

Religion, Belonging, and Social Mobility in Civil Rights Era Birmingham, Alabama

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Abstract

This project narrates the story of Greek-Americans' reactions to the historic civil rights movement in perhaps its most important nerve centers, Birmingham, Alabama. In 1960 Archbishop Iakovos placed in that racial hotbed a young priest named Father Soterios “Sam” Gouvellis, who served the Holy Trinity-Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church during the most volatile years of the black freedom struggle. Father Sam joined the ad hoc ministerial group whose letter to Martin Luther King Jr. spawned the famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. Gouvellis became involved with the black freedom struggle in Birmingham and eventually marched with King and Archbishop Iakovos in Selma. This project will tell the story of how Gouvellis and his congregation negotiated the mysteries of evangelical religion in the Bible Belt and the enigmas of race in the Jim Crow South. This article distills the argument of what will be the only biography of Gouvellis and one of a very few studies of religion, race, and Greek ethnicity in the American South.

Keywords: race, Greek Orthodox Church, Birmingham, Alabama, civil rights movement, Greek immigration, Americanization, white supremacy.

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Dig deeply enough and one can almost always find autobiographical reasons why historians are drawn to the subjects about which they write. People from the American South have justly earned a reputation as raconteurs and, of course, at least since the days of Homer, Greeks have been known to tell a story or two. Thus, as a resident of the Southern United States *and* of Greek descent, it seems appropriate that I begin with a story.

Kalliope Manis Findley remembers 15 September 1963, like it was yesterday. Indeed, no sentient being who happened to be living in Birmingham, Alabama, on that day can ever forget it. Having sat in the Holy Trinity-Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church that day, she recalls a man walking down the left side of the sanctuary just between the end of the Divine Liturgy and the beginning of the sermon. He managed to get Father Soterios (“Sam”) Gouvellis’ attention and they both disappeared behind the iconostasis through a door that doubled as an icon of the Archangel Michael. A few moments later the man came out first, followed by Father Gouvellis. The priest walked straight to his pulpit. With an ashen face and trembling voice, he made the darkest of announcements: “Today a part of Christ’s Body suffers. Our brothers and sisters have been brutally attacked by the forces of evil. The Sixteenth Street Baptist Church was bombed this morning.”

Just two miles away from where she sat was the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, the largest black congregation in Birmingham. Earlier that spring that church had been the launching pad for five weeks of civil rights demonstrations that became front page news all over the world. Now the breathless congregation focused its attention on further news to come from the mouth of their priest. Instead, Father Sam led them in a short prayer about the Body of Christ being one regardless of race or creed. His morning sermon now unexpectedly abbreviated, he then dismissed the congregation. The congregants took their traditional *antidoro* (Blessed Bread) from his hand, and filed out of the church stunned and silent (Findley).

Not for long, however. When Findley and her family got in the car, her Uncle John Katros smashed the silence into a thousand pieces with a “sermon” of his own: “We ought to send him back to that Yankee seminary where he came from. If he thinks he can come down here and change our ways, he’ll find himself on a slow boat back to his father’s God forsaken island” (Findley).

That’s a firsthand memory of what singer-activist Joan Baez called “Birmingham Sunday,” a folk song that named and numbered the 1-2-3-4 little girls killed that day in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. It was also the place where, as the song so poignantly phrased it, “the choir kept singing of Freedom” (Carawan and Carawan 122-23).

This article centers on part of the story of Father Soterios “Sam” Gouvellis, focusing on his controversial eight-year ministry in the Birmingham parish during the most crucial decade of the civil rights era. More specifically, it explores the themes of Greek Americans’ religious and racial adaptation to life in the region known as both the ‘Bible Belt’ and the ‘Lynching Belt.’ Plans are for it eventually to become a book designed to straddle the genres of ethnic studies in religion and civil rights history.

1. A Priestly Background

Soterios Demetrios Gouvellis was born in Chester, Pennsylvania on 30 July 1920, the eldest of five children in a traditionally pious Greek Orthodox family. His parents were financially well off compared to most Greek immigrants of the early twentieth century. Emigrating from the Greek city of Epirus, Demetrios Gouvellis was able to start a shoe shop in his hometown. He added to his fortune by learning to make wise investments in the American stock market. Soterios grew into a favored boy with a certain charisma and compassion for people in many walks of life. Not particularly pious in the sense of having an early calling toward the priesthood, he gravitated toward a life in the Navy as he neared the end of his high school years and contemplated his future. His erstwhile career in the military, however, was precluded when a fall resulted in a badly broken arm and a 4F draft classification.

As he cast about for a new plan, his own intelligence and work ethic, as well as his parents’ relative wealth and insistence, made it obvious that his first road away from home would be toward a college education. Along the way, discussions with his parents resulted in a rather rational decision to study for the Orthodox priesthood. He studied first in the undergraduate

program of Holy Cross School of Theology in Pomfret, Connecticut, finishing up his theological education in Brookline, Massachusetts, where the seminary had moved in 1947 (Tarsinos).

