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Prophets of the Divine Revolution: "Bad Bishop Brown," Harry F. Ward, Claude C. Williams, and the Applied Proletarian Gospel

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Prophets of the Divine Revolution: “Bad Bishop Brown,” Harry F. Ward, Claude C. Williams,
and the Applied Proletarian Gospel

David Adams
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Prophets of the Divine Revolution: “Bad Bishop Brown,” Harry F. Ward, Claude C. Williams,
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of the requirements
for the Murray State University Honors Diploma

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Abstract

This paper seeks to propose a unique strand of religious thought which united Marxist Christians in the United States. Using the lives and work of Bishop William Montgomery Brown, Dr. Harry F. Ward, and Reverend Claude C. Williams, this work proposes the term “applied proletarian gospel” to denote the political and religious thought of Marxist Christians who surpassed the social gospel and other proposed ideas of radical Christianity in their revolutionary and anti-capitalist thought and action. This paper finds that, although it remained a small trend among Christians, the applied proletarian gospel gave an outlet to Christians who sought to create a synthesis of Marxism and Christianity and who found class struggle and socialism to be an integral of Christian ethics.

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Introduction

On April 30, 1933, United Mineworkers Workers local president Barney Graham was murdered by company-hired guns for leading a strike in Wilder, Tennessee. At his funeral were several prominent Christian minister-activists, including the union organizer and socialist Howard Kester, whom Graham had planned to accompany to D.C. just three days later for the Socialist Party-sponsored “Continental Congress on Economic Reconstruction.” The local Methodist minister and union coal miner Reverend H. S. Johnson preached the funeral. Rather than preaching a somber memorial for his fallen friend or a dedication to his life, Rev. Johnson connected the martyred miner to the greater Martyr all those present were familiar with—the figure of Jesus Christ. Those who killed Graham were “the same kind of people...that murdered Jesus Christ. They crucified Christ because he was a friend to the poor man...Jesus wanted to change things in his day and they killed him...” It was no different for Barney Graham. It is unlikely that anyone who heard Johnson’s sermon that day disagreed, as many were drawn to the union out of the Christian tendency towards solidarity and brotherhood. Several months before, suspicious of outsiders and worried about retaliating violence, the miners had relayed to an envoy sent by Kester’s relief committee that they wanted no “reds” in Wilder.¹ They did not know it, but their understanding of the world was already “red,” their symbol the Cross and their theory the Bible rather than the hammer and sickle and *Das Kapital*.

¹ Brenda Bell and Fran Ansley, “Strike at Davidson-Wilder, 1932-1933,” in *Working Lives: The Southern Exposure History of Labor in the South* (NY: Pantheon Books, 1980), 95-96; Robert H. Craig, *Religion and Radical Politics: An Alternative Christian Tradition in the United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 142-143; Anthony P. Dunbar, *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets, 1929-1959* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1981), 1-10. Bell, Ansley, Dunbar, and Craig all differ on what Kester said at Graham’s funeral, while Craig provides the account of Johnson’s sermon. Dunbar and Craig relate that Kester said only a few words (differing on what he supposedly said), while Bell and Ansley provide a lengthier quotation from Kester expanding on his friendship with Graham.

Johnson and his audience were not alone in their understanding of the Christian faith, and neither was Johnson alone in using Christianity as an ideological framework against the bosses and the capitalist system in general. Johnson constituted an organic example of a very real trend in U.S. Christian theology that both rejected the usual focus upon personal salvation and otherworldly redemption and recognized the hypocrisy and inadequacy of the “social gospel” in truly implementing the radicality of the Christian social message. The critique of industrial capitalism and the inability of both the traditional religious structure and capitalist framework to set in motion the fellowship of humanity seen as implicit in the Christian faith, especially after the Bolshevik Revolution and the Great Depression, led to a coherent if scattered group of Christian ministers and activists in the United States who interpreted Christianity as a religion of the oppressed, one endorsing the establishment of socialism through class struggle of the laborers against the capitalist system. As a branch of progressive theology, the *applied proletarian gospel*, constitutes perhaps the most politically radical theological framework in U.S. history.² Although the term is not used in conventional religious scholarship, it is the truest descriptor of such a trend. Representatives of the radical trend include the Episcopalian heretic “Bad” Bishop William Montgomery Brown, the Methodist academic and activist Harry F. Ward, and the Presbyterian labor organizer and preacher Claude C. Williams. Predating most systematic liberation theologies and far surpassing the social gospel in its radicality, the applied proletarian gospel formed an early part of the global movement for the theologies of the oppressed both in and outside the United States.

² I use this term to describe a new form of progressive theology not adequately recognized in existing scholarship. I believe this term allows us to understand the multiple strains of Christian progressive activism more accurately as I hope will become clear in the research presented.

These three ministers, from widely different backgrounds and interpretations of Christian theological particulars, came to embrace the same conclusions. Bishop William Montgomery Brown, perhaps the most powerful religious segregationist in the U.S. in 1909, became disenchanted with the structure of institutional religion. In the context of the fierce battles over fundamentalism and modernism in American Christianity, Brown became a Darwinian autodidact, and eventually found in the Bolshevik Revolution a “Good Samaritan of the despoiled and wounded laborer.”³ His transition into Marxism itself was swift and pronounced but precipitated by nearly a decade of Darwinian religious doubt and scientific inquiry. In contrast to Brown’s swift downfall from institutional religion, Ward operated as a celebrity minister of the social gospel for some time before he embraced the applied proletarian gospel.⁴ Ward’s support for radical politics came despite his connections with and life-long participation in the institutional church. Claude C. Williams abandoned both the denominational conflicts of his regional Presbyterian sect and his involvement in fundamentalist religion. Instead, he embraced his evangelical roots and revivalist rhetoric as a means of preaching and organizing sharecroppers in the South. His understanding of fundamentalism and use of its methods provided him with a framework to preach a “theistic collectivism” that could defeat fascism and bring about a more egalitarian society, at home in the Jim Crow South and abroad.⁵ There were,

³ William Montgomery Brown to Alfred Wagenknecht, December 26, 1918, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.32859860>. Inside this letter is the text of an unpublished article, “Highest Peaks in Man’s History,” which Brown sent to Wagenknecht for comments and editing. Brown made it clear that, in the context of both Ohio’s “syndicalist laws” and the growing atmosphere of repression amidst the Espionage and Sedition Acts, the article was not to be published in the *Ohio Socialist*, supposedly at the request of his worried wife. The text of this article, with significant editing, would eventually appear in Brown’s infamous *Communism and Christianity*.

⁴ David Nelson Duke, *In the Trenches with Jesus and Marx: Harry F. Ward and the Struggle for Social Justice* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 74-86; Eugene P. Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet: The Life and Times of Harry F. Ward* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1984), 39-54. Interestingly, *In the Trenches* is also the title of the brief submitted to the Court of Review after Brown’s heresy trial published by his lawyer, Joseph W. Sharts, circa 1925.

⁵ Claude C. Williams, *One God, One People, One Goal: Theistic Collectivism* (Detroit: Peoples’ Institute of Applied Religion, 1944) Cedric Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1944), 233; Doris

of course, differences in the specifics. Brown denied a historical Jesus, Williams saw in the Nazarene Carpenter a prototypical revolutionary fighting for national liberation, and Ward ultimately remained a modernist in his fight for the “religion of Jesus.”⁶

Willens, *Lonesome Traveler: The Life of Lee Hays* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1988), 25-29; Erik S. Gellman and Jarod Roll, *The Gospel of the Working Class* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 27-28, 115-116. Williams also emphasized the “democratic” nature of the Presbyterian Church, one of the few positive things he was willing to say about denominational Christianity.

⁶ Ronald M. Carden, *William Montgomery Brown (1855-1937): The Southern Episcopal Bishop Who Became a Communist* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 109; Claude C. Williams, *Religion: Barrier or Bridge to a People's World?* (Birmingham: People's Institute of Applied Religion, 1947), 44-46; Nelson, *In the Trenches*, 122. Ward's biographers note that he intentionally avoided theology or entering theological abstraction about the nature of God, Christ, or religion. He focused exclusively on Christian ethics as a force for progressive political transformation.

Defining the Applied Proletarian Gospel

Although many scholars have highlighted the radical implications of various forms of Christian socialism, radical political Christianity has rarely been cast in the form of a militant class struggle.⁷ Popular, and scholarly, attention often focuses on the “social gospel” movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century or examines the development of U.S. Christian socialism with its focus on pacifism and compassion.⁸ However, the militant Christianity of Brown, Ward, and Williams, neither fit the reformist goals of the social gospel nor the pacifistic methods of Christian socialism. Their Christianity sought to minimize compromise with the traditionalist and hierarchical structures of the church and maximize revolution against capitalist society and reactionary interpretations of religion. This is why the term “applied proletarian gospel” is necessary—the Christian gospel applied in the context of an ideological apparatus to advance, in the traditional Marxist sense, class struggle on behalf of the proletariat.

⁷ Gene Zubovich’s *Before the Religious Right* offers insight into the left-liberal circles of ecumenical Protestantism from the time of the social gospel into the postwar era, sometimes veering into the more radical strains. Angela Denise Dillard, *Faith in the City: Preaching Radical Social Change in Detroit* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), analyzes the ties between the liberal black minister Charles A. Hill and the Popular Front labor movement as well as the black nationalist Albert B. Cleage and the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party. Dunbar’s *Against the Grain* details the lives of the Christian radicals Howard Kester (socialist), Don West (communist), and Claude C. Williams (communist), but focuses on the South and a limited number of personalities. Older works like Donald B. Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919-1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961) and Robert M. Miller, *American Protestantism and Social Issues, 1919-1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958) retain much value when their anti-communist impulses are tempered with a careful reading. With regards to Christian socialism, Robert T. Handy correctly noted a division between the earlier Christian socialism of “gradualism” and the later post-1900 Christian socialism affiliated with Eugene V. Debs and the Socialist Party in “Christianity and Socialism in America, 1900-1920,” *Church History* 21, no. 1 (March 1952), 42. Both movements, however, were tame in their radicality when compared to those of the proletarian gospel.

⁸ See James Dombrowski, *The Early Days of Christian Socialism in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936); Robert T. Handy, “Christianity and Socialism in America, 1900-1920,” *Church History* 21, no. 1 (March 1952), 39-54; Catherine R. Harris, “Religion and the Socialist Movement in the United States,” in *Marxism and Christianity: A Symposium*, edited by Herbert Aptheker, 217-229 (New York: Humanities Press, 1968); Paul T. Phillips, *A Kingdom on Earth: Anglo-American Social Christianity, 1880-1940* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); and to a lesser extent Zubovich’s *Before the Religious Right* and Doug Rossinow, *Visions of Progress: The Left-Liberal Tradition in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

The term “applied religion” informally denotes, generally in religious political discourse, the application of Christian principles to practice.⁹ Thus this term differed in meaning depending on the intentions of the user. Of course, Claude C. Williams and his People’s Institute of Applied Religion, found religion, and even the entire concept of God, “not a theological abstraction apart from Man, but...a dynamic doctrine to be applied among men.”¹⁰ Religion became the method through which socialism could be disseminated among the people, as well as an ideology of socialism on its own that had to be protected from reactionary theologians and misinterpretation. The radical feminist leader of the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, Frances Willard, saw socialism as “applied Christianity,” and that the time had come for Christians to put their principles of solidarity and fraternity into action through bringing about society’s evolution into socialism.¹¹ In contrast, the Jewish socialist activist and writer Isaac M. Robbins, writing on the oppression of the African-American population, saw applied religion as a “doctrine of obedience” used to keep enslaved people in their place.¹² On the opposite side of the political aisle, emphasis on “practical Christianity” and “applied religion” were used in attempts to chart the notorious and elusive “third way” between industrial capitalism and communism. Father Charles Coughlin, the Catholic antisemite and economic populist, one of Williams’s chief enemies during his time in Detroit, called for “APPLIED CHRISTIANITY” as the basis for a “Christian Front...to PRESERVE America as one of the last frontiers of human liberty.”¹³ Coughlin’s exclusive Christian Front and selective human liberty differed greatly from anything

⁹ “Applied religion” is generally not an academic term, aside from various educational programs in “applied religious studies.” I have used it here to denote the focus on practical efforts by the adherents of the applied proletarian gospel over any abstract theology.

¹⁰ Williams, *Religion: Barrier or Bridge*, 58.

¹¹ Craig, *Religion and Radical Politics*, 60.

¹² I. M. Robbins, “The Economic Aspects of the Negro Problem,” *International Socialist Review* 8, no. 10 (April 1908), 617-618, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/isr/v08n10-apr-1908-ISR-gog.pdf>.

¹³ Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 149; Charles J. Tull, *Father Coughlin and the New Deal* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1965), 189-190.

