

“Apostles of Fascism,” “Communist Clergy,” and the UAW: Political Ideology and Working-Class Religion in Detroit, 1919–1945

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Zygmund Dobrzynski, the national director of the Ford Motor Company organizing drive for the United Automobile Workers of America (UAW), attended a religious revival in 1938. Leading the service was the pugnacious Southern Baptist preacher J. Frank Norris. Four years earlier Norris had accepted the pastorate at Detroit's Temple Baptist Church, aiming his fundamentalist ministry at the thousands of working-class southern whites who had been drawn north by the lure of industrial jobs. At this particular revival Norris was flanked by the sheriff of the Flint, Michigan, police department and a prominent executive of the Ford Motor Company, and he produced a typically ebullient performance: burning a Soviet flag, denouncing unionism, and promoting a nationalistic Americanism. To a stunned Dobrzynski, Norris seemed to be a “raving minister” using the “pulpit as a mask to promote dictatorship,” and in the pages of the UAW organ he countered that the UAW contained “thousands of church-goers who recognize the putrid character of the Norris falsifications.” Dobrzynski concluded by turning the rhetorical tables, denouncing Norris as a Judas who “sold out the ONE who had led the oppressed peoples of those days in protest against human bondage.”¹

Dobrzynski's close encounter with revivalism reveals a great deal about the shifting relationship between religion, politics, and class in the United States during the late 1930s and early 1940s. The event demonstrates that religion remained a potent force within working-class culture—and that the UAW knew it. Dobrzynski's reaction suggests that the UAW was urgently struggling to assert its own moral discourse—grounded in the modernist liberalism of the Social Gospel—against Norris's doctrines of individualism and biblical literalism. Even more, however, the event reveals the cultural interpenetration of religious and political ideas in the context of a world that was sliding toward catastrophic, ideologically driven warfare. Dobrzynski could sense that religion held political consequences: it might promote dictatorship, or, alternatively, believers might reject

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¹ Zygmund Dobrzynski, “Raving Minister Uses Pulpit as a Mask to Promote Dictatorship,” *United Automobile Worker*, June 11, 1938, p. 3; Barry Hankins, *God's Rascal: J. Frank Norris and the Beginnings of Southern Fundamentalism* (Lexington, Ky., 1996), 90–117, esp. 115. Emphasis in original.

Norris's falsifications and embrace a progressive democracy. Critically, he recognized the intended target of Norris's politically charged religion was Detroit's working class.

The subject of working-class religion has long drifted in a curious historiographical no-man's-land. Influenced by materialist theories of history, generations of labor historians have been primed to relegate religion to the peripheries of working-class life. Evelyn Savidge Sterne noted that American labor historians have a tendency "to overlook religion or to dismiss it as a negative influence that distracted workers from more 'radical' or 'political' forms of activism." Historians of religion, meanwhile, have nurtured their own blind spots. Often coming from faith-based backgrounds, many scholars of religion have remained unmoved by Marxist-inspired approaches to the past (even as they scrutinize socially rooted power relations) and thus have eschewed a forthright engagement with religion as a class phenomenon. The typical practice of demarcating religious history by denominations (such as Protestantism, Catholicism, or Judaism) has consistently suggested that boundaries of belief rather than economic structures were most important in shaping communities of religiously oriented workers.²

Recent works have provided significant insight on working-class religion. Spurred by the pioneering efforts of scholars such as Leslie Woodcock Tentler, Elizabeth Fones-Wolf, and Ken Fones-Wolf, a number of senior labor historians have engaged in deeply reflective studies of religion. Michael Kazin's empathetic portrait of William Jennings Bryan, Robert Bruno's analysis of working-class religiosity, and Nick Salvatore's ruminations on the impact of faith on labor scholarship stand out as preeminent examples. At the same time, the enthusiasm that historians of religion show for the concept of "lived religion" has often placed working-class religious culture at the center of the historical narrative. James Terence Fisher's expansive study of the Irish-Catholic New York City waterfront, David Chappell's nuanced analysis of the African American civil rights movement, and depictions of southern religion by Darren Dochuk, Jarod Roll, and Richard Callahan have brought a deepened appreciation for working-class culture and politics to the fore in religious history. Additionally, the journal *Religion and American Culture* featured a special forum on religion and class, while *Labor* and the *Radical History Review* have focused special issues on the question of religion. Clearly, the desire for rapprochement and greater integration of working-class studies and religious history runs through the recent scholarship.³

² Evelyn Savidge Sterne, "Bringing Religion into Working-Class History: Parish, Public, and Politics in Providence, 1890–1930," *Social Science History*, 24 (Spring 2000), 151.

³ Leslie Woodcock Tentler, "Present at the Creation: Working-Class Catholics in the United States," in *American Exceptionalism? U.S. Working-Class Formation in an International Context*, ed. Rick Halpern and Jonathan Morris (New York, 1997), 134–35; Ken Fones-Wolf, *Trade Union Gospel: Christianity and Labor in Industrial Philadelphia, 1865–1915* (Philadelphia, 1989); Elizabeth Fones-Wolf and Ken Fones-Wolf, "No Common Creed: White Working-Class Protestants and the CIO's Operation Dixie," in *Rethinking U.S. Labor History*, ed. Donna T. Haverty-Stacke and Daniel J. Walkowitz (New York, 2010), 111–36; Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan* (New York, 2006); Robert Anthony Bruno, *Justified by Work: Identity and the Meaning of Faith in Chicago's Working-Class Churches* (Columbus, 2008); Nick Salvatore, *Faith and the Historian: Catholic Perspectives* (Urbana, 2007). On "lived religion," see Robert A. Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton, 1997), 3–21. James T. Fisher, *On the Irish Waterfront: The Crusader, the Movie, and the Soul of the Port of New York* (Ithaca, 2009); David L. Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill, 2004); Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York, 2011), esp. 79–111; Jarod Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South* (Urbana, 2010); Richard J. Callahan Jr., *Work and Faith in the Kentucky Coal Fields: Subject to Dust* (Bloomington, 2009). David G. Hackett, et al., "Forum: American Religion and Class," *Religion and American Culture*, 15



The Texas-based Southern Baptist J. Frank Norris leads a flag-burning rally in Detroit during the 1940s. Norris's politicized fundamentalism alarmed liberals and union leaders, who saw shades of fascism in Norris. *Courtesy Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.*

This essay builds from this developing scholarship but also suggests new questions and issues. The first step, however, is to identify clearly the proper historical actors. Demographically, as Liston Pope and others have observed, the phrase *working-class religion* in early to mid-twentieth-century America referred primarily to three specific groups: Catholics, African American Protestants, and white evangelicals (principally Baptists and Pentecostals) with roots in the rural South. Such an observation may seem obvious, but it remains surprisingly unexamined. For decades historians concerned with the impact of industrialization on religion focused on the rise of the Social Gospel within northern, middle-class Protestant churches. While useful, this approach reveals very little about the religion of working people themselves. Herbert Gutman's landmark essay on working-class religion redressed that omission, but Gutman too looked primarily at northern Protestant workers. To be sure, the worlds of immigrant Catholic devotionism, African American evangelicalism, and southern white revivalism were varied and distinct—but they were also unmistakably the three dominant cultures of working-class religiosity throughout the twentieth century. To construct a more comprehensive picture of working-class religion, we must begin to put these people into a common narrative.⁴

(Winter 2005), 1–29; *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 6 (Spring 2009); *Radical History Review*, 99 (Fall 2007).

⁴ Liston Pope, "Religion and the Class Structure," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 256 (March 1948), 84–91. Liston Pope's assessment is reevaluated in Christian Smith and Robert Faris, "Socioeconomic Inequality in the American Religious System: An Update and Assessment," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 44 (March 2005), 95–104. The terms of the discussion on working-class religion were established by Henry F. May and reassessed by Herbert Gutman. See Henry F. May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial*

Detroit offers a useful case study because the city encapsulated that national demographic phenomenon. By the late 1930s over 600,000 Catholics lived in the archdiocese of Detroit—by far the single largest denomination in the city. Polish immigrants—over 250,000 strong—fully dominated communities such as Hamtramck, where four large Polish parishes surrounded the nearby Dodge Brothers Company automobile manufacturing plant, but Poles were just the largest of many ethnic groups. Indeed, by 1933 Detroit's Catholics could hear the faith celebrated in twenty-two different languages. African American Baptists counted themselves as the third-largest religious group in the city during that year. By the early 1950s black migrants had established more than two hundred churches plus dozens more places of worship in storefronts and residences to hold many of the believers among the city's 300,000 African Americans who had come north to fill the foundries at the Ford plant. Southern-born whites had been seasonal migrants since the 1920s and were already reshaping Detroit's religious geography: three Pentecostal Assemblies of God congregations, forty-one non-Northern Baptist congregations, and at least six enterprises such as the Detroit Foursquare Gospel, Detroit Gospel Tabernacle, and Missionary Tabernacle flourished throughout the city. Observing some of the 250,000 new arrivals streaming north during the 1940s for war-industry jobs, one excited investigator declared that Detroit "is in a 'Bible Belt' . . . just as devout" as its more famous southern cousin. Before the war ended, Detroit had evolved into a virtual laboratory of working-class religiosity in which European Catholicism met evangelistic Protestantism, South invaded North, and black jostled white.⁵

Working-class religion, then, is partially a demographic term. More importantly, however, it is also a politicized construct of language and ideology invented by outside observers who ascribed social meanings, intellectual values, and political implications to working-class religious practices. Most of the civic and religious leaders who shaped this discourse in the early twentieth century were committed to a liberal, progressive modernism and were ill at ease with the seemingly alien religious practices of working-class "others." Consequently, critics employed a common vocabulary of culturally freighted keywords—*cultish*, *clannish*, *docile*, *fatalistic*, *otherworldly*, *overly emotional*, and *authoritarian*—to describe working-class religions. These terms constructed a narrative that placed working-class religion on the margins of modernity and allowed critics to question whether workers' religion posed a basic threat to democratic, open societies. Historians should approach this vocabulary with interest but also with caution. It does

America (New York, 1949); and Herbert Gutman, "Protestantism and the American Labor Movement: The Christian Spirit in the Gilded Age," *American Historical Review*, 72 (Oct. 1966), 74–101.

