for an integral politics. In 1973 he addressed himself to a conference convened by JPF and wrote, “I believe it is... now absolutely necessary for there to emerge in the Jewish community an explicitly Jewish organization to take a clear stand on how to achieve peace in the Middle

East and work out a clear program on how to approach this question in the Jewish community.” The role he described might be filled by JPF, or else by Breira, a new organization, focused specifically on Israel, some of whose personnel had worked in CONAME. Whereas JPF was a religious (pacifist) group, Breira was Jewish but not explicitly religious. It would take on the more prominent role that Waskow outlined. JPF remained very small and politically marginal. Waskow would channel his energies increasingly into Jewish Renewal, an extension of his early efforts to reinvigorate Jewish observance in a way consonant with contemporary culture and ethics—to rethink *halacha* for post-1960s America. Although he maintained his basic position on Israel/Palestine, the balance of his writings would shift, in the years to come, more toward personal growth and less toward political engagement. Meanwhile, some progressive Jewish groups that identified links between *halacha* and social justice would emphasize domestic policy issues exclusively, eschewing international affairs in order to avert the political bog of Israel/Palestine. The all-embracing Jewish “Path” that Waskow had prophesied at the end of the Sixties turned out to be difficult to develop and sustain.³¹

NOTES

1. David A. Hollinger, “Communalist and Dispersionist Approaches to American Jewish History in an Increasingly Post-Jewish Era,” *American Jewish History* 95, no. 1 (March 2009): 1–32.
2. Arthur I. Waskow, “L’Malshinim Al-t’hi Tikvah,” proposed article typescript attached to letter from Arthur I. Waskow to Philip E. Hoffman and Eli M. Black, March 13, 1971, 11. Waskow (who put this term in his own quotation marks) referred specifically to the “Freedom Seder” that he first led in 1969 (see below). Arthur Ocean Waskow Papers 1948–2009, American Jewish Historical Society Manuscript Collection P-152, Center for Jewish History, New York, NY, Box 3, “Jewish Involvement—*Commentary* Magazine Controversy, February–June, 1971.” Waskow later changed his middle name to Ocean.
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Ita Ford and the Spirit of Social Change

Marian Mollin

As a U.S. Catholic missionary in Chile during the 1970s, Maryknoll Sister Ita Ford engaged in what she and her congregation called “pastoral work.” She visited with her neighbors, offered religious instruction and reflection, and provided spiritual counseling to young couples preparing for marriage. In the aftermath of the 1973 coup that installed a repressive military regime, Ford’s spiritual responsibilities to the residents of the Santiago shantytown where she lived and worked expanded to include a range of additional tasks. She put her faith into action by working with the Church-sponsored *Comite de Paz*, where she advocated on behalf of political prisoners and visited jails and detention centers across the city. Reflecting the knowledge she had gained in the 1960s from U.S. civil rights and antiwar struggles, Ford also engaged in work much akin to grassroots community organizing. She led Bible-study groups that raised consciousness and promoted local solidarity, she actively supported the feeding kitchens organized by shantytown mothers to provide meals to the neighborhood’s impoverished children, and she helped organize handicraft cooperatives that provided local women with desperately needed financial resources. When she moved to El Salvador in the spring of 1980, she shifted her focus and instead worked to supply material aid and shelter to refugees

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255

fleeing the violence of the burgeoning civil war. Far from her Brooklyn home, Ford wrote letters to friends and family members describing the human rights abuses she witnessed and urging them to pressure the U.S. government to end its support for Latin America's military regimes. And although she faced many dangers herself, she refused to leave the people—the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed—that she had chosen to accompany in faith. Ford's commitment to Catholic foreign mission was, in essence, nothing less than a multifaceted effort to promote social justice and create the "Kingdom of God" here on earth.

Ita Ford became a publicly known figure through her death, after members of El Salvador's National Guard murdered her and three other North American churchwomen in December 1980. This essay, in contrast, focuses on her life and its broader historical significance in order to explore how religion and politics overlapped and merged in mid-twentieth-century left and progressive social justice efforts.¹ Ford and her female religious contemporaries grew up alongside the widely-chronicled generation of U.S. activists who spearheaded the civil rights, antiwar, and feminist campaigns of the 1960s and 1970s, and although they took different paths, it is unrealistic to assume that these two groups of American youth could escape each other's influence. Nevertheless, women religious such as Ford receive nary a mention in the scholarship on postwar American social movements, even in studies of the Catholic left.² Neither has recent research on the history of American women religious, which has begun to analyze how largely secular historical developments—particularly the black freedom struggle and second-wave feminism—shaped the lives and choices of Catholic Sisters, fully grappled with how these women's spiritual beliefs and practices affected the wider world around them.³ Women religious thus occupy an interpretive space that is marginally linked to, and yet fundamentally separate from, that period's defining struggles for social, cultural, and political change.

The work of accompaniment that Ford and the Maryknoll Sisters engaged in allows us to place these women at the center, rather than on the margins, of this history. Ford's experiences highlight the important role that U.S. women religious played as participants in and catalysts for modern struggles for social justice. Just as important, the manner in which Ford and her companion sisters linked political action and spiritual praxis through their calling as Catholic foreign missionaries reveals how secular and religious

forces—what historian Robert Orsi calls the “civic” and the “sacred”—intertwined within postwar struggles for social and political change.⁴

As a young Catholic girl growing up in Brooklyn, New York, the civic and sacred dimensions of Ford’s life were never far apart. Ford’s formative years combined the influence of postwar Catholic belief and practice, and a family history that linked religious faith to political action. Born in 1940, Ford grew up in a middle-class Irish American community defined by a religious culture that emphasized developing deeply personal connections to Christ, to the saints, and to God, that cast itself as a spiritual alternative to the materialism of mainstream American life, and that highlighted an ethos of service to others. Within Ford’s household, this belief system manifested itself, in part, through a commitment to civic engagement, exemplified by her mother’s work as a public school teacher, and in frequent family conversations about politics and social issues. It also defined the history of her extended family. Two distant cousins, Patrick and Austin Ford, made names for themselves in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century as Irish-Catholic journalists and advocates for abolitionism, women’s suffrage, Gilded Age labor struggles, and the Irish republican cause. Austin Ford’s son, Bishop Francis Xavier Ford, made the connections between his religious and civic life in a different, albeit equally powerful, manner by serving as a Maryknoll missionary in China for over three decades, until he died as a religious prisoner—and the congregation’s first official martyr—in 1952. Although Ita Ford never met these family members, she knew of their accomplishments and, in the case of Bishop Ford, his fate. Their stories provided her with a striking example of how one could combine dedication to religious life and public duty in a fulfilling and constructive way.⁵

The pull toward civic engagement was strong. Ford reached adulthood as part of a cohort of American teenagers who believed that they could and should change the world. The political climate of Cold War conformity had begun its decline. The 1960 election of President John F. Kennedy, his idealistic inaugural speech that called for young people to stand up and shape the world, and the parallel stirrings of the civil rights struggle and nascent New Left, all punctuated Ford’s coming of age. So did more subtle social and cultural shifts that encouraged college co-eds like Ford—women possessed of voracious intellects, cosmopolitan inclinations, and a deep interest in the wider world—to think of their lives in

ways that moved beyond the prescribed domesticity of their mothers' generation. By the early 1960s, even the parochial world of American Catholicism encouraged young women to celebrate their intelligence, independence, and aspirations for personal fulfillment. These experiences made Ford part of a generation of youth who approached their futures with unbridled optimism, hope, a palpable sense of agency, and a belief that they could overcome the injustices of their time.⁶

Ford's quest for fulfillment led her in 1961 to the Maryknoll Sisters, a congregation founded in 1912 as the first American Catholic religious order dedicated to foreign mission. Ford believed that joining this religious order was more than simply following a family destiny, but was part and parcel of finding what she later called "a meaningful life to live." Ford's youthful desire "not to be mediocre" and "to do something" that made a difference in the world made Maryknoll the perfect setting for her to pursue her dreams. As foreign missionaries, the Maryknoll Sisters were known among American Catholics—and, by the 1950s, to the American public—as a courageous, hardy, and adventurous lot, "Sisters on horseback" who traversed the globe in order to fulfill their understanding of God's call. The congregation augmented its outward focus with a discipline of intense spiritual searching, which Ford eagerly embraced. As Ford wrote to a friend, her rigorous training in the novitiate pushed her "to look inside" and "peel off the layers" of social artifice that obscured her true self. In these ways, Ford shared much in common with the other young women and men of her generation who, through volunteer work, cultural experimentation, and political activism, sought to achieve authenticity and purpose.⁷

Ford's and the Maryknoll Sisters' authenticity of spiritual practice became increasingly bound up with the spirit of social and political change as the 1960s progressed. While the congregation had already begun to integrate social change activities into its definition of mission, the ecclesial reforms sparked by the Second Vatican Council of 1962–65 pushed them to center stage. Vatican II, with its goal of bringing the Catholic Church in line with the modern world, transformed key dimensions of religious thought and practice: it changed the nature of prayer and liturgy, opened up opportunities for lay participation, encouraged women religious to leave behind the cloistered practices that had separated them from the wider world, and articulated a new and potentially radical and democratic definition of the Church as "the people of God." There were certainly limits to this democratic impulse; Vatican II did not eliminate the established Church hierarchy. Nevertheless, within the United States, these

changes quickly precipitated the development of what historian Jay Dolan calls a “new Catholicism.” For American women religious, primed for action by long histories of Catholic and Protestant missionary traditions and, more recently, a decade of Vatican-inspired networking and professionalization, Vatican II ushered in the era of “New Nuns”—sisters who became known for their active engagement in organized efforts for social justice and political change.⁸

The Maryknoll Sisters stood at the forefront of these social and ecclesial changes. In 1954, the congregation accepted an invitation offered by the archbishop of Kansas City, Missouri, to open and operate the first racially integrated hospital in the city. Thus, even before Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Montgomery Bus Boycott had pushed the black freedom struggle to the forefront of national consciousness, the Maryknoll Sisters had adopted what historian Amy Koehlinger calls the “racial apostolate.” Unsurprisingly, over the next decade and beyond, these women avidly followed news of the burgeoning civil rights movement as it spread across the South and into the North. King’s message of nonviolence and racial justice resonated deeply with their experiences of working with the poor and disenfranchised in both the United States and around the world. So did the influential grassroots community-organizing style of Chicago activist Saul Alinsky, who made a name for himself by mobilizing the poor around issues of racial and economic justice, and by building strong alliances with the Catholic Church. These forces combined to shape the domestic mission work of the congregation. By the mid-1960s, Maryknoll Sisters, inspired by King, Alinsky, and Vatican II, were working and teaching in inner-city black, Hispanic, and immigrant neighborhoods, participating in urban conferences on religion and race, and marching in civil rights demonstrations in New York City and Selma, Alabama. Their efforts reflected an expanded concept of mission that linked service to God to work for social and political transformation.⁹