Willard or Rev. Williams sought to bring about. Since “applied religion” or “applied Christianity” leaves a political ambiguity that can be exploited from the left or right, ensuring the partisan and class nature of the term by the added “proletarian” seems appropriate. Although Harry F. Ward and Claude Williams had inter-faith contacts, friendships, and support, and Bishop Brown often reiterated that it did not matter if one believed in Jehovah, Jesus, Buddha, or Allah, to say these men were militants of applied “religion” in general would give a universalist character that their efforts simply did not amount to.¹⁴ Thus, they were the standard-bearers of the applied proletarian *gospel*, a doctrine far more ambitious than Christian socialism but still deeply rooted in a Christian worldview.

Following this definition of the applied proletarian gospel, what is its place in the current historiography and labels applied to the social gospel and left-wing Christian radicalism in the United States? Historians have not come to a consensus on exactly where the “radical” strains of gospel should fit. Is the social gospel an umbrella term, or does it denote a specific sort of gospel? Dan McKanan and Doug Rossinow both posit that New Left activist-scholars in the 1950s and 1960s mechanically severed the relationship between the social gospel and the radical tradition, that the social gospel existed as an umbrella with a left, right, and center.¹⁵ David Nelson Duke argues a similar point, bringing attention to the social gospel as a branch of progressive era political thought and the various meanings of “progressivism” that all existed during the period.¹⁶ Contemporaries of Ward, even up to his ninetieth birthday, recognized him

¹⁴ William Montgomery Brown, *Communism and Christianity* (Galion: Bradford-Brown Educational Co., 1923), 111-117; William Montgomery Brown, *My Heresy: The Autobiography of An Idea* (New York: The John Day Company, 1926), 68-69; Carden, *William Montgomery Brown*, 196.

¹⁵ Dan McKanan, “The Implicit Religion of Radicalism: Socialist Party Theology, 1900-1934,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 3 (September 2010), 754; Doug Rossinow, “The Radicalization of the Social Gospel: Harry F. Ward and the Search for a New Social Order, 1898-1936,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2005), 63-65.

¹⁶ Duke, *In the Trenches*, 86-88.

primarily as a preacher of the social gospel, simply more radical than his peers.¹⁷ Anthony Dunbar, however, sees this gospel as springing out of the social gospel but as such a revolutionary offshoot that he deems it the “radical gospel.”¹⁸ Angela Denise Dillard, examining Williams’s activities in Detroit, comes to the conclusion that Williams had a “leftist version of social gospel,” leaving it ambiguous as to whether his gospel fell under a *part* of the already existing social gospel or a unique version.¹⁹ It must be noted, however, that Robert H. Craig opposes the use of “social gospel” for these radical interpretations of faith, as to him the social gospel comprised a middle-class movement that posited two separate gospels, a personal one and a social gospel.²⁰ Claude Williams rejected the social gospel for the very same reason as Craig, and Link records that Ward also rejected the label of the social gospel for similar reasons thereby emphasizing their mutual rejection of middle-class identification and embrace of working-class salvation.²¹

The arguments tend to focus far too much on categorizing individuals rather than accepting the fluid nature of their intellectual development and personal ideologies. Claude Williams considered himself a social gospeler when he ministered in Arkansas, and Ward lectured on Marx in the period most historians associate him with the social gospel. That said, there is a significant difference between the “radical social gospel” advocated by Walter

¹⁷ *Dr. Harry F. Ward on His 90th Birthday Anniversary* (New York: Harry F. Ward 90th Birthday Committee, 1963), 3-6.

¹⁸ Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, vii.

¹⁹ Dillard, *Faith in the City*, 8-9, 141-142.

²⁰ Craig, *Religion and Radical Politics*, 8.

²¹ Claude C. Williams, *One God, One People, One Goal: Theistic Collectivism* (Detroit: Peoples’ Institute of Applied Religion, 1944) 13; Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet*, 6, 38. Ward argued that “the very term social gospel is an unconscious confession of error...It expresses a reaction from an impossible individualistic type of religion and it fails to recognize that the Gospel, like man whose redemption it seeks, is neither social nor individual but inseparably both,” see Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet*, 225.

Rauschenbusch and that maintained by the proletarian gospel advocates.²² Although Rauschenbusch regularly used the term “revolution” in his work, he rarely worked out just what that revolution would be. In 1916, he declared Jesus explicitly a non-revolutionary framed by Pilate and unjustly accused of advocating for Roman overthrow by force of arms.²³ By 1918, he spoke of the gospel as providing a “mystic base for the social revolution.”²⁴ In the earliest of his theological works, in his *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, he perhaps went further, declaring that, “No great historic revolution has ever worked its way without breaking and splintering the old to make room for the new...[Christ] had not come to bring peace but the sword.”²⁵ Despite his last radical shift in tone, biographers of Rauschenbusch generally agree that his socialism was gradualist and non-violent in nature, that his “social revolution” was one of the spirit, the sword piercing the soul and not the body.²⁶ That his work seemingly became more moderate even as the First World War engulfed the world supports such an interpretation of Rauschenbuschian social gospel. This constitutes the key difference between even the most radical of the social gospelers and the proletarian gospel. While the proletarian gospel left a place for the necessity of violence in bringing about the Kingdom of God on Earth, the social gospel would only nod to it. Accepting even that this was not a defining feature of the social gospel as it existed, the uncompromising nature of the proletarian gospel ensured that they were forever separated from their liberal cousins. For example, *The Christian Century*, the vanguard publication for social

²² Duke sees Rauschenbusch as the most consistent representative of the “radical social gospel,” and so I have chosen him as its representative. See Duke, *In the Trenches*, 86-88, 239-240.

²³ Rauschenbusch, *The Social Principle of Jesus* (New York: Association Press, 1916), 197.

²⁴ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1918), 267.

²⁵ Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1920), 139-140.

²⁶ Dores Robinson Sharpe, *Walter Rauschenbusch* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1942), 202; Ramsay M. William, *Four Modern Prophets: Walter Rauschenbusch, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gustavo Gutierrez, Rosemary Radford Reuther* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), 22; Christopher Hodge Evans, *The Kingdom is Always But Coming: A Life of Walter Rauschenbusch* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), xxvi, 144.

Protestantism well into the Great Depression, debated endorsing Norman Thomas for President in 1932, but ended up endorsing Herbert Hoover and working with Franklin Roosevelt after his win.²⁷ For those who carried the cross of the applied proletarian gospel, this was anathema.

Brown, Ward, and Williams all saw themselves in the midst of a holy war for the Kingdom of God against capitalism, one in which there could be no compromise with segregation, capitalism, or institutional Christianity.²⁸

Closer to an accurate depiction of the proletarian gospel is Eugene P. Link's "Labor-Religion tradition," of which Harry F. Ward is the eponymous prophet. The most glaring weakness of Link's is that, even though he inaugurated the term, there is little in the way of analysis or explanation devoted to it. The concept is discussed only in the book's preface, given only a couple pages, and Link did not elaborate on the concept in any other works. Referring to the works of James Dombrowski, a student of Harry F. Ward and collaborator of Claude Williams and Don West, as well as Dunbar's *Against the Grain*, Link's "Labor-Religion tradition" is the term Link gives to the combination of Christian ethics with progressive activism alongside a unity of the personal and the social.²⁹ The question of ethics and morality were certainly prime issues for those within the tradition of the proletarian gospel. For his "bad," Bishop Brown's prime argument for the retention of religion was that "religion," for him, composed nothing more than a system of morality which could put forward an ethical framework by which to live. Communism was also a system of "morality, religion, and Christianity." The rituals and practices of Christianity, keeping their content strictly symbolic, could provide a

²⁷ Zubovich, *Before the Religious Right*, 36-37, 40-43.

²⁸ Duke maintains that an attitude of "holy war dualism" was a key feature in Ward's thought for most of his life, see Duke, *In the Trenches*, 135-136. Similar attitudes pervaded Brown and Williams.

²⁹ Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet*, xxviii-xxi.

pathway into molding the social morality and ethics of a truly socialist society.³⁰ Ward insisted that the “ethical basis of the Communist ideal and the ethical base of early Christianity were the same.”³¹ Williams declared that the (im)morality of the Truman administration showed that the “Kingdom of God is...not [in America].”³² But it would be wrong to insist that the opposition of the proletarian gospel was on an ethical basis only. All three men, although motivated by their understanding of Christian ethics, were willing to bypass ethical issues regarding socialism (namely the conduct of the Soviet government). For them, capitalism was not only fundamentally unethical and immoral, but it was also unscientific and broken. The Kingdom of God could, of course, not be built on immoral foundations, but it also couldn’t be built in a glass house on sandy ground. Ethical issues of socialism could be tolerated, as socialism was the holy side of the war against fascism, imperialism, and the evils of capitalism. Link’s “Labor-Religion tradition” also does not seem to necessitate a desire for fundamental change in political economy, as they are tangential in Ward’s “labor-religion.”³³ It cannot be so for the *applied* proletarian gospel, for which agitation for a wholly (and holy) new world erased of the sins of capitalism was non-negotiable.

Lastly is Erik Gellman and Jarod Roll’s concept of the “gospel of the working class.” Hammering out the concept for five years between their publication of an extensive article on Rev. Owen Whitfield in 2006 to their dual biography of Whitfield and Williams, there might seem to be little difference between a “working class gospel” and the “Labor-Religion tradition”

³⁰ Brown, *Communism and Christianity*, 26-27.

³¹ “Are Communism and Democracy Mutually Antagonistic?” 79th Cong., 2nd sess., *Congressional Record* 92, pt. 11, A2993.

³² Claude C. Williams, “I Am An Agent of a Foreign Power,” September 20, 1953, https://archive.org/details/sim_guardian_1950-09-20_2_43.

³³ Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet*, xx.

at a glance.³⁴ Key differences exist, however, in that the trend they analyze was a gospel of the working class not only because it preached in tandem with the workers, it preached *to and for* the workers. Gellman and Roll emphasize correctly that the gospel of Whitfield and Williams actively bucked institutional Christianity in favor of mobilizing grassroots spiritual power (what Williams termed the “mass dynamic of religion”) for progressive political change. They took “symbols, language, and folk traditions” of tight-knit communities in the South and translated them into calls for radical political change. In many ways, they adopted the radical religious symbolism of Brown and put it into practice, foreshadowing what John Brentlinger would see in the Sandinista Revolution as the incorporation of the “best [traditions] from the past” in the service of revolutionary change.³⁵ As with Link’s “Labor-Religion tradition,” however, the “gospel of the working class” mostly neglects the Marxist aspects of the proletarian gospel tradition. The “gospel of the working class” could easily include the likes of A. J. Muste and Dorothy Day who, although progressive in their activism, did not seek a new world in the same method or even the same form as the proletarian gospellers did.³⁶ Brown, Ward, and Williams all sought to bring about a “People’s World,” a Marxist socialism, to start the construction of the Kingdom of God on Earth.

Thus, we are left with the applied proletarian gospel. Applied because it was, above all, a unity of theory and practice seeking to utilize Christian tradition as a method of revolutionary activism. Proletarian, as it focused on the role of the poor and working-class as the true inheritors

³⁴ Erik S. Gellman and Jarod Roll, “Owen Whitfield and the Gospel of the Working Class in New Deal American, 1936-1946,” *The Journal of Southern History* 72, no. 2 (May 2006), 303-306; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 1-5.

³⁵ Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 1-4; Williams, *Religion: Barrier or Bridge*, 48-62; Claude C. Williams, “The Circuit Rider,” in *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression*, edited by Studs Terkel (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 330-331; John Brentlinger “Revolutionizing Spirituality: Reflections on Marxism and Religion,” *Science & Society* 64, no. 2 (Summer 2000), 185, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40403838>.

³⁶ Muste and Day were both pacifists, and preferred decentralized organizing in their approach.

of Heaven and sought the Kingdom of God through the oftentimes millenarian destruction of capitalism and establishment of a socialist state. A gospel, as it was decisively Christian in origin and character, even as its proponents were open to interfaith contacts and saw religion itself as a universal, ethical tool for mass political and spiritual mobilization towards a better world.

The Redeemed Bishop Brown and Christian Proletarian Symbolism

Bishop William Montgomery Brown occupies a fascinating place in American radical history. At one time the most prominent and vocal religious segregationist and theological racist, he spoke against racism at the founding convention of the Negro Labor Congress in 1925.³⁷ Where the church once regarded him as the author of the finest book establishing the holy superiority of the Episcopalian church above all others, he died a bishop of an unrecognized Old Catholic Church, deposed as an Episcopalian, and then tricked into a false Apostolic Succession by an enigmatic radical priest with invalid orders in an effort to preserve his title.³⁸ Once a religious literalist and then a through and through materialist for the last two decades of his life, he never completely abandoned his faith or the notion of Christianity. By no means the first Christian socialist or Marxist in the United States, he was certainly one of the most vocal and passionate about the validity of the gospels of Christ and Marx. Considered mentally ill and pitied by his clerical colleagues, he was treated as a muddled intellectual and ideologically uncomfortable curiosity by his Communist comrades.³⁹ From 1917, however, Brown remained a firm friend of the worker and an advocate for a truly moral proletarian world.

