

INTRODUCTION

In 1963 the *Michigan Chronicle*, Detroit's major African American weekly paper, invited its readers to pause in the midst of the city's ongoing civil rights struggles to take stock of the past and reflect on the contributions of an earlier generation. In a multipart series, the paper considered the contributions of labor organizers and union members, especially those within the United Auto Workers, Congress of Industrial Organizations (UAW-CIO), and of the heads of race improvement organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League. Last, the *Chronicle* dedicated one installment of the series to three ministers: the Rev. Horace A. White, pastor of Plymouth Congregational (now UCC) Church; Fr. Malcolm C. Dade of St. Cyprian's Episcopal; and the Rev. Charles A. Hill of Hartford Avenue (now Memorial) Baptist. Accentuating the experiences of this ecumenical trio, all of whom were early supporters of industrial unionism, the article positioned them as part of a generation that laid the foundations for protests in later periods. "Present Negro leadership in Detroit," the article proclaimed, "is a direct descendant, an offspring of Negro leadership that was born of necessity during the foggy gloom of the depression years and that later matured into a formidable and militant vanguard of Negro progress. There are many grandparents who insist that Detroit is ahead of other northern cities in race relations because of 'the dedicated and sterling leadership' of Negroes a quarter century ago."¹

This volume helps construct a narrative about what activism in the 1960s owed to that of the 1930s. In myriad ways, activists in places such as Detroit (i.e., northern, urban, and industrial) managed to sustain a

record of progressive political activism over the course of three decades. Like other studies of what social movement theorist Aldon Morris calls “local movement centers”—interlocking networks of resources, strategically placed activists, effective tactics, and strategies of protest developed out of indigenous traditions on a local, as opposed to national, level—*Faith in the City* seeks to account for patterns of change and continuity from the 1930s to the 1960s.² Detroit’s range of strong indigenous traditions linking civil rights and labor makes it a particularly rich site in which to situate such a study. The early labor-based struggles in which Hill, White, and Dade played a role do not constitute merely a “prehistory” of the modern (and national) post–World War II movement. Rather, as the *Michigan Chronicle* article suggests, those struggles in defense of the rights of labor were an integral influence on the contours of political protest in later periods.³

Moreover, the labor movement provided Detroit’s Black activists, both inside and outside the unions, with organizational power and experience that was virtually unmatched by any other African American urban community. The 1963 *Chronicle* article acknowledges that Reverends Hill and White, along with Father Dade, first came to the attention of a broader public via their support of industrial unionism, especially during the 1941 Ford Motor Company strike: “The trio marched with other union leaders in front of the plant on Schaefer Road; they appeared at the plant gates to talk with workers, and they were threatened at public meetings for espousing ‘radical views.’” In assisting in the cause of labor, community and religious activists learned lessons about organizing both within the Black community and across racial and ethnic lines. So, too, did Black workers. As union activist Robert “Buddy” Battle expressed his sense of the connection between labor and the Black freedom struggle after World War II, “Having been union leaders for many years we thought we had the know-how to change the situation. And after twenty years of existence, we didn’t feel we had to wait any longer.”⁴

Some have argued that the postwar movement in the South was so unique that it is best viewed as a discrete phenomenon. In *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom*, for instance, Richard H. King insists that the “recent emphasis on the movement’s ideological and institutional continuity with the past tends, wrongly, I think, to minimize what was different, even unique about the civil rights movement of the 1954–68 period.”⁵ I do not believe that the movement should be so bounded, either temporally or, for that matter, geographically.

In arguing for a certain continuity from the 1930s to the 1960s I also hope to highlight the importance of the “middle period” (roughly 1954 to 1963), which historians and social scientists have traditionally analyzed almost exclusively with reference to the South. (It is not until the “long hot summers” beginning with the Watts rebellion of 1964 that the urban North regains the limelight.)

In a sense, then, this book could be read alongside the work of scholars such as Martha Biondi, Robert O. Self, Jeanne Theoharis, Komози Woodard, and Beth Bates, who have recently begun piecing together the history of movements outside the South and before 1955.⁶ In Detroit, it was during this still understudied period that Buddy Battle, Horace Sheffield, and other seasoned veterans of union struggles created groups such as the Trade Union Leadership Council (TULC) and joined with ministers such as the Rev. Nicholas Hood, the local NAACP, and others to create a liberal coalition that fought on the Detroit front of the northern struggle. Reverend Hood replaced Reverend White at Plymouth Congregational in 1958. Although he was born and raised in Terre Haute, Indiana, he came to Detroit from New Orleans, where he had been involved in the founding of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Consequently, he personifies the North-South connection.⁷

An appreciation for the intimate relationship between the rights of labor and the rights of African Americans and other minorities provided Detroit’s militant activist communities with a sense of continuity from decade to decade. Another thread was Detroit’s well-defined tradition of religious radicalism. Indeed, in profiling the political work of “a Baptist, a Congregationalist, and an Episcopalian,” the *Michigan Chronicle* article reminds us of the importance of religious activists and their churches in the struggles that gave meaning and form to the city’s protest movements. The *Chronicle* author, however, fails to explore the broader political and cultural significance of religion—a topic that has garnered much more sustained attention in studies of the American South, especially during the civil rights movement of the 1950s and early 1960s. Unfortunately, this discrepancy has led to the labeling of southern movements as religious and northern ones as secular. Yet, as numerous histories of Detroit have suggested, politically engaged ministers were in the forefront of every major movement for social change throughout the city’s distinctive history, from industrial unionism in the 1930s to civil rights and civil liberties in the 1940s and 1950s and the rise of Black power and Black Christian nationalism (BCN) in the 1960s.⁸

THE RELIGIOUS DIMENSION OF "SECULAR" MOVEMENTS

The Rev. C. L. Franklin, pastor of Detroit's New Bethel Baptist Church for nearly three decades and a leading voice in the city's post-World War II civil rights community, once opined that Detroit "has a reputation as a city of good preachers."⁹ By the time the Mississippi-born Franklin relocated to Detroit from Buffalo, New York, in 1945, the city's clergy had a formidable record of progressive political activism. Religious leaders and their congregants—from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds—joined the sit-ins and sit-downs, the strikes and marches and organizing campaigns. They led angry confrontations in the streets and pursued quieter moments of personal reflection and collective solace in the pews of their churches.