⁵ U.S. Department of Commerce and Labor, Bureau of the Census, *Census of Religious Bodies: 1926*, vol. 1: *Summary and Detailed Tables* (Washington, 1930); Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Seasons of Grace: A History of the Catholic Archdiocese of Detroit* (Detroit, 1990), 3. For additional statistics on African American churches, see Ulysses W. Boykins, *A Hand Book of the Detroit Negro* (Detroit, 1943), 31. For statistics on southern white churches, see "Interview with Rev. E. L. Hughes," [ca. 1937], typescript, Summaries of Interviews and Observations file, box 3, Milton Kennitz Papers, 1932–1995 (Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor). On African American and southern white churches in cultural context, see Richard Walter Thomas, *Life for Us Is What We Make It: Building Black Community in Detroit, 1915–1945* (Bloomington, 1992); and James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill, 2005). "The Religious Ferment in Detroit," Sept. 1943, typescript, Survey of Racial and Religious Conflict Forces in Detroit folder, box 71, Civil Rights Congress of Michigan Collection (Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, Mich.).

not reveal much about the actual beliefs or religious world views of working-class people, but it does reveal, quite starkly, that Catholics, African Americans, and southern whites were scrutinized through the same discursive lens and that contemporaries of the time worried about the likelihood that working-class religion would foment fanaticism, divisiveness, and political corruption.⁶

The UAW worried about the reactionary potential of working-class religion, but the union simultaneously offered a more optimistic narrative and hoped to tap into what it saw as positive religious values: social equalitarianism, communalism, and prodemocracy. Even more importantly, during the 1930s Detroit's working-class religious communities were producing a generation of progressive religious leaders eager to escape the stereotypes that had long hounded their traditions. Among Catholics, Fr. Raymond S. Clancy led a new generation of "labor priests" in founding the Archdiocesan Labor Institute (ALI), while several hundred lay people became involved with the Catholic Worker movement and the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (ACTU). The southern Presbyterian minister Claude C. Williams moved north to Detroit in 1942 to found the Peoples Institute of Applied Religion (PIAR), one of the most radical religious organizations of the twentieth century. African American ministers such as Charles Hill, Malcolm Dade, and Horace White turned their congregations into hotbeds of union and civil rights activism. Not quite a fully integrated "spiritual front," these religious progressives were nevertheless an ecumenical group energized by the populist, multicultural Americanism of the New Deal and the industrial union movement. Seeking to reimagine the political possibilities of their faiths, these leaders and their liberal allies were forced to engage and resist the existing tropes of working-class religious discourse. In its place, they articulated a pro-labor, antiracist, and broadly tolerant version of working-class religion as the authentic, democratic faith of America's workers.⁷

As World War II loomed, however, working-class religion became increasingly politicized on the right and on the left. In fact, Detroit had emerged as an epicenter of reactionary and antimodernist religion by the late 1930s. J. Frank Norris, the "radio priest" Fr. Charles Coughlin, and the former Huey Long protégé Gerald L. K. Smith were all active in the city; Coughlin and Smith even joined forces in a series of political campaigns. In this cultural hothouse, the discourse on working-class religion was pushed to new ideological extremes and was no longer seen as merely obscurantist or escapist. Many leftists now linked the fundamentalism and religious ethnocentrism of Norris, Coughlin, and Smith to fascism and racism. Nervously confronting race-driven "hate

⁶ My thinking about religion as a social and political discourse has been influenced by Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation, 1800–2000* (New York, 2001); Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, 2005); and Sean McCloud, *Divine Hierarchies: Class in American Religion and Religious Studies* (Chapel Hill, 2007).

⁷ On the Archdiocesan Labor Institute and Raymond Clancy, see Matthew Pehl, "The Remaking of the Catholic Working Class: Detroit, 1919–1945," *Religion and American Culture*, 19 (Winter 2009), 37–68. On the Association of Catholic Trade Unionists, see Steve Rosswurm, "The Catholic Church and the Left-Led Unions: Labor Priests, Labor Schools, and the ACTU," in *The CIO's Left-Led Unions*, ed. Steve Rosswurm (New Brunswick, 1992), 119–38; and Pehl, "Remaking of the Catholic Working Class." On Claude Williams, see Cedric Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People* (New York, 1944); and Robert H. Craig, *Religion and Radical Politics: An Alternative Christian Tradition in the United States* (Philadelphia, 1992). On Charles Hill, see Angela D. Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor, 2007). The "spiritual front" is James T. Fisher's term for the mid-twentieth-century liberal interfaith alliance, built on the twin bases of anticommunism and social justice. See Fisher, *On the Irish Waterfront*, 131–35.

strikes” in defense plants and racial violence on city streets, progressives feared they saw the foot soldiers of fascism lurking under clerical cover.⁸

Yet in a sign of just how contested the discourse had become, Coughlin, Smith, and Norris articulated a potent counternarrative that was diametrically opposed to that of progressives. According to this alternate discourse, working-class Christianity was under deadly assault by secularists, unionists, modernists, and communists. The pernicious influence of clerical progressives such as Clancy, Williams, and Hill seemed most insidious to religious antimodernists. A corrupted religion, rightists were convinced, prepared the working class for the eventual political triumph of communism or a similar anti-American statism. Particularly within the dispensational, premillennial world views of Norris and Smith, communist tyranny was foretold by scripture and was not merely a flawed economic system but was also a portent of the end times. For fundamentalists, communism was synonymous with religious modernism (which denied the literalism of scripture) and the hand of government (which threatened God’s chosen remnant). As such, a minister suspected of smuggling communism into America under the guise of religion threatened the destruction of both democracy and Christianity.⁹

Those examples suggest a divergence from what historians have generally portrayed as the “unifying” effect of religion during the war years. In Detroit—arguably America’s most important industrial center—the Right and the Left agreed on only one point: the cultural and ideological shape of a postwar America would be determined by the rapidly shifting religious consciousness of a diverse working class. “All patriotic Americans are agreed that we must win this war,” Gerald L. K. Smith conceded in 1942, but, he insisted, “we are not agreed on what must follow.” Any veneer of consensus, as Smith indicated, was thin and conditional. On the shop floors and in the neighborhoods of Detroit, religion remained central to working-class identity, but its social consequences were unpredictable. Defining the political character of this religion—as a bulwark for democracy, a wedge for fascism, or a stalking-horse for communism—was one of the most urgent cultural projects of the war years.¹⁰

Demarcating Christian Discourse

Christian discourse in early twentieth-century Detroit was influenced by currents of progressivism in political culture and modernism in religious culture. Within this framework, religion was expected to meet certain ideological expectations: espousing universalistic doctrines of social ethics, promoting civic responsibility, and nurturing a

⁸ On Charles Coughlin, see Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York, 1982); and Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York, 1995). On Gerald L. K. Smith, see Glen Jeansonne, *Gerald L. K. Smith: Minister of Hate* (New Haven, 1988); and Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia, 1983). On hate strikes, see Beth T. Bates, “Double V for Victory Mobilizes Black Detroit, 1941–1946,” in *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles outside the South, 1940–1980*, ed. Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard (New York, 2003), 17–40.

⁹ Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York, 1997); Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (New York, 2010); Joseph C. O’Mahoney, “New Deal Fascism,” *Cross and the Flag*, 2 (Aug. 1943), 1–3. Matthew Avery Sutton, “Was FDR the Antichrist? The Birth of Fundamentalist Antiliberalism in a Global Age,” *Journal of American History*, 98 (March 2012), 1052–74.

¹⁰ For an example of the “unity” thesis, see Martin E. Marty, *Modern American Religion*, vol. III: *Under God, Indivisible, 1941–1960* (Chicago, 1999). Gerald L. K. Smith, “My Hat Is in the Ring,” *Cross and the Flag*, 1 (May 1942).

capacity for intellectual individualism. The religion preached at Central Methodist Church, for example, contained “a sort of civic aspect,” according to the religious sociologist H. Paul Douglass. St. John’s Episcopal Church added “an admirable series of lectures on civic topics” and employed professional social workers with an unusually high “technical competency.” Detroit’s mainline churches also supported that most emblematic of Progressive Era institutions: the settlement house. First Presbyterian Church, for example, founded the Dodge Community House to deliver essential social services for the immigrants of Hamtramck, while the Congregational Men’s Club sponsored the Franklin Street settlement (Detroit’s oldest). These and other middle-class, mainline congregations promoted a religion that enriched democratic social functions, and hence they received praise and encouragement.¹¹

Working-class religions, however, often fell short of these discursive ideals because they were allegedly socially unengaged, insular, preoccupied with supernatural matters, fueled by emotional excesses, and susceptible to exploitation by crafty demagogues. African American religion—with its long tradition of exuberant music and powerful preaching—was especially susceptible to charges of “over-emotionalism.” In 1918, when large numbers of black migrants began settling in Detroit, mainline church leaders expressed alarm over “forms of religious fervor” among these newcomers. A 1926 mayor’s report (from a committee chaired by the young Detroit clergyman Reinhold Niebuhr) similarly worried that African American migrants suffered from a “lack of emotional stability.” Consequently, working-class migrants found their spiritual needs met by “irresponsible religious organizations which experience mushroom growth in the city.” Storefront churches, in particular, “lack stability and discipline in their group life; the moral fruits of their religious fervor are frequently jeopardized by a type of hysteria which issues in social phenomena of dubious ethical value. The leadership in these groups is usually without adequate educational equipment and free of any kind of supervision or discipline.” In denouncing working-class black religion as “irresponsible” or “hysterical,” the report reinforced the idea that “appropriate” religion should be both emotionally disciplined and socially beneficial.¹²

Critics of working-class Catholicism picked up the same theme. Hungarian Catholics were described by one sociologist as “emotionally unstable and very suggestible.” Similarly, the supposedly “peasant mind” of Sicilian and southern Italian Catholics found cathartic release during celebrations of St. Joseph’s Day, when boisterous brass bands marched through Detroit’s Italian neighborhood carrying religious icons. Additionally, the church’s strong support for devotional culture generated a deep emotional response among lay people who, in the words of Detroit’s Catholic newspaper, embraced patron saints with “gratitude and zeal.” Southern white evangelicals, meanwhile, exhibited what

¹¹ H. Paul Douglass, *The Church in the Changing City: Case Studies Illustrating Adaptation* (New York, 1927), 151–59, 177, 287, 290; “Report of the Dodge Community House,” 1930, folder 353, box 227, Series 8: Member Settlement Houses, Records of the National Federation of Settlements and Neighborhood Centers (Social Welfare History Archives, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis); “The Franklin Scene: An Informal History of Detroit’s Oldest Social Settlement,” 1948, folder 354, *ibid.*

¹² George Edmund Haynes, *Negro New-Comers in Detroit, Michigan: A Challenge to Christian Statesmanship; A Preliminary Survey* (New York, 1918), 31–35; “Report of the Mayor’s Committee on Race Relations,” 1927, in *Papers of the NAACP: Selected Branch Files, 1913–1939*, ed. John H. Bracey and August Meier (microfilm, 18 reels, University Publications of America, 1991), part 12, series C, reel 12.