Bill Brown's early life was not an easy one. Born, 1855, to domestic servants on a kitchen table in Wayne County, Ohio, Brown was quickly pushed into tragic circumstances. His father died of pneumonia when he approached eight years old. Due to the family's poverty and a rejected war widow's pension, the young boy was "bounded out" to a strict, often abusive

³⁷ Carden, *William Montgomery Brown*, 221-222; Earle Ofari Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class Conflict, 1917-1990* (Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), 31.

³⁸ Carden, *William Montgomery Brown*, 208.

³⁹ Roy correctly emphasizes the poor treatment of Brown by his Communist comrades, and remarks that Brown would have been more at home in the Popular Front which began at the end of his life and included Harry Ward and other Christians, see Roy, *Communism and the Churches*, 25-28. He ignores, however, that the attitude of the Communist Party softened towards the end of Brown's life, as I detail later.

German Baptist family. Conditions were bad enough that the state intervened and removed him around 1870; Brown recalled in his twilight years how he was shut up in a barn when not working and was fascinated with the idea of children's games. By a stroke of luck, he was found and (unofficially) adopted by the very farming family on whose table he was born, the Methodist Gardner family, as his mother refused to recognize him. As the Gardener children had gone to a local Methodist school, Brown became fixated on the idea of attaining an education and joining the ministry.⁴⁰

With the Methodists, Brown first displayed a distaste for irrationalism that would eventually culminate in a Christian materialism in which Marx and Lenin had taken seats right beside Christ. To gain an education, emulate his adopted siblings, and please his pious stepmother, Brown sought to become a true Christian as part of the Methodist ministry. Brown, however, could not properly please the congregation to which he belonged with the authenticity of his "salvation," as he did not engage in the usual Methodist emotionalism. As Brown admitted, "the Witness of the Spirit was totally lacking."⁴¹ The eclectic blend of Wesleyan Methodism and emotional lay preaching that attracted Harry Ward so intensely to Christianity was antithetical to Brown's character.⁴² Even Claude Williams, who rejected supernaturalist aspects of Christianity like Brown would late in life, always had a respect for the power of emotionalism and revivalistic tendencies in religion, which he made a keystone of his religious organizing techniques.⁴³ His rejection of emotionalism, however, did not lead Brown out of the

⁴⁰ Brown, *My Heresy*, 4-9; Carden, *William Montgomery Brown*, 7-16; Theodore Schroeder, *The Bishop of Bolsheviks and Atheists* (New York: n.p., 1922), 4-6, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015080472171>.

⁴¹ Brown, *My Heresy*, 11-12; Carden, *William Montgomery Brown*, 14-17.

⁴² Duke, *In the Trenches*, 8-10

⁴³ Cedric Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*, 221-230; 241-244; Bill Troy and Claude Williams, "People's Institute of Applied Religion," in *Christian Commitment for the 80s: A Study/Action Guide*, edited by Harry Strharsky (Oakland: Inter-Religious Taskforce for Social Analysis, 1980), 145; Williams, "Circuit Rider," 331.

church. It should also not be taken as a complete rejection of emotion in his faith; Brown's radical Christianity was deeply emotional and spiritual, built upon a sense of brotherhood and solidarity with all religions and all of humanity. After the opportunity arose and his stepmother remarked that "one church was as good as another," Brown left the emotional Methodists in 1877 for the church that would subsequently love him for his denominational loyalty, find him an embarrassment as a vocal racist, and finally as a heretic—the Anglican-aligned Protestant Episcopal Church of America.⁴⁴

The next twenty years of Brown's life won him recognition in the Episcopalian Church as well as the credentials needed for his own Arkansas diocese. He studied for some time at Ohio Theological Seminary (Bexley Hall) without graduating and was ordained as a deacon in 1883. Two years later, he married Ella Scranton Bradford, the adopted daughter and distant relative of his Episcopalian benefactor Mary Scranton Bradford. Utilizing his background as a poor rural farmhand and speaking to prospective parishioners in their own language, Brown became an extremely successful missionary through the Galion, Ohio area. Brown became known as a defender of the Episcopalian Church and Biblical literalism against denominational detractors and biblical criticism as he began to author pamphlets amidst the rise of higher criticism in the 1880s. In 1891, the bishop of the Ohio diocese appointed Brown Archdeacon of Missions in the Ohio diocese. Most importantly, however, he published *The Church for Americans* in 1895. The

⁴⁴ Brown, *My Heresy*, 13-19; Carden, *William Montgomery Brown* 18-25; Schroeder, *Bishop of Bolsheviks*, 8. As a humorous and poignant nod towards his church union ambitions, Brown remarked that he was simultaneously a Methodist and an Episcopalian while he was a bishop, as the Episcopalians never asked him to renounce his Methodism.

book would earn him national renown within the Episcopalian Church and would be a labor for which the church repaid him with his own bishopric.⁴⁵

The Church for Americans, a series of lectures aimed at strictly denominational conversion and education, argued that the Episcopalian Church was “the church for Americans.” Attacking “nonsectarians,” “Denominationalists,” and “Romanists,” the book notably celebrated white supremacy in proclaiming that the Episcopalian Church was the “church of our [English-speaking] race,” “our civilization,” and in fact preaching and teaching to non-white races was the job of the Catholic Church. He would later change his position to one advocating separate but associated churches for people of color. Theologically literalist, it expressed a theme that would become one that Brown crusaded for even in his most heretical phase: Protestant unity. Although at the time he believed that the Episcopalians would lead the way as the “church of reconciliation,” he would move to a more radical position over time.⁴⁶

In 1897, the Arkansas Bishop Henry Niles Pierce wrote to the Archdeacon Brown and commended him for his apologetics in service of the Protestant Episcopal Church. At the same time, Pierce searched desperately for an official successor and decided that Brown fit as a candidate. The Arkansas Church was in complete disarray. Pierce, from Rhode Island, had antagonized the powerful Christ Church congregation in Little Rock with his missionary work among African-Americans, particularly with his formation of a parish for them. Despite retaining complete segregation, even accommodation was too much for Arkansas, and conservatives began to use regional rhetoric against Pierce and his “Yankee” ways. Pierce decided that Brown,

⁴⁵ Brown, *My Heresy*, 20-26; Carden, *William Montgomery Brown*, 27-45; Schroeder, *Bishop of Bolsheviks*, 8-11; Edward Bushnell, *The Narrow Bed: A Bird's Eye View of the Trial for Heresy of William Montgomery Brown* (Galion: Bradford-Brown Education Company, 1925), 9-10.

⁴⁶ William Montgomery Brown, *The Church for Americans* (New York: Thomas Whitaker, 1896), 272, 363-401, 421; Brown, *My Heresy*, 26; Carden, *William Montgomery Brown*, 45-47.

with his missionary credentials, would be the best fit for expanding the church in Arkansas. With the assistance of the black parish's representative, Brown gained a majority and became coadjutor in December 1897. Despite a fierce attack from conservatives and even his own bishop in Ohio, Brown's election was certified in May 1898 and consecrated in June. Brown became Bishop of Arkansas around September 1899 with the death of Bishop Pierce. Unlike his earlier election, however, there was no opposition from Christ Church or the Arkansas conservatives. Carden asks the appropriate question: "how had he worked such a miracle of support from all factions so quickly?"⁴⁷

The answer is tragic, especially considering all the work Bishop Pierce had done in pushing for the mildest accommodation of the black devotees. The ambitious Bishop Brown had, unbeknownst to his African-American supporters, concluded an alliance with the Christ Church congregation that turned him into, in his own words, "much more southern than the southerners."⁴⁸ And indeed it did. While he worked vigorously on missionary work and even helped establish a school for rural mountain women, he began to push his old line of the racial nature of the Anglican tradition even more. He eliminated the black seat on the annual council that had won him his election, defended segregation as natural and lynching as a justified punishment for rape, and cluelessly justified himself on the grounds of the degeneration of the black "race" in front of a majority black audience in the "Boston Incident of 1904." Keeping in mind the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of the Supreme Court in 1896 that codified segregation laws, it was no longer merely the attitudes or institutions of the United States that backed the ideas of segregationist racists like the new bishop, but the entire legal ideological apparatus of

⁴⁷ Carden, *William Montgomery Brown*, 49-70.

⁴⁸ William Montgomery Brown, "The American Race Problem," in *Heresy: Bad Bishop Brown's Quarterly Lectures* (Galion: Bradford-Brown Education Company, 1930), 19.

the nation.⁴⁹ Shifting his position to one of “uplifting” the black man in 1905, he authored in 1907 his *The Crucial Race Question*, in which he argued for a completely separated racial church.⁵⁰

A thoroughly racist work, *The Crucial Race Question* demonstrated just how reactionary the combination of Brown’s time in Arkansas and his religious literalism had made him. Over 300 pages in length, it was filled with the nonsensical stereotypes and suppositions about the racial character of the white and black. Ignorantly misinterpreting the desires of the black Episcopalians in Arkansas (whose situation left them with little choice but to agree with Brown’s autocratic decisions), Brown concluded with the concession that his proposal is “the complete drawing of the Color-Line,” and this line could “make a world of difference” being drawn “as wide as the East is from the West in every Diocese.”⁵¹ Quickly, criticism poured in. Condemned in the North for his blatant racism, the South condemned him for the fact that his segregationist proposal would create a black church with its own hierarchy and autonomous power—an equal separation.

Significant for the purpose of Brown’s overall path to heresy, however, is that his racist divergence had also made an old idea, Protestant unionism, recurrent. Throughout the book, Brown had referenced the conduct of other denominations in regard to segregation and racial issues. Finally, in strange flow of consciousness, Brown suggested that the establishment of separate racial episcopate should be carried out in tandem with the offer of “our Anglo-Catholic

⁴⁹ Charles A. Lofgren, *The Plessy Case: A Legal-Historical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 93-115.

⁵⁰ Brown, *My Heresy*, 43-46; Brown, “The American Race Problem,” 21-22; Carden, *William Montgomery Brown*, 71-85; Bushnell, *The Narrow Bed*, 10; Schroeder, *The Bishop of Bolsheviks*, 11-14.

⁵¹ William Montgomery Brown, *The Crucial Race Question: Or, Where and How the Color Line Shall Be Drawn* (Little Rock: The Arkansas Churchman’s Publishing Co., 1907), 249.

Episcopate to our Anglo-American Brethren of the various denominations of orthodox Christians...Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Baptist bodies..."⁵² An important difference in Brown's old theme came with his new suggestions—he offered the “episcopate” for other denominations unconditionally, on equal ground. No longer the “church of reconciliation,” the Protestant Episcopal Church was just a first among *equals*.

Even as Brown became bogged in church issues and abandoned his idea of a racially separate church, he continued to agitate for the church union. His endeavors would culminate in his most controversial work while an active bishop, *The Level Plan of Church Union*, published in January of 1910. In his new work, he advocated for what he termed the “republican” form of Christian ministry—the *direct* election of bishops. In a way he merely developed *The Church for Americans*, but the other way around; the Episcopalian church had to make itself the church for Americans by embracing democratic practices.⁵³ Although the union with other Protestant denominations would retain their own episcopates and the “union” amounted to a confederation of already existing denominations, Brown actively rejected the notion of Apostolic Succession. According to the concept of Apostolic Succession, inherent to Anglo-Catholic and Orthodox tradition, the consecration of bishops as successors to older bishops forms an unbroken line back all the way to the Apostles. By election through vote rather than divine ordination, Brown attacked the heart of the church, essentially arguing that being the same “church” as the Apostles of Christ did not matter. A swift and extremely fierce reaction ensued. Even laymen, whom the proposed change to elections would give much more power, did not support him. After receiving

⁵² Brown, *The Crucial Race Question*, 219.

⁵³ William Montgomery Brown, *The Level Plan for Church Union* (New York: Thomas Whitaker, 1910), xi.

a successor in 1911, Brown handed over all power in the diocese and returned permanently to his home in Galion.⁵⁴

Suffering from a deep depression as he lost his diocese and universally condemned throughout the church he had dedicated his life to, Brown received quite the prescription from his doctor. The doctor suggested that he read Charles Darwin. Following the recommendation, he read Darwin alongside rationalist discourses from England and books discussing the religious implications of Darwinian theory. He reread the Bible to review his own doctrine. By July 1913, Brown had completely rejected supernaturalism and Biblical literalism, even the historical Jesus. Religion was not supernatural but an idea, an idea providing the basis for what is good and moral in society. By 1915, the basis of his most radical phase was laid. He felt the mission of the churches should be to focus on activities of social characters, actively helping the needy instead of praying for them.⁵⁵

Motivated by his pacifistic feelings regarding World War I and disillusioned with American entrance into it, Brown moved into the realm of radical politics and socialism. Exactly how he got there is ambiguous. Brown's memory in his autobiography is often faulty and non-specific. The fact is, however, that Brown came to socialism, and he planted himself firmly in the radical camp. Like he did with Darwin, he now began to read as much socialist literature as possible, became a member of the Socialist Party in 1918, and began to plan a book entitled *Theism and Socialism*. Meeting the socialist saint Eugene V. Debs in the fall of 1917, Brown became friends with the Ohio socialists Charles Ruthenburg and Alfred Wagenknecht and followed them into their formation of the Communist Labor Party in 1919. A visit from the

⁵⁴ Brown, *My Heresy*, 47-49; Carden, *William Montgomery Brown*, 97-107; Bushnell, *The Narrow Bed*, 10-11
Schroeder, *Bishop of Bolsheviks*, 14-16

⁵⁵ Brown, *My Heresy*, 49-63; Carden, *William Montgomery Brown*, 106-118.

