The Politics of Conscience: Religious Activism and Social Change in Postwar America

Citation

Permanent link
http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:33840751

Terms of Use
This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA

Share Your Story
The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Submit a story.

Accessibility
The Politics of Conscience:
Religious Activism and Social Change in Postwar America

A dissertation presented
by
Casey Bohlen
to
The History Department

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of
History

Harvard University
Cambridge, MA

May 2016
The Politics of Conscience:
Religious Activism and Social Change in Postwar America

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is a history of the post-World War II United States religious left, from its birth in the early Cold War through its twilight in the mid-1970s. Although the study of religion and politics is flourishing, recent scholarship has overwhelmingly focused on the Christian right and the resurgence of American evangelicalism. Yet Jewish, Catholic, and ecumenical Protestant activists were key players in the mid-century political left, from nuns staging interracial sit-ins in the middle of Chicago’s busiest intersections to rabbis and ministers running the nation’s largest illegal abortion referral network. Focusing on the work of activist clergy and religious youth, this project explains why such a diverse group of believers took to the streets in the name of conscience, what impact their activism had on public life, and why their influence withered in the last third of the twentieth century. It locates the origins of the postwar religious left - counterintuitively - in the Cold War religious revival of the 1950s; demonstrates how interfaith activism helped to transform postwar liberalism from a technocratic project to a moral crusade; and shows how mass disaffiliation in the 1970s undermined the religious left’s national resources at the same moment that Christian conservatives were experiencing a renaissance, leading to their eclipse in the public eye. In the process, it reveals how deeply interfaith activism has shaped left-liberal politics and policy-making in the modern United States, as well as how movements for social justice have transformed American faith traditions in turn.
# Table of Contents

LIST OF FIGURES .................................................................................................................. V

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................ VI

INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTER ONE
To Serve God And Country: Postwar Religious Thought And The Call To Social Action ....... 23

CHAPTER TWO
Empowering The Faithful: Postwar Growth And The Institutional Foundations Of New-Breed Activism .......................................................................................................................... 63

CHAPTER THREE
To ‘Arouse The Dozing Conscience Of The Nation’: The Civil Rights Movement And The Rise Of New-Breed Activism ................................................................. 113

CHAPTER FOUR
“Let Him Join The Devil”: Interreligious Conflict And Civil Rights In The Urban North....... 163

CHAPTER FIVE
The Religious Crusade For Abortion Reform: A Shifting Model Of Activism And A Rising Political Tide................................................................. 220

CHAPTER SIX
Beyond Church Walls: The Fate Of The Postwar American Religious Left........................ 260

EPILOGUE ............................................................................................................................... 307

BIBLIOGRAPHY .................................................................................................................... 312
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Percentage of Americans Affiliated with a Religious Institution, 1920-1963 .......... 69
Figure 2: Annual Denominational Revenue, 1930-1963 ....................................................... 70
Figure 3: Annual Value of New Religious Construction, 1920-1963 .................................. 71
Figure 4: President Kennedy Receives a Historic Torah from RAC Representatives........... 111
Figure 5: Campuses of Origin for Spectrum '66 Participants .................................................. 180
Figure 6: Religious Identification of CCCO Delegates ............................................................ 183
Figure 7: Press Coverage of Religious Arrests in Willis Demonstrations, June 12, 1965 ...... 185
Figure 8: White Counter-Protesters, July 31, 1966 ................................................................. 195
Figure 9: Marquette Park March, August 5, 1966 ................................................................. 196
Figure 10: Editorial Cartoon in The New World, August 5, 1966 ........................................... 200
Figure 11: Percentage of Americans Affiliated with a Religious Institution, 1960-1980 ....... 267
Figure 12: Percentage of Americans Attending Religious Services Weekly, 1954-1976 ........ 268
Figure 13: Annual Value of New Religious Construction, 1964-1980 ................................. 270
Figure 14: Reasons for Religious Disaffiliation, 1978 .............................................................. 274
Figure 15: Church Attendance by Age Group, 1958-1971 .................................................... 276
Figure 16: Confidence in Select American Institutions, 1978 ............................................... 280
Figure 17: Protestant Membership Trends, 1960-1980 ......................................................... 301
Figure 18: Protestant Revenue Trends, 1960-1980 ............................................................... 301
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Historians rarely share academic authorship, but if we followed the example of the sciences, our bylines would break records. First and foremost, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to the members of my dissertation committee, who were all unceasingly generous with their time, advice, and critical feedback. The fingerprints of my advisor, Lizabeth Cohen, are all over this dissertation, from the minutiae of word choice to the grand sweep of the argument. I refer back to her margin notes on a daily basis, the bold strokes of her pen striking out unnecessary hyphens and pushing me towards sharper reasoning and greater economy of language. I will never understand how she carved out so much time for her students while serving as Dean, but I am eternally grateful that she did.