While a seminarian both in Pomfret and in Brookline, Gouvellis came under the influence of the Reverend Father Demetrios Coucouzes, who had taken the ecclesiastical name Iakovos when he was ordained to the priesthood in 1940. As Dean of the Annunciation Greek Orthodox Cathedral in Boston, Iakovos became mentor to Gouvellis, ordaining him as a deacon and choosing him as his assistant. Their relationship would continue after Iakovos was elevated to Archbishop and chosen in 1959 to be Primate of the Greek Orthodox in North and South America.¹

In his new role in the Church, Archbishop Iakovos would distinguish himself in two areas of concern: ecumenism and the struggle for civil and human rights. For four years he represented his own mentor, Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras, in the World Council of Churches, later serving nine years as its president. Ecumenism, he later asserted, was “the hope for international understanding, for humanitarian allegiance, for true peace based on justice and dignity, and for God’s continued presence and involvement in modern history” (Papaioannou 527).

His support of and eventually his involvements with the American civil rights movement became one of his points of pride, as illustrated by a special section of the Archbishop Iakovos Library at the School of Theology in Brookline. But some of his involvement would develop out of his continuing relationship with his young priest, Sam Gouvellis. In turn, to a significant extent, Gouvellis learned these lessons from his mentor and embodied them in his later ministry in Birmingham (Tarsinos).

Ordained in 1948, Gouvellis began his priestly ministry as assistant pastor at the Church (later Cathedral) of the Annunciation in Baltimore. One of this congregation’s early pro-Americanization leaders was restaurateur Theodore Agnostopoulos, who was one of the founders of the American Hellenic Education and Progressive Association (AHEPA) and later shortened his name to Agnew. His son, Spiro, would of course grow up to be Governor of Maryland and Vice President of the United States during the early Nixon administration (Papaioannou 527).

Gouvellis was the first American-born priest to serve the Annunciation and symbolize the congregation’s commitment to reach its American-born youth. Arriving as a stark contrast to Father Joachim Papachristou, Father Sam was a charismatic young priest committed to an energetic, aggressive program to attract the youth of the congregation. Willing to use his natural sense of humor and an unprecedented approachability, Gouvellis began attracting enough young persons that Annunciation was able to develop its own basketball and softball leagues. Eventually, the young assistant’s growing popularity became a threat to the senior pastor, who secretly requested that the archdiocese move Gouvellis to another parish. The archdiocese acceded to this request and Gouvellis left Baltimore in January 1950 to serve the St. George parish in Pontiac, Michigan (Papaioannou 546-48). He would lead the Michigan congregation

¹ For more information, see the short biographical section on Archbishop Iakovos at www.goarch.org/archbishop-iakovos.

and, over the next ten years, would lead in the building of two other congregations in Springfield and Woburn, Massachusetts. These efforts impressed Archbishop Iakovos enough to appoint him in 1960 to serve as senior pastor of the Holy Trinity-Holy Cross Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

2. Parish Developments

In 1906 a small contingent of Greek Birminghamians were led in the Divine Liturgy by Father Callinicos Kanelos, who would become the first priest of the community. Raising \$9,500 they purchased a vacant church building on the south side of town, while local painter and artist Constantine Macris designed the church's traditional Byzantine interior. In July 1907 the newly-named Holy Trinity Church held its first Divine Liturgy in their refurbished sanctuary, the seventh Greek Orthodox Church in the United States (Petrou, *A History* 18).

Typical of others in the South, the Birmingham congregation benefited from the Greek immigrants' comparatively rapid adjustments to their new world situation. Without extensive industrial development in the South, fewer Greek immigrants found employment in factories. Instead, a larger percentage of Greek immigrants became entrepreneurs, establishing fruit stands, bootblack shops, and restaurants. As a result, Greek immigrants in the South realized earlier than their compatriots who settled in other regions that America would become their permanent home. This in turn created in these newcomers a powerful incentive to be accepted into the social and economic fabric of their new homeland and consequently a comparatively more rapid rise to middle-class and professional status.

When the post-World War I resurgence of the Klan, however, endangered these developments, a group of entrepreneurial Greeks in the South found an ingenious strategy for deflecting the nativism rising around them. Deviating from the early fraternal organizations which sought to preserve the culture of the homeland, Greek businessmen in Atlanta founded the American Hellenic Educational and Progressive Association (AHEPA), which focused on aiding the process of Americanization. AHEPA, wrote historian Lazar Odzak, attracted business leaders who were primarily concerned to "find acceptance in the middle strata of American society" (86). From the seeds of this concern would grow a conservative element within the Greek immigrant community, one eager to side with the established norms of southern society.

More specifically, they purposed to counter growing nativism and preserve their access to the social ladder by convincing fellow southerners, and especially the Klan, that Greek immigrants would become the right sort of Americans—namely the kind who believed in white supremacy. One of AHEPA's founders, Harry Angelopoulos later explained to his daughter that "it was necessary to organize under the same principles as those whom we intended to convert" (Georgeson 174). Through contacts in the Atlanta business community, they self-consciously retained Carl Franklin Hutcheson, a prominent attorney and known Klansman, to draw up the incorporation papers of their new fraternal organization. As a result, AHEPA's charter declared a purpose of "advancing and promoting pure and undefiled Americanism," (Georgeson 174) a phrase remarkably close to the Klan's slogan of '100 percent Americanism.'