Soviet Bureau in New York gave him the idea for the title *Communism and Christianity* in 1920, and he would soon publish his most controversial work.⁵⁶

Communism and Christianity: Analyzed and Contrasted from the Marxian and Darwinian Points of View is a jarring work, a spirited defense of communism that argues for the retention of religion despite its totally symbolic nature. It opens with the quotation “Banish the Gods from the Skies and Capitalism from the Earth and make the World safe for Industrial Communism.” A picture of Brown in his full priestly robes is provided with the Latin caption “Episcopus in partibus Bolhsevikium et Infidelium,” “Bishop in part a Bolshevik and an Infidel.” Dedicated to the proletariat, it is introduced with portions of the “Official Manifesto of the Socialist Party of Great Britain” (SPGB) that deal with religion in a harsh and critical manner.⁵⁷ Divided into two parts, dealing independently with communism and “christianism,” both parts are framed as epistles to acquaintances of Brown.

The proletarian gospel that Brown pushes forth in *Communism and Christianity* might seem antithetical to the very idea of the Christian gospels. Brown proclaims that “Christianism as a religion has collapsed,” that there is no objective “God” aside from the symbols that he represents, that Jesus was simultaneously a revolutionary, “a symbol of all that is for the good of the world,” and the “god of slavery,” all while not existing in the first place.⁵⁸ The extent to which Brown could be considered an atheist of the caliber Carden finds him is debatable. Brown found that a prayer towards God was nothing more than a symbolic gesture towards the creative and producing powers of the proletariat. “Productive labour” was the “saviour of the world, *its*

⁵⁶ Brown, *My Heresy*, 64-70; Carden, *William Montgomery Brown*, 119-132.

⁵⁷ William Montgomery Brown, *Communism and Christianity*, 1-9. The SPGB, part of the “World Socialist Movement” trend of Marxism, is a still active hyper-sectarian and anti-Leninist party. That Brown relied on such an organization hostile to the principles he upheld perhaps demonstrates how rushed Brown’s publication was.

⁵⁸ Brown, *Communism and Christianity*, 17, 89, 25, 92.

real god, the divinity in which we live, move and have our being.”⁵⁹ Was his position one of atheism, or the elevation of humanity itself to the level of the divine? It seems, rather than simply reading Marx, Brown could have benefitted from reading the philosophical works of Hegel in his radical interpretation of God. Hegelian scholar Stephen Houlgate concludes that, like Brown, “God” in Hegel’s work became the idea of truth as it existed in interaction with other people.⁶⁰

However controversial his statements about orthodox Christianity, Brown did not seek to discard the religion he believed in. Only its perverted form, one which played archangel to the bourgeoisie, had collapsed. His definition of religion was not synonymous with Christianity or supernaturalism. Religion was the “ideal...of the sphere in which humanity lives, moves and has its social being.”⁶¹ His God was simultaneously nature and humanity, all the laws of nature as well as the potentialities of man.⁶² He had multiple trinities: in the “physical realm,” matter, force, and motion; in the “moral realm,” fact, truth, and life; in the “social realm,” religion, politics, and civilization.⁶³ He had his own pantheon, the great scientists who had proved to him the futility of his path before Marxism: Lavoisier, Mayer, Kant, Laplace, Kepler, Newton, Darwin, Wallace, Marx, and Engels.⁶⁴ Communism was, to him, the “synonym at once of morality, religion and Christianity.”⁶⁵ Jesus, in his symbolic interpretation, was the greatest representative of the working classes, who will make great sacrifices, be crucified, in the revolution, but be resurrected in the new world to come.⁶⁶ The religion he upheld bordered on

⁵⁹ Brown, *Communism and Christianity*, 38. My italics.

⁶⁰ Stephen Houlgate, *An Introduction to Hegel: Freedom, Truth, and History* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 96.

⁶¹ Brown, *Communism and Christianity*, 16

⁶² Brown, *Communism and Christianity*, 22, 113.

⁶³ Brown, *Communism and Christianity*, 153, 174.

⁶⁴ Brown, *Communism and Christianity*, 62.

⁶⁵ Brown, *Communism and Christianity*, 27

⁶⁶ Brown, *Communism and Christianity*, 198.

atheism and was solidly humanist, but until his very end, Brown insisted that he was a communing Christian, and one whose God was higher, more powerful, and far more beautiful and spiritual than that of the orthodox Christian.

The reaction from mainstream Christianity and especially his own church was predictable and has been dealt with at greater lengths by others.⁶⁷ One must wonder, however, how the socialists found Brown's new and strange interpretation of Christianity. The ideas he brought forth did not equate to Christian socialism, it argued for an identification of Marxism with religion, of Christianity with socialism, of materialism with God. The Socialist Party of America, Brown's old comrades, were not enthused. The Chicago *Socialist World* castigated Brown, somewhat unfairly, as an "irresponsible person, not even a socialist." Much of the criticism focused on the inclusion of the SPGB manifesto at the beginning of the book, with its assertion that socialism and religion were diametrically opposed. Had the editor read on, he may have discovered that Brown dedicated the entire book to an identification of socialism with religion, and that Brown clearly aimed the SPGB manifesto at the orthodox Christianity he criticizes.⁶⁸ Even Brown's own fellow Marxists in the Communist Party, however, did not receive him. Those sympathizing with Bolshevism criticized Brown's retention of religious symbolism as hurting the revolution more than it did capitalism, and they cast doubt onto Brown's very dedication to Marxism and revolutionary socialism just as the socialists had. This time, however, instead of being too rude to religion, he had been too friendly. The American Communist H. M. Wicks and Russian Bolshevik Pyotr Krasikov both attacked Brown for retaining religious

⁶⁷ See Carden, *William Montgomery Brown*; Ralph Lord Roy, *Communism and the Churches* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1960), 21-28.

⁶⁸ William M. Feigenbaum, "Again—Religion," *Socialist World*, January 15, 1921.

practice, obfuscating material conditions in favor of outdated and reactionary sentimentalism.⁶⁹ Praise, or at least neutral notice, did come from one surprising place, the mouth of Leon Trotsky. Rather than criticizing Brown's retention of religion, Trotsky noted with praise that Brown had rejected a personal, supernatural God, and recognized that "religion flows from the class nature of society."⁷⁰ Brown indeed had recognized the fluid nature of religion and its conditioning by societal development, but Trotsky noticeably ignored the Bishop's contention that religion still had something positive to offer socialist society. Such an ambiguous attitude would pervade Brown's relationship with the official Communist movement for the rest of his life.

Brown's trial for heresy concluded with his guilt confirmed in 1924, and the House of Bishops officially reviewed and deposed him 1925. While Brown awaited the Court of Review on his heresy sentencing, a group of Communists had been arrested in Bridgman, Michigan, for allegedly plotting the overthrow of the US government. The group had with them a check from the Bishop.⁷¹ Despite the ambivalence of the Party leadership towards Brown, many rank-and-file communists whose general understanding of Marxism often left a place for religion regarded Brown as a safe refuge for any activist or person in need.⁷²

Brown spent the last years of his life fighting illness and in service to the Revolution. One of the few whites in attendance, Brown gave a speech to around forty delegates at the founding convention of the American Negro Labor Congress in 1925. Although naively declaring he had been "Jimcrowded" with his heresy conviction and deposition from the church,

⁶⁹ H. M. Wicks, "The Final Damnation," *The Daily Worker*, October 13, 1925; Pyotr Krasikov, "The Bishop and the Bolsheviks," *The Liberator*, September 1924.

⁷⁰ Leon Trotsky, *The Position of the Republic and the Task of Young Workers: Report to the 5th All-Russian Communist League of Youth 1922* (London: New Park Publications, 1972), 22.

⁷¹ Kyser, "The Deposition," 43.

⁷² Carden, *William Montgomery Brown*, 237-238.

he demonstrated his progressive credentials and repudiation of his former views when he shouted, “Long live the American Negro, and on an equal footing with American Caucasians!”⁷³ He would only double down on his anti-racist position as he went on. In 1930, he declared that “in America the Negro is the future Bolshevik Christ, the revolutionary Christ, to whom we must look for salvation from our...ruinous national sin of exploitation.”⁷⁴ Brown turned his position around completely. He no longer saw people of color in need of white civilization. Instead, the racist structure of American capitalism and the underprivileged status of African-Americans gave them the revolutionary class consciousness necessary to lead the socialist revolution in the United States.

After his heresy trial and deposition, the Bishop involved himself extensively with activist causes on the left. He was a member of the All-American Anti-Imperialist League in 1926. In 1927, he returned to one of the issues that had galvanized him into the socialist movement, the defense of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) agitator Tom Mooney, by going on a speaking tour for the communist International Labor Defense and presenting a speech entitled “Revolution and Evolution.” He spoke at the memorial service for Ruthenburg upon his death in 1927, and the FBI considered him an influential and dangerous enough radical to keep tabs on him.⁷⁵ In 1931, he helped organize the National Committee to Aid Striking Miners Fighting Starvation, an organization formed to aid the Harlan County, KY strikes.⁷⁶ In August

⁷³ Carden, *William Montgomery Brown*, 221-222; Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds*, 31.

⁷⁴ Brown, “The American Race Problem,” 28.

⁷⁵ Carden, *William Montgomery Brown*, 226-228. Interestingly, Carden remarks that he found it likely the FBI withheld some of the information he obtained under the Freedom of Information Act as most of the received files dealt with Brown’s attempts to advertise *Communism and Christianity* in 1921 while the file itself went to 1940.

⁷⁶ His membership in the NCASMFS comes from Elizabeth Dilling’s infamous *The Red Network* and is noted by Carden as the only source for some of his speeches. See Elizabeth Dilling, *The Red Network: A “Who’s Who” and Handbook of Radicalism for Patriots* (Chicago: Elizabeth Dilling, 1934), 196, http://moses.law.umn.edu/darrow/documents/The_Red_Network_1934.pdf.

1933, he spoke at the World Fellowship of Faiths Parliament on the advancement of socialism in the Soviet Union and how its science replaced the supernaturalism of the past.⁷⁷ In 1934, he had membership on the national committee of the Friends of the Soviet Union, which had sold *Communism and Christianity* during his heresy trial.⁷⁸ Perhaps the last radical act of Brown's heretical career was to meet the Communist Party Chairman and General Secretary Earl Browder on his 81st birthday, September 4, 1936. Brown had been invited to attend the CPUSA national convention to nominate Earl Browder and James Ford as the CPUSA presidential ticket for 1936 but was unable to attend. With the advent of the Popular Front, the Communist Party had dropped much of its antagonistic stance towards believers themselves and the idea of religion in general, Browder himself declaring that "the cessation of ineffective, rude and vulgar attacks upon religion is a positive improvement in our work."⁷⁹ One can only wonder if the elderly and eccentric Bishop's radical enthusiasm for a new world and a proletarian gospel sat in any Communist's mind when the Popular Front policy on religion came into being.

On October 18th, 1937, Bishop William Montgomery Brown suffered a stroke and fell into a coma. His daring sacrilegious conduct continued even unto death, he died in the early morning hours of October 31, Halloween, 1937.⁸⁰ The Bishop who, no more than an indentured servant in the early 1870s, died a daring radical who had given up his lofty position in the Episcopalian church for a movement, and a proletarian gospel, he believed in.

⁷⁷ Carden, *William Montgomery Brown*, 231; Dilling, *Red Network*, 153. The text of his speech was likely more friendly to "religion," as he understood it, than Dilling made it out to be

⁷⁸ Dilling, *Red Network*, 162.

⁷⁹ Earl Browder, *What is Communism?* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1936), 148; Carden, *William Montgomery Brown*, 234-237.

⁸⁰ Carden, *William Montgomery Brown*, 240-241.

Harry F. Ward and His Marxian Social Methodism

Announcing the memorial service for the late “Bad Bishop Brown,” the same 1938 issue of the flagship Communist newspaper *People’s Daily World* also announced a talk on the topic of “Democracy Under Fire.” Scheduled to speak alongside the Farmer-Labor Governor of Minnesota Elmer Benson, Harry F. Ward found himself one of the leading stars of the Popular Front.⁸¹ How could it be that one of the most prominent Methodists in U.S. history, author of the Methodist “Social Creed,” and one of the most prominent social gospellers of the pre-WWI years became the most influential religious radical of the Great Depression and McCarthyist eras?