one scholar described as a “deep drive for individualistic expression” in their religious lives, often through rollicking revival services.¹³

In addition to being too fervent, working-class religion was also accused of producing a sullen resignation toward the disappointments of earthly life. Polish immigrants, for instance, were described as suffering “low standards of living . . . revealed in fatalism.” Southern whites were “trained to a stoic concealment of their emotions” by a “rigid, patriarchal morality.” In response, critics said, workers turned toward otherworldly “superstitions,” especially folk medicine. Various investigators found the widespread use of charms, curses, herbs, and folk elixirs, along with a generalized acceptance of faith healing, among Poles, Hungarians, Mexicans, African Americans, and southern whites. The problem, as Reinhold Niebuhr told his friend Fred Butzel, was that this type of religion “excites the people but doesn’t do them any good, doesn’t give them any leadership.” Reflecting the broader modernist belief, Niebuhr suggested that religion was “good” when it directly engaged the serious problems of society. Churches that substituted otherworldly exuberance for social ethics were, in Niebuhr’s words, “the lowest form of religious life.”¹⁴

Outsiders also worried about the clannish insularity and authoritarian tendencies of working-class religion. Catholics, in particular, were presumed to lack intellectual independence. To one observer, Detroit’s Hungarian Catholics seemed “sheep-like,” locked in helpless thrall to the parish priest. The lives of tens of thousands of Polish immigrants who surrounded the Dodge Brothers plant were “enveloped in religion,” and the authority of the parish priest was rarely questioned. African Americans, too, formed “cults,” built around the intense and supposedly authoritarian charisma of particular ministers. As the Detroit Urban League president John Dancy described them, cults depended on an “emotional attitude for holding on to [their] membership” and served “no real worthwhile purpose in the community.” Dancy criticized the Church of God and Saints of Christ in particular on these grounds; the congregations were “for the most part very poor . . . [and] made up of people who are tremendously emotional and usually below the average in intelligence.”¹⁵

The story that modernists told about working-class religion flattened and simplified what were complex and often-ambiguous cultural systems. Nevertheless, the description of the social dangers posed by working-class religion was powerful, and in the context of

¹³ Erdmann Doane Beynon, “Crime and Custom of the Hungarians of Detroit,” *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 25 (Jan.–Feb. 1935), 772; Lois Rankin, “Detroit Nationality Groups,” *Michigan History Magazine*, 23 (Spring 1939), 115; Ida M. Santini, “The Preservation of St. Joseph’s Day and Something about the Sicilian Colony in Detroit,” 1953, typescript 37 (Folklore Archive, Reuther Library); *Michigan Catholic*, July 3, 1930. On Catholic devotionalism, see Robert A. Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women’s Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven, 1996). D. K. Wilgus, “Country-Western Music and the Urban Hillbilly,” *Journal of American Folklore*, 83 (April–June 1970), 158.

¹⁴ Albert J. Mayer and Sue Mark, “Social Change, Religion, and Birth Rates,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 62 (Jan. 1957), 384; Elmer Akers, “Southern Whites in Detroit,” 1937, typescript, p. 7, Summary of Individual Interviews folder, box 3, Kemnitz Papers; Wilgus, “Country-Western Music and the Urban Hillbilly,” 165; Victoria W. Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill, 2001), 113–26; Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Reminiscences of Reinhold Niebuhr: Oral History, 1953,” 1953, transcript, p. 24 (Columbia Center for Oral History, Columbia University, New York, N.Y.).

¹⁵ Beynon, “Crime and Custom of the Hungarians of Detroit,” 774; Arthur Evan Woods, *Hamtramck, Then and Now: A Sociological Study of a Polish-American Community* (New York, 1955), 34. John Dancy to F. Marion Woods, Sept. 28, 1928, in *Microfilm Edition of the Detroit Urban League Papers*, ed. John M. R. Chavis and William McNitt (microfilm, 18 reels, Michigan Historical Collections, 1973), reel 3; Dancy to Julius Hadley, Feb. 25, 1930, *ibid.*



Gerald L. K. Smith, a one-time follower of Huey Long, used Detroit as his publishing, political, and organizational base during World War II. *Courtesy Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University.*

the early 1930s the message grew even more urgent. Detroit was hammered mercilessly by the Great Depression, which pushed unemployment for factory workers to 50 percent. For those who were able to keep their jobs, the demands of the increased speed of production combined with lower wages to increase stress and cause industrial accidents. Tensions culminated in 1932 when the Detroit Unemployed Councils and the UAW organized a hunger march against the Ford factory to protest job losses; the march met violent police resistance. A year later, a massive strike wave exploded throughout area factories. Meanwhile, Catholics began recounting apocalyptic appearances of a “ghostly figure”—perhaps St. Joseph—across the city, and African Americans embraced the militant Nation of Islam. Religious responses, like political ones, were becoming desperate.¹⁶

The UAW surged to the forefront of the national labor movement at this deeply uncertain moment. Union leaders recognized that they could hardly ignore working peoples’ religion; instead, they hoped to capitalize on it by offering their own creed—a synthesis of the modernist middle-class Social Gospel with a working-class vision of industrial democracy. The union made numerous symbolic gestures to the importance of such a religion. Homer Martin, the UAW’s first president, was chosen in part because as a former Baptist minister he “made men feel that in organizing a union they were going forth to battle for righteousness and the word of God.” R. J. Thomas, Martin’s successor as UAW president, was also a one-time divinity student and member of the Christian Endeavor movement. Although Walter Reuther was no churchgoer, his brother Victor argued that “religion had a good deal to do with the shaping of our family life.” The pages of Reuther’s first UAW newsletter, the *West Side Conveyor*, often celebrated prolabor religious

¹⁶ On the 1932 hunger march and the 1933 strike wave, see John Barnard, *American Vanguard: The United Auto Workers during the Reuther Years, 1935–1970* (Detroit, 2004), 40–72; Tentler, *Seasons of Grace*, 411–13; Erdmann Doane Beynon, “The Voodoo Cult among Negro Migrants in Detroit,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 43 (May 1938), 894–907.

leaders and articulated a version of working-class Christianity. Later, as the UAW president from 1946 to 1970, Reuther maintained strong alliances with ecumenical organizations such as the National Religion and Labor Foundation.¹⁷

Even so, the UAW faced a difficult cultural balancing act. Some workers required convincing that the new and untested union could be reconciled with their powerful, pre-existing religious identities. The shop steward J. K. Paulson, for example, encountered “a few workers who seem to believe that to be a member of a union . . . would conflict with their religious views.” He dismissed those beliefs as “rather absurd” and insisted that union leaders were “most sincere in worship of their Lord and Master.” Simultaneously, some local industrialists offered generous financial support to antiunion preachers and often assailed the UAW as an atheistic front of un-American radicalism. Clearly, the union needed to persist in attempting to meet workers on their own cultural ground. It repeatedly paid for full-page advertisements in the *Michigan Catholic* encouraging Catholic workers to join, and it loudly promoted Archbishop Edward Mooney’s statement that “no Catholic Church authority has ever asserted that the C.I.O. [Congress of Industrial Organizations] is incompatible with Catholicity.” African American ministers—many of whom received needed financial assistance from Henry Ford—remained almost uniformly opposed to the union. Therefore, when the UAW hired William Bowman in 1937 as one of its first black organizers, the organization highlighted Bowman’s role not only as an iron molder but also as the pastor of a local church.¹⁸

If the union hoped that religion might unify workers around common moral and political goals, such hopes were sometimes cruelly frustrated. When the UAW ran a “labor slate” of candidates in the 1937 Detroit common council elections, it was counting on the class consciousness of striking workers at the Dodge plant to reshape city government. Fueled in part by anti-Semitism, however, workers decisively rejected Maurice Sugar, the UAW-supported Jewish labor lawyer. In the middle of a sit-down strike, frustrated organizers angrily harangued their own members: “Your rotten with racial and religious intolerance.”¹⁹

Experiences such as these caused unionists to retreat into familiar discursive tropes about the clannishness of working-class religion, but the swiftly changing context of the late 1930s pushed this discourse to more extreme conclusions. The UAW member Harry Cruden epitomized this shift when he expressed alarm about the Detroit triumvirate of the “three little stools”: Coughlin, Smith, and Norris. For Cruden and others the rise of mass media added a dangerous new element to the pitfalls of working-class religion. Collectively, the radio sermons and newspapers that Coughlin, Smith, and Norris

¹⁷ On Homer Martin, see Irving Howe and B. J. Widick, *The UAW and Walter Reuther* (New York, 1949), 51. “Labor’s Program Is True Christianity,” *United Automobile Worker*, Oct. 22, 1938; Edgar DeWitt Jones, “Congress Attacks Church Reaction,” *Christian Century*, Oct. 4, 1944, pp. 3–4; Victor G. Reuther, *The Brothers Reuther and the Story of the UAW: A Memoir* (Boston, 1975), 35–36; *West Side Conveyor*, Aug. 10, Sept. 21, 1937; “The Religion and Labor Council of America: A Precis of Its Service to the American Labor Movement,” May 2, 1960, typescript, folder 1, box 519, UAW President’s Office: Walter P. Reuther Records (Reuther Library).

¹⁸ J. K. Paulson, “Unions and Churches,” *United Automobile Worker*, Nov. 26, 1938; *Michigan Catholic*, Aug. 3, Aug. 12, Oct. 7, Dec. 8, 1937; August Meier and Elliott M. Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York, 1979), 43.