Thus, much as Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Compromise" had convinced white southerners that blacks who recognized their place in the pecking order could be trusted as 'good Negroes,' AHEPA enjoyed great success in convincing their southern neighbors that Greeks were becoming trustworthy Americans of an acceptable sort—Americans who shared an anti-elitist commitment to democracy, moral values, and unabashed patriotism. But there was a darker side to this arrangement: Greeks were trusted as also Americans who would remain silent on Protestant dominance, white supremacy, and brute force.²

According to Stephen P. Georgeson's helpful study of Atlanta Greeks, there were few voices in Atlanta and Georgia—and presumably most of the Deep South—that would publicly oppose Klan, which had begun reconstituting in Georgia after the Atlanta race riots and the Leo Frank murder case. Georgeson expresses no doubt that "the Greeks of Atlanta in 1922 would establish the Order of AHEPA as a direct response to the rise of the Klan" (174). Thus, AHEPA's founders would resort to using the vocabulary of the Klan as proof that Greek immigrants sought only to promote so-called pure Americanism among American Greeks.

AHEPA chapters sprung up like wildfire in Greek communities across the nation, but especially in the South. Twenty-nine of the first thirty-two AHEPA chapters were planted in southern cities. With some ties to the Atlanta leaders who founded the new fraternal organization, Birmingham's Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church established the third AHEPA chapter in the nation.

Within a year, other members of the Greek community bristled at AHEPA's 'English only' policy and founded a rival organization more traditionally devoted to perpetuating Greek culture and tradition. The Birmingham chapter of the Greek American Progressive Association (GAPA) quickly attracted some 150 members. Most of their misgivings regarding AHEPA seemed to be focused on AHEPA's 'English only' practice, which disadvantaged members who lacked facility in the language. Theodore Saloutos, however, suggested that GAPA drew members who "sincerely believed that an unintelligent brand of Americanism was robbing the Greek-American of a heritage worth preserving" (254).³ This division would set the stage for disagreement about race, the civil rights movement, and inevitably the ministry of Soterios Gouvellis.

One of the foremost authorities on Greek American culture, Yiorgos Anagnostou, has suggested another significant way AHEPA created space for Greek Americans to assimilate to their American environment without running afoul of the South's racial arrangements. Anagnostou's understanding of white ethnicity makes room for a dual function for the immigrant past, which can be deployed in two ways: it can be used as a resource for constructing identity, but also to sustain racial hierarchies (Anagnostou 6).

Nobel laureate Toni Morrison has called these practices "race talk," whereby consenting to race talk means embracing whiteness (Morrison). Failing to challenge white negative appraisals of blacks was sure to open the path of opportunity. Labor historian Dan Georgakas similarly

² For more information, see Odzak 96-97; Saloutos; Angelopoulos; Montzoros 9-11; Leber 147-51.

³ On Birmingham's chapters of AHEPA and GAPA, see also Petrou 29.

showed how immigrants' fear of retribution by whites, rather than racism itself, opened the path of opportunity for Greek immigrants. Even if they had wanted to allow blacks in their bars, Greek bar owners were in no position to challenge the color line. The result would have been empty stools and tables at the least, more likely broken windows, smashed heads, and possibly worse.

Greeks often laugh at their own tendencies toward argumentation with the saying that a Greek army of eight thousand will have ten thousand generals. Thus, apart from the philosophy toward Americanization, other matters divided Birmingham's Greek community. Greek immigrants were divided over political differences back in Greece, some becoming supporters of Eleutherios Venizelos and democracy, and others remaining Royalists who supported the monarchy. Rivalries between immigrants from different locales in Greece also emerged with the Peloponnesians settling in north Birmingham as entrepreneurs and *nisiotes* (islanders) gravitating toward more industrial working class areas of the western suburbs of Ensley, Fairfield, and Bessemer (Odzak 190-91).

These underlying divisions burst to the surface in the early 1930s over the administration of the church's Greek language school. Disagreement over whom to hire as principal of the school sharply divided the congregation. Despite efforts of the archdiocese to heal the breach, a formal and bitter break created a second congregation, Holy Cross Greek Orthodox Church, in 1933. Families of opposing churches refused to speak to each other. Church organizations, including AHEPA, also split. The division lasted twenty years, as generational change brought the two congregations back together.

Young people in both congregations continued to go to public school together and social activities among them saw youth who cared little about the matters that had divided their parents. Dating, courtship, and marriage with fellow Greeks in opposing congregations were vastly preferable to dating, courtship, and marriage to non-Greeks. In addition, in 1950, Archbishop Michael, known for his interest in Greek young persons, called for a national youth organization. The idea for the Greek Orthodox Youth Association (GOYA) was conceived in Birmingham. GOYA's third national convention in 1953 is described in terms reminiscent of evangelical camp meetings. Held in Birmingham, the convention brought together more than seven hundred persons, raised more than \$45,000, and generated an unprecedented enthusiasm. Boiling over among the adults in Birmingham, committees in both congregations that had been working since 1947 used the GOYA convention as a teachable moment to begin a process of reunification. By the end of 1953 both congregations had voted to reunite under the dual name of Holy Trinity-Holy Cross (HT-HC).