Harry Frederick Ward was born on October 15, 1873, to the cheese monger-butcher and Methodist lay preacher Harry Ward and his wife Fanny in London, England. The dual religious character of his household cannot be understated; the family practiced within traditional Wesleyan Methodism but embraced certain evangelical practices with their lay-preaching and informal worship as part of a “mission band” aimed at London’s working-classes.⁸² Here, early in life, were sown the seeds of Ward’s dedication to a sort of Methodism that transcended institutional boundaries and sought instead a more democratic system in all aspects of life.

Ward grew up in a situation that could have been detrimental to the development of his adult radicalism. One instance related by Ward’s biographers is notable for just how formative it could have been on the development of Ward’s radical views. The Ward family, although not exactly rich, was well-off enough that they were able to hire shop assistants for the elder Ward’s

⁸¹ “Ward to Talk in Los Angeles on Tuesday: Peace Congress Head to Share Platform with Governor Benson,” *People’s Daily World*, January 15, 1938, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/peoples-world/n523-v1n13-jan-15-1938-PDW.pdf>. *People’s Daily World* was the Popular Front successor to the *Daily Worker* (which actually continued publication until 1958) and is still published by the CPUSA today as *People’s World*. The *Daily Worker* originated from the *Ohio Socialist* which Brown had written for.

⁸² Duke, *In the Trenches*, 1-12; Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet*, 2-3.

business. Pious in his personal conduct, the senior Ward acted harsh towards his workers—fourteen hour-a-day shifts that made him a “sweater” to the local workers. He refused to engage constructively with his workers’ protests or their attempts to organize, and in one instance pelted their protests with soapy water and flour. Link records that Ward preserved an interesting document to his death. It was the flier printed by the workers which labeled his father “this SWEATER of your Oppressed Brothers and Sisters.” Perhaps it reminded him that he came from a position of privilege and had a duty to correct the sins of the father.⁸³

In 1891, at seventeen, he immigrated to the United States where he had relatives in the Midwest. Ironically working as a typist for the Latter-Day Saints in Salt Lake City, he also began to serve as a Methodist chaplain to a local military base. He eventually began to attend classes at the University of Southern California in 1893, where he read Progressive intellectual Richard T. Ely’s *Social Aspects of Christianity*.⁸⁴ Although Ely opposed socialism, he argued that the church had given in to “subserviency to the powers of the world,” attacking the excesses of capitalism in usury, unfair capitalist practices towards labor, and the neglect of the Golden Rule.⁸⁵ Thus, without exposure to Christian socialism or Marxist theory, the seeds of a rejection of the immoral nature of the capitalist system were sown in the mind of Harry F. Ward just several years after arriving in the U.S..

⁸³ Duke, *In the Trenches*, 15-16; Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet*, 3.

⁸⁴ Duke, *In the Trenches*, 19-23; Link, 5-6. Link relates that Ward did not read Ely until he attended Northwestern University in Illinois in 1894. However, Link also incorrectly relates that Ward met and studied with George Albert Coe in his first semester at USC, while Duke correctly states that Coe had left years earlier in 1890. This also means that it was not John H. Gray who introduced Ward to Ely, but the ministerial classes he was taking for the Methodist ministry, as Duke states.

⁸⁵ Richard T. Ely, *Social Aspects of Christianity and Other Essays* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Company, 1889), 11-16.

When he moved to Northwestern University in the fall of 1894, other non-socialist intellectuals would further push him to the left. George Albert Coe, a philosophical pragmatist with whom Ward had a lifelong friendship, instilled in him the idea of complete socialization. In Coe's view, there was no such philosophical thing-in-itself amounting to the "individual." As man was a social being, everything had to be considered with this in mind. Coe termed his concept the "social self arising in experience."⁸⁶ The economist John H. Gray, who advocated a "moral economics" fundamentally different from capitalism in which unions would manage enterprises, taught Ward at Northwestern.⁸⁷ When Ward graduated Northwestern and moved on to Harvard, the Christian ethicist Francis G. Peabody would join his group of influences.⁸⁸ In Peabody's *Jesus Christ and the Social Question*, he sympathized with the "socialist aim," and critiqued the conduct of capitalism and industrialism as he found it in America. Like most Christians, however, Peabody recoiled at the violence and anti-religious attitudes of orthodox socialism (lamenting the lack of an independent Christian socialism rooted firmly in itself), and still hooked himself tightly to the tradition of the spiritual gospel against interpretations of Christ as a revolutionary or reformer.⁸⁹ Through the guidance of his teachers at Northwestern and Harvard, Ward had been exposed to Christian critiques of both Marxism and capitalism. By no means an outright radical, his attitude had been shaped by these influences into one of deep discontent with the morality of capitalism and its adherents.

Harry Ward's job as head resident of the Northwestern University Settlement, which he took up in 1898, and other positions in Chicago for the next decade, pushed him into the arms of

⁸⁶ Duke, *In the Trenches*, 23-29; Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet*, 5-6.

⁸⁷ Duke, *In the Trenches*, 29-30; Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet*, 6-7.

⁸⁸ Duke, *In the Trenches*, 39-40.

⁸⁹ Francis G. Peabody, *Jesus Christ and the Social Question* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1900), 56-78.

the radical social gospel and would nudge him towards his future proletarian gospel. Modeled after Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr's Hull House, Ward's Settlement house meant that Ward lived among the immigrant population in Chicago (often heavily Catholic) and attempted to build personal relationships and networks among them alongside material aid and workers' programs. Ward became co-pastor at Wabash Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church. Although he left the Settlement house in 1900, he led a working-class church at 47th Street, Methodist Episcopal, in October of the same year. Here he realized the error of his ways. Working men did not come to the church because of its connections with the bosses that exploited and mistreated them. Ward then entered the labor movement as a ministerial ally and remained one for the rest of his life.⁹⁰ Although Ward kept up close contact with Coe and both men debated and discussed Marxist ideas until Coe's death, it is clear that Ward's experiences in Chicago, especially among the working poor and the labor movement, that pushed him out of the intellectualist and utopian social Christianity of Ely and Peabody into something more radical.

These intellectual influences and practical experiences led Ward to embrace activism beyond the church and explore ideology beyond the Christian worldview. In 1905, he read Karl Marx. Two years later, in 1907, he was a key figure in founding the Methodist Federation for Social Service (MFSS). Ward authored the influential "Social Creed" for the MFSS, which would be adopted by the inter-denominational ecumenical Federal Council of Churches and called by Link the "Magna-Charta for Church-Labor relations."⁹¹ Although certainly a progressive, even radical, document for its time, the "Social Creed" had traces of Progressive Era reformism that Ward would all but abandon by 1917. It called for "conciliation and arbitration in

⁹⁰ Duke, *In the Trenches*, 44-52; Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet*, 16-25.

⁹¹ Duke, *In the Trenches*, 58-61; Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet*, 38-48.

industrial dissensions” rather than the supremacy of the workers, as well as the paternalistic concern for women’s health common in labor discourse at the time, “regulation of the conditions of labor *for* women as shall safeguard the...moral health of the community.”⁹² The leader of the Christian Socialist Fellowship of the Socialist Party, Edwin Ellis Carr, wondered like many radicals weary of the Christian reformers how the demands of the MFSS were “to be satisfied under a system of industry where greed rules and men must battle like wild beasts against each other for the means of life?”⁹³ In 1912, provisions were added for a moralistic “protection of the family” from the destructive influence of an unregulated economy, but also a far more radical “new emphasis on the application of Christian principles to the acquisition and use of property.” Ward would outline and defend the more radical creed in his 1914 book, *The Social Creed of Churches*.⁹⁴ By that time, however, Ward had found fame as the leading Methodist minister in the United States as well as a popular framework for his ideas and activism in Rauschenbusch's social gospel.

Around Ward’s post-educational period, Christian socialism in the United States began to transform into an ideology more radical than what Ely or Gray presented Ward with at university. Published in 1907, Rauschenbusch’s *Christianity and the Social Crisis* appeared the same year Ward organized the MFSS. In June, Ward presented the lecture “Christian Socialism” to a public audience in Chicago in which, although opposed to Marxism, he argued that the church had to take socialism seriously for its proximity to the ideas of Christ, that God was “the God of the poor.” He embraced Rauschenbusch’s notion of the social crisis as well as the “holy war”

⁹² Harry F. Ward, “The Social Creed of Churches,” quoted in Duke, *In the Trenches*, 60-61, and Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet*, 47-48.

⁹³ McKanan, “Implicit Religion of Radicalism,” 771.

⁹⁴ Harry F. Ward, *The Social Creed of the Churches* (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1914), 5-15.

mentality historian Duke identifies within him with the conclusion that “the Day of Armageddon is upon us.” Duke, citing the Methodist scholar William McGuire King, identifies Ward with Fabian Socialism at this point in his career. His radical impulse would lead him to a sort of celebrity status as the chaplain of the labor movement and would also lead him to his first great disappointment with institutional Christianity, leading the fight to unionize the Western Book Concern, a Methodist publishing house. From 1914, Ward launched a fierce, years-long campaign against his fellow Methodists at the Book Concern for what he saw as their un-Christian hypocrisy, which expanded into a greater critique of the church at-large when more secular labor leaders than Christians rallied alongside him.⁹⁵ Leaving the Progressive Era and the years of World War I, Ward experienced the contradictions of the church under capitalism firsthand, and found the institutional church seriously lacking.

Amid the malaise and cynicism of 1919, Ward authored *The New Social Order: Principles and Programs* signaling the dawn/beginning of his radical period. *The New Social Order* precipitated cultural critiques of the “Roaring ‘20s” with a condemnation of capitalism’s entrance into a period of “decadence” and a declaration that the capitalist order had solidly destroyed the bonds of moral solidarity and brotherhood that were the essence of Christianity. He refused to endorse violence but made it clear that the duality of luxurious autocracy and impoverished slavery of the post-war era could only end in revolt.⁹⁶ The radical religious fervor which began as far back as 1898 continued developing—although disagreeing with Communist methods, Ward showed more than sympathy with the aim of the Marxists in the Soviet Union

⁹⁵ Duke, *In the Trenches*, 62-65, 81-97; Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet*, 61-63.

⁹⁶ Harry F. Ward, *The New Social Order: Principles and Programs* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1919), 68; Rossinow, “Radicalization of the Social Gospel,” 76-80.

and the left-wing radicals in the United States. He joined their chorus of critique and championed their attempts to revolutionize the social order.

From the post-WWI period onwards, Ward's Christianity existed as neither a social gospel nor an academic theology. It was a practical endeavor to implement Christian ethics, an endeavor in which Ward strove to cooperate with as wide coalitions as possible whilst still maintaining his radical goals, involving himself in a plethora of organizations. Ward's radicalism, both academic and activist, created reaction against his career. With Ward allegedly connected to the anarchist Emma Goldman's No Conscription League and the American Union Against Militarism, Dean L. J. Birney of the Boston University School of Theology almost fired the budding academic in June 1917.⁹⁷ The American Union Against Militarism (AUAM), which would become the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), was one of Ward's most important commitments until 1940. The Lusk Committee, a postwar Congressional committee investigating American radicals, attacked Ward directly for advocating a "Bolshevism far worse than the Bolshevism of Russia" for his involvement with the AUAM, the Emergency Peace Committee, and his critique of capitalism.⁹⁸ There is a morbid absurdity in Ward's political persecution for suspected extremism. Ward, although by 1919 a radical, did not near the radical stage he would enter in the 1930s. The ACLU itself would force Ward to resign from his chairmanship in 1940 when it began a purge of Communists. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, with whom Ward worked to start the organization, was the other notable casualty. His expulsion did not deter him, and he became

⁹⁷ Duke, *In the Trenches*, 93-94.

⁹⁸ Duke, *In the Trenches*, 117-118; Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet*, 92-94.

involved with the much more militant and leftist Civil Rights Congress from its foundation to disbandment.⁹⁹

In a sabbatical from Union Theological Seminary encompassing 1924 and 1925, Ward's understanding of the world widened as he went on an international trip to the USSR, India, China, and Japan. Before he embarked, he penned an article, "How Can Civilization Be Saved?" in which once again he denied the necessity of violence and put forward "revolutionary reform." Unimpressed by what he found in the USSR, he saw the regime as too repressive on civil liberties, although continuously stressed that he found the United States to be equivalent in its treatment of radicals. In India, he met with Gandhi and discussed their shared love of nature, while in China he found a student movement for which he was "not radical enough," but won admiration from the students with his critique of capitalism and powerful defense of socialism.¹⁰⁰

While in China in 1925, Ward penned "Lenin and Gandhi" for the progressive Christian journal *The World Tomorrow*. Ward praised the two leaders as the men who embodied the "future of mankind." More important, however, was Ward's distinction between Lenin's "philosophy of power" and "program of force" and Gandhi's "philosophy of love" and "program of non-violence." Lenin's philosophy was necessary in Russia to prevent counter-revolution and ensure the survival of socialism (a sympathetic position few non-Communists were willing to take by 1925), while Gandhi's had won India worldwide sympathy and attention. Whose philosophy would win out?¹⁰¹ Duke notes that Ward clearly preferred the philosophy of Gandhi, but he was more interested in how the two philosophies would get practical results. Just as

⁹⁹ Duke, *In the Trenches*, 178-183, 209-210; Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet*, 103-111, 254. Both Link and Duke note the complete wiping of the memory and work of Ward for the ACLU, both in institutional histories as well as the academic community.