¹⁹ *Dodge Main News*, March 27, 1937; Bruce Nelson, “Autoworkers, Electoral Politics, and the Convergence of Class and Race: Detroit, 1937–1945,” in *Organized Labor and American Politics, 1894–1994: The Labor-Liberal Alliance*, ed. Kevin Boyle (Albany, 1998), 121–56. On the impact of ethnoreligious traditionalism on the labor movement, see Peter Friedlander, *The Emergence of a UAW Local, 1936–1939: A Study in Class and Culture* (Pittsburgh, 1975), 130–32.

disseminated widely broadcast a hyperpatriotic, antilabor message to tens of thousands of Detroit-area Catholic and Protestant workers. The UAW organizer Joseph Ferris, for example, was convinced that Coughlin “controlled the people . . . from the radio.” This militant, religiously tinged nationalism was piped through a vast media network into working-class homes and provoked in modernists a nightmarish comparison to the fascism simultaneously spreading across Europe. Cruden forcefully pleaded with workers to recognize that “the Bible of those preachers is not the Word of God, but an Americanized version of ‘Mein Kampf.’” T. McNabb, a worker at Detroit UAW Local 227, agreed, arguing that Coughlin and Smith enabled “the mass mania that precedes totalitarianism.” With the rise of European fascism, the discourse surrounding working-class Christianity became increasingly divisive and remained deeply contested during the war years.²⁰

Catholicism and the Struggle for Democracy

Few individuals influenced the parameters of Christian discourse in the 1930s and early 1940s more decisively than Charles Coughlin. While the priest’s early sermons espoused a vision of ecumenism and social justice, these pronouncements were uneasily nestled within his countervailing tendency toward demagoguery and intolerance. By the mid-1930s Coughlin had veered far to the right, earning the enmity of liberals and unionists and causing more than a few observers to worry about the compatibility of Catholicism and democracy. At the same time, however, a strong prolabor Catholic coalition took shape within Detroit’s parishes, union locals, and archdioceses. Prolabor Catholics diligently worked to extricate themselves from Coughlin’s shadow and articulated a “democratic,” pro-United Automobile Workers vision of Catholicism to stand against the “fascist” faith that was increasingly championed by Coughlin. In the process, working-class Catholicism came to serve as a mirror for the larger cultural and political struggles of the late New Deal era.

By the mid-1930s Coughlin loomed as a towering figure revered by many working people. They took solace from Coughlin’s sympathetic descriptions of a blue-collar Jesus, “born in the cradle of the laboring class.” Coughlin began translating these sentiments into concrete political results, including the formation of labor organizations. In 1936 Coughlin allied with the labor organizer Richard Frankenstein to create the Automotive Industrial Worker Association in the Dodge Brothers Hamtramck plant (later United Auto Workers Local 3). He was even an invited speaker at the first UAW convention.²¹

By later in the year, however, Coughlin’s sympathy to unionism had become clouded by hostility to strikes and a certainty that the Congress of Industrial Organizations had opened the gates for communism. He angrily repudiated Franklin Roosevelt and supported the Union party presidential campaign of William Lemke. Anti-Semitism increasingly colored Coughlin’s denunciations. In 1938, his newsletter *Social Justice* printed the anti-Semitic *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an authorless document purporting to be an actual, secret Jewish plan for world domination. Coughlin even called for the formation

²⁰ Letter to the editor, *United Automobile Worker*, Nov. 29, 1939, p. 7; *ibid.*, May 1, 1940, p. 7.

²¹ Charles E. Coughlin, *Father Coughlin’s Radio Discourses, 1931/32* (Royal Oak, 1932), 176; Steve Jefferys, “Matters of Mutual Interest: The Unionization Process at Dodge Main, 1933–1939,” in *On the Line: Essays in the History of Auto Work*, ed. Nelson Lichtenstein and Stephen Meyer (Urbana, 1988), 100–128; “Coughlin Makes Unity Appeal,” *United Automobile Worker*, May 1936, p. 1. This was a special convention issue.

of “platoons,” and shortly afterward founded the Christian Front to mobilize his followers. With his intolerance exposed and his intentions unclear but possibly dangerous, his incompatibility with the UAW was unquestionable.²²

To progressive critics, Coughlin embodied and confirmed the worst characteristics of working-class religion, epitomizing both clerical “authoritarianism” and socially destructive “emotionalism.” When Joseph Ferris sought to explain Coughlin’s popularity with workers, he concluded that the priest “was an outlet for [people’s] emotions.” The labor organizer John Zaremba also noted Coughlin’s authoritarian power, complaining that Polish autoworkers obstinately viewed him as “infallible.” Wyndham Mortimer, the UAW’s first vice president, made the obvious political connection: Coughlin was no more than a “fascist demagogue.” The UAW newspaper articulated the indictment in 1938: “Fascism brazenly hurls defiance at Christianity and crucifies the faithful. The bible is being rewritten to conform with what Hitler ‘thinks’ of God. And in Detroit, a priest looks at this modern spectacle of Christ being crucified in Europe and applauds the barbarian horde.”²³

Even so, many liberal priests and working-class lay people in Detroit rejected Coughlin’s views. The social vision of the UAW seemed more appropriate and appealing to a largely post-immigrant, more assimilated generation of workers who urgently sought to reconcile their deep-seated religious identities with “democratic” unionism. Between 1937 and 1939 Catholic Action—a church-sponsored movement to unite spirituality with social engagement—unleashed a flood of activity. In 1937 Detroiters founded a cell of the Catholic Worker movement that pulsed with energy and excitement. In July of the next year lay workers founded Detroit’s chapter of the ACTU, which boasted over 2,500 members by the early 1940s; as one member put it, the organization was devoted to “a Christian platform in the U.A.W.” In 1939 a group of labor priests led by Fr. Clancy established the Archdiocesan Labor Institute. By 1940 the institute had founded more than forty labor schools in local parishes to discuss Catholic social teachings and instruct unionists in the nuts and bolts of parliamentary procedures. Additionally, Detroit became home to two nationally circulating Catholic labor newspapers.²⁴

Many Detroit Catholics coalesced around this prolabor culture. When Joe Zarella, a member of the Catholic Worker movement from New York City, toured Detroit’s Catholic high schools, students “bombarded him with questions, and promised support for the Catholic Worker ideal.” The movement’s “houses of hospitality” quickly became important neighborhood gathering places and resources. Fr. Clare Murphy, meanwhile, sought to enlist workers who were “profoundly in love with God, who . . . have zeal, courage, and real attack” to advance Catholicism within the city’s unions. A sizeable vanguard of lay Catholics responded. According to ACTU leaders at the Chrysler Motor

²² On Coughlin’s later career, see Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 242–67.

²³ Joseph Ferris interview by Jack W. Skeels, 1961, transcript, p. 8, United Auto Workers Oral Histories Collection (Reuther Library); John A. Zaremba interview by Skeels, 1961, transcript, pp. 15–16, *ibid.*; Wyndham Mortimer, *Organize! My Life as a Union Man* (Boston, 1971), 75, 96–97; “Father Coughlin’s Anti-Semitism,” *United Automobile Worker*, Nov. 26, 1938, p. 5.

²⁴ *Catholic Worker*, Oct. 1937; *Michigan Catholic*, Nov. 18, 1937; “Constitution of ACTU,” July 15, 1938, typescript, folder 1, box 1, Association of Catholic Trade Unionists of Detroit Records (Reuther Library). For Association of Catholic Trade Unionists membership statistics, see John C. Cort, *Dreadful Conversions: The Making of a Catholic Socialist* (New York, 2003), 160. On a “Christian platform,” see student evaluation, [n.d.], folder 16, box 1, Father Raymond S. Clancy Papers (Reuther Library); “Minutes of the Meeting of January 26, 1939, to Plan Parish Labor Schools,” typescript, folder 15, *ibid.* Raymond Clancy, “Detroit ALI,” *Christian Social Action*, Dec. 1939.

Corporation plant, “the welfare of Local 7 . . . is PART OF OUR RELIGION!” For lay Catholics—so often accused of submitting to an “authoritarian” religion—the ACTU visibly emboldened many to combine evangelical enthusiasm and democratic activism. “You can do more than any priest, bishop, or Pope,” an ACTU speaker told members, “toward bringing your non-Catholic fellow-worker back to the faith of their fathers!”²⁵

Prolabor Catholics needed to prove their commitment to industrial democracy and to distance themselves from the image of an obscurantist, authoritarian religious culture. Catholics faced an additional challenge in this task because not only did they not seek to define themselves against the “fascist” strain in American Catholicism but they also asserted a fervently anticommunist Christian discourse. While many prolabor activists in the 1930s gravitated to the communist Popular Front, Catholic laborites hoped to chart a third course that celebrated democracy and unionism while unequivocally opposing communism. Thus while the ACTU outlined a detailed plan for what it termed “economic democracy,” the organization also frankly rebuffed potential alliances with communists. “No good thing need be opposed because it happens to have the unsolicited support of Communists,” the group delicately declared. “But no reciprocal political relations can rightfully exist between Catholics and the Communist Party for any cause.”²⁶

The ALI labor schools were critical because communist-trained activists often dominated the operations in the early days of many locals. George Merrelli, who organized Polish and Italian workers at the Detroit Chevrolet Gear and Axel Division plant, recalled walking into a Polish social club for the union local’s first meetings and finding portraits of Joseph Stalin on the walls. It was “through the educational effort of the Catholic group,” Merrelli said, that ordinary ethnic Catholics learned “how to spot a Commie” and manage a local. Frank Marquart, a socialist in the education department of the UAW, recalled that activists would “point out the line which was being peddled, and make it clear to the workers” when a policy was for the narrow good of communists. The ACTU, according to Marquart, “served as a training ground. Where else did the people who had leadership abilities acquire them in those days except in radical groups or in the ACTU?”²⁷

Thus Catholics found themselves taking sides in the often-brutal factional infighting that bedeviled the UAW for its first several years. The ACTU’s relationship with George Addes is revealing in this regard. Addes, the first UAW secretary-treasurer, was raised a Catholic and even cited papal labor encyclicals to legitimate UAW efforts at arbitrating work speed. Politically, however, Addes was a thoroughgoing leftist, and his loyalty and

²⁵ *Catholic Worker*, Jan. 1938; *ibid.*, May 1938; Fr. Clare Murphy to members of Catholic Study Clubs, July 16, 1938, folder 6, box 17, F. J. Patrick McCartney Papers (Archives of the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Ind.); Newsletter, ca. 1938, Chrysler Local 7 folder, box 23, Association of Catholic Trade Unionists of Detroit Records. Emphasis in original.

²⁶ On the Catholic-communist conflict, see Douglas P. Seaton, *Catholics and Radicals: The Association of Catholic Trade Unionists and the American Labor Movement; From Depression to Cold War* (Lewisburg, 1981); and William Issel, “A Stern Struggle: Catholic Activism and San Francisco Labor, 1934–1958,” in *American Labor and the Cold War: Grassroots Politics and Postwar Political Culture*, ed. Robert W. Cherney, William Issel, and Kieran Walsh Taylor (New Brunswick, 2004), 154–76. Resolution, Aug. 5, 1938, UAW folder, box 34, Association of Catholic Trade Unionists of Detroit Records.