3. A Priest for the Sixties

Both the specific situation in the HT-HC congregation and the decade during which Father Sam Gouvellis served it made the times ripe for a young priest with a talent for youth work. The success of Birmingham's GOYA chapter continued as the two congregations renewed their communal life during the remainder of the 1950s. More and more Greek American youth

increased their involvement in GOYA, making it an easy choice for the Archdiocese—now led by Gouvellis’s seminary mentor, Archbishop Iakovos—to assign Gouvellis to Birmingham. Not only did Gouvellis bring his expertise in reaching young people in a place and time when it was particularly valued, he also brought with him three future GOYAnS. Here then was a comparatively young priest of forty years of age, with an unprecedented energy and charisma, a similarly energetic and charismatic wife, and three children, aged ten, seven, and four. Like the young Kennedy family elected to live in the White House later that year, the Gouvellis family found a house on Birmingham’s Southside as their constituents awaited the accomplishments of a new leader. Clearly, at HT-HC as in the nation as a whole, “the times they [were] a-changin’.”⁴

Change, however, was not particularly welcome in the Deep South, perhaps least of all in Birmingham and definitely not coming from the hand of a Yankee priest of a very foreign Christian communion. By most accounts “outside agitators” were causing all the uproar in the post-World War II South. The reigning mythology was clear that southern blacks, like their slave forbears, were naturally “contented” with their lot in the South. Like Booker T. Washington, they knew their place, and as long as they remained in it, all was well. Only when bamboozled, so the story went, by “outside agitators” from the North, who sought to exploit the Jim Crow racial situation for their own gain, did southern blacks begin to find trouble with whites.

The Brown ruling of 1954 and the Montgomery bus boycott had galvanized black protest and launched what the American press began calling the civil rights movement. Both the Brown Ruling and the Montgomery events had struck fear in Jim Crow Alabama, which saw all NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) activities banned all across the state by court injunction. This in turn triggered the 1956 founding of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights, an indigenous civil rights organization led by the native Birminghamian Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth, pastor of the Bethel Baptist Church, with occasional assistance from Martin Luther King Jr. and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Thus began a seven-year battle royal with Commissioner of Public Safety Eugene T. “Bull” Connor, Birmingham’s “Great White Hope” of staving off the integration movement.

In reality, after his December 1956 victory in the Montgomery Bus Boycott, victories for King and the SCLC were minor, few, and far between. At the end of 1962, after another set of unsuccessful desegregation efforts, this time in Albany, Georgia, King desperately needed a victory for himself as much as for the movement. In January 1963 King finally accepted Shuttlesworth’s invitation—persistently proffered and consistently rejected by King for the previous four years—to bring SCLC and join Shuttlesworth’s Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR) in what came to be known as “Project C. (Confrontation)” (Manis 162-200).⁵

⁴ Lyrics from Bob Dylan’s song “The Times They Are a-Changin’,” which was released in 1964.

⁵ You can also watch Clayborne Carson’s lecture “Where Do We Go from Here? Chaos or Community,” available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=e96H0l0XGU8

The South never had a more valiant defender of Jim Crow than “Bull” Connor. With his hand on the controls of both the city’s Fire Department and a Klan-sympathizing, if not a Klan-infested Police Department, Connor had the power to intimidate all potential allies of the movement, white or black. In office off and on since 1938, Connor had also cultivated numerous direct contacts with the Klan and other arch-segregationist groups around Birmingham. Connor’s Klan contacts made it possible for him to hatch various plots to assassinate Shuttlesworth, plots that resulted in three separate attempts to bomb Shuttlesworth’s church (Manis 162-200).

White Birmingham, including its Greek community, was quietly divided over allowing Connor to remain the face of the city. His illicit involvement with his secretary led him to opt out of office rather than to face the voters’ ire in 1953, but his promise to put Shuttlesworth in his appropriate place won back their favor and *his* office. Once back in office, Connor responded to a series of civil rights activities including:

- Shuttlesworth’s call for desegregating Birmingham’s police force
- ending segregation “on all fronts”
- weekly mass meetings in black churches across the city
- numerous suits against the city (including one enjoining Connor from sending plainclothes detectives to record and the fire department to interrupt mass meetings)
- student sit-ins and a general boycott of all segregated facilities
- the Freedom Rides, 1961
- the 1962 convention of the SCLC, 1962
- the major protests, 1963

Each response by Connor heightened tensions in the city and whites mostly supported Connor’s defense of segregation or cowered in fearful silence. In addition, the 1962 gubernatorial election pitted judge George C. Wallace against the more moderate state legislator Ryan DeGraffenried, a contest that divided Greek American voters. Wallace had been defeated in 1958 by the arch-segregationist campaign of Attorney General John Patterson and reportedly vowed never to be “out-niggered” in an election again. DeGraffenried hailed from Tuscaloosa County and appealed to moderate whites in the Birmingham area sixty miles away. Surviving a close run-off election against DeGraffenried, Wallace rode the wave of massive resistance against integration to an easy general election victory against a hapless Republican opponent, and debuted on the national stage with his “Segregation Forever” inaugural speech (Wallace).

Like the rest of Alabama, members of HT-HC were divided. Ministering in relative obscurity to his politically divided flock on Birmingham’s Southside, Father Gouvellis had misgivings about Governor Wallace and especially about the ways the race issue divided not only the Greek community but also families. In this matter he shared the experience with other white ministers in the city. By the end of 1958, *Pulpit Digest* published the findings of its own opinion poll, which indicated that 53 percent of white southern ministers approved of the Brown ruling (“Southern Ministers” 13).