Religion and politics were fused in this unique northern industrial city on the banks of the Detroit River. Known as the Motor City, the home of Motown and the UAW, Detroit is also a city in which faith has sustained the population, where activists found a little soul to match the beat of industrial production. One of the major aims of this book is to highlight religion's place within Detroit's protest communities from the 1930s to the 1960s.

Men of the cloth such as Hill, Dade, White, and Franklin frequently placed the power of their moral authority in the service of progressive causes. At the same time, they remained ever mindful of their duty to minister to the spiritual needs of their flocks and the communities of protest in which they lived and worked and struggled and prayed. Maintaining this delicate balance among the personal, political, and pastoral was doubtless not an easy task, yet there were times when the world of politics and the world of faith merged to such a degree that they must have seemed merely different aspects of a single life. While this is surely true of politically engaged ministers and priests and rabbis overall, I want to suggest that it was (and is) particularly so among African American clergy and within the Black freedom struggle.

The seminal role of the Black church in sustaining communities and fostering protests on behalf of civil rights, social justice, and human dignity is by now well known. From the often clandestine and "invisible" institutions of the slavery era to the massive brick-and-mortar structures that dot the present-day urban landscape, the Black church has been heralded as the most important institution built and maintained by African Americans for African Americans.¹⁰ It has also been the locus of social and political activism for Black women. Ministers' wives, in particular, often played a role as "first ladies" of their respective congregations:

they joined forces with other churchwomen to organize ladies' aid and missionary societies and participated, externally, in the Black women's club movement, which dedicated itself to racial uplift. As a crucial part of the Black public sphere, the church also provided women with an avenue of engagement in the broader social, political, economic, and cultural debates that shaped African American political culture from the late nineteenth century onward.¹¹

The much-vaunted independence of the Black church, however, has never been automatically assured and has often been secured at a painfully high price. In point of fact, the Black church might best be seen as a contested space in which ministers, congregants, activists, and other interested parties have battled for control and influence. For instance, in the late 1930s, as the fledgling UAW-CIO waged its protracted battle to unionize the massive automotive industry, the Rev. Horace White—surely one of the “good preachers” Franklin had in mind—asked, rhetorically, “Who Owns the Negro Church?”

Writing in the *Christian Century*, White charged that in Detroit

people interested to see to it that the Negro stays anti-labor start with the preachers. . . . The one organization through which the Negro ought to feel free to express his hopes and to work out his economic salvation cannot help him because the Negro does not own it—it belongs to the same people who own factories. . . . The leadership of the Negro people is still in the hands of the clergymen and will be for years to come, and these clergymen are at the moment leading for the industrialists rather than for the welfare of the Negro people.¹²

White was speaking about African American ministers who had aligned themselves with the automotive industry, especially the Ford Motor Company—clergymen who relied heavily on Ford's patronage to secure their own personal power and jobs and other benefits for their congregants. Ford's persistent influence was one of the major reasons why Hill, among others, saw the automaker's plants as “the battleground for the civil rights movement whether you worked for it or not.”¹³

By 1938, when White penned his attack, it was already clear that powerful ministers and their churches were going to be a major roadblock to union efforts. This was also true to some extent within white ethnoreligious enclaves. Although the local Catholic hierarchy was generally sympathetic to industrial unionism, Polish workers and organizers were frequently confronted with the accommodationist attitudes of local parish priests. Some, such as Fr. Charles Coughlin, actively worked against CIO-

affiliated unions, believing them to be “communist dominated.” And the majority of white Protestant clergymen were equally troublesome. As a young minister straight out of Yale’s divinity school and committed to “social justice versions of modern Protestantism,” theologian Reinhold Niebuhr remembered being “particularly disconcerted” by the “subsistence of the Detroit churches to the myths of justice in the Detroit community,” especially those myths that served the interests of the automotive industry. He also recalled numerous attempts to silence those ministers “who defied the ruling group.”¹⁴

But these conflicting tensions were probably strongest in the city’s African American community. Thousands of Black workers eventually found employment at the Ford Motor Company, the leading industrial employer of Blacks before World War II. When one factors in spouses and families, the welfare of thirty to forty thousand individuals—roughly one-fourth of the city’s Black population—depended on Ford wages. As one contemporary observer noted, “There is hardly a Negro church, fraternal body or other organization in which Ford workers are not represented. Scarcely a Negro professional or businessman is completely independent of income derived from Negro employees.”¹⁵ Black workers, many of whom were drawn from the South by Ford’s promise of five dollars a day, were understandably grateful for the opportunities offered by the company, as were the ministers, with whom the company formed a “cooperative relationship.” This relationship, or alliance, between the company and select Black ministers was inaugurated shortly after World War I and lasted until Ford was successfully unionized in 1941. Throughout this period, Black ministers and churches functioned as agents of the Ford employment office.