Jim Kloppenberg’s near-miraculous ability to conjure up grand insights out of mundane details is unparalleled. Entire sections of this dissertation sprang from the seeds of his passing comments, and our conversations in his office were among the most intellectually invigorating experiences of all of graduate school. Lisa McGirr knows more about modern social movements than any other human being on the planet, and insofar as I successfully connected the work of grassroots actors to larger patterns of social change, it was through her influence and scholarly example. Curtis Evans warmly welcomed me into the academic community at the University of Chicago’s Divinity School, and then went above and beyond by agreeing to serve as my outside reader. His expertise in the history of religion was invaluable, as was his constant encouragement of the project.

My interest in this research topic stretches back to my time as an undergraduate at Brown University, when Robert Self first encouraged me to explore the history of the religious left and
Luther Spoehr shepherded my sprawling interests into a more succinct thesis on Father Robert Drinan, the first Catholic priest elected to Congress. Along the way, many talented librarians and archivists pushed my research down avenues that I could never have found on my own. Special thanks go to Mary Richardson and the rest of the staff at Yale Divinity Library, who spent an entire summer digging invaluable material out of unprocessed archives on my behalf. I was only able to take advantage of their hard work through the generous financial support of Harvard’s Department of History, the Charles Warren Center for the Study of American History, the Center for American Political Studies, and the beneficence of Ambassador John J. Loeb, Jr.

Early drafts of this dissertation were improved greatly with the help of professional feedback from fellow scholars. I am deeply indebted to Nancy Cott, Dan McKanan, K. Healan Gaston, Michelle Nickerson, Daniel Horowitz, and Kathryn Lofton for their generous advice and feedback at various stages of this process. Andy Jewett deserves special thanks for spending so much time mentoring a student who was not his own, in ways both professional and personal. He made academia a warmer place, and his generosity of spirit is something we should all strive to emulate. Thanks also to the many participants in the workshops and conferences in which I presented portions of this project, including the University of Chicago Religions in America Workshop, Harvard’s North American Religions Colloquium, the GSAS Gender and Sexuality Workshop, the Boston University Graduate Student American Political History Conference, the Boston College Biennial Conference on the History of Religion, and the annual meetings of the Labor and Working-Class History Association, the Society for U.S. Intellectual History, and the Organization of American Historians. I am particularly grateful to the many
members of Liz Cohen’s dissertation workshop. They were forced to read nearly every word of this project, and nearly every word was improved in the process.

I went to graduate school to build a professional career, but I would not have survived it without the friendships I made along the way. Claire Dunning, Shaun Nichols, and I went through this entire process as a team, and it is hard to express how grateful I am for their support. Together, we studied for generals, line-edited chapter drafts, shared and overcame mutual insecurities, and, perhaps most importantly, enjoyed quite a few beers. You two have kept me afloat. Team America for life. Many thanks to Andrew Pope, Zoe Silverman, Eva Payne, and Theresa McCulla for being fantastically supportive both on and off the clock. My introduction to Clair Dahm was an accident, but a happy one, and she has since been an unending source of both professional feedback and opportunities to sing loudly and off-key. From my first day as an undergraduate student until my last day as a graduate student, Alan Gabel has sustained me, both figuratively and literally, with his love of intellectual combat and ever-improving attempts at cooking.