In Birmingham and the wider South, however, congregations where pulpit and pew saw eye to eye on this issue were very rare. Groups of vocal laypersons were often publicly committed to driving their ministers away from such attitudes, if not to driving them away altogether. Historian Jonathan Bass noted one segregationist who asserted: “The worst obstacle we face in the fight to preserve segregated schools in the South is the white minister” (16).⁶ Between 1954 and early 1963, ministerial groups had, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, issued statements of support for the Brown ruling in the southern cities of Richmond, Chattanooga, Dallas, Miami, Houston, Columbus, Georgia, Little Rock, and Baton Rouge. The Alabama cities of Huntsville, Montgomery, and Mobile had followed suit. In a vivid example of the intimidation factor, no such statement emerged from any formal group of white ministers in Birmingham (Bass 11-12).

Five days before Wallace’s inauguration, Father Gouvellis received an invitation from Episcopal bishop George Murray to meet him and several other white ministers for lunch at the downtown Tutwiler Hotel. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss racial matters in Birmingham and the state, and to determine what they as a group might do to help the situation. The situation had, of course, been exacerbated by Governor Wallace’s inaugural address, which, occurring just two days before the ministers met, became one of the central subtopics of their conversations. Gouvellis and the other ministers decided to issue a joint statement critical of incendiary, Wallace-type rhetoric on race without actually naming the new governor. Its timing, however, led most journalists to believe their letter was a direct response to Wallace’s speech. While the meeting had been planned before the 14 September inauguration, the defiant tenor of the speech nonetheless did largely trigger the decision to publish the clerical commentary.

Bearing the title “An Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense,” the ministers’ letter ran in both Birmingham newspapers on 17 January 1963. The letter was in reality a revision of a statement by the Huntsville [Alabama] Ministers Association in October 1962. In times of tension and change, the statement called on “men who occupy places of responsibility” to avoid defiant rhetoric, as “inflammatory and rebellious statements can lead only to violence, discord, confusion and disgrace for our beloved state.” Commending seven affirmations to the public including nonviolence, disagreement without defiance, dependence on legislative solutions, obedience to court rulings, personal freedom, freedom of speech, and human dignity, the ministers urged desegregation opponents to pursue court solutions while obeying current rulings. They concluded by inviting the public in seeking divine guidance “as we make our appeal for law and order and common sense” (Bass 233).

The segregationist response seemed to think the ministers’ statement reflected anything but “common sense.” Each of the ministers was deluged with harsh criticism in the form of letters and crank phone calls. Letters to the local papers branded the ministers as “Reds, pinks, or so-called liberals,” who had violated the spiritual concerns of the churches and “endorsed the sin of integration.” Although the ministers received a few letters of support on the editorial pages, the

⁶ Bass’s work is the definitive analysis of these ministers who, with Gouvellis as a noteworthy exception, helped give rise to Martin Luther King’s classic “Letter from Birmingham Jail.”

bulk of responses vehemently denounced them. “The day I have to go in church and have to smell stinking niggers,” complained one hardliner, “that’s the day I’ll stay away and take a chance on my hopes of Heaven” (Bass 22-23).

Like the others, Gouvellis received his share of criticism and even threats. Around this time, for several months the priest found himself checking under his car every day for the presence of explosives. Early on Sunday mornings he made a similar check under the pews of the Holy Trinity-Holy Cross sanctuary (Tarsinos). Such was the experience of a nonconformist Yankee priest of the very foreign Greek Orthodox Church dropped by happenstance or by God’s will, whichever your theology will allow, into the American South, a place ironically nicknamed the ‘Bible Belt’ while simultaneously and unofficially being known as the ‘Lynching Belt.’

The mood around HT-HC seemed to be uncomfortably similar to that of their white Protestant neighbors—some support with a good deal of criticism from persons in the majority who were convinced that these swarthy, Mediterranean types had not yet earned the right to tell *real* “100 percent Americans” how to conduct social relations in the Deep South. Gouvellis hardly endeared himself to his critics in his next move. Three months after the letter vaguely critical of Wallace, whom the ministers regarded as an extremist on the right, they again took up the pen to address Martin Luther King Jr., whom they cast as an extremist on the left. By then King’s SCLC had finally answered Shuttlesworth’s four-year-old invitation to join forces with his ACMHR for an all-out attack on “Bull” Connor and Birmingham’s version of Jim Crow. This letter, which appeared in the Birmingham papers on 13 April 1963, famously spawned King’s classic epistolary response, “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” and criticized the timing and purpose of the demonstrations then under way.

By seeing the two letters together, one detects a strategy of staking out the reasonable middle ground by bringing their critiques against both dangerous extremes. This approach had the virtue of being perceived as even-handedness—we criticized Wallace (indirectly and not by name) when his speechifying crossed a dangerous line from the right; we must criticize King (directly and by name) now that he is crossing a dangerous line from the left.

Gouvellis distinguished himself among the ministers who signed the first letter. Of the eleven signers, three, including Father Sam, did not sign the letter to King. He is the only one of the three who later became involved in the civil rights protests. Why they did not join the other eight ministers in writing to King is a matter of speculation. Possibly all three of them simply missed the meeting when writing to King was decided upon. Or they may have dropped out because of the heat they had encountered since the first letter. Given his later involvements, however, it appears probable Gouvellis deliberately decided not to sign the letter to King. But why so?