These changing currents in the political and religious culture of the Catholic Church in general, and Maryknoll in particular, influenced Ford in profound ways. Although chronic medical conditions forced Ford to leave Maryknoll in 1964, just before she planned to take her initial vows, she continued to follow an activist vision of progressive Catholicism. She took a job in New York City, moved to Greenwich Village, maintained her connection to a circle of progressive Catholic friends and institutions (including the Maryknoll Sisters), and participated in projects that reflected her deepening political concerns. In the years that followed, Ford marched in civil rights demonstrations, joined protests against the Vietnam War,

actively supported the work of César Chávez and the United Farm Workers, and worked with a local parish to provide services and assistance to poor single mothers. As her mother recalled, those experiences “gave Ford maturity, independence, [and] political consciousness in her work for human rights.” Like so many others of her generation, Ford approached the decade’s end seeking more effective ways to turn her personal beliefs into actions that would lead to substantive and meaningful change. In response, she chose to return to Maryknoll in 1971. At a time when Catholic women were leaving U.S. religious orders in droves, Ford bucked the demographic trend and re-entered the congregation she had loved in her youth. Her writings at the time, as well as friends’ remembrances of her, indicate she still believed that following her “call” to religious life provided the best route toward an authenticity of being and purpose. At the same time, transformations within the Church and the world of women religious meant that Ford could tangibly link her personal commitment to social change and her activist experiences to the sisters’ work of “evangelization and witness.”¹⁰

The spirit of the 1960s also manifested itself within the Maryknoll congregation, and within Ford herself, through an understanding of spirituality as relational in nature. For the Sisters, putting faith into practice meant building and sustaining deeply personal connections amongst themselves as women religious, and between themselves and the communities they served in mission. Rooted in a personalist philosophy that celebrated the inherent dignity of every human being, and a commitment to collective solidarity that echoed the civil rights, New Left, and antiwar struggles, as well as the communal experiments of the counterculture, this ethos was one of the factors that drew Ford back to Maryknoll in 1971. By building a prefigurative version of the “beloved community” designed to unify spirituality and social action, the Maryknoll Sisters pursued the development of what they described as “a world as God intends it to be, a world of justice and peace.” This pursuit fed into Ford’s ongoing search for authenticity and meaning, and she celebrated how Maryknoll made it possible for “our personal identity... [to be] discovered within the larger scope of the community.” Within this context, forging interpersonal and group connections served as an expression of religious belief that Ford and her Sisters linked to the task of changing the world.¹¹

Maryknoll’s religious framework took these relational priorities and moved them beyond the prefigurative politics of that era’s largely secular social movements by adding God to the mix. Prayer and faith combined in

the Sisters' lives to create what Orsi characterizes as a network of relationships "between heaven and earth." Ford, for example, described her decision to return to Maryknoll as part of being "drawn to a life which is a process of realizing our relationship between ourselves and God." Orientation materials for Maryknoll novices from the early 1970s similarly emphasized the concept of "prayer as relational—the totality of a person communicating with God in the full climate of community living and apostolic involvement." As Orsi argues, we should not dismiss these descriptions of divine relations simply as colorful allegories or tropes, but should instead take them seriously as reflections of "the realness of sacred presence in the imaginations and experiences of religious practitioners." We need to assume that the Maryknoll Sisters quite literally meant it when they wrote in their 1974 General Chapter Proceedings that, "in the rhythm of our prayer, there are moments in which God calls us to life, quietly, each by her own name." Ford, a friend recalls, was similarly "shaped and directed by Christian consciousness." She regularly used "distinctively Christian" language, speaking "of 'signs' and 'counter-signs;' of 'bearing witness;' of 'making one's peace known,'" and, in times of crisis, saw herself as speaking to God. This embrace of a connection to the divine suggests that although Ford's and the Sisters' spirituality may have pushed them in what appeared to be an activist direction, their commitment to what they called "covenant relationship" distinguished them in important ways from those involved in the better-known social movements of their time.¹²

Developments in Latin America and the Latin American Catholic Church added to the distinctive quality of the Maryknoll Sisters' approach to foreign mission and social change. As in the United States, the 1960s began in Latin America with signs of hope, especially for those seeking to improve the conditions of the continent's impoverished majority. By the mid-1960s, however, disillusionment with the power of liberal reforms to foster meaningful structural change had tempered this optimism and led to a rise in calls for more radical formulas for social, economic, and political transformation.¹³ The 1959 Cuban Revolution inspired many of these revolutionary impulses, but so did shifts in what historically had been one of Latin America's most conservative institutions: the Catholic Church. In response to Vatican II's potentially democratic redefinition of the Church as "the people of God," a group of young Latin American priests and theologians reoriented Catholic teaching and practice to reflect the needs and experiences of the continent's oppressed and impoverished masses.

The grassroots popularity and influence of this spreading theology of liberation became apparent in 1968, when the Conference of Latin American Bishops met in Medellín, Colombia, formally declared their “preferential option for the poor,” and abandoned the Catholic Church’s traditional alignment with the continent’s economic and political elite. This ecclesial revolution, although not universally embraced by the Catholic hierarchy, nevertheless represented a radical shift in Catholic religious culture. In Latin America and elsewhere, and at a time when student revolts were sweeping across the United States, Western Europe, and the Global South, liberation theology fostered a culture of hope and resistance to entrenched economic and political powers that turned Catholic teaching into something comparable to a social movement.¹⁴

It also utterly transformed the Maryknoll Sisters’ understanding and practice of mission. The sisters first embraced the tenets of liberation theology while working in the Peruvian *altiplano* in the mid-1960s, where they encountered radical theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez, and, according to their own notes, quickly adopted these men as “solid spiritual guides, pastoral leaders, and deeply loved and respected friends.” As Sisters Louise Ahrens and Barbara Hendricks later reflected, Gutierrez taught them that “the poor were not simply objects of evangelization,” but were, instead, the actual leaders of the Church’s evangelizing mission, the people who could teach the missionaries and the global Catholic Church the true meaning of the gospel. Maryknoll missionaries in Latin America and beyond took this new perspective and ran. With the encouragement of local Church leaders, Sisters left the schools and hospitals they had been running, and the centralized houses where they had lived, and relocated to poor barrios, shantytowns, and rural communities to engage in new and experimental forms of ministry, becoming, as they described it, “more pastoral and... more dialogical” in their theology. They encouraged the formation of Christian base communities, small local prayer groups that, through a combination of grassroots evangelization, education, and organization, encouraged people to use the Bible as a tool for reflection and action against poverty and injustice. Equally important, the Maryknollers carried these ideas back home to the United States, integrating their commitment to “a preferential option for the poor and... the promotion of peace with justice” into their mission activity, their constitutions, their Sister Formation training, and their outreach to North American communities. By the time Ford arrived in Chile as a newly professed Sister in the

summer of 1973, her congregation had come to occupy the leading edge of this theologically inspired and highly politicized push for social change.¹⁵

This hybrid approach to mission, which combined influences from the political culture of North American social movements, the Maryknoll Sisters' recent history, and liberation theology's central tenets, profoundly shaped Ford's experiences in Santiago, where she served from 1973 until 1980. There, Ford followed the decentralized approach to pastoral work that the Maryknoll Sisters had come to embrace. She settled with two other sisters in a shantytown, or *población*, on the far outskirts of the city and worked to integrate herself into her adopted neighborhood. The challenges of living through the traumatic experience and aftermath of the September 1973 military coup, however, forced Ford and her companion sisters to reevaluate their understanding of pastoral work. Within what quickly became "a frightened, jobless, ill-fed community," their acts of faith and religiosity took on a decidedly political cast. And as they embarked on a program that combined teaching their neighbors the basics of Catholic liturgy and prayer with the work of social welfare, community empowerment, and advocacy for human rights, their efforts began to more closely resemble a grassroots community-organizing campaign than the traditional work of Catholic foreign mission.¹⁶

In El Salvador, the Sisters' religious work looked quite different, even though it retained similar political implications. Ford and her close friend, Maryknoll Sister Carla Piette, moved to this tiny nation in the spring of 1980, in response to a call for support from San Salvador Archbishop Oscar Romero. Many people, including Ford, considered Romero to be a Central American incarnation of Gandhi, a man whose commitment to nonviolence and whose decision to cast the Catholic Church on the side of impoverished *campesinos* and embattled urban laborers not only placed him and his fellow church workers in direct opposition to the policies of the local ruling military and economic elite, but turned all of them into targets of brutal repression.¹⁷ As if to highlight the violence that the Sisters would face, Piette arrived in El Salvador on the very day that a right-wing death squad publicly assassinated Romero as he celebrated mass. The ensuing trauma and violence made the community-oriented pastoral work the Sisters had previously engaged in impossible to initiate in their new home. Instead, Ford and Piette delivered food and medical supplies to refugees who had fled military violence to hide in the mountains, transported many of these same people to unofficial refugee centers in the capital city, and helped priests travel to small communities to lead mass and

provide a sense of spiritual solidarity.¹⁸ For these acts of faith, they joined the ranks of those labeled by the regime as enemies of the state.

Despite these circumstances, it would be a mistake to cast Ford's efforts, and those of her companion Sisters, as "political" in the most common and partisan understanding of the term. Ford's decision to side with the poor and oppressed had unmistakable political consequences. In both Chile and El Salvador, the militarized regimes of the era viewed an empowered underclass, and the allies and supporters of this underclass, as threats to national security. Nevertheless, the Maryknoll Sisters consistently refused to characterize their work as "political," and instead cast it as representing their willingness to act upon their religious beliefs.¹⁹

Above all else, faith motivated Ford to take the actions that she did. The Maryknoll Sisters of the 1960s and 1970s believed that putting religious belief into action meant resisting "the sin [that] has entered into the very bone of political economic, social, and religious structures... [that] oppress and deprive... whole classes and countries of people." Their goal, as the Sisters repeatedly articulated in governing documents and reports, was the "conversion of persons and societal structures which will transform our milieu into a just and peaceful world." This path foreshadowed what theologian Walter Wink later characterized as resistance to the biblical concept of "principalities and powers": the need for people of faith to unmask and oppose a "Domination System" characterized by violence and oppression. From Ford's perspective, the physical and spiritual manifestations of this system—the hatred, the cruelty, the repression—were "evils worse than death."²⁰

In both Chile and El Salvador, the "principalities and powers" that Ford and other Maryknoll Sisters confronted were the structures of those nations' highly militarized political regimes. Indeed, the treatment they received from these "powers" legitimized their perception that this was a genuine conflict between what Social Gospel theologian Walter Rauschenbusch called the "kingdom of evil" and what the Sisters referred to as "the Kingdom of God." Under the thumb of two brutal military states, Ford quickly learned that her religious beliefs made her a target for harassment or worse. Chilean guards repeatedly searched the small house she shared with two other sisters, ostensibly looking for weapons, but really hunting for copies of *La Biblia Latinoamérica*, the annotated Bible used by liberation theology's followers, which the soldiers hoped to use as evidence of the Sisters' "subversion." In El Salvador, the state and right-wing paramilitary forces accused the Catholic Church of using its