¹⁰⁰ Duke, *In the Trenches*, 122-129; Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet*, 116-128.

¹⁰¹ Duke, *In the Trenches*, 130; Rossinow, "Radicalization of the Social Gospel," 86.

compelling is the fact that Ward put the two philosophies on equal standing, that his focus on obtaining practical results and fighting the holy war meant that he would now seriously consider the “program of violence” in tandem with that of non-violence. Six years later, in his *The Opportunity for Religion in the Present World Situation*, he advocated strict control over the “spirit of aggression” in favor of “peaceful methods.”¹⁰²

His reservations could not hold him back for long as he continued to grapple intellectually with the unethical and decadent nature of capitalist society. By 1928, Harry Frederick Ward was ready to declare himself firmly in the revolutionary camp, writing his magnum opus *Our Economic Morality and the Ethic of Jesus*. Ward set himself a grueling routine to write it but returned with marvelous results and won praise from the budding Christian radical Reinhold Niebuhr.¹⁰³ Ward prophetically declared that “The Russian revolution will have its children as did the French.” He further praised Trotsky’s *In Defense of Terrorism*, a treatise written exclusively to defend the repressive apparatus in the budding Soviet Union against the criticism of Kautsky and the social democrats. He also drew direct parallels between Christian theology and the proletarian revolution:

To millions of the proletariat the coming revolution is what the Second Coming of Christ was to the early Christians, and heaven to their successors...It is to accomplish no mere alteration in the form of human living, but a deep change in its nature. Its violence is the purging of the body politic, to which official Christianity has at times committed itself—also in the name of righteousness and justice.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Harry F. Ward, *The Opportunity for Religion in the Present World Situation* (New York: The Woman’s Press, 1919), 34-35.

¹⁰³ Duke, *In the Trenches*, 139-140; Link, *In the Trenches*, 159.

¹⁰⁴ Harry F. Ward, *Our Economic Morality and the Ethic of Jesus* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1929), 286-289.

If one takes Ward's words and interprets them through the lens of his focus on ethical Christianity, the meaning is even clearer. In the proletariat there consisted a millenarian force similar to the Apostles and the early Christians. Ward perceived their revolution, even their violence, in the service of socialism as an expression of the same zeal for justice and righteousness that animated the early Christians against Rome. What Ward now committed himself to was, if necessary, Lenin's "philosophy of power" and "program of force," as it would bring about a socialist state that would deepen the nature of democracy far more than what the American model had been able to achieve. Ward had no illusions about the repressive forces at work in the Soviet Union. He had seen it firsthand in 1925. Yet in contrast to his earlier views, Ward now believed that capitalism's culture of decadence and total immorality, to the complete neglect of brotherhood and solidarity so fundamental to the ethics of Christ, could never bring about the Kingdom of God on Earth. As his theology stood in 1929, Ward had fashioned a radical Christian political realism that found Marxist socialism the only point left for salvation. Writing a sequel of sorts, *Which Way Religion?*, published in 1933, he drew back and emphasized that the "religion" of Communism contradicted the "religion of Jesus" for its dependence upon violence, but said that those who denigrated the communists for such a reason need only to look at their own "democracies" and the force of violent economic imperialism upon which they relied.¹⁰⁵ He wrote to Coe in 1933, seemingly contradicting *Which Way Religion?*, that "what we need in this country is an American form of Communism."¹⁰⁶ His change in views shouldn't be taken as hypocrisy or an about face, nor an attempt to hide his revolutionary views from his publications. During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Ward underwent a period of significant intellectual growth as he grappled with the emergence of

¹⁰⁵ Harry F. Ward, *Which Way Religion?* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933), 197-203.

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in Duke, *In the Trenches*, 157.

Fascism in Italy and Germany. Struggling to find a realistic solution, he realized that his vacillation on the question of violence or the nature of the impending socialist order was no longer helpful to the causes he supported. Despite this, Ward categorically refused to label himself a “communist,” nor become a member of any political party. Always a fellow traveler, he would never go any further.

As a fellow traveler, Ward fell into a unique position to marshal key organizations of the Popular Front as well as organizations unaffiliated with the Communist Party.¹⁰⁷ With the MFSS still his flagship organization, he led an ideological shift to the left in which the Methodist organization both strove to “abolish the profit system and develop a classless society,” and opposed the “economic Fascism” of the New Deal. He helped to form the United Christian Council for Democracy, a federation of radical Christian organizations which included a certain “Fellowship of Southern Churchmen,” which James Dombrowski, a former student of Ward and a comrade of Claude Williams had laid the foundations for as a founder of the Conference of Younger Churchmen. He founded “New America,” a somewhat mysterious national progressive organization of U.S. intellectuals who sought, somewhat naively, to sweep a national election at some point in the future to create a postrevolutionary socialist state with as little violence as possible. Little scholarship exists on the group, and Ward left it after disagreements with other leaders. Although he would leave the ACLU as it expelled communists in 1940, he also chaired the American League Against Fascism and War, which changed its name to the American League for Peace and Democracy (ALPD) in 1937. Ward led the organization from its

¹⁰⁷ A critical and unsympathetic analysis of Ward and others’ role in the Popular Front and mass organizations connected to the Communist Party comes from David Cate, *The Fellow-Travellers: Intellectual Friends of Communism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). Cate rebukes Ward for his supposed gullibility in accepting the statements of Soviet government officials as facts as well as defending the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. He does devote admirable space to explaining Ward’s critique of institutional religion “used to cloak imperialism’s motives under a masquerade of benevolence,” see Cate, *Fellow-Travellers*, 257.

foundation in 1934 to its dissolution in 1939, and affiliated it with both the MFSS and New America.¹⁰⁸ In his work with the ALPD, while trying to pull together liberals and anti-communist radicals like Norman Thomas and his Socialists to accept working with Earl Browder and the Communist Party, he stressed the need to ensure the participation of the working class and unions to continue the ALPD's activities no matter the political divisions. In 1939, counting its member organizations, the APLD and by extension Harry F. Ward represented over seven million Americans.¹⁰⁹

Ward continued his Popular Front activism into his intellectual endeavors applying Christian ethics to analyze society. Based on a visit to the Soviet Union, Ward also authored *In Place of Profit: Social Incentives in the Soviet Union* in 1933. Building on his previous works, he still commented on the unfortunate repression in the Soviet Union but emphasized more clearly the “direction and spirit” of the Soviet Union.¹¹⁰ It may seem antithetical to Ward's constant emphasis upon the democratization of all aspects of life, but to him the Soviet Union advanced closer to democracy every day. Repression was instrumental in nature, its objective constructive. To construct the new social order, the Soviets had to tear down what had been in place as well as keep the old social order outside from creeping back in. The capitalist state had done the same with the French Revolution, and in many ways the repression in the United States was instrumental but destructive. Left-wing radicals in the United States saw the repression of left-leaning organizations as well as the segregation in the South as equivalent to the repression in the

¹⁰⁸ Duke, *In the Trenches*, 161-176; Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet* 173-226. The League changed its name to the American League for Peace and Democracy (ALPD) in 1937. Claude Williams was never a member of the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, as his former friend, classmate, and then politico-religious rival of the Socialist Party, Howard Kester, denied his application in December 1939, see Gellman and Roll. *Gospel of the Working Class*, 105.

¹⁰⁹ Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet*, 215.

¹¹⁰ Duke, *In the Trenches*, 148-149; Harry F. Ward, *In Place of Profit: Social Incentives in the Soviet Union* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1933), 219-221.

Soviet Union in conduct but totally reactionary in purpose. If one had to choose between one or the other, as there had to be a path chosen to the Kingdom of God, Ward chose the Soviet Union. He continued and developed his thoughts in his *Democracy and Social Change*, published in 1940, arguing that “From the beginning there have been two elements in modern society: one capitalistic and one democratic...Is our democratic procedure to become the instrument through which capitalist autocracy can destroy political democracy?”¹¹¹

Ward continued to defend the Soviet Union, as well as other radicals, until his death in 1966. His last great effort was his involvement with the Religious Freedom Committee, formed in 1953 in response to the atmosphere of increasing repression amidst the Second Red Scare. The Committee was instrumental in defending the radical ministers Willard Uphaus and the Reverend Claude C. Williams as he continued his radical preaching in Alabama.¹¹² He wrote a manuscript for a book entitled “Jesus and Marx,” meant to demonstrate the compatibility of Marxist thought with Christian religion, but his usual publishers at Macmillan denied publication.¹¹³ Dr. Harry Frederick Ward died on 9 December 1966, and was cremated. Duke remarks that Ward lived too long. His radical socialism and defense of the Soviet Union tarnished the reputation of the social gospeler he had a revered name as in the early 1900s.¹¹⁴ It might better be said that he lived too early—he came in on the heels of the Progressive Era, did not fully mature into his radicalism until he was in his 50s, and died right as the New Left made its way onto the political stage. Ward likely would not see it in such a way. To him, it was the duty of a Christian to work as hard

¹¹¹ Harry F. Ward, *Democracy and Social Change* (New York: Modern Age Books, 1940), 60-73. Uphaus had agreed to leave the Religion and Labor Foundation due to his opposition to the Korean War, as it brought the organization negative publicity, and was later sent to jail by HUAC for refusing to testify against his friends and comrades.

¹¹² Link, *Labor-Religion Prophet*, 264-265; Meyer, *Protestant Search for Political Realism*, 184.

¹¹³ Duke, *In the Trenches*, 1-2.

¹¹⁴ Duke, *In the Trenches*, 228-234.

as possible, however possible, whenever possible, to establish the Kingdom of God, and he did it as best he knew it—through the application of his proletarian gospel.

Claude C. Williams, the Way of Righteousness, and Building the People's Church

In the 1963 program produced for the celebration of Harry F. Ward's 90th birthday, there appeared a statement from an organization unlike all the others which sent their regards. Rather than being dedicated to a specific issue or general idea, it was dedicated to a person:

A FAITH TO FREE THE PEOPLE, the title of a book written about the life and work of Claude Williams, seems to us to describe also the kind of faith which has motivated the life and work of Dr. Harry F. Ward, whom we now honor on his 90th birthday anniversary. WE SALUTE DR. WARD...CLAUDE WILLIAMS COMMITTEE

Twenty pages later the regards of Claude and Joyce Williams themselves appear: "Dr. Harry F. Ward has a head and a heart. He uses both: what he says makes sense and what he does makes trouble—and history."¹¹⁵ The applied proletarian gospel made its way south and into the heart of one of its ablest representatives, the Presbyterian minister Reverend Claude Clossey Williams.¹¹⁶

Claude C. Williams was born in 1895 to an impoverished sharecropper family in the hills of Weakley County, Tennessee. His father, Jesse Williams, was a racist Solid South Democrat and his mother a largely apolitical Republican. They were Cumberland Presbyterians, a regional anti-predestination denomination located largely in Tennessee and Kentucky. Apparently battling the "call" to the ministry for much of his early life, he enlisted in the army during the Great War, but never served overseas. Finding it impossible to resist his spiritual calling by the end of his service, he entered Bethel College in Tennessee hoping to receive a pastorate.¹¹⁷ Here were the makings of one of the most radical ministers the United States would ever see. Williams knew

¹¹⁵ *90th Birthday Anniversary*, 48, 69.

¹¹⁶ Alternatively spelled "Clossie," "Clossee," or "Closey."

¹¹⁷ Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*, 1-23; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 32; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 1-25. William H. Cobb describes Belfrage's biography as "nauseatingly idolatrous," and it does at times read more as a hagiography than biography and is certainly non-academic.

work and poverty, and he knew the teachings of the Cumberland Presbyterians. Although strict in their understanding of personal morals and conduct, their theology, with its emphasis on the democratic nature of the Christian faith and the inherent falsehood of predestination, settled in Williams the conviction that faith could be harnessed for progressive potential and mobilization of the working class, especially the rural poor. While he worshipped with the Cumberlanders, however, Williams did not approach the proletarian gospel. He was by-and-large a Biblical literalist.

At Bethel, he met perhaps the most important influence on his life, Joyce King. Joyce King had entered Bethel as a descendant of one of the founders of the Cumberland denomination. A confident and intelligent student, her family decided she should be a missionary long before she was born. After knowing Claude for just a few months, they courted and wed. Joyce would continue by his side, supporting and encouraging him in all his radical endeavors for the rest of his life. The Cumberland Elders at Bethel expressed their disapproval of the pair's romantic episode, and Williams repaid them by applying for a pastorate with their national rival, the northern Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, after he graduated in 1923.¹¹⁸ Here advanced another foundation of Williams's radicality. He would not be cowed by the disapproval or condemnation of anyone in the institutional church. The Reverend Claude Williams would do the work of the Lord and Christ as he saw fit, and no one (except for Joyce) could tell him otherwise.