He may have been, as his daughter believes, somewhat intimidated by the criticism and wanted to protect his family from possible repercussions. He thus simply withdrew from the ministerial group and did not participate in crafting the letter to King. On the contrary, he might have actually helped redeem himself among his critics by signing the 12 April letter and thus being perceived as criticizing King in public. After all, as Jonathan Bass has established, most of the response to the eight ministers who did sign the letter has tended to lump them with the

segregationists (1-8). More importantly, given Gouvellis's later involvements in civil rights activities, it appears more likely that Gouvellis deliberately distanced himself from his erstwhile colleagues because of his sympathy with King's cause rather than from any sort of expediency.

His name attached to a document that indirectly called into question the leadership of the popular new governor, coupled with immediate actions during worship on the morning of the Sixteenth Street church bombing, left little doubt where he stood on the issue of the day. His comments included the African American congregation within the Body of Christ. He expressed solidarity with "our brothers and sisters" who had been "brutally attacked." He characterized the perpetrators as "the forces of evil." The following week Father Gouvellis poured out his assessment of the situation in Birmingham in a letter to Archbishop Iakovos:

It seems that every time the priest mentions the word negro in church, the resident of the Board of Trustees ... has the feeling of ... dislike for the clergy and the negroes. It has been my task to attend meetings of the spiritual leaders ... to discuss problems that face this dying city. It has been our obligation to meet with leaders of all denominations and color ... Last Sunday, following the bombing, I made a plea to my people ... to offer contributions ... to aid in the rebuilding and to pay for the funeral and hospital bills of the dead and injured. This morning, my president was greatly disturbed ... This brought about the wrath and the threats of the president that 'we will petition the Archbishop ... I went thru [sic] a period of harassment and threats from my president and board. It seems that members of the parish fear the wrath of the segregationists of Alabama. One cannot blame them who have lived here many years ... This morning, a group of clergymen, Catholics, Protestants, and Jews are flying to Washington to discuss the problems of my city with the President. I was asked but knowing of the stand of my board, I did not accept [the invitation to go]. Not fearing my position, but lack of clearance from New York and the final words of Bishop Silas, 'Stay clear of all problems on this issue' ... At present, I requested that people of the parish contribute money to help the Negro rebuild and contribute to the agony of the bereaved families. Money cannot buy lives, nor replace the daughters that were killed ... If it be wrong to request that funds be sent to the bombed Church fund, kindly let me know so I can inform my people. (Gouvellis)

Five days later the Archdiocese published its official response to the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing:

The Greek Orthodox Church is against segregation of any kind and believes in the full equality of all races and peoples. Our Church believes, moreover, that all Americans, regardless of faith or color, should be granted equal opportunities for public education and for employment in all fields of endeavor ... and that all should enjoy equal advantages and be the beneficiaries of equal public accommodations and facilities ... In this spirit, we call upon our citizens of all faiths, and upon all those who cherish truth and

justice, to oppose every expression and demonstration of bigotry ... But the Christians of America should feel that they have a special mandate to work for equal rights for all. We are challenged to prove that the Legions of Christ can, in His Name, uphold these rights wherever and whenever they are endangered. Christian love is not a semantic symbol. It is a commandment to which we must conform our actions as Christians and strive in every way to make a reality, consistent with the will of God, which was expressed by His Son Jesus Christ when He said: 'Love ye one another.' (Valarmos 154)

Twenty-three days later, on 8 October, Gouvellis participated in a meeting of the Ministers' Association of Greater Birmingham. He also initiated the most important action of the meeting by motioning that the group endorse blacks' call for the Birmingham Police Department to hire black officers to patrol black areas of the city—a goal Shuttlesworth had been advocating for the preceding eight years. Father Gouvellis's motion met no opposition from the eighty-five ministers in attendance. Identified in the press as having made the motion, the priest thus qualified as a trouble-making 'outside agitator'⁷ and did meet harassment from the larger segregationist element in the city. More importantly, he also met opposition from a significant portion of his parishioners.

Since the anti-immigration legislation passed by the Congress of the 1920s, the Birmingham Greek community, due to minimal infusions of new members from Greece, had become Americanized. Part of that process, of course, meant acceptance because of their work ethic and growing middle-class status. Another part of that process, however, included a combination of racial antipathies, some brought from the old country itself and some an infection from the strain that dominated the American South. Identifying with an unpopular minority was an association some successful Greek Birminghamians could not afford. As white customers were reportedly angry over Gouvellis's perceived meddling, Greek proprietors saw what they viewed as precipitous declines in both their businesses and their social positions (Petrou, *A History* 41-43).

Older members of the congregation today are divided in their perceptions of Gouvellis's opposition. At least one parishioner wrote to the Archdiocese that a powerful member was "conducting an unrelenting and vicious campaign to oust Father Gouvellis" (Petrou, *A History* 41-42). Gathering a small group that shared the same view, Gouvellis's powerful opponent spread unfounded rumors about the priest and withheld church mail and church records from him. In their own letters to the Archdiocese, the critics complained that Gouvellis's actions had created "a considerable amount of embarrassment to the majority of members who are in business" (Petrou, *A History* 41-42). Another member, Frank T. Kanelos, suggested that Father Sam, who was his next-door neighbor, enjoyed "some support" to counter a larger degree of opposition (Petrou, Interview with Frank T. Kanelos).