“preferential option for the poor” as an excuse to collaborate with Leftist opposition groups, and openly persecuted Catholic representatives—priests, nuns, catechists, and even the archbishop—through arrests, disappearances, torture, and death. Ford, who literally thought of the Church, in the words of Vatican II, as “the people of God,” explicitly interpreted the violent oppression experienced by the Latin American Church as “part of the continuing reality... of Christ’s crucifixion.”²¹

Ford resisted these “powers of evil” through the work of accompaniment, of being with and staying with the poor and oppressed through the hardships and injustices that marked their lives. The concept of accompaniment had its roots in liberation theology’s “preferential option for the poor,” which called on Catholics to challenge the structures of violence that perpetuated poverty and injustice, and, in doing so, demonstrate God’s love. For Ford, this joining of faith and action came to life through the work of Archbishop Romero and what he called “*el pastoral de acompañamiento*,” a phrase that the Maryknoll Sisters interpreted to mean “the pastoral task of being a companion on the way,” or, more directly, “to accompany a people in their suffering.” In Chile, this sense of purpose pushed Ford and her fellow Sisters to see their mission “not only as one of teaching the gospel to the poor, but rather of living the message of Christ in their midst... to attempt to share the lives of the Chilean pobladores.” El Salvador’s intense violence complicated this task: their lives and the lives of the people they served were in constant danger, and it was difficult, if not impossible, to build up relationships of trust. Nevertheless, although the Sisters were frightened by working in what was, for all intents and purposes, a war zone, and understood that they could leave at any time, they intentionally chose, as another Maryknoll Sister stationed in El Salvador explained, “to stay with the poor here, helping them in their struggles.” The Maryknoll Sisters viewed this commitment to remain with “the people” as a fundamental part of what they described in their governing documents as their “prophetic role of announcing signs of hope and denouncing sin.” It stood at the center of Ford’s work as a foreign missionary.²²

More than anything, accompaniment in El Salvador served as a form of lived solidarity that brought Ford and the other Sisters face to face with the terrifying experiences of the poor and oppressed. Ford’s “baptism into violence” began with Romero’s assassination and continued unabated until her death eight months later. Ford arrived in Central America the day of the Archbishop’s funeral mass, only to be greeted by television footage of soldiers bombing and firing into the huge crowd of mourners who had

gathered outside of San Salvador's main cathedral. Sister Carla Piette, who had arrived several days earlier, was part of that memorial crowd, and, as she stood vigil over Romero's casket, she cared for the injured and witnessed the deaths of those who had been shot. It did not take long for Ford to also experience what she called "an incredible climate of violence" firsthand. A random shootout in a shopping mall sent Ford scurrying for cover, soldiers searched and roughed her and Piette up at roadblocks, and the task of identifying dead bodies that families were too frightened to identify themselves brought her face to face with the "repression & genocide" sweeping that tiny nation. Ford and Piette joked about how blonde hair, white skin, and U.S. passports seemed to protect them; in reality, they were filled with fear.²³

Ford's identity as a woman religious also offered no protection, and in fact made her more of a target given what Piette described as the Salvadoran government's "terrific hatred of the Church." The colonel of a local regiment menacingly told Ford that he considered "the Church... indirectly subversive because it's on the side of the weak." Even more frightening was the ominous graffiti that appeared on the door of the small parish house where Ford lived, and which warned that "this house lodges communists. Anyone entering will die." Ford's abduction, disappearance, rape, and murder in December 1980, on the very same day that her name prominently appeared on a death squad hit list, dramatically underscores the political implications of her pastoral work. The fact that three other U.S. churchwomen—Maryknoll Sister Maura Clark, Catholic lay missioner Jean Donovan, and Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel—accompanied Ford in death, and that uniformed members of El Salvador's National Guard perpetrated this brutal crime, made it clear that her disappearance, rape, and murder were acts of state-sponsored violence against visible representatives of the Catholic Church. In El Salvador, at least, the spiritual and the political had become inextricably linked.²⁴

The four churchwomen's deaths also reverberated deeply within U.S. politics. Robert White, the U.S. ambassador to El Salvador, publicly protested the murders, but to little effect: Jimmy Carter's presidential administration and its rhetorical support for human rights were coming to an end, and there was neither the will nor the way to change U.S. policy or the Salvadoran government's behavior. President-elect Ronald Reagan, instead, vowed to increase U.S. backing of right-wing Latin American dictatorships in order to counter what he described as the threat of Soviet domination. Unsurprisingly, in order to deflect criticism,

Reagan's incoming officials politicized the churchwomen's murders in a manner that supported rather than opposed El Salvador's military regime. The U.S. Ambassador-designate to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick, insisted that "the nuns were not just nuns. The nuns were also political activists." Alexander Haig, Reagan's Secretary of State, publicly blamed the women for their own deaths and falsely insinuated that they had been involved in a firefight with the police. Although the Maryknoll Sisters vociferously disputed these accusations, the responses of the powers-that-be indicate that state actors at home and abroad viewed these women as threats to established "systems of power and domination."²⁵

The Maryknoll Sisters were not naïve; they clearly recognized the political consequences of their work even as they framed it in terms of religious mission. Ford was well aware that supplying food and medicines to people who had fled their homes in fear of the military was, in essence, supporting the opposition. As she wrote in one letter home, "if we have to take a preferential option for the poor, we have to take sides." From her perspective, making this choice was part and parcel of living a faithful life. Long before Ford's death, her congregation had acknowledged that aligning themselves with the poor and oppressed would entail embracing "the mystery of the cross," and accepted that solidarity and accompaniment could lead to martyrdom at the hands of government and military forces. As such, it is critical to understand Maryknoll's refusal to characterize its work as "political activism" not as a strategic or rhetorical decision, but as a reflection of how its members interpreted their reality. "We have tried to avoid the term 'political activism,'" several Sisters explained almost a decade after Ford's death, "because... it does not express our motivation and approach. It seems to obscure the prophetic role of the missionary... It just does not ring true." Such statements, however, did little to minimize how politicized their religious work had become.²⁶

The words and rhetoric that Ford surrounded herself with during the last months, weeks, and days of her life indicate precisely what she believed she was working toward: not martyrdom, not a political revolution, but rather a deep and lasting relationship with God. When she and Piette drove their battered jeep through the mountains and countryside of El Salvador, transporting people and delivering food and medicine, the song they wrote and sang to keep their spirits up was not a tune of political protest, but an affirmation of their faith. "You are the Lord of the Road," their refrain proclaimed as they asked God to help them "see," "hear," "love," "console," and "be in solidarity with your poor." The banner the

two Sisters hung in the small room that served as the chapel in their Chalatenango home also did not espouse a partisan or political slogan. Instead, it simply declared, “Father, I believe in your surprise for me today.” And when Ford’s companion Sisters packed up her otherwise barren room after her death, they found a hand-painted sign suspended over her bed that hopefully declared: “Almighty and Eternal God our Father, your goodness is beyond what our spirit can touch and your strength is more than our mind can bear. Lead us to seek beyond our reach. Give us the courage to stand before your truth.” For Ford, and for the Sisters and church workers who served alongside her, standing before God’s “truth” meant nothing more and nothing less than being “committed to the Gospel” and being willing to “[give] their lives in love with and for the poor.” There is no doubt that this commitment had political implications amidst the repression and violence that characterized Chile and El Salvador in the 1970s and 1980s, but earthly politics was the consequence, not the goal, of Ford’s efforts to live out her faith.²⁷

The national publicity that occurred in the wake of Ford’s and the three other churchwomen’s deaths helped turn El Salvador’s civil war and U.S. government support for that nation’s repressive military regime into a *cause célèbre* for secular and church-based social justice activists within the United States. Given the dynamics of Ford’s life and work, it is perhaps unsurprising that grassroots opposition to U.S. policies in Central America blurred the boundaries between the sacred and the civic as allies and activists advocated on Ford’s behalf and on behalf of the tens of thousands of murdered and persecuted Salvadorans. The Maryknoll Sisters and the families of the four slain churchwomen made immediate and then ongoing pleas to the U.S. Congress and State Department to stop military aid to the region and investigate the churchwomen’s deaths. In the process, they used the power of their personal loss and religious commitment to turn the issue of U.S. foreign policy in the region into a subject of national political debate.²⁸ Decidedly secular groups such as Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (CISPES), whose roots went back to the U.S.–Latin American solidarity movements of the 1960s and 1970s, worked closely with members of the local Catholic hierarchy—bishops and priests—as well as with women religious and lay Catholic activists. The strength of this connection between spiritual and corporeal protest became most visibly manifest in the 1990s through the annual mass protests organized by Maryknoll Father Roy Bourgeois against the training of Latin American military officers at the School of the Americas

in Fort Benning, Georgia. The intersection of religion and progressive left politics quickly came to define organized opposition to the U.S. government's Central American policies in the 1980s and 1990s.²⁹

In many ways, Ford and the Maryknoll Sisters helped set the stage for this blurring of boundaries between religion and left politics. In contrast to the stereotypical image of cloistered nuns, women religious such as Ford were very much engaged with the wider world. Indeed, Ford's youthful quest for "authenticity" and "meaning," combined with her congregation's commitment to nonviolence and social justice, meant that she shared much in common with her generational peers who, rather than entering religious orders, joined more recognizable movement centers and political campaigns. The Sisters' commitment to a style of mission work that drew on their insights from and experiences with civil rights, New Left, and antiwar struggles in the United States, and from liberation theology in Latin America, additionally gave them an important role in the social movements of that era. As Ford and her cohort at Maryknoll put their religious beliefs into practice, and put their organizing and political know-how to work, they facilitated the transmission of experience, knowledge, strategies, and tactics across regional and national borders. Indeed, through the work of accompaniment, Ford and the Maryknoll Sisters engaged in efforts akin to building a transnational, intersectional, and faith-based social movement that linked "religion" to "politics," and the Global South to the Global North. It was the logical result of them placing themselves, and their understanding of the sacred, at the center of their worldly pursuits.