²⁷ ACTU Bulletin, folder 3, box 1, Association of Catholic Trade Unionists of Detroit Records; George Merrelli interview by Patricia Pilling, 1982, transcript, pp. 18, 37–38, Polish-American Autoworkers Oral Histories Collection (Reuther Library); Frank Marquart interview by Skeels, 1960, transcript, pp. 9, 11–12, United Auto Workers Oral Histories Collection.

proximity to prominent communists caused many Catholics to recoil. When Addes joined the leftist ticket in the pivotal 1946 UAW presidential election, the ACTU backed the anticommunist platform of Walter Reuther, cementing what one scholar has termed an “informal alliance” between Reuther and the Catholics. In the wake of Reuther’s victory, ACTU president Paul Weber sought to assure worried outsiders that there was no “Catholic bloc” within the UAW. The group’s decision to back Reuther, Weber said, “was made freely, and individually, without direction or pressure from any source.” More interestingly, Weber pointed out that the ACTU supported Reuther because his policies “have been consistently in harmony with the principles laid down in the Papal Encyclicals,” and they offered the best chance of enacting something resembling the group’s “industry council” plan. In an interview after Reuther’s election, Weber explained, “We are not campaigning for the election of Catholic officials but for the adoption of Catholic principles.” The ACTU viewed the policies of the Protestant-bred Reuther as more “Catholic” than those of their coreligionist George Addes.²⁸

Communists and their leftist allies naturally pushed back against Catholic laborites with words that had become stock-in-trade for critics of working-class religion. In 1938 the ACTU chaplain in Detroit, Sebastian Erbacher, complained that “laborers are being filled with hatred for the church,” and accused communists of painting all Catholics with the brush of fascism. Two years later the ACTU warned its members that a “fake handbill” insinuating a link between the organization and European fascism was floating through various factories. Again in 1942 the former *Christian Social Action* editor Richard L. G. Deverall—at the time an official in the UAW Education Department—was accused of being a closet fascist. When *In Fact* magazine published the charge (even after the UAW executive board had already dismissed the accusation), Deverall wrote to the magazine’s editor with barely contained rage. “As a member of the liberal element within the Catholic Church,” he fumed, “I very bitterly resent being attacked as a fascist, when I have suffered for years because of the fact that I HAVE battled Fascism.” In fact, prolabor Catholics agreed with the modernist premise that religion might serve as fascism’s American handmaiden. Rev. Frederick Siedenburg—appointed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to the Detroit branch of the National Labor Relations Board—concluded in 1939 that “if Fascism arises in the United States it will come in a sugar-coated form” like an escapist religion.²⁹

Some workers remained suspicious of Catholic laborites. Secular workers often distrusted any religious involvement in working-class institutions, while Protestants, prizing traditions of religious individualism, worried about the hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church. Ultimately, however, prolabor Catholics made strides in distinguishing themselves from Coughlinites and in building alliances with secular unionists. The Socialist Frank Marquart, for example, appreciated the activism of the ACTU in defending

²⁸ George Addes to Raymond Clancy, Nov. 29, 1939, folder 2, box 4, Clancy Papers; George Addes, n.d., untitled speech, George Addes 1941–1946 folder, box 7, Association of Catholic Trade Unionists of Detroit Records; Edward Duff, S. J., “Activation in ACTU,” *Queen’s Work*, May 1946, p. 1; *Detroit News*, Aug. 3, 1941; Statement of support for Reuther, UAW folder, box 3, Association of Catholic Trade Unionists of Detroit Records.

²⁹ Sebastian Erbacher to Norman McKenna, Feb. 25, 1938, folder 6, box 1, Norman C. McKenna Papers (American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.); *Wage Earner*, Oct. 14, 1940; Richard Deverall to George Seldes, April 6, 1942, folder 14, box 1, McKenna Papers. Emphasis in original. Industrial Conference Reports, Season 1939: The Detroit Meeting, folder 13, box 36, Records of the Social Action Department, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Collection (American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives).

“democratic unionism.” The African American unionist Horace Sheffield added, “There’s no question about it . . . [the ACTU] made some positive contributions.” Meanwhile, Coughlin became anathema within Catholic circles. In late 1939 the ACTU chaplain Raymond Clancy publicly rebuked Coughlin on behalf of the archdiocese, and by 1943 two well-regarded priests asserted that “90% of the clergy [in Detroit] have no use for Coughlin.”³⁰

Yet as the United States entered World War II, Coughlin remained a popular parish priest and still represented to modernists a dangerous manifestation of working-class religion. The priest’s apparent alliance with Gerald L. K. Smith was especially disconcerting for liberals. Smith, a Disciples of Christ pastor, joined many evangelical southern whites by relocating to Detroit in the late 1930s. In 1941 he launched the newspaper *The Cross and the Flag*—a title indicative of Smith’s admixture of Christianity and politics—and a year later ran for the Senate on the Republican ticket. He lost but subsequently ran for president three times as the Christian Nationalist party candidate—perhaps the first explicitly political program premised on Christian fundamentalism since the schism between modernists and fundamentalists in the 1920s. By the onset of World War II this budding political activism among fundamentalists coincided with a new willingness to form interdenominational coalitions; both developments emerged largely from an increasing sense of panic that “communistic” modernism had infected American religion. “We Christians must continue to enjoy our liberty to disagree theologically,” Smith wrote in a 1945 defense of Coughlin, but, “when it comes to Communism and Atheism the lovers of Christ must stand together as one solid body.” In this populist political theology, the bastions of American democracy—private property, the traditional family, and white Christianity—were under siege by the forces of secularism, communism, unionism, and pluralism. Smith hoped to enlist other southern-born white evangelicals for the cause; in Claude Williams, one of the fiercest religious progressives of the twentieth century, he would find a formidable antagonist.³¹

Southern Evangelicals and Christian Discourse

The surge of southern evangelicals into Detroit’s booming industrial plants left religious modernists stunned and puzzled. Edward DeWitt Jones, one of Detroit’s leading Protestant luminaries, announced with bewilderment in 1942 that “no other city . . . has so many flourishing ‘Tabernacle churches’ as Detroit.” Ellsworth Smith, director of the War Emergency Commission for the Detroit Council of Churches (DCC), was initially optimistic about the “church-minded” migrants, but by 1945 he was worried. “It cannot be said too emphatically,” he warned, that “Detroit is a center of terrific religious energy.” Moreover, a “very disturbing proportion of this energy is being drawn off by independent groups which offer a poor and often destructive religious education.” Smith feared that “vast areas of population” might be “surrendered to these nondenominational, but very

³⁰ “Father Coughlin’s Errors,” *Michigan Catholic*, Nov. 16, 1939; Marquart interview; Judith Stephan-Norris and Maurice Zeitlin, *Talking Union* (Urbana, 1996), 173; “Conversations with Father J. L. Cavanaugh and Father John Coogan,” Survey of Racial and Religious Conflict Forces in Detroit folder, box 71, Civil Rights Congress of Michigan Collection.

³¹ “Protestants and Catholics Beware,” *Cross and the Flag*, 4 (Sept. 1945), unpaginated; Jeansonne, *Gerald L. K. Smith*, 64–79; Carpenter, *Revive Us Again*, 89–107.

energetic, groups." In fact, by 1943 only 400 out of the city's 1,600 churches belonged to an established denomination.³²

Committed to biblical literalism, revivalist worship, and a premillennialist belief in the imminence of end times, southern white evangelicals typically rejected both the theology and the social activism of modernist Christianity. For modernists, these cultural concerns were rapidly translated into political concerns. Writing of Detroit in *The Churchman*, Wilbur Larremore Caswell worried that "fanatical sects," once under the influence of a Norris or a Smith, represented "one of the most serious perils to both our religious and our political life." The Michigan Civil Rights Congress concurred, warning that vast numbers of newly arriving southern fundamentalists were "susceptible to leadership by dangerous demagogues" and bluntly concluding that "there is probably more American fascist, reactionary, and downright sedition propaganda generated in Detroit than in any other city."³³

Liberals' tropes, while heightened by the war, had some validity. In 1942 Smith announced that he had received support from 50,000 Detroit-area CIO members—proof, he averred, that there are "still millions of Bible-reading, church-going, prayerful workers in America" who remained untouched by "Communists" such as Walter Reuther. Southern evangelicalism was also transforming the workplace. By late 1943 multiple sources estimated that between 3,000 and 3,500 shop-floor preachers were working in defense industry plants; UAW president R. J. Thomas counted more than a thousand preachers in Ford factories alone. Hoping to reach these industrial workers, the Presbyterian Church made a daring departure: it arranged for Claude Williams, a fiery evangelist and political radical from Arkansas, to serve as the presbytery's "minister to labor."³⁴

Williams read the Bible as a manifesto of progressive political causes. His ministry, he explained to Studs Terkel, consisted of translating the "democratic impulse of mass religion rather than its protofascist content into a language then understood." In his booklet "The Galilean and the Common People," Williams taught that the "religion OF the prophets and the Son of Man is a religion OF, BY, and FOR the toiling masses of humanity." In another lesson, "The Carpenter," Williams contrasted the "false" religion of rulers and priests with the "true" religion of Moses, Jeremiah, and the prophets. These lessons were frequently rendered in quasi-mathematical formulas such as "the Labor Movement : Government = True Religion : Real Democracy." Williams always attempted to ground his political points with scriptural references or biblical parallels. Only this radically democratic religion, he believed, could pull southern evangelical workers away

³² Edgar DeWitt Jones, "Strange Churches Rise in Detroit," *Christian Century*, Dec. 9, 1942, pp. 3–4; Ellsworth Smith, "Mobilization for War-Time Services and Reconstruction," [ca. 1943], typescript, folder 1, box 5, Series II: Metropolitan Detroit Council of Churches Records (Reuther Library); Ellsworth Smith, "Report for the Summer, 1945," typescript, folder 2, *ibid.*

³³ Wilbur Larremore Caswell, "Educating the 'Bible Christian,'" *Churchman*, Feb. 15, 1944; "The Religious Ferment in Detroit," Survey of Racial and Religious Conflict Forces in Detroit folder, box 71, Civil Rights Congress of Michigan Collection; "The Hill-Billies as Strikebreakers," Sept. 1943, *ibid.*

³⁴ Gerald L. K. Smith, "We Take Our Stand," *Cross and the Flag*, 1 (April 1942); Claude Williams, "The Hell-Brewers of Detroit," folder 14, box 111, Series II: Topical Files, RG 73, Social Ethics Pamphlet Collection (Special Collections, Yale University Divinity Library, New Haven, Conn.); "First Report of Peoples' Congress of Applied Religion," July 22–24, 1944, folder 5, box 19, Series III: Peoples Institute for Applied Religions, 1939–1977, Claude Williams Papers (Reuther Library); Claude Williams to Henry Jones, April 3, 1942, folder 19, box 2, Series I: Correspondence, 1929–1979, *ibid.*

from “the Detroit apostles of fascism” who used “the King James Bible as their *Mein Kampf*.”³⁵