To secure employment at a Ford plant, an aspiring Black worker generally had to obtain a letter of recommendation from his minister. For the handful of Black ministers who refused to participate in this arrangement, such requests could be agonizing. “I guess the good Lord, the Holy Spirit was guiding me,” recalled Fr. Malcolm C. Dade, “but I never got caught in that trap, though it was pitiful to see how many men would come to you and beg you just to give them a letter.”¹⁶

The situation in Detroit was not unlike that described in Liston Pope’s seminal 1942 study of southern textile company towns, *Millhands and Preachers*. Pope found that in “normal times” Christianity legitimized “capitalist” virtues, such as hard work, sobriety, and responsibility to one’s employers, and in times of crisis (such as the infamous Gastonia strike that Pope chronicles) ministers were called upon to directly sanction and preserve the traditional order.¹⁷ While there were certainly dif-

ferences between a mill town, where industrialists supplied the church's physical structure and paid the minister's salary, on the one hand and Henry Ford's Detroit on the other, the analogy holds. "Company ministers" and parish priests, indebted either directly or indirectly to the industry, were often unable or unwilling to discuss the merits of unionization. Those who bucked this status quo risked various forms of social and economic reprisal.

For ministers such as Father Dade, Reverend White, and Reverend Hill, resistance to the company's allure allowed them to ensure their own personal and political independence. According to Reverend Hill, who went on to become one of the most radical clergymen in the city, he was forced to refuse the overtures of the company time and time again. It was a gamble. Throughout the late 1930s, the Ford Motor Company (the last of the large automotive concerns to unionize) carried on a campaign of political intimidation and economic terrorism intended to prevent Black ministers and their congregations from taking any kind of active interest in the UAW's efforts. Hill, however, allowed union organizers to use his church for clandestine union meetings disguised as prayer services. "If they met in a union hall," Hill explained, "then some of the spies from Ford would take their automobile license numbers and they lost their jobs. By holding it in a church, it would be difficult for them to prove we were just discussing union matters."¹⁸

All social movements need what historian Sara Evans and sociologist Harry Boyte characterize as "free spaces": communally grounded and autonomous associations that permit people to work out alternative visions of society and to organize collectively.¹⁹ The central role of Hill's church in organizing one of the largest UAW locals (Local 600) testifies to the Black church's institutional significance in protest struggles. At the same time, Hill also understood the *discursive* power of religion. He consistently attempted to bridge the secular and the sacred, to make faith serve the needs of progressive activism. Hill "was really one of the few preachers I could ever sit and listen to," recalled Eleanor Maki, a local schoolteacher and member of the Detroit Civil Rights Federation (CRF) in the early 1930s. She continued, "He was, I think, sincerely, devotedly, really religious. And he made sense, and he was never afraid to go anywhere or do anything."²⁰

Although much of the city's civil rights activity took place within seemingly secular contexts, religion, often translated into a diffuse yet powerful moral imperative, provided a readily identifiable subtext—even for those who questioned the efficacy of organized religion. "I turned away from my church and what I felt was a mockery of religion,"

writes Margaret Collingwood Nowak in her combined autobiography and biography of her husband, Stanley Nowak. The Nowaks worked for years in Detroit's radical Left community "and became involved in the activities of unemployed groups and the Proletarian Party." "Here," said Margaret, "I felt was religion in action; here I belonged. . . . Working for a better world here and now was far more satisfying than the idea of a distant and problematical Heaven."²¹ But Nowak never turned her back on the idea that organized religion could be a useful political tool. Both she and her husband befriended and supported Reverend Hill and were often in attendance at Hartford.

Stanley Nowak, who was part of the UAW's Polish Organizing Committee, met Hill during the 1941 Ford strike, and the two went on to work together during the 1942 Sojourner Truth Housing Project incident, in which Blacks and Poles—the two largest cultural minority groups in the city—clashed violently over who would live in the newly constructed federal project. This World War II housing controversy, along with the race riot the following year, would, as historian Thomas Sgrue argues, set precedents for Detroit's public housing policy for another decade. Through all their efforts to prevent the conflicts that Sgrue documents in such ample and depressing detail, Hill and Nowak developed what Margaret Nowak describes as "a wonderful friendship that would take them through two joint campaigns for election to Detroit's Common Council."²²

The Nowaks, along with Hill, also befriended and supported religious radical Claude C. Williams, a southern white minister who preached a leftist version of the social gospel inspired as much by Marx and Lenin as Christ. Williams's political theology resembled that of religious thinkers and activists Harry Ward and Harry Emerson Fosdick, both of whom believed, as Ward once wrote, that there existed in capitalism "an irreconcilable antagonism to the ethic of Jesus."²³ Williams arrived in Detroit in 1942 to take up a position as "minister of labor" for the Detroit Presbytery. He was attracted by the chance to work with newly transplanted southern workers who had been lured to Detroit by employment opportunities in the "Arsenal of Democracy."

Williams was also energized by the challenge of confronting and working against the reactionary men of God whom he believed held sway over large segments of the white working class, men such as Fr. Charles Coughlin, the famous "Radio priest" of the 1930s, who became enamored of fascism and had to be silenced by the Catholic Church and the U.S. government in the early 1940s, and the Rev. Gerald L. K. Smith, a former devotee of Huey Long's "Share the Wealth" ideology who

became a rabid anti-Semite and a trenchant opponent of any form of racial mixing.²⁴ For activists within the city's civil rights community, the presence of "hate-mongering religious demagogues" was an important civil rights issue in and of itself. And, while many noted the possible connections between fundamentalism and racial violence, none came close to the feverish pitch of Claude Williams's "exposé," which characterized Detroit as a "modern Babel" of religious reactionaries driving the city toward a race war.²⁵ When a major riot broke out in 1943, leaving 34 dead, 675 seriously injured, and 1,893 jailed, few were completely surprised given the escalating racial violence on the city's streets and in the plants.²⁶

In the tense atmosphere of wartime Detroit, Williams was welcomed and appreciated by Detroit's Left community. Admitting that for years "there has been a growing feeling among labor that the church is not interested in the day-to-day problems of the people," Stanley Nowak asserted that "Claude Williams has done more than any other person we know of to counteract this feeling and tendency among labor people."²⁷ Reverend Hill, for his part, regarded Williams as a man who "in a very practical way" was "making Christianity real," and he literally thanked God for Williams's work in Detroit.²⁸ Hill's assistant pastor, the Rev. John Miles, became a devotee of Williams and worked closely with his People's Institute of Applied Religion (PIAR). While members of the city's Left were extremely worried about the presence of southern fundamentalists in Detroit (and there were thousands of small storefront churches and congregations catering to the waves of the white southern workers who were flooding the city during the war), Williams actively reached out to them.²⁹