NOTES

1. Several writers have explored Ford's life and death, but none place her in the kind of historical context necessary to assess the greater significance of her life's work. See: Judith M. Noone, MM, *The Same Fate as the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984; repr., 1995); Phyllis Zagano, *Ita Ford: Missionary Martyr* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996); Jeanne Evans (ed.), *"Here I Am, Lord": The Letters and Writings of Ita Ford* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005).
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- and Jim O'Grady, *Disarmed and Dangerous: The Radical Lives and Times of Daniel and Philip Berrigan* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); Anthony Giacchino, "The Camden 28" (First Run Features, 2007). "Women religious" is a commonly used term that refers to Catholic sisters and nuns.
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 5. Noone, *The Same Fate as the Poor*, 13–15; Evans, *Here I Am, Lord*, 1–5; James Rodechko, "An Irish-American Journalist and Catholicism: Patrick Ford of the Irish World," *Church History* 39, no. 4 (1970); John F. Donovan, *The Pagoda and the Cross: The Life of Bishop Ford of Maryknoll* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1967).
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- Penny Lernoux, *Hearts on Fire: The Story of the Maryknoll Sisters* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995). Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity*, Farrell, *The Spirit of the Sixties*.
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Global Encounters and the Evangelical Left

David R. Swartz

The domestic planks got most of the attention. Ron Sider, a professor at Messiah College, railed against poverty in America's cities. Jim Wallis, a longhaired seminary student with ties to the New Left, wrote a screed against racism, what he called "America's original sin." Sharon Gallagher, member of a Christian commune in Berkeley, pushed to include a denunciation of sexism. At the end of the so-called "Thanksgiving Workshop," held in Chicago in late November 1973, these three signatories—along with dozens of other moderate and progressive evangelical leaders—issued the Chicago Declaration, a document declaring that "God requires justice" on issues of race, gender, and poverty in the United States. The *Washington Post* described the gathering as the start of "a religious movement that could shake both political and religious life in America."¹

This emerging evangelical left, however, imagined impact beyond the nation. The Declaration also included the following lines:

- "We recognize that as a nation we play a crucial role in the imbalance and injustice of international trade and development. Before God and a billion hungry neighbors, we must rethink our values regarding

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277

our present standard of living and promote a more just acquisition and distribution of the world's resources.”

- “We acknowledge our Christian responsibilities of citizenship. Therefore, we must challenge the misplaced trust of the nation in economic and military might—a proud trust that promotes a national pathology of war and violence which victimizes our neighbors at home and abroad. We must resist the temptation to make the nation and its institutions objects of near-religious loyalty.”

These denunciations of American imperialism and super-patriotism pointed to international, even cosmic, obligations. “We make this declaration,” wrote the drafters of the profoundly religious document, “in the biblical hope that Christ is coming to consummate the Kingdom and we accept his claim on our total discipleship until he comes.” This global emphasis, underplayed in scholarship on the religious politics of the 1970s and 1980s, represented an important plank in the evangelical left’s platform.²

Samuel Escobar of Peru embodied this internationalism. At the Thanksgiving Workshop, the Latin American theologian represented the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship-Canada as its president. In a plenary session characterized by both hope and sorrow, he described many interactions over the last decade between white-bread American evangelicals and Latin Americans. Speaking to students in Córdoba, Argentina, Escobar mourned revivalist Bob Pierce’s staunch defense of American intervention in Korea and Vietnam. He cheered the productive, even friendly, exchange between Paul Rees, a former president of the National Association of Evangelicals, and leftist students at a café in Cochabamba, Bolivia. These encounters demonstrated to Escobar—and to his white fellow travelers at the Thanksgiving Workshop—that global relationships were real, growing, and pushing North Americans in progressive directions. Escobar himself served on the drafting committee of the Chicago Declaration, which rhetorically bludgeoned American materialism and imperialism. While recognizing that this new movement might be marginalized as “an interesting outburst from a group of *enfants terribles*,” he suspected that “small, experimental” models “of the Spirit of God moving among his people” might show American evangelicals a way forward in living out “the social implications of the gospel.” Rejecting both “the Constantinian captivity of the Church” and “Marxism dressed with the rhetoric of liberation,” Escobar proposed “a New Testament Christianity that takes seriously again what it means to call *Jesus* and *only Jesus*—not Mammon—Lord.”³

Escobar, a radical Latin American evangelical running a North American organization, was not the sole representative of this global reflex. A host of Latin Americans would deliver strident critiques of the United States the following year at the Lausanne Congress of World Evangelization in Switzerland. Collectively, these Latin Americans—and many Asians and Africans from the Majority World—comprised an important bloc within the evangelical left. When organizers planned a second Thanksgiving Workshop for 1974, they invited 13 individuals from a “Third World Participant List” and offered a seminar on “Third-World Women.”⁴

The emergence of new interpretive lenses within American historiography has begun to illuminate previously hidden characters like Escobar. In recent decades, scholars have called for the integration of both religion and transnationalism into narratives of America previously fixated on politics and circumscribed by national boundaries. Religion, according to Jon Butler, generally appears in post-Civil War history only as a “jack-in-the-box,” popping up as “momentary, idiosyncratic thrustings up of impulses from a more distant American past or as foils for a more persistent secular history.” Thomas Bender and Ian Tyrrell similarly have called for scholars to study America in its global context. Over a decade old now, these pleas to add transnational and religious dimensions to American scholarship still have far to go. Historians Luke Clossey and Nicholas Guyatt write, “we’re overwhelmingly interested in ourselves. Europe, the U.S., and Canada are the subject of more than three-quarters of all historical research in Britain and North America.” The same is true in the field of religious history. In the last ten issues of *Church History*, only three articles out of over sixty focused on the history of Christianity since 1500 in Asia, Africa, or Latin America. Even fewer have scrutinized religious movements that cross borders.⁵

A transnational analysis of the evangelical left, at first blush a thoroughly domestic project, demonstrates how new lenses can illuminate the past and present of American politics. Majority World critics, often using a deeply Christian vocabulary and logic, pushed American evangelicals toward the left on issues such as civil rights and economic development. At the same time, they rejected the sociosexual politics embraced by the new social movements of the 1970s and beyond. Majority World evangelicals thus defy the accepted progressive-conservative (left-right) binary that dominates political discourse within the United States. Whatever the prospects of future coalitions, analyses of the political left must reckon

with global evangelicalism. Indeed, the acceleration of immigration since 1965 and the new phenomenon of “reverse missions” should make the study of religion within the left anything but marginal.

E. STANLEY JONES AND CIVIL RIGHTS

Global encounters began pushing evangelicals in progressive directions long before the 1973 Chicago Declaration. Missionary E. Stanley Jones, for example, joined the Civil Rights Movement after several decades in India. Having grown up and attended college in racially segregated settings south of the Mason–Dixon Line, Jones encountered the “beautiful soul” of the Indian ashram in the 1920s as a young missionary. At the Sabarmati Ashram, Jones interacted with a very diverse group that included a not-yet-famous Gandhi, high-caste Hindus, outcastes, Indian Christians, Muslims, and Westerners. Jones found their egalitarian practices striking, and he rhapsodized about them in verse: “I took my lamp and went and sat / Where men of another creed and custom / Dwelt together in bonds of common search.” The only thing missing, he determined, was Christ. In 1930 Jones founded the Sat Tal Ashram, a community that was meant to be “truly Christian and truly Indian.”⁶

It was also strikingly egalitarian. At Sat Tal, a beautiful estate in the Himalayan foothills, members participated side by side in daily worship, prayer, meditation, physical exercise, work, and debate. Ashramites came from a wide spectrum of religious backgrounds, but they all began the day by sharing in a ritual called “Morning of the Open Heart” in which participants confessed to barriers of race, class, titles, and personal feelings of fear, resentment, self-centeredness, and guilty—anything, said Jones, that interfered with “real community.” In keeping with its profoundly egalitarian ideal, Sat Tal also forbade titles. Participants became Brother Gopal and Brother Stanley. Jones, the seasoned missionary, was very different from Jones, the young graduate of the conservative evangelical Asbury College. He remained fundamentally grounded in the experiential piety of historic Methodism—Wesleyan scholar Bill Kostlevy has called him “an unreconstructed holiness evangelist”—but his experience in India had transformed him away from dogmatic apologetics toward a profound concern for social equality. Jones’s interactions with Mahatma Gandhi, Hindu ashrams, and grinding poverty in India profoundly changed him. Against many quarters of American evangelicalism, he began to embrace pacifism, critique capitalism, support racial integration, and live communally.⁷

Jones brought his new convictions back home. In 1942 the Wesleyan evangelist conducted evangelistic crusades in the American West. Instead of holding them at Methodist churches, he preached at half a dozen Japanese internment camps, including Manzanar in California and Topaz in Utah. Jones was horrified at what he saw, and he told the world. "I was an American citizen, as were most of them. I was free; they were not." The barbed-wire camps, he said, were "a monument to American stupidity." He was "embarrassed" for his country. In subsequent speeches across the world, Jones relayed the words of a Japanese pastor in one of the camps: "Help save our wavering faith in democracy." As Jones wrote in *Christ of the American Road* (1944), Japanese internment had exposed "a false America, a traitorous America, and a greater danger to our democracy than Hitlerism." America, he said, had held the moral leadership of the East, but immigration policy and internment was destroying Asian openness to democracy. To white American audiences, Jones said, "I go back to the East with a heavy heart, knowing that I shall have to apologise for the attitude of the land of my birth to the land of my adoption. I shall meet it in every public meeting at question time, in nearly every personal conversation and in the changed attitude of sullen indifference."⁸

Jones also challenged American racial segregation. He did so in a variety of ways, including serving on the Advisory Committee for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which organized the first Freedom Rides in the late 1940s. He persistently lobbied presidents and Congress. He headlined hundreds of Kiwanis, Lions, and Rotary Club events around the country. In each of these contexts, Jones made specific calls for federal intervention and interracial committees. Perhaps one of his most profound challenges to segregation came in the form of the ashram. From the 1940s forward, Jones led hundreds of these intensive spiritual retreats, which were intended to be an egalitarian micro-community in which the wealthy and poor, black and white practiced a churchly version of the "beloved community" ideal of the Civil Rights Movement. He told participants that "barriers of class and cash dissolve completely. An executive bunks with a laborer, a society hostess with a shopgirl." Each, including Jones, who usually picked up trash from the ground, was assigned work of manual labor. The most revolutionary aspect for most, even those from the North, was race. In 1943 in Mars Hill, North Carolina, black and white ashramites ate together, played together, prayed together, and roomed together for four days. The movement grew through the 1950s.