By the early 1940s Williams had identified a number of “shop tabernacles” at area plants, likely established with the support of management. The UAW rightly worried about the content of industry-sponsored religion, suspecting that it countered the union’s religious discourse. Williams agreed that employers had been “attempting to take advantage of the religious sentiment of their employees and of the uncritical preachers among them to foster under the guise of religion” an antiunion scheme. Williams sought to counter this influence by establishing what he called a Gospel Preacher’s Council of Applied Religion. The initial group consisted of twenty-five preachers employed in war plants, but members believed that “there are hundreds of us preachers who toil with their hands as we do.” Joining together for fellowship, Bible study services, and publication of a newsletter, the council was intended to serve as Williams’s main conduit into working-class religious communities. In 1943 councils were operating at General Electric, Hudson Motor Car Company, U.S. Tire and Supply Company, and Murray Body Corporation, with organizing efforts underway elsewhere.³⁶

In 1944 Williams founded the Detroit Council of Applied Religion. In May of that year he hosted an “ordination” ceremony for his working-class ministers that unabashedly mixed radical politics and religious ritual. Held at the Lucy Thurman branch of the Young Women’s Christian Association, the gathering’s participants were an interracial fellowship. Williams provocatively chose to hold the ceremony on May 1, a day of international workers’ solidarity. In the sermon he presented that day, he urged the participants to “return to vital religion” and “return to the people.” While receiving their ordination, Williams’s ministers were instructed not to kneel as if before a bishop “in a submissive way” but to stand as ready to fight. Music and song had long been key to Williams’s ministry, and “old tunes with new content” were liberally used on that day as well. Appropriately, the ceremony’s closing “hymn” was the labor ballad “Joe Hill.”³⁷

A month later, Williams convened the Peoples’ Congress of Applied Religion, to, as he put it, “map action, not debate issues” in the “fight for democracy.” Out of this gathering grew the umbrella organization Peoples’ Institute of Applied Religion (PIAR). Williams sought to fuse together representatives from organized labor, youth groups, “grass-roots” preachers, and the “middle-class preacher and laymen.” To further its ministerial aims, the congress designed Bible study courses to teach that the “history of the labor movement will never be completely written until it begins with Moses,” and labor

³⁵ Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York, 1970), 380; Claude Williams, “The Galilean and the Common People,” folder 15, box 18, III: Peoples Institute for Applied Religions, Williams Papers. Emphasis in original. Claude Williams, “The Scriptural Heritage of the People,” folder 11, box 111, Series II: Topical Files, RG 73, Social Ethics Pamphlet Collection; Claude Williams, “The Man Who Has an Answer,” *ibid.*; Claude Williams, “Anti-Semitism, Racism, and Democracy,” *ibid.*; Belfrage, *Faith to Free the People*, 260–61.

³⁶ “Gospel Preachers’ Council,” 1944, typescript, folder 10, box 18, Series III: Peoples Institute for Applied Religions, Williams Papers; Williams, “The Man Who Has an Answer”; Williams to “Sponsors and Friends,” 1943, box 8, United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Presbytery of Detroit Records (Bentley Historical Library).

³⁷ Williams to Herbert Hudnut, March 9, 1944, folder 12, box 19, Series III: Peoples Institute for Applied Religions, Williams Papers; Undated typescript, [ca. May 1944], folder 22, box 18, *ibid.* On the labor ballad “Joe Hill,” see Donald E. Winters Jr., *The Soul of the Wobblies: The I.W.W., Religion, and American Culture in the Progressive Era, 1905–1917* (Westport, 1985).

“will never enlist and retain the bulk of American workers until it recognizes and approaches them in terms of their deep religious conditioning.”³⁸

Williams obsessively measured the PIAR against the machinations of Gerald L. K. Smith’s America First party. The reasons were clear: for both men, the political shape of working-class religion was at stake. “Smith would distort and pervert the Bible, exploit the faulty religious conditioning of the masses and prostitute religion to develop shock troops at the behest of an industrial baron who aspires to be the Thyssen of an American fascism,” Williams emphatically wrote to one of his supporters in the presbytery. He hoped to “appeal to the very deep and genuine religious sentiment of the masses, to enlist them as democratic elements in the dynamic movements of a free society.”³⁹

Just as Williams and his allies worried that fascist religion could spell the end of democracy, however, those on the right accused Williams and his organization of serving as a communist front. Even so, for Williams’s gathered ministers, communism presented just as grave a danger to the intertwined future of Christianity and democracy as fascism posed for liberals and leftists. To J. Frank Norris, Williams was part of a “MODERNISTIC, COMMUNISTIC ECCLESIASTICAL CONSPIRACY” and “one of the rankest Communists in America.” The National Laymen’s Council of the Presbyterian Church described Williams as a “militant agitator for a *new social and economic order*.” The council claimed to have a document from the files of the House Committee on Un-American Activities proving Williams’s connection to the Communist party, and the council even claimed to know Williams’s party name.⁴⁰

Smith likewise began his campaign against Williams by describing him as the “Communist on the Presbyterian payroll” and claimed to possess a confidential memo showing that Williams was a paid Soviet agent. By 1945 Smith had upped the rhetorical ante, referring to Williams as “Satan’s Apostle to the American Church.” One of Smith’s followers infiltrated a conference that Williams held at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Detroit, decried the presence of “Satan in God’s House,” and claimed that Williams’s followers “crawled over the pews and actually saturated the place.” For Smith and his fundamentalist followers, the threat of communism was literally demonic.⁴¹

Williams did little to stifle rumors of his political unorthodoxy. In fact, his defiance regarding the issue only heightened emotions. According to one credible report, Williams often made allusions to communist rhetoric, referring to himself as a “fellow-traveler with the Man Who Went to the Cross.” In a letter to Henry Jones, one of his supporters, Williams dismissed the communist charge as “irrelevant” and turned the tables to aggressively accuse his own church benefactors of complicity in the “evils” that communists confronted. Williams ultimately admitted that he paid dues to the Communist

³⁸ “First Report of Peoples’ Congress of Applied Religion”; Claude Williams, “Report on Work under War Emergency Program,” Aug. 31, 1944, typescript, folder 12, box 18, Series III: Peoples Institute for Applied Religions, Williams Paper.

³⁹ Williams, “Report on Work under War Emergency Program.”

⁴⁰ Belfrage, *Faith to Free the People*, 283–88; Williams, “Man Who Has an Answer”; National Laymen’s Council, “Special Report—Involving the Rev. H. P. Marley,” [ca. 1944], typescript, box 8, United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Presbytery of Detroit Records. Emphasis in original.

⁴¹ “Red Preachers,” *Cross and the Flag*, 3 (Nov. 1944); “Satan in God’s House,” *ibid.*, 3 (Feb. 1945); “Claude Williams,” *ibid.*, 4 (Sept. 1945); Kenneth Goff, “Christians, Beware!” *ibid.*, 4 (Nov. 1945); “Red Preacher Slurs the Cross,” *ibid.*, 4 (March 1946). On apocalyptic beliefs, see Paul S. Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).

party for a few months in 1937, but that he never strayed from his firm religious beliefs. Williams's deep religiosity likely solidified his political absolutism.⁴²

Williams was profoundly committed not just to the labor movement but also to the ideal of racial equality. In a typical pamphlet, he declared that "prejudice or discrimination" constituted "a *transgression at the very heart of true religion*." Williams's fierce support for equality dovetailed with a swelling civil rights movement within black Detroit. Not coincidentally, two of Williams's earliest and most loyal Detroit supporters, John Miles and Charles Hill, were progressive African American clergymen who viewed Williams as a leader of the "spiritual front" against racism and reactionary politics. Williams's gatherings were almost always biracial, and he often recruited Owen Whitfield, a prominent African American religious radical from the South, to address PIAR audiences. As Williams understood, race was becoming increasingly central to Christian discourse during the war years; it added an entirely new dimension to the struggle between reactionary and progressive visions of working-class religion.⁴³

Racial Ideology and Christian Discourse

By the early 1940s racial ideology had emerged as perhaps the most crucial element in the discourse surrounding working-class religion. For those who had built and supported the UAW, "fascist" religion became inextricably linked with "racist" or anti-Semitic religion. Contrarily, for right-wing religious leaders who condemned the UAW and its religious allies as "communist," communism became virtually synonymous not only with unionism but also with promiscuous race mixing. African Americans were naturally at the heart of these changes and debates, and African American ministers played a decisive role in bringing racial justice to the forefront of Christian discourse. In particular, the Congregationalist Horace White, the Episcopalian Malcolm Dade, and the Baptist Charles Hill hoped to diminish the stereotype of "overly-emotional" black religiosity, to promote a progressive politics of interracial solidarity within the UAW, and to tighten the discursive links between "fascist" and racist religion.⁴⁴

These developments emerged haltingly at first. In the early 1930s black churches and workers were slow to warm to the UAW. Most churches remained the recipients of corporate gifts (especially from Henry Ford), and many black workers knew unions to be bastions of white privilege. Moreover, the individualistic theology of evangelical religion caused some black workers to view secular collective action suspiciously, but as the UAW

⁴² Sourlock, "The Peoples Institute of Applied Religion," July 1945, private report typescript, folder 14, box 111, RG 73, Social Ethics Pamphlet Collection; Royal Wilbur France, "The Case of Claude Williams," [ca. 1953], typescript, *ibid.*; Williams to Jones, Feb. 3, 1945, folder 12, box 19, Series III: Peoples Institute for Applied Religions, Williams Papers.

⁴³ Williams, "Anti-Semitism, Racism, and Democracy"; Williams to Leslie A. Bechtel, Aug. 18, 1945, box 8, United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Presbytery of Detroit Records; Erik S. Gellman and Jarod H. Roll, "Owen Whitfield and the Gospel of the Working Class in New Deal America, 1936–1946," *Journal of Southern History*, 72 (May 2006), 303–48.