Some of Williams's beliefs were extreme. For instance, in his theological universe Jesus, the "Son of Man," had emerged as a "class-conscious leader" of a people's revolutionary movement aimed at destroying "fascist" Rome. His brand of Christianity was stripped of its supernaturalism, which he saw as "an unscriptural invention of theology" or, more specifically, a corruption of Jesus' revolutionary zeal by the "Christ-centered" theology of Paul. God was not so much a Supreme Being as a "Symbol of Struggle for Freedom, Security, Brotherhood." Sin became any manifestation of "ultra-individualism," while salvation was transformed into "a collective effort of the workers and other victims of this world system to save themselves from the oppressors."³⁰

This was controversial material, but the idea of a *social gospel* of faith in action, of a liberating theology, inspired religious and secular activists alike. Many of the most politically engaged ministers in Detroit took up

the challenge of navigating the sacred/secular divide. One, the Rev. Albert B. Cleage Jr., a founder of Black theology and the Black Christian nationalism movement, was especially eloquent in this regard. In the early 1970s, Cleage changed his name to Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman, which means “liberator, holy man, savior of the nation” in Swahili. His BCN movement was subsequently reformulated as the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church (PAOCC). Since the events narrated in this book deal primarily with the period before Cleage’s name change, I have decided, for the sake of clarity and consistency, to use his familial name, along with the original name of the church of which he was founder and eventually holy patriarch. No disrespect is intended to the current members of the individual Shrines of the Black Madonna in Detroit, Houston, and Atlanta or the PAOCC overall.

Much like Claude Williams, Albert Cleage believed that Christianity had become too cluttered and muddled by supernatural ideas and that the “Negro” church—like other forms of ossified organized religion—was failing to address the needs of the poor and marginal. Distressed, too, at the number of young radicals who were leaving the Black church in the 1960s, Cleage struggled to make the church not only relevant but central to the goal of self-determination and freedom. He knew that many young activists agreed with Charleen Johnson, a community organizer and welfare activist, who left the church when she was eighteen because she believed that it contributed to a sense of “powerlessness” in its members’ lives and because she was seeking “to overthrow the system.”³¹ Cleage also knew that the sentiment expressed by Luke Tripp, another young radical in Detroit who would go on to become a key figure in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW), was widespread. “Man, I don’t operate out of a religious bag,” Tripp told a local reporter. “I was baptized a Catholic but now you can say I am a free thinker.”³²

Early on, some older activists and community leaders had hoped that Cleage would provide guidance to the younger radicals and “give them a little discipline.”³³ Instead, what Cleage offered to younger activists such as Tripp, General Baker, Ken Cockrel, John Watson, and others affiliated with UHURU, an early Black nationalist group, was encouragement. In a sense UHURU—the name means “freedom” in Swahili—was among the earliest organizational expressions of the diverse intellectual and political trends that converged within Detroit’s radical circles as a rejection of nonviolence and the embrace of Black nationalism and third world revolution. Many of the young people involved in UHURU, and later with the independent paper *Inner City Voice*, had been regular

attendees of the Socialist Workers Party's (SWP) weekly Militant Labor Forums. Some had been involved in the southern struggle, traveling south to work with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

The writings and example of Cuban and African revolutionaries were profoundly influential within this circle, as were, closer to home, the works of Robert F. Williams, whose 1962 volume *Negroes with Guns* was "popular early reading," along with texts by Malcolm X and Albert Cleage. Dan Georgakas, who with Marvin Surkin would go on to chronicle the experiences of their generation in *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying* (1974), remembers attending a talk by Cleage on the Cuban missile crisis and "going home thinking we might be dead by morning."³⁴ Despite a substantial difference in age (Cleage was born in 1911), Cleage shared many of the younger generation's views and positions. At one point, he even put forth the idea of ordaining young civil rights workers in the North and South as a way of protecting them against "the conspiracy to either kill them in Vietnam or take them out of active work by putting them in a penitentiary."³⁵ And while the *Black Manifesto*, a document written in Detroit and dramatically presented in May 1969 by James Foreman at Riverside Church in New York, expressed an ambiguous relationship with religion—it demanded \$500 million from white churches and synagogues—Cleage, the members of the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO), and other budding Black theologians supported the manifesto's goals.³⁶

Given the religious dimensions of the political struggles that animated Detroiters in the latter half of the 1960s, we must question the conventional view that the Black power movement was "de-Christianized" and totally secular. Indeed, Reverend Cleage was so central in the creation of what might be called the latter or second civil rights movement in Detroit—as opposed to the "early" movement of the 1930s and 1940s—that I chose to highlight his experiences and political theology in the second half of this book.

Despite the richness of these sorts of connections between political radicalism and progressive religion in both the 1930s and the 1960s, historians and theorists of social movements in Detroit and elsewhere have too frequently addressed religion as a tangential, rather than central, factor in political struggle. My argument is not that religion does or should take precedence over other modes of individual or collective identification but that religion has been a crucial factor in the cultures of opposition that make collective action possible. Gospel hymns and other forms of sacred music, as well as biblical stories—David's defeat of

Goliath, the story of Exodus, and the life of Christ—can be given a political spin and incorporated into an oppositional consciousness. Further, even in its most “otherworldly” manifestations, emphasizing the eschatological transcendence of the material world, religion provides the raw materials for an ethical and prophetic critique. Religion, that is to say, can provide a picture of an ideal world that is continuously—and critically—juxtaposed against an actual social order. “At its worst,” argues Black theologian Cornel West, religion “serves as an ideological means of preserving and perpetuating” the status quo, but “at its best” religion has the potential to yield “moralistic condemnations of and utopian visions beyond present social and historical realities.”³⁷

Thus, if America has historically denied freedom to African Americans and members of other oppressed and marginalized social groups, then religion—from Judaism to the Nation of Islam (NOI, founded in Detroit in the early 1930s) to variants of Christianity ranging from evangelical Protestantism to Catholicism and beyond—has often appealed to a higher standard, a greater authority and source of justice. The content of religious belief and practice need not be “liberal” or “progressive” in order for it to serve this function. The type of Christianity that sustained most Black southern communities in their civil rights activism, for instance, was illiberal, highly emotional, and structured by an “irrational” belief in miracles, faith healing, and other direct manifestations of the Divine.