In the summer of 1963 alone, 4,000 people attended one of 18 North American ashrams, which violated racial protocol in both the North and South.⁹

Jones represents the conspicuous internationalism of white evangelical participation in the Civil Rights Movement. To be sure, most did not join the movement (though neither did most white mainliners or Catholics). But those, like Jones, who did, often came from overseas. Billy Graham's larger investment in civil rights coincided with his international evangelistic crusades. This phenomenon was also true among in Jones's Wesleyan circles, within the Southern Baptist Convention, and at neo-evangelical institutions like Wheaton College and Fuller Seminary. In almost every case, missionaries pursued integration more than local pastors. The global encounter, especially during the Cold War, convinced missionaries that segregation hurt the cause of Christian faith and democracy. When progressive evangelicals wrote in the Chicago Declaration that they deplored "the historic involvement of the church in America with racism and the conspicuous responsibility of the evangelical community for perpetuating the personal attitudes and institutional structures that have divided the body of Christ along color lines," they saw themselves as pioneers that would redeem centuries of bad theology and behavior. But evangelical efforts toward racial justice were never entirely homegrown. They derived significantly from global sources.¹⁰

WORLD VISION AND GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT

The global encounter also pushed the evangelical humanitarian organization World Vision leftward. Founder Bob Pierce, who functioned as a rhetorical foil for Samuel Escobar at the Thanksgiving Workshop, was part of a burgeoning "China Lobby" that pushed for an aggressive roll back of Communist gains in the Pacific theater of the Cold War. Pierce and evangelist Billy Graham joined publisher Henry Luce, himself born to missionary parents in China, in spreading the word of Mao's impending victory and anti-Christian atrocities. Pierce traveled over 2.5 million miles between 1950 and 1960 in his pursuit of child sponsorships, revival, and democracy for Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, India, and Thailand. "If Christian Americans fail these strategic points today, then all Asia may be lost to the witness of Christ tomorrow," wrote Pierce. World Vision, launched during the Korean War to address a humanitarian crisis, began as an outpost of Christian Americanism.¹¹

World Vision's Cold War imperative waned in the 1970s. First, World Vision experienced the chastening of Vietnam. Second, decolonization opened evangelical eyes to the dangers of imperialism. In an era of global resentment toward American military interventions, World Vision encountered more resistance than before to its assumptions of American dominance. Many questioned whether American Christians were always a force for good. "Must Christian relief agencies be the monopoly of the West?" asked Singaporean Chua Wee Hian, the general secretary of the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students. A multitude of global voices, especially from Thailand and India, began calling for more democratic structures and a "strict equality between North and South" within the organization. The difficulties of Vietnam and elsewhere, contended former staffer Alan Whaites, made World Vision more open to hearing "lessons on the danger of internal domination by a single culture and national perspective." The political and cultural climate, wrote one administrator, is "more searching, more testing, more threatening than it has ever been. We cannot assume a welcome because we come with gifts and compassion." The organization's leaders began to understand its work as being compromised in certain contexts because of its overtly American identity.¹²

World Vision responded in the 1970s. It "de-Americanized" in what President Stanley Mooneyham called "a grand experiment." Recipient nations from Europe, Asia, Latin America, and Africa became full partners of World Vision International. These new global voices brought new perspectives to relief work. Specifically, they urged a more structural approach to world hunger and poverty. Surveys of field offices reflected a desire to move beyond "simply welfare" and the "ministry mainstay" of childcare toward a "long-range planning system" and "community development." One exemplary 1975 issue of *World Vision Magazine* featured the views of L.R. Bawla, a professor at Burma Divinity School, and a group of Sri Lankan evangelicals: B.E. Fernando, the former Collector of Revenue for Ceylon and current director of World Vision in Bangladesh; Celestine Fernando, a minister and secretary of the Bible Society; and Neville Jayaweera of the Marga Institute. These writers indicted evangelical efforts that focused solely on personal evangelism and disaster relief. Against the objections of neo-evangelical titan Carl Henry, they insisted that evangelicals should recover the theme of liberation from the Old Testament. Lee Huhn of Latin America World Vision International modeled his leadership after the Nicaraguan Evangelical Committee for Aid and Development

(CEPAD), whose remarkable work at the end of the Somoza regime, said Huhn, was going “beyond relief to a completely new dimension of exciting development.”¹³

These initiatives, modeled by the Majority World, fed progressive evangelical sensibilities. Stanley Mooneyham’s 1975 book *What Do You Say to a Hungry World?*, a favorite book among moderate and progressive evangelicals in the United States, contrasted sharply with World Vision’s strident anticommunism and relief work in the 1950s. While Mooneyham still utilized a moderate anticommunism, his rhetoric was more self-critical, in the vein of Niebuhr, and far less animated by animus against the Soviet Union. And while Mooneyham employed longstanding evangelical tropes of “intense personal encounters,” he added penetrating discussions of the structural causes of global hunger, which were “numerous, interrelated, and complex.” The United States was culpable, he wrote, because very little foreign aid actually addressed hunger. Most went toward military hardware and exports that the Majority World didn’t need. Poking at a triumphalistic Christian Americanism, Mooneyham wrote, “Foreign aid is typically self-interest flying under the false colors of generosity and altruism.” Aid came at the risk of vassalage for many “developing” countries. Using a very loose definition of aid—one that included military aid and private investment—it was clear that the United States was not as generous as it often projected itself.¹⁴

The broader evangelical community also reflected the new sensibilities. Bryant Myers, World Vision’s development guru, wrote *Walking with the Poor: Principles and Practices of Transformational Development* (1999), which became very influential among moderate evangelical missions and humanitarian agencies. Reflecting important trajectories toward indigeneity and self-criticism that had taken shape over the 1980s and 1990s, the book preached that poverty could not be reduced to material conditions and that transnational corporations practice a “web of lies and deceit in big structural systems” and “play god in the lives of the poor.” Myers’ critiques radiated out to Food for the Hungry, World Relief, The Evangelical Alliance Relief (TEAR), the World Evangelical Fellowship’s International Development Assistance Commission, HEED, Jubilee Crafts, Tearcraft, Worldcrafts, The International Institute of Development, the Society for Community Development, Partnership in Third World Ministry, the United Action Association, Enterprise Development International, and dozens, perhaps hundreds, of others.¹⁵

Significantly, the roots of the new evangelical humanitarianism came from overseas. Myers's extensive experience in Majority World sites and his use of theory pioneered by evangelicals such as Jimmy Yen of China and Jayakumar Christian of India informed the rising development movement in the United States. Reagan's 1980s-era American triumphalism may have overwhelmed Carter's theology of limits in the electoral college. But internationalization tempered the Christian Americanism of many evangelicals, especially those associated with an emerging evangelical left. World Vision itself, which grew into a behemoth NGO of 100 entities overseen by 6,000 full-time staff by the early 1990s, transformed from an American-dominated, relief-oriented charity to an international organization characterized by partnerships and long-term solutions to world poverty. Nurturing close ties with progressive evangelicals, World Vision fit the Chicago Declaration's stated desire to "promote a more just acquisition and distribution of the world's resources" and to resist making the nation an object of "near-religious loyalty." Its more global perspective distanced World Vision from the religious right's preoccupations with biblical inerrancy and culture warring.¹⁶

IMMIGRATION

Increasingly, global encounters have been happening at home. What progressive evangelicals at the 1973 Thanksgiving Workshop could not have known was how immigration would change the demographics, and thus the nature, of American Christianity. Majority World evangelicals, buoyed by growing numbers and high confidence, have been evangelizing the United States, which they perceive as an apostate and secularizing nation. As early as 1972, one missiologist counted over 250 mission agencies in the Majority World that had sent out 3,369 missionaries. Among them was Samuel Escobar, who lived in North America from 1972 to 1975 and then returned often to speak at missionary conferences. Since the 1970s, according to Jehu Hanciles, numbers have risen at "an extraordinary rate." As of 2000, 67,000 missionaries from Asia alone had arrived in the United States. In 2010, the Redeemed Christian Church of God, a Pentecostal group from Nigeria, built a 550-acre compound in Texas to serve as its missionary headquarters. "It was the Westerners, the Europeans and Americans that brought us the Gospel as missionaries to us on the dark continent of Africa. So the seed was sown, is grown, germinated, and it is

now bearing fruit. So we're now here to give back," explains Kwesi Ansah, Jr., a Ghanaian missionary in South Carolina who has also preached the gospel in Israel, Australia, and Spain. In a kind of reverse mission, Christian immigrants see themselves as both converting a secular America and sanctifying the already converted.¹⁷

These high numbers reflect the demographically consequential effects of the Immigration Act of 1965. Prior to this legislation, which revoked earlier quotas that favored immigrants with European countries of origin, 82 percent of visas went to northern and western Europe, 16 percent to eastern and southern Europe, and only 2 percent to the rest of the world. Post-1960s policy restricted European immigration and prioritized Asian, African, and Latin American immigration, especially refugees and families seeking to reunify. The impact was striking. By 1990, the U.S. was home to 23 million immigrants, a number which jumped to 38.4 million by 2005. 90 percent of these immigrants, about 13 percent of the American population, were non-European. Immigration has become a truly global encounter that is remaking the face of America. Demographers expect the trajectory to intensify, predicting that the United States will become a minority-majority nation by the 2040s.¹⁸

A large majority of those immigrants are Christian. This is in part because of the rapid growth of evangelicalism abroad. According to the most recent report from Gordon-Conwell's Center for the Study of Global Christianity, three out of every four evangelicals live in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. From 1970 to 2010, the evangelical population grew 5.5–6.5 times faster in those regions than in North America. In the present decade alone, demographers project evangelical growth in the Global South to outpace growth in the North by a factor of 2.5–3.5. The demographic impact on American immigration is monumental. According to missiologist Jehu Hanciles, himself an immigrant from Sierra Leone, nearly two-thirds of immigrants are Christian, a higher proportion than among homegrown millennials. About a quarter of the Christian population in the U.S. are either immigrants or have at least one parent who was born abroad. According to a report from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 620,000 Christian immigrants received green cards in 2012. The new immigration, as Warner observes, is bringing about "not so much a new diversity among American religions as diversity within America's majority religion."¹⁹

Boston, located at the heart of New England secularism, represents one of the most striking examples of Christian diversity and vitality. Though

not one of the three major gateways to the United States—New York City, Miami, and Los Angeles—Boston’s urban geography has been completely transformed by immigration. So has the religious landscape. Observers describe the burgeoning churches as evidence of a “quiet revival.” As white churches moved to the suburbs, Haitian, Brazilian, and Asian storefront churches boomed, more than making up for evangelical departures. In 1970, there were 300 churches in Boston. By the mid-2000s, there were some 600. Outpacing any other era in Boston—even the Great Awakenings—this “quiet revival” has become “the longest sustained period of Christian growth” in the city’s history, according to Jeff Bass of the Emmanuel Gospel Center.²⁰

Religious revival often takes sociopolitical shape. Al Padilla, the director of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary’s Center for Urban Ministerial Education, says that the migrant workers and poor laborers who fill immigrant churches “are very concerned about how the church should act in the public square, and they are progressive in social and urban issues.” Immigrants, after all, often occupy a similarly marginalized space as American racial minorities. After episodes of police brutality in the 2010s, one immigrant church leader in Miami contended that he could “no longer afford to stand by while Africans are murdered and assaulted by police.” African immigrants must, as scholar Jacob Olupona puts it, “engage in discourse about ethnicity, racism, and violence against immigrants because these issues impinge upon their daily lives.” Immigrants may hold to the conservative theology of many white evangelical churches, but they are nonetheless subject to the whiteness embedded in American social and economic arrangements.²¹