⁴⁴ For the context of the liberal, antiracist alliance during the 1940s, see Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York, 1995), 164–70. On the countervailing conflation of racial and economic conservatism, see Glenn Feldman, "Southern Disillusionment with the Democratic Party: Cultural Conformity and 'the Great Melding' of Racial and Economic Conservatism in Alabama during World War II," *Journal of American Studies*, 43 (Aug. 2009), 199–230.

achieved major victories and began a concerted recruitment effort, African Americans reconsidered unionism. Religion occupied a central place in this process.⁴⁵

Horace White, a graduate of the Oberlin College Divinity School, was one of the earliest black pastors to push churches in the union's direction. A Social Gospel advocate, White was deeply impressed with the social potential of the labor movement, and he immediately turned his Plymouth Congregational Church into a meeting place for aspiring black unionists. Malcolm Dade's story neatly paralleled White's. Dade, similarly steeped in the Social Gospel, arrived from New England to pastor St. Cyprian's Church in 1936; he found the situation of black workers "just flagrantly bad, wrong, certainly not good." Together, both churches drew the most progressive and socially engaged element of Detroit's black middle class, while also becoming social, spiritual, and organizational resources for the swelling ranks of UAW supporters. Dade understood the significance of this development. Union leaders, Dade explained, "wanted to put their finger on Negro life. And, Negro life . . . is in the Negro church."⁴⁶

The Reverend Charles A. Hill loomed even larger, combining a universalistic vision of human rights, a commitment to radical politics, and the passion of his Baptist pulpit to become black Detroit's preeminent prophetic voice. A Detroit native, Hill became assistant pastor at the huge and influential Second Baptist Church in 1918. In 1920 he established his own congregation, Hartford Avenue Baptist Church, which would become one of the ten largest black churches in Detroit by 1926. When the UAW mounted its first organizing campaigns in the 1930s, Hill turned the church into one of the most vital social resources at black unionists' disposal.⁴⁷

By early 1941 UAW efforts to transform Detroit into a "union town" approached a defining crisis point. The union needed recognition from the last unorganized auto giant, the Ford Motor Company. The company employed by far the largest number of African Americans of any auto company; for Ford to be organized—and the union to survive—the UAW needed the support of black workers. In April, during the decisive strike against the River Rouge plant in Dearborn, the union's black clerical supporters proved crucial. White delivered speeches and sermons from the UAW's sound truck outside the plant. When a contingent of black workers resisted joining the strike, Hill "went out to the Ford factory and . . . pleaded with them to come out; [he] told them that they could not afford to make any advance by themselves; they had to learn to work with other workers." He was happy to host union meetings in the basement of the church, making it "difficult for [Ford spies] to prove that we were just discussing union matters. And so . . . [unionists] got together regardless of their race and nationality." Although Ford tried once again to divide the black clergy by promising exclusive access to jobs for members of loyal church bodies, Hill happily reported in 1943 that "the majority of the colored clergy worked hand in hand with the CIO and blocked the move. . . . The colored clergy tell their flocks to obey the Lord and obey the CIO." Gloster Current of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

⁴⁵ Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*.

⁴⁶ Horace A. White, "Who Owns the Negro Church?" *Christian Century*, Feb. 9, 1938, p. 177; Malcolm Dade interview by Jim Keeney and Roberta McBride, Sept. 17, 1969, transcript, pp. 7, 17, Blacks in the Labor Movement Collection (Reuther Library).

⁴⁷ Rev. Charles Hill interview by McBride, May 8, 1967, transcript, Blacks in the Labor Movement Collection; Dillard, *Faith in the City*, 27–40.

agreed with Hill, observing that “many colored deacons who were previously anti-CIO have now swung around and are all out for the CIO.”⁴⁸

This political shift among many black churches and worshippers also signaled a discursive shift in the construct of working-class religion. Although some observers continued to dismiss working-class African American religion as excessively emotional and dangerously obscurantist, this language steadily retreated as religion became a potential bridge linking black workers, CIO unionism, and New Deal politics. Reorienting both the political culture of black churches and the discourse surrounding black religion was a central preoccupation of the prophetic preachers. By presenting black religion as progressive, universalistic, and “rational,” these clerics linked it with the culture of contemporary liberalism. Such a connection, especially made in the context of World War II, permitted the ministers to make an additional contribution to the discourse surrounding the politics of religion: “fascist” religion was really “racist” religion, and both needed to be opposed in the name of democracy.

Progressive whites quickly accepted this analogy. Among Catholics, the ACTU president Paul Weber acknowledged in 1943 that the “race problem in Detroit” had become critical, and he placed the “greater part of the blame . . . upon white people who persist in a totally undemocratic and un-American attitude of discrimination toward colored people.” The ACTU chaplain Raymond Clancy agreed, reiterating the theme that racism was both un-American and un-Christian. The lay people most committed to this doctrine soon erected an organization network linking Catholicism and racial equality. A small but lively chapter of the Catholic Interracial Council of Detroit distributed thousands of pamphlets and lectured before tens of thousands of area Catholics. At a remarkable service in 1943, Sacred Heart Church established an “interracial shrine”: mass was followed by a program on “Catholic action and race relations,” cosponsored by the ACTU and the United Automobile Workers Local 600. Such religious rituals and social performances tightly interwove the threads linking religious identity with political commitments to racial justice, industrial unionism, and democracy.⁴⁹

Mainline Protestants agreed. In 1942 Protestants took a leading part in the Metropolitan Detroit Fair Employment Practice Council because equal opportunity laws presented a chance for “translating Judeo Christian principles and democratic ideals into practice.” In 1944 the Detroit Council of Churches issued an “interracial code”—the first of its kind in the country—that sanctioned member churches for excluding African Americans, citing “Christian, democratic, and scientific principles.” An interracial workshop, sponsored by the city of Detroit in 1945, demonstrated the growing pervasiveness of such discourse. Representatives of one hundred churches attended, and many speakers expounded the theme that had come to define the war for many: democracy needed Christianity, and both needed to advance an agenda of racial equality. Herbert Hudnut, the pastor of the Woodward Avenue Presbyterian Church, made the connection explicit:

⁴⁸ Hill interview, 4–6; “Conversation with Charles A. Hill,” Sept. 1943, Survey of Racial and Religious Conflict Forces in Detroit folder, box 71, Civil Rights Congress of Michigan Collection; “Conversation with Gloster Current,” *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Paul Weber, “Editorial,” *Wage Earner*, June 11, 1943; *ibid.*, June 25, 1943; *Michigan Catholic*, July 15, Oct. 28, 1943; Catholic Interracial Council, “Bulletin,” Sept. 1946, Catholic Interracial Group folder, box 11, Association of Catholic Trade Unionists of Detroit Records.

“We are Nazis to the extent that we possess degrees of hate within us against our fellow men.”⁵⁰

This discourse reflected the desire to ameliorate very real social tensions simmering within workplaces and neighborhoods throughout the city. The politics of race rather than the boundaries of denomination increasingly shaped both Christian discourse and religious identity during World War II. As Detroit’s African American population continued to increase, black workers found themselves slowly advancing into some previously “all-white” factory jobs and positions of leadership in the UAW. As a growing, avidly Democratic constituency, they represented a rising political threat to conservatives. Throughout the city, new African American neighborhoods were established and older ones grew, persistently challenging the highly segregated racial geography. And the promise of a “double victory” over fascism abroad and racism at home produced a more confident, militant, and confrontational attitude among many blacks. For all these reasons, the religion of conservative and antimodernist working-class whites became fixated on preserving racial hierarchies at the same moment that progressives were linking Christianity to racial equality.⁵¹

Progressives especially worried about the local volatile Packard Motor Car Company plant, which became a highly contested battleground between antithetical religious and cultural forces. In October 1941 white workers at Packard launched an unauthorized strike over the transfer of two African American metal polishers to what was considered “white” work on defense products; the strike spiraled on for six months. When twenty-five thousand Packard workers launched a second hate strike in June 1943, working-class unity seemed elusive at best. Religion exacerbated these disputes. Offering his considerations on the troubles at Packard, the *Michigan Chronicle* reporter Theodore Wood observed that “conflicts in plants between whites and blacks were more frequent where revivalist influence was strong.”⁵²

Frank Norris was the most notable influence. He hosted popular “Packard days” services on Thursday and Friday nights at Temple Baptist Church, using the opportunity to excoriate communism, the UAW, and racial integration. According to Williams, Norris operated sixteen different religious programs at the Packard plant, plus a shop-floor radio show. Williams described the content of Norris’s gospel to a Civil Rights Congress investigator: “Sunday after Sunday, both from his pulpit and on the air, [Norris] preaches that it is an insult that white men should be compelled to work along side of ‘niggers’ in plants. For the ‘protection’ of white women, he demands that the whole Negro population of ‘rapists’ and ‘primitives’ be separated in schools, in homes, in theatres, in parks, in shops, in jobs.” Yet simultaneously Norris cultivated a handful of African American preachers on the shop floor. The case of the African American Pentecostal preacher and

⁵⁰ “Of One Blood All Nations’: An Interracial Code for Protestant Churches,” Feb. 17, 1944, typescript, folder 14, box 29, United Community Services Central Files (Reuther Library); “Summary of the Interracial Workshop Conference Sponsored by City of Detroit Interracial Committee,” June 1, 1945, typescript, folder 14, box 101, *ibid.*

⁵¹ For studies of racial conflict in World War II-era Detroit, see Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, “Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of American History*, 75 (Dec. 1988), 786–811; and Thomas J. Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, 1996), 33–57.

⁵² Meier and Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW*, 125–36; Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO, 1935–1955* (Chapel Hill, 1997), 155; “Race Conflicts in Detroit Riots,” Sept. 1943, Survey of Racial and Religious Conflict Forces in Detroit folder, box 71, Civil Rights Congress of Michigan Collection.

Packard worker Robert Hill vividly illustrates the cultural trench warfare that was waged over religious ideology. Hill, described by Williams as “the most dynamic speaker in the plant,” had been courted by Norris and even had appeared on Norris’s radio show. Williams’s protégé, the African American Packard shop preacher Virgil Vanderburg, approached Hill and apparently convinced his fellow evangelist that “he was being used.” Flipped to Williams’s position, Hill addressed hundreds of workers each week and, “being the most influential speaker, the anti-Negro forces are check-mated in their religious programs.”⁵³

While it is difficult to directly correlate religious influences, Norris’s hostility to the UAW likely won a generous hearing among recently resettled southern whites, especially after the union threatened the jobs of those who participated in racially inspired walk-outs. Even so, incendiary religious conflict was not limited to Protestants. According to Leroy Spradley, an African American committeeman in the UAW, one Polish American priest also visited the Packard plants and urged an alliance between white Protestants and ethnic Catholics toward “maintaining Christian civilization there”—essentially creating an interfaith black-white dyad that would thwart the promotion of blacks into previously all-white shop departments.⁵⁴

Beyond the workplace, many ethnic Catholics viewed home ownership as a sacred duty, and perceived threats to these Catholic communities—often established through heavy sacrifice from working-class parishioners—were greeted with hostility. The small-scale riots surrounding occupancy of the Sojourner Truth Housing Project in February 1942 offers the most vivid example. Designed to house two hundred African American defense workers, the project—federally funded, but locally administered—was designed for a northeast section of the city near previous black settlements. Whites in the adjacent neighborhoods reacted swiftly to the construction. Led by the Polish American realtor Joseph Buffa, residents formed the Seven Mile–Fenelon Improvement Association (SMFIA) to lobby officials to keep “their” neighborhoods—and public housing in general—white.⁵⁵

To the dismay of liberal Catholics, priests and parishioners became a driving force in the SMFIA. In December 1941 the Detroit Council of Social Agencies complained that Fr. O’Mara was “one of the most bitter factors” opposing the housing project. Even more important was Fr. Constantine Dzink, whose overwhelmingly Polish parish—Saint Louis the King—became a headquarters for SMFIA meetings. Described by one reporter as “an aged, bald, Polish peasant,” Dzink personified liberal fears that working-class religion nurtured fascism. Employing long-standing discursive categories, the report described Dzink as “a virtual dictator over the lives and thoughts of several thousand Poles.” During the 1920s the supposed “authoritarian” culture and emotional

⁵³ “Interview with the Rev. Claude Williams,” Sept. 1943, Survey of Racial and Religious Conflict Forces in Detroit folder, box 71, Civil Rights Congress of Michigan Collection; Williams to Hudnut, March 9, 1944, folder 12, box 19, Series III: Peoples Institute for Applied Religions, Williams Papers.