Historian Christopher Lasch presaged this notion in an almost lyrical way when he wrote:

Religious contributions to social movements might be characterized as inspirational and inflammatory, disciplinary and morally self-corrective, politically sobering and cautionary, emotionally healing and hopegiving. Only the notion of some higher set of standards prevailed and that these, at least, were not flouted with impunity could give hope to the hopeless or enable them to see themselves as moral agents not merely as victims.³⁸

This passage also describes the political faith that guided the words and deeds of some of Detroit’s most prominent and politically engaged ministers—a core of belief that sustained the movement culture over more than three decades of militant civil rights activism.

That activism can be divided into two distinctive periods: the first from the early 1930s to the early 1950s; and the second from roughly

the late 1950s to the late 1960s. I have framed my investigation within a study of two ministers who are especially representative of religiously inflected activism in their respective periods: the Rev. Charles A. Hill and the Rev. Albert B. Cleage Jr. My two narratives—the history of various civil rights mobilizations from the 1930s to the 1960s and the political biographies of Hill and Cleage—offer a running dialogue between history and biography, with each influencing and hopefully enriching the other.

The great promise of the biographical approach, even in the attenuated version that I employ here, lies in its ability to at least partially personify a moment or in this case a succession of moments. By drawing our attention to the complex processes of identity formation, biography gives us a perspective on an equally complex set of historical trends and social forces—forces that structure our society and its politics. Because all of our lives play out in social and cultural contexts, a biographical narrative should transcend its individual subject and steadily draw us into the webs of friendships, rivalries, aspirations, fears, and circumstances that give his or her life meaning. As pastors of large and politically significant Black congregations who pursued distinct social, political, and religious strategies, Hill and Cleage shaped and were shaped by two distinct yet overlapping communities of protest and struggle. The Left, with which this book is chiefly concerned, looked very different in the 1930s and 1940s than it did in the 1960s. The personal and political and religious lives of Reverends Hill and Cleage do evidence moments of symmetry, but between them lies the redefinition of the social gospel, the transformation of the militant Left, and perhaps the very meaning of civil rights and social justice itself.

THE DIALOGUE BETWEEN HISTORY AND BIOGRAPHY

The first half of *Faith in the City* is organized around the Rev. Charles A. Hill. Born in Detroit in 1893, Hill's activism and implicit political theology—he was not a theologian in the traditional sense—was rooted in the prophetic tradition of African American Christianity and the idealism of early-twentieth-century versions of the social gospel. As it was developed by thinkers such as Walter Rauschenbusch, the social gospel linked ideas about social transformation with an understanding of God's immanence, of his Kingdom as something that was at least partially realizable in this world. As Rauschenbusch himself explained in his *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917):

This doctrine [of the Kingdom] is itself the social gospel. Without it, the idea of redeeming the social order will be but an annex to the orthodox conception of the schema of salvation. It will live like the negro servant family in a detached cabin back of the white man's house in the South. If this doctrine gets the proper place which has always been its legitimate right, the practical proclamation and application of social morality will have a firm footing.³⁹

In Rauschenbusch's recasting of orthodox Christianity, *sin* is defined as a social or collective expression of selfishness transmitted from generation to generation not through blood forever tainted by Adam's—and therefore mankind's—Fall, but through exploitative social and economic structures. In turn, salvation is reconceived as collective and corporate: "This involves redemption of the social life from the cramping influence of religious bigotry, from the repression of self-assertion in the relation of upper and lower classes, and from all forms of slavery in which human beings are treated as mere means to serve the ends of others."⁴⁰ Rauschenbusch arrived at these theological conclusions after spending years toiling in a parish in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of New York, working primarily with the area's immigrant and impoverished residents.

As a movement within American social Christianity and Protestant or "evangelical" liberalism, the social gospel is generally said to have begun during the Gilded Age and to have reached its peak in the 1920s, after which it suffered a decline (its insistence on combining theology with practice may explain why the movement never became particularly large or widespread). But the social gospel was also, arguably, a precursor to liberation theology and similar in some respects to a broader compass of ideas, popular in the 1930s, that linked Christianity with Marxism. The stress on justice for workers, immigrants, and (though seldom articulated in older versions of the social gospel) African Americans is echoed, for instance, in the writings and political activism of Harry Emerson Fosdick, Harry Ward, and Claude C. Williams, as well as those of Catholic social thinkers such as Msgr. John A. Ryan, who used his position at Catholic University to advocate the "just wage" theory.⁴¹ While the more radical and anticapitalist applications of these ideas can be seen as a response to urban-industrial problems in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the social gospel might also be conceptualized as part of a larger tradition of American social Christianity rooted in antebellum voluntary societies, home missions, and reform movements, including abolitionism.

At the same time, the social gospel has been justly criticized for its aversion to the nascent feminist movement, its adoption of paternalistic attitudes toward Blacks and immigrants, its vagueness on practical programmatic matters, and its perhaps excessive optimism about political change. Seen from this perspective, the social gospel's origins lay less in a radical critique of capitalism and more in a "growing conservative awareness that industrial capitalism has been the radical force in American society, generating social change of unforeseen consequences, heedlessly disruptive of human community."⁴² Although American social Christianity developed an increasingly radical dimension in the 1930s and 1940s, it did not completely shed its prior affinity with an organic conservatism. This blend of, or perhaps creative tension between, the radical and the conservative is reflected in the complexity of Charles Hill's own political theology.