Many immigrants thus criticize libertarian arrangements that permit cultures of whiteness to persist. In polls Latinos articulate belief in the American ideal of self-sufficiency and hard work, but they also question whether the free market is an economic panacea. According to researchers with the polling agency Latino Decisions, “Minority citizens prefer a more energetic government, by large and statistically significant margins.” Even Latinos in the Assemblies of God, a denomination whose American adherents largely hold to a right-wing politics, support health care reform, back increasing the minimum wage, and tend to vote Democratic. 80 percent of global evangelicals—compared to 56 percent of American evangelicals—think that the government has a responsibility to help the very poor who cannot take care of themselves.²²

Faith language suffuses this progressive rhetoric. Christian immigrants frame activism on poverty in terms of “the least of these.” Environmental justice takes the shape of “creation care.” Emanating out of a consistent-life framework, anti-death penalty activism has begun to pervade immigrant populations. In the mid-2010s, for example, churchgoing Latinos helped overturn the death penalty in Nebraska. Currently comprising about 10 percent of the state’s population (but likely to reach 25 percent by 2030), they lobbied legislators to override the governor’s veto of the abolition bill. The National Latino Evangelical Coalition assisted their efforts, declaring that capital punishment was “systemically flawed.” NLEC spokesperson Gabriel Salguero explained, “All life is precious. We’re pro-life: womb to the tomb.” On issues ranging from capital punishment to welfare, rising numbers represent significant potential to reinvigorate an evangelical left that has languished since the 1970s.²³

DEFYING AMERICAN CATEGORIES

As Salguero’s “pro-life” reference suggests, however, those who foresee a revitalized evangelical left made in the image of the Democratic Party will be disappointed. These evangelical immigrants may push left on economics and diplomacy, but they also embody religious sensibilities that bewilder, even offend, the priests of a secular democratic progressivism. Samuel Rodriguez, a Hispanic evangelical leader, often proclaims, “It’s not the donkey or the elephant. It’s the Lamb!” Given Majority World views on sexuality and the exotic supernatural arts, a productive coalition may be difficult to sustain.

Many immigrants from the Majority World practice a vibrant supernaturalism. Pentecostals in particular speak in tongues, pray for healings, get slain in the spirit, and hold around-the-clock prayer meetings. This spiritual energy, often heightened upon their arrival in the U.S., animates their life together as a vulnerable population. While spiritual enchantment has sometimes motivated political activism and community organizing, in other cases it has inspired both Majority World and American evangelicals to bypass progressive methods for attacking poverty. Missionary C. Peter Wagner, for example, was exposed for several decades to Pentecostal practices in Bolivia. Upon his return, he urged Americans to take seriously “the role of supernatural power in dealing with social injustice.”²⁴

In the 1990s, Wagner and Guatemalan Pentecostals asked American audiences to consider the insidious role of Maximón, an ancient Mayan

deity in the mountain town of Almolonga. As described in the popular evangelical documentary called *Transformations* (1999), a mustachioed, three-foot mannequin with cowboy boots stood propped up around lit votive candles on a dirt floor. Kneeling worshippers danced lewdly before the deity, placed lit cigars in his hollowed-out clay mouth, and presented him whiskey to appease his anger. This “lord of death” was thus a financial and spiritual burden. To have any hope of good and health and good crops, Almolongans had to offer money and alcohol to this “spiritual strongman” who kept them mired in poverty. But then a local pastor named Riscajache began to fast four times a week, hold prayer vigils, and perform exorcisms against Maximón. “Those being set free,” Riscajache remembered, “were sometimes thrown across the room and coughed up blood.” Having been healed, they sobered up and joined economic development and rural health projects. To millions of Americans, they became embodied symbols of how downtrodden communities could be transformed.²⁵

Transformations tells an unconventional narrative of social justice. Scholars and liberal activists have excluded Latino exorcisms from their histories of the left. As Leilah Danielson has argued about twentieth-century pacifism and Jeffrey Kripal has contended about liberalism in general, scholarship needs to get “way, way weirder” if it means to capture the full breadth of religious activism. Because of African American membership in the New Deal coalition and leadership in the Civil Rights Movement, there is precedent for the inclusion of spirituality. But these appear to be exceptions in a longer list of other, more “embarrassing” examples that include Amish traditionalism, Gandhian fruitarianism, and Pentecostal supernaturalism. The possibilities of a Majority World-progressive coalition on wealth inequality and race significantly rest on the willingness of the left to work with practitioners of immoderate spirituality.²⁶

Second, the very conservative views of Majority World evangelicals on below-the-belt issues could abort such a coalition. In the 2000s Henry Orombi, an Anglican archbishop from Uganda, told National Public Radio’s Barbara Bradley Hagerty, “You remember hundred years ago, Africa was taunted as a dark continent. Now, you just believe me that darkness has shifted to Europe and America. The passion for the gospel, the love for Jesus Christ is way out in Africa and we’ll bring the same thing back.” Orombi’s quote was a barely veiled reference to American tolerance of homosexuality. In fact, many African bishops, overseeing hundreds of Anglican congregations in the United States, have campaigned stridently

against what they characterize as the libertine sexual practices of homosexuality, abortion, and pornography. Over the last decade Majority World evangelicals—including those who have immigrated to the United States—have been highly effective in reversing progressive gains in the Anglican, Methodist, and other global denominational bodies.²⁷

Reinforcements from abroad, then, are hamstrung by the same forces that plagued the domestic evangelical left of the 1970s. They are politically homeless, estranged from the Republican Party over issues of diplomacy, poverty, and race and alienated from the Democratic Party over sexuality. Despite common communitarian sensibilities and alienation from electoral structures, evangelical immigrants have had even fewer interactions with the American left than progressive evangelicals have had. Reinforcing a sense of incongruity, historical and contemporary political narratives consistently depict American radicalism as inherently irreligious and evangelicals as consistently right wing. This despite the reality that the evangelical left and Christian immigrant populations, defying the conflation of American political conservatives as the religious right, express progressive views on immigration, race, and poverty using overtly Christian vocabulary and theology. In the end, there are large numbers of voices that defy the religious and political imaginations of most Americans. Majority World evangelicals simply do not fit the archetypal conservative–progressive binary as it stands in the United States. Nor do they fit either side in the liberal–left divide. The potential for rapprochement between the evangelical left and the broader political left, then, remains uncertain and fluid. Demands for ideological purity on either side sabotage such an alliance. The newer ecumenical sensibilities of evangelicals could result in alliances of convenience on particular issues, but probably not full inclusion in a revitalized American left.

Whatever the political prospects of evangelical immigrants, scholars need to narrate a more global story. The “sixties” were vibrant not only in Berkeley, but also in Asia, Europe, and a decolonizing Africa. The networks that connect disparate geographies have been more dense and far-flung than the academy has recognized. Samuel Escobar, to take just one example, was not an idiosyncratic presence at the 1973 Thanksgiving Workshop. He represented an important global evangelical reality, one that seems certain to accelerate through the twenty-first century. As the full implications of the Immigration Act of 1965—and the persistent nativist reaction to this legislation—continue to unfold, the United States remains a nation among many other nations.

NOTES

1. Marjorie Hyer, "Social and Political Activism Is Aim of Evangelical Group," *Washington Post*, November 30, 1973, D17.
2. For the full text of the Declaration, see Ron Sider (ed.), *The Chicago Declaration* (Carol Stream: Creation House, 1974).
3. Samuel Escobar, "Reflections," 119–22, in Sider, *Chicago Declaration*. For a fuller narrative of Escobar, see Chapter Six in David R. Swartz, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 113–34.
4. "Third World Participants," in Folder "1974 Chicago Workshop," Evangelicals for Social Action Archive; "Workshops," in Box 4, Folder 15, "Evangelical Women's Caucus; records; November 1974–May 1976, n.d.," Evangelicals for Social Action Collection, Billy Graham Center Archives. The term "Majority World," proposed by Bangladeshi Shahidul Alam, is meant to replace outdated terms such as "Third World." It recognizes the demographic strength of these geographies and defines them in terms of "what it is, rather than what it lacks."
5. Jon Butler, "Jack-in-the-Box Faith: The Religion Problem in Modern American History," *Journal of American History* 90, No. 4 (March 2004), 1357–78; Thomas Bender, *A Nation Among Nations: America's Place in World History* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2006); Ian Tyrrell, *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective since 1789* (New York: Palgrave, 2007); Luke Clossey and Nicholas Guyatt, "It's a Small World After All: The Wider World in Historians' Peripheral Vision," *Perspectives on History* (May 2013).
6. Barbara Brady, "Just Plain Missionary," *Sunday Digest* (David C. Cook), October 9, 1955, in Box 44, Folder 7, Asbury Theological Seminary Special Collections; E. Stanley Jones, *Christ of the Indian Road* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1925), 164; Richard W. Taylor, "The Legacy of E. Stanley Jones," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 6, No. 3 (July 1982), 102.
7. For "Morning of the Open Heart," see "What Is an Ashram," Box 17, Folder 4, ATSSC. For a description of Jones as rooted in the "experiential piety of historic Methodism, see Bill Kostlevy's 2001 biographical sketch in "E. Stanley Jones ARC 2000–007 Finding Aid," 2012, ATSSC.
8. On Jones's experience in and condemnation of internment camps, see Jones, *Christ of the American Road* (Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1944), 75–82, 95–8, 134–39; Jones, "Barbed-Wire Christians," *Christian Century*, November 24, 1943; Jones, "Evangelism in Japan after the Occupation," *The Indian Witness*, undated, in Box 18, Folder 41, ATSSC.

9. On Jones and CORE, see James Farmer to John F. Kennedy, April 26, 1961, in Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project. For an example of Jones's congressional and presidential lobbying efforts, see Jones to Eisenhower, December 26, 1956, in Folder 5, Box 5, ATSSC. For an example of Jones's call for interracial committees and federal intervention, see Jones, "Christianity and Race," *World Outlook* (April 1943), 37–39, in Folder 8, Box 40, ATSSC. On Jones's American ashrams, see Anna B. Mow, "I Remember!," *Transformation* 18, No. 4 (Winter 1983), 13; Preston King Sheldon, "Retreats Slated by Church Group: 25 Christian Leaders to Join with Methodist Missionary in Conducting Assemblies," *New York Times* (June 19, 1954), 16.
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INDEX¹

A

Accompaniment, 256, 265, 267, 269,
274n22
Addams, Jane, 24
Africa, 24, 50, 126–129, 137–140,
143n34, 193, 204, 279, 283–290
Alinsky, Saul, 173, 186, 259
Alter, Robert, 238–239
Amalgamated Textile Workers of
America, 103
American Catholic War Council,
30–32
American Civil Liberties Union
(ACLU), 32, 43, 103
American Federation of Labor (AFL),
28–32
American Friends Service Committee
(AFSC), 126, 138–139, 144n42,
242, 252n19
Anarchism, 9, 82–83, 85, 90–96
Anti-communism, 5, 32, 102,
105–106, 112, 284

Antinuclear activism, *see* Nuclear
weapons, opposition to
Anti-Stalinism, 101, 102, 104–106,
112, 117n2, 119n16
Antiwar movement
interwar era, 45, 52–53
post-World War II, 101, 112–114
World War I, 29, 31, 53, 103
World War II, 108–110
Vietnam War era, 234–235,
237, 259
Assimilation, Jewish, 60–62, 65,
71–74, 239

B

Baker, Ella, 151–152
Barber, William J., II, 3
Barth, Karl, 106, 115
Baton Rouge (LA), 148–151
Bellamy, Edward, 22
Bennett, John C., 115

¹ Note: Page numbers followed by ‘n’ refer to notes.