I am not sure that any member of my family fully understands what I do, and most of them are under the impression that graduate school is a permanent paid vacation. Perhaps this document will show them otherwise. It would have been impossible to write without their unconditional support, and it exists only because they nurtured a love of reading in me from the youngest age.

My deepest appreciation is reserved for my wife, Eliza Congdon. The life of an academic can feel hopelessly unsettled. Since graduating from Brown, we have collectively gone through seven apartments, five cars, uncountable conferences and research trips, and far
more airline tickets than I would like to admit. Through it all, she has been my home. For that, and for so much else, I thank her.
For Eliza
INTRODUCTION

Writing in 1978, historian William McLoughlin penned a short book reflecting on the relationship between religion and social change in the United States. From Puritan New England to the present, he argued, religious revivals “had been the shaping power of American culture.” Their intense spiritual ferment challenged contemporary power structures, awakening the nation to its shortcomings, spurring on social reform, and forging new moral consensuses. Looking back on the previous two decades, he argued that the social movements of the tumultuous 1960s had been just such a ”millenarian” revival. From the youthful rejection of Cold War liberalism to the battle for black liberation, activists had spearheaded a “Fourth Great Awakening,” which was ushering in a sweeping “ideological reorientation.” In the wake of their prophetic critiques, traditional norms were suffering “from a crisis of legitimacy,” while backward-looking “neo-Evangelicalism” was withering on the vine. A new “belief-value system” was arising from the ashes of the old, which McLoughlin predicted would produce a “consensus” committed to “some form of Judeo-Christian socialism” by “early in the 1990s.” “Sacrifice of self will replace self-aggrandizement,” he declared, “helping others will replace competitiveness as a value,” and social institutions will be reorganized “for the fulfillment of individual needs by means of cooperative communal efforts rather than through the isolated nuclear family.” The revolution was nigh, and a radical religious ethic lay at its heart.1

Although McLoughlin was perhaps unduly optimistic, he was by no means unusual in his assessment. Countless contemporary observers noted that 1960s social movements had fundamentally revivalist qualities and that religious ideas and institutions were vital to their

---

successes. Many more predicted that the future of the American left and Judeo-Christian religion would remain deeply entwined. In the mid-1960s, famed community organizer Saul Alinsky suggested that churches had “taken over the position organized labor had a generation ago,” becoming “the big dominant force in civil rights” and representing the future of “leadership in social change” more generally.² Sociologist Robert Bellah thought that the “spiritual ferment” of the late 1960s would fuel transformative political change, on the grounds that “culture is the key to revolution; religion is the key to culture,” and “no one has changed a great nation without appealing to its soul.”³ Historian and social critic Theodore Roszak observed that while “at least since the Enlightenment, the major thrust of radical thought has always been anti-religious,” the 1960s left was by contrast an “eclectic religious revival,” its culture a rejection of “skeptical, secular intellectuality” and its politics “swarming with Christ and the prophets.”⁴ Religious scholar Harvey Cox singled out “socially activist clergy” for praise, arguing they were revitalizing American religious life and might permanently “restore to visibility” a tradition of religious radicalism that reached back through “the Free-Soilers, Abolitionists, Feminists, and Social Gospelers.”⁵

Such hopes seem outlandish in hindsight. As history has since made clear, the Fourth Great Awakening took place not in Haight-Ashbury, but in the Sunbelt South. Its legacy was not