The commonalities between the social gospel and the prophetic strain in Black religious thought often went unnoticed, but the imperative to reform society—to bring it in line with Christian ethics—has always been central to African American Christian thought. The example of Martin Luther King Jr. is obvious in this context; but, as with many of the topics covered in this book, an argument can also be made here about the ways in which the 1930s laid the foundations for the 1960s. Indeed, a number of even earlier figures, such as Reverdy C. Ransom and Nannie Burroughs, who were active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, harbored a special affinity for the social gospel tradition and particularly its emphasis on making religious institutions more responsive and relevant to contemporary social conditions.⁴³

Hill's rendering of the social gospel was never as radical as that of his good friend Claude Williams, who believed that it was necessary to overthrow capitalism in order to lead men and women from the sins of exploitation to the salvation of justice and human liberation. Yet Hill believed deeply in the tenets of evangelical liberalism. He also believed that the future of African Americans was tied to labor and that the early years of the industrial unionization movement held out the possibility of reconstructing the social order and fulfilling the promise of economic, and by extension racial, democracy.

The pastor of Detroit's Hartford Avenue Baptist Church for over forty years, Hill was dedicated to integrationist civil rights struggles predicated on the viability of interracial, interethnic coalition building in which the left wing of the labor movement, as well as the Communist Party (CP) and its various "front groups," were central. Hill was not a member of the CP, but at a time when individual communists and local

fellow travelers made up a sizable portion of the city's Left, he evidenced few qualms about positioning himself within that political and cultural milieu. This openness was not peculiar to Hill or Black activists in Detroit. As Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake note in their study of Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s, Blacks

take their friends and allies where they can find them. Most of them were attracted to the Communists primarily because the "Reds" fought for Negroes as Negroes. . . . Every time a black Communist appeared on the platform, or his picture appeared in the newspaper, Negroes were proud; and no stories of "atheistic Reds," or "alien Communists" could nullify the fact that here were people who accepted Negroes as complete equals and asked other white men to do so.⁴⁴

Or, as Detroit's Coleman A. Young put it, "Hell, I would have teamed up with Satan if he could have assured me that I'd have all the working privileges of a white man."⁴⁵

More important, the feeling appears to have been mutual. Few radical organizations in Detroit failed to incorporate some sort of religious presence or dimension. The Civil Rights Federation, for example, which united many of the strains of leftist political activism in Detroit during the late 1930s, including those within the orbit of the Communist Party, always had a religious flavor. The purpose of the organization (which began its existence in 1935 as the Conference for the Protection of Civil Rights, and merged with the national Civil Rights Congress in the late 1940s) was to create "a real united front" and provide a Left alternative to such liberal organizations as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the Jewish Community Council, and the NAACP. Until the 1940s, when local Jewish radical Jack Raskin assumed the helm, the group was headed by clergymen, including the Rev. John H. Bollens, a white pastor of the Messiah Evangelical Church and a former director of the local ACLU, and the Rev. Owen Knox, a white Methodist minister and proponent of Methodist social action, a movement inspired by Harry Ward. In the late 1930s, Hill served as head of the federation's Negro Department. He was also among the leaders of the Detroit branch of the National Negro Congress (NNC), which was equally committed to religious and ministerial representation. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) files on the NNC list the Reverends Hill, White, and John Miles (Hill's assistant pastor at Hartford, whose ties to the CP appear to have been much stronger than Hill's), as well as unionists Christopher

Alston, Hodges Mason, John Conyers Sr., Snow Grigsby, and Sen. Charles Diggs Sr., as among those sponsoring the Michigan chapter.⁴⁶

Perhaps because they had to contend with a host of reactionary fundamentalist preachers who took up residence in the city and advocated against racial justice and progressive unionism, local activists from both the religious and secular traditions seemed very much aware of religion's potential. This was true even for those on the Far Left. The assumption that communists, Marxists, and associated radicals are by definition "godless" is simplistic at best: Marx's famous characterization of religion as an opiate, in its entirety, reads: "Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress *and the protest against real distress*. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of an unspiritual situation. It is the opiate of the people."⁴⁷ Radical organizations such as the Communist Party or the Socialist Workers Party may not have been in touch with the sigh, the heart and the spirit of religion, but they found numerous opportunities to use the trappings of religion, especially Christianity, to make a political point.

One of my favorite examples of this functional use of religion as political critique is a cartoon by Art Young, which was reprinted in a 1954 issue of the CP's *Daily Worker*. The drawing depicts a wanted poster for Jesus Christ, who is charged with "Sedition, Criminal Anarchy, Vagrancy, and Conspiring to Overthrow the Established Government." The caption underneath the dispirited and disheveled-looking Christ reads: "Dresses poorly, *said* to be a carpenter by trade, ill-nourished, has visionary ideas, associates with common working people, the unemployed, and bums. Alien—Believed to be a Jew . . . *Professional agitator* . . . Marks on hands and feet the result of injuries inflicted by an angry mob led by respectable citizens and legal authorities."⁴⁸ Nor was it unusual, in Detroit as elsewhere, to find union organizers drawing connections between unionization and Christianity—Christ as worker—or to see union publications differentiating between "true" and "false" religion. As one CIO publication ventured, true religion "puts its faith in the people, believing in power with, not over them."⁴⁹

For someone like Hill, a belief in the "Brotherhood of Man" and the "Fatherhood of God"—that God is ultimately no respecter of persons—coalesced nicely with the union's and the Left's support of social and racial equality. The plight of African Americans was central to Hill's political activism, but he was involved in a cause and a community that united people from various faiths and doctrines—especially Jews, Poles, the foreign born, and political minorities—in a common struggle for