⁷ The term 'outside agitator' was a standard phrase of the time and the "Alabama Senate Joint Resolution No. 28, 03/19/65" can be traced as its source. The archival material is available at archives.alabama.gov/teacher/rights/lesson4/doc3.html

Whatever its size, the critics confronted their priest, condemning his actions and accusing him of violating the principles of church-state separation. When Gouvellis ignored their charges, they began correspondence with Archbishop Iakovos, demanding that he remove the offending priest. Within a week of Gouvellis's motion before the Ministers' Association, his opposition at HT-HC had engineered two meetings of the parish Board of Trustees, which unanimously adopted a resolution restricting their terms for Gouvellis's continuing as their priest. Copies of the resolution were delivered to both Father Gouvellis and Archbishop Iakovos (Petrou, *A History* 43).⁸

The dissident group was apparently unaware of Father Gouvellis's close and long-standing relationship with the Archbishop or of Iakovos's fervent commitment to the cause of civil rights. He paid little attention to their complaints and even criticized the petitions of Gouvellis's opponents. The Birmingham demonstrations largely convinced President John F. Kennedy to introduce a landmark civil rights bill that would eventually end Jim Crow in American life. Archbishop Iakovos publicly and vigorously supported the Civil Rights Act of 1964, commenting on its passage: "Glory to the Most High! May this mark the beginning of a new age for all humankind, an era when the Word of God charts and guides our lives" ("Archbishop Iakovos").

In February and March 1965, King's protest efforts moved on to Selma, Alabama, with the goal of extracting from the Johnson administration federal legislation protecting black voting rights. After violence at the hands of Alabama State Troopers broke out on Bloody Sunday, March, and the murders of civil rights worker Jimmie King and the Reverend James Reeb, King called upon clergy and rabbis from all over the nation to come join a massive protest march from Selma to the state capital of Montgomery. Learning of King's call, Archbishop Iakovos immediately committed himself to joining the Selma march.

Much to the surprise of Gouvellis and the HT-HC Church, the prelate called Birmingham and requested that Gouvellis join him in Selma for the march. Gouvellis complied with what was something between a request and an order, but half-seriously joked with the Archbishop, "Kala, esi tha figeis, alla ego tha meino etho" ("Fine, *you* will leave but I will stay here") (Drossos).

Thus, on 15 March, Gouvellis met Iakovos and some five hundred other ministers, rabbis, and nuns from across the nation. They gathered at Brown's Chapel for a spirited memorial for Reeb, where the Archbishop delivered a short eulogy for Reeb. He told the congregation that he felt certain his presence there had the support of "the Greek Orthodox faithful of America" (qtd. in Raboteau 3). Perhaps Gouvellis smiled inwardly or even rolled his eyes at that point, but Iakovos then said that Greek history and Orthodox tradition had made such "sacrificial involvements" understandable (qtd. in Raboteau 3). Years later he explained to Taylor Branch that his memories of Greeks suffering under the occupation of the Ottoman Turks had compelled him to go to Selma. He did so in spite of his staff's warnings that Greek Americans still

⁸ At the time of the writing, Petrou was still an active member of the Holy Trinity-Holy Cross Church. Rather than create controversy in the congregation, she chose to withhold the names of those members who sought to remove Gouvellis from his position.

struggling for acceptance in America would view him as a traitor to that cause. Other causes required a greater loyalty, however, as he preached:

Let us seek out in this tragedy a divine lesson for all of us. The Reverend Reeb felt he could not be outside the arena of this bitter struggle, and we, too, must feel that we cannot. Let his martyrdom be an inspiration and a reminder to us that there are times when we must risk everything, including life itself, for those basic American ideals of freedom, justice, and equality, without which this land cannot survive. (qtd. in Raboteau 3)

They also participated in various vigils, prayer sessions, interfaith conversations, and despite their unexpected and perhaps unprecedented unity, as one Jesuit priest later described the occasion, “they knew beyond doubt that they would never again be the same men [and women] that had lived Before Selma” (qtd. in Friedland 129-30).

Indeed, neither Archbishop Iakovos nor Father Gouvellis were the same after Selma. As his protégé had joked, Iakovos did leave Selma physically to return to New York and his oversight of the Greek Orthodox Church of North and South America. But spiritually, he remained with King and the movement. He returned to the South once again to attend King’s funeral three years later and when he died in 2005 almost all the obituaries included the photograph he treasured for the rest of this life, one of himself with King, Abernathy, and Shuttlesworth as it graced the cover of *Life* magazine on 26 March 1965. Today, a trip to Brookline, Massachusetts, and the Holy Cross School of Theology will lead one to the Archbishop Iakovos Library, whose exhibits highlight his lifelong commitments to ecumenism and civil and human rights.

The *Life* cover photo, however, generated quite a different response in Birmingham’s Greek community. Upon learning of the Archbishop’s cover photograph, a number of Greek mothers sent their sons or daughters to hurry to the nearest newsstand or magazine rack with orders to buy up every copy of *Life* they could find before the “Americans” could form even more negative feelings about the true loyalties of the city’s Greek population (McCoy; Derzis).