---


the rise of Judeo-Christian socialism, but of Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority. Subsequent generations of scholars have displaced McLoughlin’s vision almost entirely, building a new body of literature around the history of Christian conservatism. A first wave of studies focused on the politics of right-wing backlash, exploring how evangelicals and conservative Catholics built a powerful coalition in opposition to abortion reform, school busing, and the Equal Rights Amendment, and in defense of ‘traditional’ gender roles, school prayer, and ‘law and order’ politics. A second wave of scholarship has since burrowed deeper into the past, stretching the history of the modern religious right back to the turn-of-the-century. Its origins can be linked to Cold War anti-Communist organizing, pre-World War II Southern outmigration patterns, anti-New Deal partnerships between businessmen and evangelical leaders, and efforts to reformulate conservative Protestantism in the wake of the fundamentalist-modernist controversies. The rise of the Christian right, from interwar obscurity to its capture of the Republican Party, is arguably now the centerpiece of the history of modern United States religion and politics.

At the same time, a parallel literature has emerged on the so-called ‘God Gap,’ or the idea that modern political polarization is fueled by a standoff between an increasingly religious right and an increasingly secular left. Sociologists and political scientists have produced numerous studies quantifying the God Gap, which focus especially on the correlation between political

---


liberalism and irreligiosity, whether measured by church attendance, theological orthodoxy, or self-identification surveys. Historians like Andrew Hartman have incorporated the God Gap into political narratives, framing the post-1945 ‘culture wars’ as a clash between a “normative America,” which “assumed that the nation’s Christian heritage illuminated its unique character,” and a “more pluralistic, more secular, more feminist America.” And the God Gap framework has become particularly influential in popular press coverage. Liberal journalists like Amy Sullivan condemn the religious left for “beating a retreat in the competition for religious voters and the discussion of morality,” “effectively ceding the ground” to the Christian right and making battles between the two the equivalent of “a tricycle going up against a Mack truck.” With entirely different motives, conservative commentators like Bill O’Reilly denounce the modern left for its ‘anti-religious ideology,’ arguing that liberals see all “churches, synagogues, mosques as oppressive, standing in the way of things like abortion and a libertine lifestyle.” On both ends of the political spectrum, the God Gap has become a “spectre haunting a large segment of the chattering classes,” in the words of one analyst at The New York Times.


11 The O’Reilly Factor, FOX News, July 1, 2015.

Research on the history of Christian conservatism has been undeniably valuable, and there may indeed be a God Gap lying at the heart of present-day polarization. Yet the rise of both of these paradigms has obscured the phenomenon that originally caught McLoughlin’s eye. To a degree not reflected in either scholarly or popular narratives of the era, religious liberalism and the activist religious left were defining features of the postwar political landscape. Protestant intellectuals like Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer inspired a generation of student radicals to take to the streets, while mainline denominations pioneered innovative anti-poverty initiatives in crumbling urban centers. Rabbinic leaders built social action networks that mobilized Jewish support for civil rights legislation, while local synagogues held Freedom Seders to criticize the modern Pharaoh of racial segregation. Catholic nuns staged interracial sit-ins in the middle of Chicago’s busiest intersection to protest residential segregation, while priests broke into military draft facilities and burned draft cards to challenge military intervention in Vietnam. Ecumenical groups of rabbis and ministers fought to expand abortion access in the days before Roe v. Wade, lobbying for legislative reform and building the largest illegal abortion referral network in the nation.

The history of this postwar religious left has not been ignored by scholars, but neither has it been adequately integrated into the broader history of religion and politics in the postwar United States. In contrast to their conservative counterparts, the key organizations and leaders of the religious left still suffer from what historian Jon Butler has dubbed the problem of “jack-in-the-box faith.” They pop up idiosyncratically, providing colorful effect, only to be stuffed back into their boxes and set aside. Overviews of postwar political history may make references to fiery Yale chaplain William Sloane Coffin, Jr. leading a major 1961 Freedom Ride. They may

reproduce images of Jewish rabbis linking arms with Orthodox bishops in the streets of Selma. They may show migrant labor organizer Cesar Chavez breaking his 1968 hunger strike during a folk mass, alongside fellow Catholic and Presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy. But it is much harder to say how - or even if - the religious dimensions of these moments mattered to postwar American politics more broadly.