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Art Young

"Wanted Poster of Christ" by cartoonist Art Young. (From the *Daily Worker*,
September 19, 1954.)

social justice. In many ways, that common struggle can be best conceptualized as an “early” civil rights movement conducted by an “early” civil rights community that began to take shape in the 1930s around organizations such as the Civil Rights Federation, the National Negro Congress, and the militant wing of the labor movement; that was active in the 1940s in Detroit’s version of the Double Victory campaign (victory against fascism abroad and victory against discrimination at home); and whose existence was severely challenged in the harsh anticommunist climate of mid- to late 1950s. This argument was made most convincingly by historians Nelson Lichtenstein and Robert Korstad in a 1988 article in the *Journal of American History* entitled “Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement,” and it guides the development of the first half of this book.

Building on British historian E. P. Thompson’s observation about the “window of opportunity” that seems to define the life cycle of a movement, Lichtenstein and Korstad argue that the narrowing of public discourse in the cold war era contributed to the “defeat and diffusion” of the early civil rights community, that the rise of anticommunism shattered the Popular Front coalition on civil rights, and that the “retreat and containment of the union movement deprived black activists of the political and social space necessary to carry on an independent struggle.”⁵⁰ It was under these circumstances, they claim, that the civil rights struggles of the late 1950s and early 1960s took on their unique social character and political strategy. While some of this is certainly true, Lichtenstein and Korstad overlook the myriad ways in which the movements of the 1930s and the 1960s exist on a single continuum. A closer study of intergenerational transmission, of reflection and continuity, offers a much more accurate model for understanding the movement cultures created in places such as Detroit and the role that key figures such as Reverend Hill, whose activism spans the 1930s–1960s divide, played in making these cultures into rich and vibrant and spiritual and active spaces.

The second half of this study therefore focuses on this question of change and continuity within and among activist communities in Detroit. The main focus is on the Rev. Albert B. Cleage Jr. and what might be called the *reconstitution* of the city’s Left from the late 1950s onward. Cleage embarked on his ministerial and political career in Detroit in the mid-1950s as Hill’s viability as a spokesperson and community organizer was beginning to wane under the pressures of a repressive political climate. Some of the issues that animated Hill and his allies—the lack of adequate political representation for Blacks, housing

and job shortages, police brutality—were also cornerstones of Cleage’s activism. Cleage, however, adopted a new approach to the amelioration of these social ills. Preaching a type of gospel very different from the Reverend Hill’s—one based on the “realism” of neo-orthodox theology as opposed to the traditional “idealism” of the social gospel—Cleage eventually repudiated the older Left-labor coalitions and their integrationist tendencies. Instead he turned to Black theology and Black Christian nationalism.

In this sense, Cleage was part of a growing national trend in Black religious and political thought, a trend that developed and codified Black theology and linked it with other liberation theologies in Latin America, Africa, and North America. On Easter Sunday, 1967, he unveiled an eighteen-foot painting of the Black Madonna at his Central Congregational Church and began to lay the foundations for his Black Christian nationalism movement. Deploying a political theology based on a Black Christ as a Black revolutionary, Cleage worked to transform the Black church into the foundation of a new, or rather redeemed, Black nation. Calling for community control of institutions in the inner city as well as self-determination in economics, culture, and religion, Cleage offered what he viewed as the only viable alternative to the social and political vision of the mainstream civil rights movement. “You can’t fight an enemy that you believe is your friend,” he wrote, “dedicated to your welfare and your best interest.” For Cleage, as for many other radicals in the mid- to late 1960s, American society—white society—was far too sick to merit the extreme effort of integration: “Every time the cattle prod was used, every time the fire hose was used, every time a black person was beaten, we saw the bestiality to which the white man has degenerated in a racist society.”⁵¹

For Cleage, who was very taken with Reinhold Niebuhr’s theology as a young divinity student, the construction of “Heaven on Earth,” to use a well-worn phrase associated with the social gospel, was an impossible dream. Racism, as a manifestation of unequal divisions of power and resources, was a deeply entrenched social phenomenon, one that could not be overcome by moral suasion and enlightenment. Led to these conclusions by disillusionment with the ideology and tactics of the southern-based civil rights movement, as well as the liberal and labor-based traditions of its northern counterparts, Cleage represented an important transition for Black political and religious radicalism in Detroit. The “rights of labor,” especially equal employment opportunities and increased Black representation within unions, were still a goal of Cleage’s activism, but the context within which the struggle was waged

had shifted dramatically. As one contemporary commentator noted, the UAW had become a “right-of-center union with a left-of-center reputation” and could no longer be reasonably counted on as a source of support. Yet, the overwhelmingly working class character of the movements remained a constant. It was this character, Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin argue, that “clearly differentiated the Detroit experience from other major social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s.”⁵²

With Cleage and his constituency, which included an array of Black nationalists and separatists, as well as Black and white Marxists, the city’s civil rights movement may be said to have entered a new phase—one marked by a new, or at least reconstituted, community of protest, which was located around organizations such as the Group on Advanced Leadership (GOAL, headed by Cleage along with Milton and Richard Henry, who later changed their names to Brother Gaidi Obadele and Brother Imari Obadele), UHURU, the Freedom Now Party (FNP), the Socialist Workers Party, the Inner-City Organizing Committee, the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization, and of course Cleage’s church. Interestingly, Reverend Cleage viewed the years 1963–64, not 1967, the year of the massive uprising in Detroit, as a decisive turning point in the history of the movement. “In the North, the ‘Black Revolt of 1963’ departed radically from the pattern established in the South,” Cleage wrote in his independent paper, *Illustrated News*.