- Birmingham (AL), 152–156, 202
- Bittelman, Alexander
 disillusionment with Soviet
 communism, 72–74
 early life, 62–64, 75
 as member of the Bund, 64–65, 68
 as member of socialist and
 communist parties, 66, 69–70
 Morning Frayhayt Association,
 and, 70–71
- Black freedom struggle, 7–9, 54–56,
 102, 110, 113–114, 125–140,
 145–158, 169–170, 173–174,
 185–204, 215, 219, 234,
 259–260, 280–282
- Black Manifesto*, 10, 185–204
- Black Power movement, interpretation
 of, 10, 185–188, 190–192,
 197–198
- Black Power theology, 188–189,
 192–198, 200–204, 219, 225, 236
- Bourgeois, Roy, 268
- Braude, Ann D., 213–214
- Breira, 250
- Bryan, William Jennings, 25
- Bunch, Charlotte, 224–225
- C**
- Call to Resist Illegitimate Authority
 (1967), 234
- Calverton, V. F., 104, 106
- Campbell, Ernest, 196, 198–199
- Carter, Jimmy, 266, 285
- Catholic Action, 169–173, 178
- Catholic anarchism, 82–83, 85, 90–96
- Catholic Church, 26, 81, 86–89, 96,
 165–168, 170–171, 176–180,
 181n6, 214, 218–221, 258–259,
 261–266
- Catholic Interracial Council (a.k.a.
 League for Social Justice) (CIC),
 164–169, 172–176, 178–179
- Catholicism, 5, 6, 9, 14n9, 15n13,
 26–28, 81–97, 167–172,
 176–180, 181n6, 202–203,
 214–215, 218–222, 255–268
- Catholic Worker
 founding of, 86, 97n2
 house of hospitality, 93–95
 movement, 81–97
 works of mercy, 87–88, 90–97
- Catholic Worker, The* (newspaper), 92
- Chávez, César, 8, 173, 260
- Chicago Declaration, 277–278, 282,
 285, 291n2
- Chicana/o movement, 165, 172, 174,
 176–180
- Chile, 255, 262–265, 268
- Chomsky, Noam, 242, 245
- Christ, Carol P., 211, 221–224
- Christian internationalism, 9, 45–46,
 48–53, 103–104, 106–107,
 109–110, 119n20, 125–140,
 277–290
- Christian realism, neo-orthodoxy,
 107–110, 112, 115
- Church Peace Mission, 115
- Civil Rights Act (1964), 146, 156
- Civil rights movement, *see* Black
 freedom struggle
- Cleage, Albert B., Jr., 193, 195–197,
 200, 202–203
- Comité de Paz (Chile), 255
- Commentary* (magazine), 238–239
- Commission for a Just and Durable
 Peace, 108–109
- Committee for Nonviolent Action
 (CNVA), 114
- Committee in Solidarity with
 the People of El Salvador
 (CISPES), 268
- Committee on New Alternatives in the
 Middle East (CONAME),
 241–243, 245, 250, 252n19
- Communism, 32, 69–75, 87

Communist Party, American, 14n11,
30, 62, 66, 69–70, 74, 78n44,
82, 104, 110, 147
Communists, 9, 14n11, 69, 72, 87,
94, 102
Conference of Latin American Bishops
(CELAM), 262
Congress of Racial Equality (CORE),
110–111, 281, 292n9
Consciousness-raising, 215–217,
222–223, 225

D

Daly, Mary, 211, 214, 218–219,
221–222
Day, Dorothy
antiwar activism, 115
conversion to Catholicism, 83, 85–86
early activism, 81–82, 84–85, 90
leadership of Catholic Worker, 82,
86, 90, 92–97
de Hueck, Catherine, 94–95, 97
Debs, Eugene, 23, 25, 29
Dellinger, David, 44, 114
Democratization, 90, 151
Diaspora, Jewish, 62–69, 71,
73–75, 236, 239–240, 249
Dombrowski, James, 45, 54
Douglass, Frederick, 200–201
DuBois, W. E. B., 127, 129,
146–148, 159n6
Dulles, John Foster, 108–109

E

Ecumenical movement, 42–45, 51,
59n32, 106–108, 115–116, 126,
129, 170, 214, 225
Eddy, Sherwood, 5, 9, 48–51, 53, 56
Edwards, Richard Henry, 42–43
El Salvador, 10, 255, 263–268
Ely, Richard, 42, 46

Escobar, Samuel, 278–279, 282,
285, 290
Espionage Act, 29, 31
Evangelical Christianity, 3, 4, 6, 11,
32, 42, 46, 56, 57n3, 103–104,
215, 224, 277–290
Existentialism, 5, 101–102, 108,
114–115, 120n25, 218, 239

F

Farmer, James, 110, 126, 134–135
Farmers' Alliance, 23
Federal Council of Churches (FCC),
28–34, 42, 47, 53, 108–109,
116, 120n26
Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR),
32, 43, 51, 53–54, 103, 106,
109–110, 118n9, 121n30, 126,
135, 137–139, 241–242
Feminism
liberal feminism, 213–214, 217, 256
radical feminism, 10, 212–214,
217, 235
women's liberation, 10, 212–217,
220, 222, 224, 227
Feminist theology, 211–227
Ford, Austin, 257
Ford, Francis Xavier, 257
Ford, Ita
in Chile, 255, 262–265
death, 10, 266–267
in El Salvador, 255–256, 263–268
family background, 257
religious beliefs, 257, 259–261,
267–269
training as a Maryknoll Sister, 258
Ford, Patrick, 257
Foreign missions
African American, 129
Catholic, 255–269
Protestant, 19, 46, 48, 50, 52, 106,
171, 280, 282–286, 288

Forman, James
 1969 Detroit conference, at, 186
Black Manifesto, 10, 186, 196, 201
 general information, 186, 197–199,
 204, 205n3
 Riverside Church, at, 196–197, 199,
 208n38
 Fosdick, Harry Emerson, 47–48, 53, 56
 Foster, William Z., 30
 Freedom rides, 111, 135, 147, 281
 Freedom Seder, 237–238, 241
 Friendship House, 94, 167
*From Race Riot to Sit-In, 1919 to the
 1960s* (1966), 234

G

Galut (exile), 240
 Gandhi, Mohandas, 52, 110,
 126, 128, 131–134, 137,
 238, 280, 289
 Gandhian nonviolence, 103, 109–110,
 114, 120n29, 121n30, 126,
 133–136, 140
 Garvey, Marcus, 127, 129, 202
 Gendler, Everett, 242, 245
 General Jewish Workers' Union
 (Bund), 64–66, 68, 72
 George, Henry, 22–23
 Ghilan, Maxim, 249
 GI Forum, 167, 173, 178
God that Failed, The (1950; 2001), 105
 Goldberg, Naomi, 222
 Goldstein, Valerie Saiving, 218, 221
 Great Depression, 33, 49, 84, 104
 Gutierrez, Gustavo, 172, 262

H

Haig, Alexander, 267, 275n25
Halacha (Jewish law), 234, 239,
 240, 250

Herberg, Will, 73
 Hook, Sidney, 104
 Horton, Myles, 53–55
 Houser, George, 45, 110, 137
 Howard University, 51, 126,
 128–129, 133–135, 146, 219
 Howe, Irving, 74

I

Identity politics, 10
 Jewish, 233, 235
 Immigration, 11, 30, 163, 175, 177,
 280, 281, 285–287, 290
 Immigration Act of 1965, 286, 290
 Imperialism, 4, 10, 106, 109, 111,
 118n8, 128, 132, 142n14,
 205n3, 214, 235, 244, 246–248,
 278, 283
 Industrial Workers of the World
 (IWW), 30, 31, 84, 85
 Institute for Policy Studies (IPS), 234,
 242, 243, 251n3
 International Missionary Council, 106
 Interreligious Foundation for
 Community Organization
 (IFCO), 18, 189–193, 195, 199,
 200, 204, 206n9
 Israel (State of)
 1967 war, and, 235, 240
 Arthur Waskow's travels in, 241
Israel without Zionists (1968), 239

J

Jewish Peace Fellowship (JPF), 241,
 245, 249–250
 Jewish Voice for Peace, 3
 Jews for Urban Justice (JUJ), 236,
 237, 243
 Jones, E. Stanley, 280–282
 Journey of Reconciliation, 110

K

Kagawa, Toyohiko, 52
Kairos, 108, 111
 Kilpatrick, James J., 152–153
 King, Martin Luther, Jr., 5, 10, 55–56,
 60n53, 114, 126, 140, 145–146,
 149–158, 173, 187, 196, 237,
 244, 259
 Kirkpatrick, Jeane, 267
 Knights of Labor, 19, 23–25
 Koestler, Arthur, 105
 Kropotkin, Peter, 85, 90–91

L

Labor movement, 9, 21, 27–29, 31,
 33, 66, 67, 70, 75, 102, 104,
 105, 118n9, 170
 Lafarge, John, 172
 Latin America, 6, 10, 215, 256,
 261–262, 265, 266, 268, 269,
 278, 279, 283, 286
 Latina/os, 6, 163–165, 169–175,
 177–178, 204, 287–289,
 293n22, 294n23
 Lawrence strike (1919), 103
 League of Latin American Citizens
 (LULAC), 167, 172–176, 178–179
Liberation magazine, 114
Liberation of Palestine and Israel, The
 (1971), 143–148
 Liberation theology
 and Gustavo Gutierrez, 172,
 183n23
 and the Maryknoll Sisters,
 262–265, 269
 Lucey, Robert, 170–171
 “Lyrical Left,” 84–86