Part of the reason for this state of affairs is the fact that most of the existing literature on the postwar religious left treats its subject as either undistinctive or too distinctive. In the first instance, scholars frame transformations in religious liberalism as symptom of the broader social upheavals of the era. They portray the 1960s religious left as a sign of the times, rather than a contributing cause of them. The rise of Catholic folk masses was the mere reflection of an emerging American counterculture. The battle for women’s ordination was simply an outgrowth of a broader feminist awakening. Declines in youth church attendance were part and parcel of a generational rejection of centralized institutions. Activist clergy were responding to ‘the movement,’ rather than leading it. In other words, such histories take the postwar religious left to be epiphenomenal. Their underlying research question, to quote historian Mark Oppenheimer, an exemplar of this school of thought, is “how the religions either fought or acquiesced” to the broader trends of their time. Scholars not already interested in the subject need not focus on the answers.\textsuperscript{14}

Yet although the postwar religious left undeniably responded to external forces, and in that sense was a ‘sign of the times,’ it simultaneously wielded unprecedented and unrivalled influence over American public life. In the years following World War II, theologians were leading intellectual figures, politicians of all persuasions infused their rhetoric with religious symbolism, and, as historian David Hollinger has pointed out, virtually everyone “in charge of something big” was a liberal Protestant.¹⁵ Church affiliation statistics hit record highs and religious institutions grew correspondingly, expanding into sprawling national networks with enormous revenue streams and educational programs that shaped the worldview of the vast majority of young Americans. The social movements of the 1960s were incubated in this religious environment, and because of its influence over political culture, religious activists were unusually well-positioned to contribute to them. It was no coincidence that ministers, priests, and rabbis were a prominent part of nearly every iconic demonstration of the 1960s, nor that the vast majority of ‘secular’ New Left activist had been raised in a religious tradition. In this particular historical moment, how the religions fought or acquiesced to the broader trends of their time had disproportionate influence over those trends themselves. One might plausibly ask whether the social change of the 1960s was ‘just’ a sign of religious transformation as the other way around.

By contrast, the second branch of scholarship treats the history of the religious left too distinctively. Scholars in this vein write magnificent monographs. Some focus on specific denominations or faith groups, whether that be Quaker anti-racists or Catholic nuns or liberal

Jews. Others chronicle the work of exceptional individuals or organizations, from the
prophetic radicalism of the Berrigan brothers to the pioneering pacifism of the Fellowship of
Reconciliation. Still more focus on particular social movements, most commonly the civil
rights movement, but also the anti-war movement and migrant labor organizing. Their fine-
grained analysis deepens our historical understanding, shedding light on the complex and often
contentious relationship that evolved between religion and left-liberal politics in the postwar
years in specific organizational settings. Yet they have difficulty explaining why so many
activists, hailing from such radically different religious traditions, converged on nearly identical
political positions at precisely the same historical moment. It is hard to see the forest for these
trees.

Indeed, although each religious denomination and single-issue organization trod its own
distinctive historical path, perhaps the most salient feature of the postwar religious left was its
transcendence of such categories. Activists self-consciously forged alliances that overcame
historical religious divisions, uniting liberal Protestants, Catholics, and Jews around a shared

16 Allan W. Austin, Quaker Brotherhood: Interracial Activism and the American Friends Service Committee, 1917-
1950 (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012); Stanley Keith Arnold, Building the Beloved Community:
Philadelphia’s Interracial Civil Rights Organizations and Race Relations, 1930-1970 (Jackson, MS: University
Press of Mississippi, 2014); Amy L. Koehlinger, The New Nuns: Racial Justice and Religious Reform in the 1960s
(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Marc Dollinger, Quest for Inclusion: Jews and Liberalism in