Defying the elders at Bethel and joining with the PCUSA gave the young minister a chance to test the mettle of his religious learning. He was given the pastorate with the PCUSA

¹¹⁸ Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*, 24-27; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 25-26.

that he requested and more—three relatively rural churches clustered north of Nashville. Williams first proved his theological mind by battling against the other churches in the district around Wilson county (conservative Restorationists/“Campbellites” and Baptists) on the subject of baptism. Conducting his own investigation into the matter, Williams found baptism preferable but complete “immersion” unnecessary to enter Heaven.¹¹⁹ Although here Williams merely confirmed the teachings of the Presbyterian church he preached for, he also demonstrated a willingness to investigate scripture and make a critical and detailed analysis to come to his own conclusions. Such ability would prove quite an important skill when he began his labor ministry. Around the same time, the preacher was motivated by his faith to shake hands with the only black member of his congregation. His efforts would culminate in him preaching a Sunday at a local black church (which doubled as a black schoolhouse) as well as mobilizing his own congregation to donate money to fix the “shack.”¹²⁰ The minister learned that his position brought him a special right to attempt to bridge the racial gap in the South, however small his efforts.

The next development in Williams’s ministry would be one that brought him a great spiritual struggle but also a new way of mobilizing his faith. In 1927, Claude and Joyce went to a revival in Nashville preached by the fundamentalist evangelist Billy Sunday. His experience there led Williams to completely change his style of preaching into one of “fire and brimstone,” condemning the immorality of the modern world in favor of conservative Christianity. His foray into fundamentalism also led him, however, to embrace the commonalities in Christianity, to

¹¹⁹ Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*, 29-30. “Campbellites,” as Belfrage refers to them, is a pejorative term for conservative churches rooted in the Restoration Movement of Thomas and Alexander Campbell. Belfrage does not relay a specific denomination, so it seems likely that these were independent “Christian Churches” or “Churches of Christ” unaffiliated with official denominations descended from Campbell’s movement.

¹²⁰ Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*, 31-34.

begin to criticize the denominational factionalism in the Christian faith.¹²¹ Christian and non-Christian socialists alike despised Billy Sunday for his conservative faith and grip over the religious fervor of the American public.¹²² The power of the literal interpretation of the scriptures made an imprint on the Presbyterian Reverend from Weakley. Deeply held beliefs could not be changed by didactic argument over theology. They had to be taken as they were, harnessed, and mobilized in the service of causes far greater than the personal salvation of any individual or the revivals of Billy Sunday.

Ironically it would be Williams's foray into the fundamentalist practices of evangelism where he would be exposed to non-literalist interpretations of Christianity. He started correspondence courses on evangelism with the Moody Bible Institute, an organization devoted to fundamentalist educational efforts in Chicago, but as he did with the issue of baptism, he began his own independent studies of philosophy and theology. The "Religious Book Club" he joined around spring of 1927 introduced him to the liberal theology of Harry Emerson Fosdick, which set Williams on the path to becoming the Marxist preacher of the "Way of Righteousness."¹²³ Fosdick's *The Modern Use of the Bible* embraced the so-called "Higher Criticism" that the Bible was subjected to by rationalist scholars, accepted that the Bible was "a record of developing ideas and ideals," and sought to continue such development through a Modernist and liberal application of Christian ethics and ideas in the present day.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*, 35-39; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 27-28.

¹²² Jacob H. Dorn, "'In Spiritual Communion': Eugene V. Debs and the Socialist Christians," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 2, no. 3 (July 2003), 309, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25144337>.

¹²³ Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*, 41-43; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 32; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 27-28.

¹²⁴ Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Modern Use of the Bible* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), 6-12.

The ideas presented in Fosdick's work sent a wave of new ideas through Williams, which Joyce supported. He asked for and received a leave of absence to attend classes at the Vanderbilt School of Religion under Dr. Alva Wilmot Taylor. Although Vanderbilt largely became a hotbed of reactionary intellectualism under the direction of the Southern Agrarians, Taylor cultivated a class of some of the most radical Christians to ever hit the South. This group included Howard Kester, Ward Rodgers, Don West, and Claude C. Williams. All four men (oftentimes joined by Taylor himself when they weren't too radical) would go on to work for radical causes in the South: Kester, Rogers, and Williams for the Southern Tenant Farmers Union; West for miners in Harlan as well as the Communist and Progressive Parties; Taylor and West with Williams and his People's Institute of Applied Religion, and so on. Taylor, although never more than a New Deal Democrat, emphasized the ethical nature of Christian religion, the necessity for social activism, and the futility of supernaturalism in the face of the necessity to build the Kingdom of God on Earth with social democratic policy and science.¹²⁵ In his time with Taylor and his increasingly radical classmates, everything that Claude had learned and known converged and developed into a radical revolution against the literalism and fundamentalism he had been preaching. Williams found himself a changed man, and it would lead him down a dangerous road.

His modernist ideas, unsuited to the conservative congregations of central Tennessee, led him to a new home and propelled him into leadership roles in labor activism. Unable to preach his new gospel to his old congregations in Tennessee, especially after he began preaching racial

¹²⁵ Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*, 43-45; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 28-33; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 28-30; Meyer, *Protestant Search for Political Realism*, 342-343. One wonders if Taylor was not more radical than he presented himself. He served on religious committees with Ward and the pro-Soviet Jerome Davis, and defended the Soviet Union in 1926, see Meyer, *Protestant Search for Political Realism*, 169, 181, and Miller, *American Protestantism and Social Issues*, 42.

equality, the PCUSA offered Williams an opportunity to preach in a mining town in Arkansas. In June of 1930, they packed their bags and went.¹²⁶ As it did in Auburntown, his new gospel stirred up controversy. Opposed to the moralizing attitudes of the other churches and looking for a method to gain new members, Claude and Joyce opened a pool hall inside the church and hosted young people in their home to discuss taboo topics. He won the ire of the Baptists when the church hosted a student dance after the community had refused to allow the local school to hold one. He began preaching his gospel, one focused on labor and more than a little bit red, and attracted the attention of the local miners in their efforts to form a union.¹²⁷ Cedric Belfrage provides an account of the gospel Williams preached at the time, using scientific examples to illustrate the cooperative nature of mankind: “Article One of the Code of Creation...is cooperation, mutual, and brotherhood...God is in cooperation and union...Organize! It is nature’s imperative. ‘The truth makes us free.’” His new applied proletarian gospel attracted miners to Williams as they sought his aid to organize.¹²⁸

With these miners and their struggle, Claude Williams got into his head the idea of a “Labor Temple,” a “Proletarian Church” created specifically to cater to the applied proletarian gospel. It would be a church, a union hall, a recreation center. It would serve the spiritual needs of the people better than any regular church or capitalist institution. But there was trouble afoot. He had the labor; the union members would provide their work for free. But he needed money for materials and the support of the church elders. The old church members opposed Claude’s radical turn. The United Mine Workers union, led by David Fowler in the area, opposed his

¹²⁶ Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*, 46-66; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 33, 67; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 31, 41.

¹²⁷ Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*, 66-73; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 67; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 41-45.

¹²⁸ Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*, 74-75.

effort because miners were donating wages meant to go to union dues. The old church members were able to get an investigation started, and eventually the church deprived Williams of his pastorate. Letters sent to the Judicial Commission reveal that those who supported Williams felt that his greatest crime had been that of advancing the cause of civil rights and involving African-Americans in the Paris church. Not all was lost. Claude's time in Paris, Arkansas had put him into contact with very important organizations and individuals, including Willard Uphaus and the National Religion and Labor Foundation, the radical Commonwealth Labor College headed by Lucien Koch, the future star of the American folk revival Lee A. Hays, the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, and the newly-formed Southern Tenant Farmers Union.¹²⁹

With his connection to the church severed, Williams threw himself into working with these contacts. Although at the time he felt Uphaus seemed too moderate and unreliable, he accepted an appointment as the southern head of the NRLF. He joined Ward Rodgers and Howard Kester in membership with the Socialist Party. Belfrage relates that Williams devoured the works of Marx, Engels, and Lenin during the period around 1934. He and Joyce moved to Fort Smith in Arkansas where he briefly ran the "New Era School for Social Action and Prophetic Religion." Residing in Fort Smith for a short while, he quickly joined in on a hunger strike meant to protest the paltry wages of the Works Progress Administration in 1935. Just as quickly arrested, he received firsthand experience with the repressive apparatus of the South and the horrors of its jail system; he went in on February 18th and was out on bail paid for by the Socialist Party, the STFU, and the NLRF in March.¹³⁰ It is notable that Williams had been quite

¹²⁹ Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*, 83-137; James S. Currie, "Claude Williams and the Proletarian Church," *Presbyterian Historical Society*, February 24, 2022; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 67-69; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 47-54; Willard Uphaus, *Commitment* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1963), 42-50; Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 27-31. Letters referenced are part of Currie's article.

¹³⁰ Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*, 137-176; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 64-73; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 55-65; Willens, *Lonesome Traveler*, 31-33. For a general history of the STFU, see Donald H.

the radical for several years, likely since 1929, and it was six years into his long career of activism that Williams finally became acquainted with the southern “justice” system.

After being brutally beaten alongside the Memphis socialist Willie Sue Blagden for investigating the disappearance of the black STFU organizer Frank Weems in Crittenden County, Arkansas in 1936, Williams won a measure of national fame. STFU President, the socialist H. L. Mitchell, feared that Weems had been lynched, and sent Williams to investigate Weems’s disappearance and to preach his funeral if he truly lay dead. It is unclear if Williams preached the funeral, or where he was stopped, but it is known that he and Blagden were stopped by six men, who then “took them for a ride.” Blagden, whipped three times, was let go on a train back to Memphis. Although the men seemed to have debated lynching Williams, they decided it would be unwise and would only bring more scrutiny and let him drive himself back to Joyce. In spite of the fact that Weems was later found alive, the incident quickly gained infamy as the beating of Blagden, a woman, violated Southern social norms regarding “chivalrous” conduct. Newspapers picked up the incident, and the STFU used the beatings to pressure the Roosevelt administration for more relief.¹³¹

Belfrage does not cover very much of the Reverend’s time working with the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. His omission might seem a massive error—during the ignored time, Williams made some of his most important contributions to the labor movement as well as some of the most important contacts (including Owen Whitfield) that he would keep for the rest of his

Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union and the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971).

¹³¹ Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*, 197-202; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 128-129; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 68-69. For Blagden’s account and analysis of the incident see Willie Sue Blagden, “They Call It Southern Chivalry,” *Women Today*, September 1936, <https://www.marxists.org/history/usa/pubs/wt/v1n07-sep-1936-women-today.pdf>.

life. It also, however, carried one of the most damning incidents against Williams, so bad that he would end up expelled from the STFU in 1939. From early 1930s, Williams had made contacts within both the Socialist Party (whose membership dominated STFU leadership) as well as the Communist Party (both with the national leadership during a stay in New York as well as various Communists who worked at Commonwealth college). At the Muskogee convention of the STFU in 1937, Williams came to blows with Mitchell, who feared Communist infiltration or hostile takeover of the STFU, especially on the topic of race. Williams had come a long way since his father's racism in Weakley County, and now he had become more progressive than his fellow white radicals who feared the reaction of the Jim Crow authorities and the alienation of potential white union members.¹³²

The preacher's appointment as the director of Commonwealth College in mid-1937 furthered tension with the STFU. The STFU had initially supported Claude's bid for the directorship in order to secure it from control of the Communist Party, as his reorganization plan ensured against "political influence" in favor of a "non-factional" nature. It had been discovered prior to his appointment that Williams had membership in the Communist Party under the name of "John Galey" (his mother's maiden name), but he apparently dropped his membership in both the Socialist and Communist Parties to take up the directorship. His work with Commonwealth came to an end in 1938 when a document, found by STFU Vice-President and former Commonwealth teacher J. R. Butler in the pocket of a coat Williams left with him, proposed to the "Center" of the Communist Party that it take absolute control of the institution and from there

¹³² Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 152-154; Lowel K. Dyson, "The Southern Tenant Farmers Union and Depression Politics," *Political Science Quarterly* 88, no. 2 (June 1973), 243-245; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 74-80. Dyson implies that Williams's charges were false and motivated by a desire to secure the union for the STFU.

capture the STFU, if only it would fund Commonwealth. The outcry from the STFU, especially the anti-Communist Mitchell and Kester, began immediately. Williams attempted to defend himself from the charge. He claimed he did not write the document, but it had been turned in by a Commonwealth student as part of a homework assignment on how to get more funding. Williams kept the document because he believed it could be suitably edited to elicit funding from the CPUSA without compromising Commonwealth's independent nature, as the college struggled desperately for financial support. Mitchell and Kester would have none of it. Even Butler, a friend to both Williams and Commonwealth, could not support him. The STFU expelled Williams and he left Commonwealth. Unfortunately, the spat over Williams's supposed allegiance to the Communist Party became the last battle for both organizations. Although it would continue in name, the STFU largely folded in 1940 whilst Commonwealth shut down for good.¹³³ Williams did have a lasting impact at Commonwealth, however. There he met Agnes "Sis" Cunningham and influenced her in her songwriting and efforts at creating progressive folk music. She went on to join Lee Hays and other radical folksingers to create the Almanac Singers.¹³⁴