As for Father Sam, he did remain in Birmingham for four more years, despite the continued efforts of his critics. A number of relatively wealthy Greek members of Birmingham’s professional classes gravitated to the congregation’s Parish Council (often called the “Board of Trustees”) who fed the fires of criticism of the archdiocese. Father Gouvellis’s sharp sense of humor in one moment strengthened many parishioners’ complaints; in other times tickled Archbishop Iakovos’s funny bone. So did their correspondence amuse both as is evident in their epistolary put downs of their critics in Birmingham. Gouvellis even made light of the situation by signing a few of his letters to the Archdiocese, “Yours truly, Sam, bishop of Selma.” But from several members of the Parish Council—in particular those members of the Council most influenced by AHEPA—what was expected was an Americanization defined by what Yiorgos Anagnostou would call AHEPA’s “assimilative politics of national inclusion” (26). AHEPA’s approach included more than political and cultural conformity. It required “a narrative of its

racial fitness to American ‘whiteness’” (Anagnostou 25). While Anagnostou’s explanation does not specify the situation in Birmingham, its description does fit the Greek community’s challenge in Birmingham. AHEPA and the members of the Parish Council “sought to exclude ethnic memories deemed incompatible with the imperative of ‘white’ American republicanism” (Anagnostou 25).

While brimming with insights, Anagnostou’s model of “‘white’ American republicanism,” may be unnecessarily dense, perhaps less comprehensible to the non-sociologist. Isabel Wilkerson, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Warmth of Other Suns*, has summed up and clarified in beautiful American English prose the insights of Anagnostou in her *New York Times* bestseller, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. She finds the roots of the Americanization process buried deeply in an American racial hierarchy created by the institution of slavery. By the early decades of the twentieth century, that powerful hierarchy had coached European immigrants on what acceptance in America—and especially in the South—required of them. In her view, oppressed Europeans arriving in America discovered a “pre-existing hierarchy, bipolar in construction, arising from slavery.” This hierarchy forced the newcomers to “figure out how and where to position themselves” in their “adopted new land.” The process often began at Ellis Island or other reception centers where many “shed their old selves, and often their old names to gain admittance to the dominant majority” (Wilkerson 49). Whiteness, she continued, “was among the most important possessions one could lay claim to. It was their whiteness, not any kind of new world magnanimity that opened the Golden Door.” In America these newcomers “had to learn how to be white.” She continued:

They could establish their new status by observing how the lowest caste was regarded and imitating or one-upping the disdain and contempt, learning the epithets, joining in on violence against them to prove themselves worthy of admittance to the dominant caste ... Hostility towards the lowest caste became part of the initiation rite into citizenship in America. Newcomers learn to vie for the good favor of the dominant caste and to distance themselves from the bottom-dwellers ... They learn to conform to the dictates of the ruling class if they are to prosper in their new land. (Wilkerson 50-51)

Both Anagnostou and Wilkerson would agree that many Birminghamians of Greek descent had worked for much of their lives to find acceptance among the city’s professional classes—for their children’s generation, if not for their own. Their progressive priest and Archbishop tried to call them back where they could remember whence they had come—a time and a place where they fought for respect despite accusations that they were no better than the *mavri*.⁹ But most hoped primarily to ignore the plight of America’s black citizens, and scurry past the dangerous 1960s and their call for racial justice and civil rights.

Thus, as Governor Wallace learned of Gouvellis’s involvement in Selma, he sent an investigator to HT-HC to question the Board of Trustees and gather documents. This elevated the

⁹ *Mavri* in Modern Greek is a vernacular word—with racist undertones—that refers to people of African descent.

paranoia of some of Gouvellis's critics (Petrou 41-42). But Iakovos's words and deeds in Selma gradually seemed to validate their Archbishop's and their priest's presence there. In effect, they gave up trying to convince the Archbishop to move Gouvellis to another parish. Father Sam Gouvellis continued to challenge his congregants to understand their Orthodox faith and Greek traditions in ways that superseded even the power of race in southern and American culture. He also continued to deal with the occasional grumbling of those who valued financial success and social status above all else.

This essay has sought to straddle academic fields of ethnic studies and historical study of archived texts from the parish life of a Greek Orthodox Church in a segregationist southern city during a historic moment when America was trying to redefine itself. In reality, native-born Americans in Birmingham and the naturalized Americans who came from Greece were *both* struggling to redefine themselves. In 2006, at the centennial of the Holy Trinity-Holy Cross Church in Birmingham, its pastor, Father Paul Costopoulos, accepted on the congregation's behalf a framed proclamation from the Mayor of Birmingham Bernard Kincaid. The proclamation honored the congregation's "strong stand on civil rights" and noted deep appreciation for their support of the late Archbishop Iakovos and Father Sam Gouvellis, and their participation in the civil rights movement (Lafakis). When a younger generation of Greek-Americans, some even the children and grandchildren of those who prized their hard won social status, accepted the Mayor's proclamation, they were ironically appropriating for themselves an acclaim that Father Gouvellis and Archbishop Iakovos had won for them—and that in spite of the opposition of their own grandparents. And if one's theology allows contemporary Greek-Americans to project into the hereafter, perhaps their eyes and ears of faith or imagination would manage to locate Sam and Jake reminiscing about events long ago and far South of heaven, "way down South in Dixie." Somewhere in heaven, if they did not burst into outright laughter, an Archbishop and a priest must have at least shared a wink and a smile.

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