⁵⁴ “Talk with Leroy Spradley,” Sept. 1943, Survey of Racial and Religious Conflict Forces in Detroit folder, box 71, Civil Rights Congress of Michigan Collection.

⁵⁵ “Visit to Bishop Stephen Woznicki,” Sept. 1943, Survey of Racial and Religious Conflict Forces in Detroit folder, box 71, *ibid.*; “Relations between Poles and Jews,” *ibid.* On conflicts between Catholics and African Americans, see John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago, 1996), 74–77; and Dominic J. Capeci, *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit: The Sojourner Truth Housing Controversy of 1942* (Philadelphia, 1984).

susceptibility of immigrant Catholics was considered socially unhealthy; by the early 1940s it had morphed into something inherently political and downright dangerous.⁵⁶

Thus, racial ideology divided black workers from white workers as well as progressives from conservatives within the same religious traditions. When Louis Murphy and Marie Conti of the Catholic Workers movement visited fellow Catholics protesting the Sojourner Truth project, they came away deeply troubled. Conti, noting the ubiquity of American flags on the protest line, wondered whether “the Negro can help but doubt democracy.” Although the pair tried to stimulate conversation and reflection, they instead found themselves in bitter disagreement with other “good Catholics” from the parish of St. Louis the King. “I said to a Catholic, self-called, that Christ died for both white and Negro—and he actually denied it,” Conti lamented. Tellingly, another “good Catholic” accused the members of the Catholic Workers movement of not being “real” Catholics, but rather Communists and “nigger-lovers”—a painful contrast to Conti’s own dismissal of a racist as a “self-called” Catholic and a revealing conflation of “communism” with racial pluralism. As Murphy and Conti retreated, a group of men followed them menacingly, one uttering threats. “I have never in my life seen hate personified as I did in the persons of these Catholics,” Conti morosely concluded.⁵⁷

Black clerical leaders naturally supported the Sojourner Truth homes and used their churches as spaces to hold rallies and discuss strategy. For Charles Hill, who led the Sojourner Truth Citizens’ Committee, the conflict was an opportunity to plead for working-class solidarity. African Americans and Polish Americans, he wrote, were “in the same boat together.” Piercing through decades’ worth of Christian discourse, Hill recognized that immigrant Catholics and African Americans had *both* been the subject of demeaning stereotypes: that “Polish people are stupid and uncouth and unfit for anything except manual work,” or that “Negroes make poor neighbors.” Hill urged Poles to “refuse to listen any longer to these stories.”⁵⁸

Unfortunately, as Hill later admitted, his arguments did not seem to change any minds. Indeed, the riots at the Sojourner Truth Housing Project was just a prelude to the much more serious violence that erupted in June 1943. According to a state investigative committee, tensions between black and ethnic (likely Catholic) youth sparked the violent eruption. Trouble allegedly started days before the riot began, when African American boys were pelted with stones at an amusement center and decided to retaliate by “[taking] care of the Hunkies.” This “retaliation” began on Belle Isle, an island park in the middle of the Detroit River. Hot, irritable, and overcrowded whites and blacks in the park engaged in scuffles that eventually spread through the city and produced a wave of racial violence that raged virtually uncontrolled until federal troops arrived two days later. Thirty-four people, twenty of them African American, lay dead after three days of vicious street fighting.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Charles Livermore to Robert MacRae, Dec. 5, 1941, folder 9, box 110, United Community Services Central Files; “Conversation with Father Constantine Djuik,” Sept. 1943, Survey of Racial and Religious Conflict Forces in Detroit folder, box 71, Civil Rights Congress of Michigan Collection; “Detroit: A Survey and a Program of Action,” [ca. 1944], typescript, folder 13, box 101, United Community Services Central Files.

⁵⁷ *Catholic Worker*, March 1942.

⁵⁸ Capeci, *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit*, 93–99; Charles Hill, “To Loyal and Patriotic Polish-Americans Living Near Sojourner Truth Homes,” 1942, typescript, 1942, folder 11, box 110, United Community Services Central Files; “A Statement of a Point of View regarding the Sojourner Truth Homes Controversy,” *ibid.*

⁵⁹ “Factual Report of the Detroit Race Riot of June 20–21, 1943,” typescript, folder 2, box 1, Michigan Governor’s Committee to Investigate the Detroit Race Riots Records 1943 (Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago, Chicago, Ill.).

Responses to the race riot perfectly capture the politicized shape of Christian discourse heading into the postwar period. For Gerald Smith, the riot was a textbook example of the failure of interracialism, the fruits of moral dissolution, and the mendacity of communists. He believed that northern “screwballs and sentimentalists” had upset the “natural” order of racial separation and hastened the disintegration of traditional sexual mores. Once in the North, African Americans were “encouraged by politicians and Communists to make dates with white girls and to flirt with white girls on the street.” Communists employed white women to bait gullible black men, thus artificially fomenting black discontent. The only solution, Smith averred, was “Christian statesmanship,” which might preserve the hierarchies of race and gender, oppose communism, and in the process save “traditional” American democracy.⁶⁰

Louis Martin of the *Michigan Chronicle* also invoked Christian rhetoric to draw diametrically opposite political conclusions. The riot alluded to efforts by reactionaries to preserve an antidemocratic racial caste system. When the state investigative committee concluded that the riot had been provoked by the African American bid for equality, Martin angrily compared the report to anti-Semitic fascist propaganda. “By a similar procedure,” Martin observed, “passages could be taken out of the Holy Bible which would make the Scriptures equally inflammatory.” Indeed, Martin concluded, had committee members read the Bible, “their report would have repudiated the principle of brotherhood of man as an incitement for oppressed Negroes to riot.” Martin, like Claude Williams and other religious leftists, linked “true” religion to political democracy and racial equality; “false” religion, or simple godlessness, produced both racial oppression and fascism.⁶¹

As World War II ended, the discourse surrounding working-class religion cooled considerably. Fears of a “fascist” insurrection led by a religious demagogue shriveled away in the glow of Axis defeat. The most vituperative religious antimodernist was once again scuttled to the margins of cultural life, replaced by the more moderate and telegenic evangelism of Billy Graham. Leftist religious radicals suffered a more certain defeat. Charles Hill found himself before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1952; the ACTU struggled against the “apathy” of Catholic workers; and Claude Williams was even convicted of heresy (charged with being a communist). Moreover, by the early 1960s increasing numbers of Catholics, Pentecostals, and Southern Baptists were enjoying a measure of upward mobility while their churches embraced an aura of respectability. Moderation and consensus, it seemed, had prevailed in religious culture, and working-class religion had become, simply, American religion.⁶²

Even so, the legacy of Christian discourse from the 1930s and 1940s would not fade away so easily. The war years had deeply politicized religious language and ideas while eroding traditional denominational barriers. Various iterations of a religious Left reemerged beginning in the mid-1950s, pursuing political goals rooted in the values of the war-era Social Gospel: progress, justice, and equality. The activists and organizations

⁶⁰ Gerald L. K. Smith, “Race Riots: An Interpretation,” *Cross and the Flag*, 2 (July 1943).

⁶¹ “The Famous Report,” *Michigan Chronicle*, Aug. 21, 1943, p. 4.

⁶² On postwar religion, see Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America since 1945: A History* (New York, 2003); Dillard, *Faith in the City*, 186–91; Untitled manuscript, [ca. 1957], Father Hubble ACTU Report to Cardinal Mooney folder, box 4, Association of Catholic Trade Unionists of Detroit Records; and France, “Case of Claude Williams.”

that pursued these goals—from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to Concerned Clergy and Laity against the War to Interfaith Worker Justice—sought to create religiously pluralistic coalitions of the politically like-minded, and they usually linked their moral goals to some vision of direct government action. Conservatives, meanwhile, also hearkened to the values of their war-era antecedents: a preference for limited government, a respect for long-held traditions, a suspicion of social change, and an idealization of the nuclear family. By the 1970s new conservative coalitions—from the Stop ERA movement to the Christian Coalition to Evangelicals and Catholics Together—had politicized these values across the denominational spectrum.

More startlingly, the discursive categories of the 1930s survived remarkably intact. Conservative critics continued to denounce civil rights activists as communists well into the 1960s. More recently, suspicions of socialism leveled against liberals have carried meanings not dissimilar from the accusations from Coughlin or Smith: that an intrusive state and modernist elite are dismantling traditional Christianity and “true” democracy. Progressive critics have maintained their discursive categories as well. The religious Right, for example, has been denounced as a would-be theocracy, undermining American political values in the name of an obscurantist, end-time theological authoritarianism. Recent journalists have even revived the term *fascist* to describe the political theology of far-right Christian groups.⁶³

As historians continue to integrate religion into the narrative of the American twentieth century, World War II-era Detroit offers useful insights. First, it illustrates that class identity and class politics cannot be ignored in studies of religion. It also provides a model for placing the most significant and populous working-class religious groups inside a larger, more transformative story. Finally, as the contemporary world continues to assess the promises and pitfalls of politicized religion, wartime Detroit offers one important example of people simultaneously coming together and moving apart in the context of a rapidly changing world.⁶⁴

⁶³ Politicized religious language has reemerged in, for example, Jim DeMint, *Saving Freedom: We Can Stop America's Slide into Socialism* (Nashville, 2009); Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York, 2006); and Chris Hedges, *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America* (New York, 2006).

⁶⁴ On religion's ambiguous political impact, see Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York, 2010), 493–550.