For a third time the Reverend had been run out of his work for the proletarian gospel. But his defeats would lead to his next effort, the People's Institute of Applied Religion (PIAR). When it came into being in 1940, the PIAR represented a fundamentally unique organization. Combining Williams's earlier experiences with the power of fundamentalism with his organizing

¹³³ William H. Cobb, *Radical Education in the Rural South: Commonwealth College, 1922-1940* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), 183-202; William H. Cobb and Donald H. Grubbs, "Arkansas' Commonwealth College and the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (Winter 1966), 303-311, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40035694>; Craig, *Religion and Radical Politics*, 160-161; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 165-175; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 82-95; Raymond Koch, *Education Commune: The Story of Commonwealth College* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 194-204. Commonwealth would

¹³⁴ Ronald D. Cohen, "Agnes "Sis" Cunningham and Labor Songs in the Depression South," in *Radicalism in the South Since Reconstruction*, edited by Chris Green, Rachel Rubin, and James Smethurst, 88-92.

experience with STFU, the PIAR sought to reach grassroots, evangelical “work-a-day” preachers, and educate them in the proletarian gospel. The prophetic religion he had wanted to create with the New Era School he now took to the PIAR with the support of the National Religion and Labor Foundation and linked with the CIO in Memphis.¹³⁵ Bill Troy and Williams described the PIAR’s method when it centered around Memphis and Evansville. It would hold education seminars through regional “institutes,” 50 men and women on average, an equal number of black and white, and educate them in what Claude called “the Way of Righteousness” with songs, lectures, and charts created specifically to cater to the South’s low level of literacy.¹³⁶ Illustrating how the PIAR sought to channel evangelical impulse into progressive political action, both Belfrage and Williams himself related an anecdote about a pastor in North Carolina named Sister Price. Knowing he had to win her to win the congregation, he preached an “old-time” sermon of “three square meals a day,” but feared he would lose her when she started an emotional scene of religious shouting. He quickly cut her off and went into a quick sermon, looking to “translate that emotion into action,” and managed to organize Price and her congregation as members of the PIAR.¹³⁷

Although the PIAR established itself particularly for the South and Southern religion, Rev. Williams managed to make his way back into the Presbyterian Church and make the PIAR a key organization in Detroit political organizing. Alongside the well-known “Great Migration” of African-Americans into northern industrial cities, there was also a migration of southern whites (the “Hillbilly Highway”) into the industrial centers of the Midwest, especially Detroit

¹³⁵ Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*, 231-233; Craig, *Religion and Radical Politics*, 164-167; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 204; Gellman and Roll, 106-110

¹³⁶ Troy and Williams, “People’s Institute of Applied Religion,” 145-147.

¹³⁷ Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*, 241-244; Claude Williams, “The Circuit Rider,” 331-332. Belfrage relates that the woman was African-American, whilst Williams specifically says, “the pastor was a white woman.” The anecdote is enlightening about Williams’s methods and objectives, nonetheless.

and its automobile industry. The city was, in every way, a powder keg. The southerners brought with them far-right ministers like J. Frank Norris and Gerald L. K. Smith (and increased the influence of Father Coughlin, who already agitated in the area), who were supported in their anti-union preaching by the motor companies, especially Ford.¹³⁸ What Norris and Smith were doing acted as the opposite of Williams's mission. They were harnessing the evangelical and emotional mass dynamics of religion into reactionary purposes.

In 1941, Williams spoke for the PIAR at an event in Detroit and found himself invited back in May of 1942 by the Presbyterian Church to serve as a "industrial chaplain" to the UAW. There, Claude Williams would unite with the Baptist Charles A. Hill and his assistant pastor John H. Miles alongside civil rights and labor organizations to fight the influence of Father Coughlin, Norris, and Smith. While he worked in Detroit, Williams pushed for a broad Popular Front-like unification of civil rights, labor, and religious organizations to fight the influence of the far-right among the city's working-class while helping to unionize and ensure progressive control of the political situation. Williams pursued a unique strategy, developed from his former emphasis on getting uneducated "working preachers" in the South to work for the PIAR—he targeted the growing phenomenon of "work-a-day" preachers who were among the toiling masses in the Motor City's factories. If he could win these from Norris and Smith, he would win Detroit. Some of his most prominent comrades, like Virgil Vandenburg, came from these recruitment efforts. At the height of the PIAR's power, Williams even organized a "People's

¹³⁸ Mathew Pehl, "'Apostles of Fascism,' 'Communist Clergy,' and the UAW: Political Ideology and Working-Class Religion in Detroit, 1919-1945," *The Journal of American History* 99, no. 2 (September 2012), 440-441.

Congress of Religion,” but complaints surrounding his radical views haunted him and the PIAR’s influence declined.¹³⁹

Most accounts of Claude Williams and the PIAR end here, at the height of his influence in Detroit, with the PIAR’s dissolution in 1948, or with his defrocking and conviction of heresy in 1953.¹⁴⁰ But Claude Williams did not die until 1979, and he kept up his fight for the applied proletarian gospel until his last breath.¹⁴¹ Chris Green relates one of the last, and perhaps the most interesting, acts of the PIAR. Don West, an old classmate from Taylor’s classes in Vanderbilt, organized a deal to publish *Clods of Southern Earth*, a book of poetry West had written over the course of his life. Somehow, even though he hadn’t published before, West managed to sell 14,000 copies in the first year of printing. Green discovered that over half, 8,000, were purchased by Claude Williams and the People’s Institute of Applied Religion. West may have been the most radical of all Taylor’s students. An ordained Congregationalist minister, he was a dedicated member of the Communist Party from 1933, organizing extensively in Kentucky, Georgia, and Alabama. His poetry sought to harness southern culture and past to evoke a progressive future where the exploited white worker of the south realized their kinship with African-Americans, and fomented a progressive political revolution against Jim Crow and the Solid South.¹⁴² In a radical and innovative pedagogical step, Williams and West sought to

¹³⁹ Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*, 246-295; Craig, *Religion and Radical Politics*, 167-170; Dillard, *Faith in the City*, 140-152; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 205-207; Gellman and Roll, *Gospel of the Working Class*, 126-132; “People’s Congress of Religion,” *Information Service* June 10, 1944; Troy and Williams, “People’s Institute of Applied Religion,” 148-149.

¹⁴⁰ “Williams is Defrocked by Detroit Presbytery,” *The Presbyterian Outlook* March 1, 1953.

¹⁴¹ Rev. Williams related his and Joyce’s struggle with the Klan in Alabama in two articles for the *National Guardian*, edited by his friend and biographer Belfrage. The couple were forced to live in a trailer for the rest of their lives after their home was firebombed. See Claude C. Williams, “The Two Souths,” *National Guardian*, June 4, 1956; Claude C. Williams, “The Knight Crawlers of Alabama,” *National Guardian*, November 25, 1956.

¹⁴² For a biography of Don West, see James J. Lawrence, *A Hard Journey: The Life of Don West* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007).

use his poetry, written in vernacular and dialect, to teach a revolutionary form of literacy and combat poor education in the South.¹⁴³ Although it did not save the PIAR from dissolution, this attempt remains one of the most revolutionary educational initiatives of the South and a fitting end to Claude and Joyce Williams's story.

¹⁴³ Chris Green, "The Tight Rope of Democracy: Don West's *Clods of Southern Earth*," in *Radicalism in the South Since Reconstruction*, 107-110.

Conclusion

Journeying through some of the most tumultuous eras in radical history, Bishop William Montgomery Brown, Dr. Harry F. Ward, and Reverend Claude C. Williams came to similar conclusions about the state of the world and the necessity for the involvement of Christians in creating a proletarian state, one to emulate or be inspired by the example set by the Soviet Union and the international Communist movement. Although Ward never joined the Communist Party and refused to take the label of Marxist, his status as a trusted and true fellow traveler placed him in the same position as his Christian-Communist cohorts Brown and Williams.

Rather than the “co-operative commonwealth” sought by the earlier Christian socialists or the general reconciliation of capital and labor that the social gospelers brought forth, the advocates of the applied proletarian gospel believed in the necessity and inevitability of an intense class struggle between the working class and the capitalist system. Watching the course of historical development in the early and mid-20th century, they decided that Christianity had to be adapted to the conditions and needs of the new chosen people—the proletariat. They preferred to avoid violence but saw the instructions of Christ to “turn the other cheek” as a tactical suggestion, not a doctrinal rule. All three men differed in their attitudes and actions towards the organized church. Brown spent the rest of his life appealing his heresy conviction and seeking acceptance back into the church as a fellow Episcopalian. Ward, although he fought with Methodist publishers over labor and had the MFSS cut off as an unofficial organization, stayed within the Methodist church and tried to educate a new generation of religious leaders at Union Theological Seminary. Williams, cut loose from the Presbyterians twice and condemned as a heretic, harshly denounced the “institutional church” and focused his efforts on the unofficial, independent ministers of the South. Yet these radicals were united in their realization

of the inadequate and oftentimes contradictory role the church had as an organ of social control and class disparity.

Perhaps to their chagrin, Protestants did not respond in large numbers to their call for a proletarian gospel to critique capitalism and bring forth a new world. Rather than take up the call of a new world through revolution and use of the methods of Marxism, those that did respond worked to produce dialogue rather than synthesis, and to work together only through practical matters rather than accept Marxist understandings or analyses of history. European dialogues initiated mostly by the French Communist Roger Garaudy often focused on the works of the twentieth-century Jesuit priest and scientist Teilhard de Chardin and the idea of a shared “faith in man” between Marxists and Christians.¹⁴⁴ Few of these dialogues amounted to conversions on either side. The Communists often found the Christians too concerned with matters of ethics and fixated upon Marx’s early humanism, while the Christians found the Marxists an unmoving and dogmatic crowd with whom they could not effectively cooperate. Taking both philosophies and attempting to mesh them together in practical efforts proved fruitless, as the gospel the Christians approached with did not have proletarian politics in mind and the Marxism the Communists approached with demonstrated an unwillingness to self-critique or learn from their Christian counterparts.

Catholics from Latin America responded most fervently to the plight of the poor and oppressed in the capitalist system. Gustavo Gutierrez remarked that, unlike politically stable

¹⁴⁴ See Anthony Dyson and Bernard Towers, ed., *Evolution, Marxism, & Christianity: Studies in the Teilhardian Synthesis* (London: The Garnstone Press, 1967); Roger Garaudy, *From Anathema to Dialogue: The Challenge of Marxist-Christian Cooperation* (London: Collins, 1967); Herbert Aptheker, *Marxism and Christianity: A Symposium* (Humanities Press, 1968); James Klugmann and Paul Oestreicher, *What Kind of Revolution? A Christian-Communist Dialogue* (London: Panther Books, 1968); Jurgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969), among others. Aptheker’s *Symposium* was printed as a memorial to Harry F. Ward. Infamously, Garaudy seemingly *was* converted to Christianity in his quest for Christian-Marxist cooperation, but later allied with Gaddafi and converted to Islam in 1982.

societies in the Global North where interactions between Marxism and Christianity took the form of theoretical dialogue and philosophical debate, the conditions of Latin America as an especially exploited continent allowed for “ever more resolutely a common adversary” and practical work between Marxists and Christians fighting for a socialist goal.¹⁴⁵ Marxist philosopher John Brentlinger analyzed the impact of the intersection between Christianity and Marxism in the context of Nicaragua and the Sandinistas, and the Colombian priest-revolutionary Camilo Torres noted that “...it is possible to build socialism without destroying that which is basic in Christianity.”¹⁴⁶ The same sort of revolutionary Christianity that Claude C. Williams and Owen Whitfield had found and fostered in the Southern Tenant Farmers Union with its preacher-organizers and religious-socialist rhetoric arose spontaneously in Latin American Catholicism, and gave rise to the concept of liberation theology itself.

Although they never quite found themselves an ideological label beyond Christians, the advocates of the applied proletarian gospel form a core part in the historical experience of and relationship between Marxism and Christianity. They proved, with their quest towards a working synthesis, that a Christian Marxism can be built and applied not only in the context of the Global South, but among the Christians of the Global North as well. Their Christianity analyzed the capitalist system and found it inconsistent with the ideas and goals of the Nazarene and the nature Christians were asked to emulate; only through the revolutionary transformation of Christianity and the destruction of capitalism would the proletarian Kingdom of God on Earth be brought forth.

¹⁴⁵ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2013), 60.

¹⁴⁶ Camilo Torres, “Message to Communists,” in *Revolutionary Priest: The Complete Writings and Messages of Camilo Torres*, ed. by John Gerassi (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), 378.

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