M

Macdonald, Dwight, 113
 Malcolm X, 187

March on Washington (1963), 137,
 173, 223
 March on Washington Movement
 (1943), 110
 Marcuse, Herbert, 116, 219
 Marxism, Marxists, 6, 14n11, 71,
 73–75, 85, 101, 102, 104–105,
 113, 114, 186, 187, 190, 278
 Maryknoll Sisters
 history, 257, 258, 268–269
 liberation theology, adoption of,
 261–265, 267
 racial apostolate, 259–260
 Maurin, Peter, 82, 83, 86, 90–92, 94,
 95, 99n22
 Mays, Benjamin, 51–55, 126,
 128–130, 133–135, 137
 McKinley, William, 25
 Messianism, 5, 63, 73–75, 108,
 238–241
 Methodist Church, 21, 22, 46,
 53, 198, 199, 224–225,
 280–281, 290
 Mexican American activism, *see*
 Chicana/o movement
 Middle East Research and Information
 Project (MERIP), 249
 Miller, Kelly, 146–147, 149, 151
 Mills, C. Wright, 102, 116
 Missionaries, 19, 46, 48, 52, 67, 106,
 129, 171, 259, 280, 282,
 285–286, 288
 Mollenkott, Virginia Ramey, 224
 Montgomery bus boycott, 54,
 147–150, 157, 159n9, 259
 Mooneyham, Stanley, 283, 284
 Moral Mondays, 3
 Morning Frayhayt Association, 70–71
 Mott, John R., 46, 48
 Murray, Pauli, 135–136, 140, 214
 Muste, Abraham Johannes (A. J.)
 1960s, New Left, 110, 113–114
 and civil rights, 110–111

Muste, Abraham (*cont.*)
 and ecumenical movement,
 106–109
 and labor movement/Old Left,
 101, 103–105
 and nonviolence, *satyagraha*,
 103, 109–115
 and nuclear weapons, cold war,
 opposition to, 111–115
 and pacifism, peace movement, 103,
 106, 109–110, 114–115
 theology, 43, 106–108

N

National Association for the
 Advancement of Colored People
 (NAACP), 127, 147–149, 151,
 159n6, 169, 173–174
 National Black Economic
 Development Conference
 (NBEDC), 185, 186, 192
 National Catholic Welfare
 Conference, 88
 National Committee for a Sane
 Nuclear Policy (SANE), 114
 National Conference for New Politics
 (NCNP), 235, 237, 245
 National Conference of Black
 Churchmen (NCBC), 188–190,
 194, 203, 206n10
 National Council of Catholic
 Women, 89
 Nelson, William Stuart, 126, 128
 New Left, 9, 102, 113–114, 116, 212,
 214–215, 220, 222, 246, 257,
 260, 269, 277
 New Nuns, 259
 Niebuhr, Reinhold, 5, 43–44, 49, 54,
 106–110, 112, 115, 154,
 160n22, 218, 223, 284
 Niemoller, Martin, 115
 Nixon, E. D., 148–149

*Not by Might, Christianity: The Way to
 Human Decency* (1947), 111
 Novak, Bill, 236, 246, 153n26
 Nuclear weapons, opposition to,
 113–115, 138

O

O'Hare, Kate Richards, 25
 Occupied Territories (Palestine), *see*
 Palestine
 Old Left, 9, 102, 104, 109, 113
 Oxford Life and Work Conference, 106

P

Pacifism, pacifists
 and anti-colonialism, 137–138
 and anti-nuclear movement,
 111–114
 and antiwar activism, 114–115
 and the black freedom
 struggle, 110–111, 114,
 126, 134–136, 140
 Catholic Worker movement, 95
 and Gandhian nonviolence, 51–52,
 103, 109–110, 131–136
 Jewish, 241–242
 Protestant, 43, 51, 106–109,
 131–134
 Quaker, 125–126, 138–139
 radical, 111–114
 Page, Kirby, 49–51
 Palestine, 71, 233–234, 237,
 240–250
 Palmer, A. Mitchell, 29
 Peacemakers, 112–113
 Peace movement, 7, 101, 109–115,
 135, 139–140, 234, 241–245
 People's Party, 19, 23–25
 Piette, Carla, 263
 Plaskow, Judith, 211, 221, 223–224
 Pope Leo XIII, 26, 170

- Pope Pius XI, 170
- Populism, populists, 19, 24–25
- Populist Party, *see* People's Party
- Producerism, 19, 22–25, 27, 34, 35n8, 50
- Progressivism
 - early 20th century, 24, 27, 32, 34, 43, 56, 187
 - general, 1–3, 7, 8, 11, 65, 70, 71, 137, 154, 167–169, 177–179, 234, 245, 250, 256, 259, 269, 277–280, 282, 284, 285, 287–290
- Protestant internationalism, 45, 49, 51, 103, 107, 109–110, 129, 131, 140, 278, 282
- Protestantism, mainline, 5–7, 9, 21, 28, 33, 34, 42, 45, 53, 55, 110, 215, 226, 227n1, 282
- Q**
- Quadragesimo Anno*, 170
- Quakers, 125, 138–139, 143n35
- R**
- Racial segregation
 - of African Americans within the Young Men's Christian Association, 50–51
 - challenges to, 110–111, 136, 145, 147–150, 152–153, 155, 281–282
 - residential, 164, 166, 168
- Racism
 - challenges to, 4, 50–52, 102, 103, 109–111, 127–128, 132, 135–136, 145–146, 150, 157, 168–169, 172–174, 178–179, 194–197, 199, 220, 277
 - general, 89, 106, 140, 163, 174, 177, 187, 191, 214, 219, 247, 248, 282
 - on the left, 25, 50–51, 59n37, 248
- Radical Haggadah, 237–238, 241, 252
- Randolph, A. Philip, 110, 173
- Raskin, Marcus, 234
- Rauschenbusch, Walter, 4, 41–48, 50–56, 264
- Reagan, Ronald, 266–267, 275n25, 285
- Religious right, viii, 1, 4, 6, 13n8, 14n9, 32, 145, 158, 285, 289–290
- Rendón, Armando, 177
- Rerum Novarum*, 26, 170
- Reverse mission, 280, 286
- Riverside Church, 56, 60n53, 196, 198–199
- Romero, Oscar, 263, 265–266
- Roosevelt, Franklin, 111, 170
- Rorty, James, 104
- Rose, Sharon, 247–248
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford, 211, 218–221, 225
- Rustin, Bayard
 - and anti-colonialism, 9, 129, 137
 - and civil rights, 9, 114, 134–135, 140
 - and nonviolence, 110, 126, 134
 - Speak Truth to Power*, 139
 - visit to West Africa, 137–138
 - work with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, 110, 138
- Ruth, Sheila, 217
- Ryan, John A., 31, 88–89
- S**
- Sanctuary movement, 10, 180
- Satyagraha, *see* Gandhian nonviolence
- School of the Americas, 268
- Selective Service Act
 - 1940, 111, 126n35
 - 1948, 112
 - resistance to, 112, 235
- Silone, Ignazio, 105
- Smiley, Glenn, 110, 114
- Social Creed of the Churches* (1914), 28

- Social Gospel
 before World War I, viii, 19–21,
 29–31, 33–34, 38n34,
 41–43, 45–47
 during the interwar years, 43–45,
 48–56
 general, 4–6, 9, 57n3, 59n37, 154,
 220, 264
 influence on Martin Luther King,
 Jr., 55–56, 154
 neo-orthodox criticism of, 43,
 107–108
 and race, 50–51, 135, 187–188
- Socialism, socialists, 5, 15, 19, 25–28,
 30–33, 35n8, 42, 47, 65, 66, 68,
 69, 72–75, 84, 94, 102, 103,
 112, 249
- Socialist Labor Party, 27
- Socialist Party, 22, 25, 27, 30, 31,
 43, 66
- Social Principles of Jesus, The* (1916),
 41–42, 47, 56
- Sojourners, 3
- Solomonow, Allan, 241–242
- South Africa, 127, 133–134, 136,
 199, 246, 248
- Southern Christian Leadership
 Conference (SCLC), 149,
 151–152, 155–157, 187, 190, 192
- Soviet Union (USSR)
 American visitors in, 49–50, 69
 antisemitism in, 72–73
 general, 102, 105, 112, 114, 284
 multicultural policies, 68–69, 72, 75
 and relations with the United States,
 109, 112, 139, 244, 266
- Spring Mobilization Committee
 against the War in Vietnam
 (MOBE), 115, 237
- Stanton, Elizabeth Cady, 213,
 217–218
- Starhawk, 222
- Steinem, Gloria, 226–227
- Stelzle, Charles, 27–28
- Stern, Sol, 246
- Student Christian Movement, 45–46,
 110, 131, 224
- Student Nonviolent Coordinating
 Committee (SNCC), 114,
 152, 186
- Students for a Democratic Society
 (SDS), 114
- Subsidiarity, 83, 91
- Supernaturalism, 289
- T**
- Thomas, Norman, 43
- Thurman, Howard: 5, 9, 51–52, 126,
 128, 130–137, 140
- Tijerina, Felix, 174
- Tillich, Paul, 108, 213, 223
- Tittle, Ernest Fremont, 53
- Tolstoy, Leo, 64, 90, 134
- Trotskyists, 104–105, 113
- Truman, Harry, 166
- U**
- United Auto Workers, 33
- United Farm Workers movement, 8,
 172, 173, 260
- U.S.–Vietnam War, 5, 60n53,
 114–115, 146, 157–158,
 196, 222, 234, 237, 245,
 259, 278, 283
- V**
- Vatican II, 10, 172, 177, 218, 222,
 258–259, 261, 265
- Voting Rights Act (1965), 146, 157

W

Waldman, Selma, 248
 Walker, Charles, 114
 Walker, Lucius, 186, 189–191,
 198, 204
 Wallis, Jim, 3, 277
 Ward, Harry F., 28, 31, 42–43, 47,
 49–50, 54
 War Powers Act (1941), 111
 War Resisters League, 137, 139, 242
 Waskow, Arthur
 early activism, 234–235
 and Israel-Palestine conflict,
 241–246, 248–250
 religious awakening, 237–238
 theological views, 240–241
 and Zionism, 239–240, 246
 Wilson, Woodrow, 29–33, 103
 Womanist theology, 203, 210n55, 225
Womanspirit Rising, The (1979), 223
Women's Bible, The (1895), 218
 World Council of Churches, 55, 108,
 115, 199, 226
 World Peace Brigade, 114
 World Student Christian Federation, 46
 World Vision International, 282–285
 World War I, 4, 9, 29–30, 32–34, 42,
 43, 45, 47–49, 51, 53, 62, 66,
 85, 103, 106, 126, 165, 170

World War II, 5, 52, 53, 71, 95, 105,
 108, 110, 113, 116, 137, 164,
 165, 169, 171

Y

Yiddish culture, 64, 66–70, 72–75
 Young Men's Christian Association
 (YMCA)
 Association Press of, 47
 and internationalism, 48, 51–52,
 129, 131, 133
 origins of, 45–46, 58n17
 and race, 50–51, 55, 60n40, 126
 and the Social Gospel, 29, 46–50,
 53–56
 and Student Christian Movement, 46
 Young Women's Christian Association
 (YWCA)
 and feminism, 224
 and internationalism, 131
 and race, 126
 and the Social Gospel, 58n19
 and Student Christian Movement, 224

Z

Zionism: 64, 74, 234, 236–241,
 246, 248