In northern centers a new kind of “Black Nationalism” began to emerge. The Negro, disillusioned with “integration,” began to look for another way—an independent course he could chart and travel alone. Black men began to talk of Black History, Black Art, Black Economics, Black Political Action and Black Leadership. Black Nationalists didn’t merely talk black, they began to act black.⁵³

For all of his insistence to the contrary, Cleage’s “break” with the past was neither sudden nor clean, however. Nineteen sixty-three was hardly the first time that Black men and women in Detroit and elsewhere began to talk and act like Black nationalists. The city was, after all, the birthplace of the Nation of Islam and the home of Temple #1, and Detroit also had a thriving Garveyite movement in the 1920s. Further, a number of the older activists, many of whom were involved in the union movement and the CP, made the transition from the Popular Front ideology of “Black and White Unite and Fight” to the social and political reality of militant Black nationalism, thereby bridging the city’s two eras of civil rights struggles. Moreover, the Black power stance that Cleage eventually

adopted had a long gestation period, and he was influenced by an array of notable forerunners. One of them was the Rev. Charles A. Hill. Although Hill resisted the turn toward Black nationalism, he sought to enlist the institutional power of the church and the discursive power of religion with a vigor that rivaled Cleage's.

Hill's example was not lost on Cleage. The course of events would increasingly place the two men at political odds, with Hill openly denouncing Black power politics and Black separatism as shortsighted extremism and Cleage retaliating with charges of "Uncle Tomism." But Hill had served as a role model for a number of younger activists, including Cleage. Scorning what he saw as an emphasis on "spirituality" in Hill's social activism, Cleage nonetheless admired the elder man's "radicalism."⁵⁴

As a young man, Cleage attended services and political meetings at Hill's church, even though the prosperous Cleage family belonged to Plymouth Congregational, which was pastored by Horace A. White, another of Cleage's role models. Further, Cleage visited Hartford well into the late 1950s, when Hill defied anticommunist slurs by offering a platform to such unpopular individuals (at the time) as Paul Robeson, W. E. B. DuBois, and Ben Davis and by providing a meeting space for equally unpopular organizations such as the National Negro Labor Council (NNLC) and the American Committee for Protection of Foreign Born. Cleage, for his part, continued this open-door policy at his own church. In fact, such political, ideological, and communal openness was a point of pride and principle for both ministers. "This morning's paper has an article listing all of the Black Nationalist groups in the city," Cleage enthusiastically reported at the beginning of a Sunday sermon, "saying that for all or most of them the Shrine of the Black Madonna is their spiritual home."⁵⁵ As this statement suggests, the civil rights movement in which Cleage participated was as porous as the one to which Hill gave much of his life. For all their other differences, the two men shared a pragmatic and moral quest for unity amid diversity. Although actively engaged in seemingly secular movements, they were wholly dedicated to the creation of an open "spiritual home" for political radicals.

The movements and protest communities of both eras also had to negotiate an appropriate space for the labor movement, on the one hand, and a militant, predominantly white Left on the other. For the community of activists in the 1930s, this negotiation took place during the early years of what was then an unpopular UAW-CIO and an active period for the Communist Party and its front groups. In the late 1950s

and 1960s, the negotiation was between a UAW dominated by Walter Reuther and liberal anticommunism and the Socialist Workers Party, which was particularly active in Detroit after the CP was weakened by McCarthyism. Throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, the SWP became increasingly supportive of the politics and ideology of revolutionary Black nationalism, and its members were among the earliest white supporters of Malcolm X. In fact, generations of students have been introduced to the words and philosophy of Malcolm X via the collection *Malcolm X Speaks*, which was edited by the SWP's George Breitman and published by Pathfinder, the party's press. The SWP also sponsored a Friday Labor Forum that attracted dozens of young radicals, many of whom would go on to work with Reverend Cleage and found some of the most important organizations of the late 1960s, including the League of Black Revolutionary Workers and the Revolutionary Union Movement (RUM), the West Central Organization (WCO), and the Black Economic Development Conference.

Local radicals such as James and Grace Lee Boggs had ties to the SWP, as did national figures such as Conrad Lynn and William Worthy. Cleage and others worked with all of them in groups such as the Freedom Now Party, and many from within the SWP's orbit worked on Cleage's campaign when he ran for governor of Michigan in 1964. By noting these sorts of connections, I hope at least to begin to explore the often contentious yet relatively cooperative relationship between the SWP and the rise of Black (Christian) nationalism in Detroit during the late 1950s and 1960s.⁵⁶

One way to chart the development of political radicalism and civil rights militancy in Detroit, then, is along a line from Hill to Cleage. This is a line that highlights the significance of religion. The point is not to pit Hill against Cleage and thereby create a false dichotomy between integration and Black nationalism or civil rights and Black power. Like Hill and Cleage themselves, these strategies coexisted on a single ideological continuum as different inflections of the struggle for social justice that informs various protest movements throughout African American and American political culture. Nor is it my intention to elevate the Reverends Hill and Cleage to the status of prophets preaching in the wilderness. As historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham rightly cautions, "In portraying the church's role, historians tend to rely too heavily on the speeches and actions of outstanding ministers. Too often, 'minister' functions as a metonym for church and the embodiment of the church's public identity." A church may serve as the power base for the activism of

a highly political minister, but in the end ministers remain accountable to their congregants, who may have divergent social and political and economic interests.⁵⁷

Hill and Cleage are important historical figures because through the courage of conviction and faith they worked on the local, grassroots level to bring about social change. It is difficult to avoid the pitfalls identified by Brooks Higginbotham, especially in a book that relies so heavily on biography and intellectual history; yet it is obvious that neither man worked alone and that neither, studied in isolation, fully reflects the rich and varied nature of Detroit's multilayered civil rights communities. This book, therefore, is crowded with the presence and voices of dozens of individuals, as well as organizations, networks, and social forces, struggling with—and against—the Reverends Hill and Cleage.