17 Murray Polner, Disarmed and Dangerous: The Radical Lives and Times of Daniel and Philip Berrigan (New

18 The literature on religion and civil rights is voluminous; for more, see the historiographical discussion in Chapter
Three. On religious antiwar and migrant labor activism, see: Mitchell K. Hall, Because of their Faith: CALCAV and
Religious Opposition to the Vietnam War (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Michael B. Friedland, Lift
Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet: White Clergy and the Civil Rights and Antiwar Movements, 1954-1973 (Chapel Hill,
NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); Marco G. Prouty, Cesar Chavez, the Catholic Bishops, and the
Farmworkers' Struggle for Social Justice (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2006); Alan J. Watt, Farm
Workers and the Churches: The Movement in California and Texas (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University
Press, 2010).
moral vision and an ecumenical commitment to social action. They created mass religious movements, mobilizing a grassroots army through campus ministries and social action departments whose numbers dwarfed those of well-known leaders like the Berrigan brothers and exceptional organizations like the Fellowship of Reconciliation. And their politics stretched far beyond the cause of civil rights and the streets of Selma, revolving around a universalistic vision of justice that faced down everything from Cold War militarism to criminal abortion laws. To explain the scope of the postwar religious left, a more holistic account is needed.

With those goals in mind, I use this dissertation to analyze the history of the interfaith religious left, from its Cold War origins to its post-1960s fate, and to situate it within the broader narrative of postwar American politics. My subjects include liberal Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, encompassing leading public theologians and grassroots student organizations alike. I reject the idea that religion is epiphenomenal, taking seriously the need to understand how and when religious transformations have shaped American politics and culture, as well as the idea that seemingly secular ideas and organizational spaces can be understood by historical actors to have sacred dimensions. And in restoring the postwar religious left to its place within the grand sweep of United States political history, I hope not to displace the reigning narrative of Christian conservatism, but to open up new avenues of inquiry. Interreligious conflict played a profound role in shaping postwar American political discourse, and the politics of neither the religious right nor their rivals on the left can be fully understood without attention to the interactions between the two. With so much ink already spilled on studies of Christian conservatism, it is time to tell the other half of that story.
Methodologically, my attempt to provide such an account borrows from two traditionally antagonistic approaches to religious history: the study of “religion as prescribed” and “religion as practiced,” in the words of Thomas Tweed.19 The first school of scholarship is an older one, which refracted the history of American religion through the prism of religious elites. Historians in this tradition studied the formal writings of theologians and the published sermons of preachers, analyzing liturgical rituals and chronicling the inner workings of centralized religious institutions. They narrated the history of Puritanism through the mind of John Winthrop, and the history of Catholicism through the doings of the American hierarchy.20 By contrast, influenced by the broader rise of social history in the 1960s, a second generation of religious historians began to argue that American religion was more properly understood not in terms of how it was preached from the pulpit, but in terms of how it was lived at the grassroots. Their scholarship, better known as the study of “lived religion,” focused on popular representations of the supernatural, informal religious practices, and how faith permeated the many hours of congregants’ lives not spent sitting in pews on Sunday. They narrated the history of Puritanism through broadsheets and devotional books, and the history of Catholicism through the popular worship of patron saints.21


Like other recent scholars of religious history, particularly those who focus on modern evangelicalism, I have found it productive to merge these two realms of inquiry, exploring how religion as prescribed and as practiced have interacted dialectically. I delve into highbrow theological developments and changing institutional dynamics in the postwar years, demonstrating how elite representations of religion’s ‘authentic’ purpose trickled down to the grassroots through denominational apparatuses and educational programming, and so shaped the worldview of a generation of youth and clergy. In turn, I show how congregants deployed those same religious principles to make more radical claims on their parent institutions, redefining authentic religiosity in explicitly political terms and commandeering organizational resources in the name of shared social values. The interreligious conflicts that ultimately unfolded between these two poles led to sea-changes in religious thought and dramatic transformations in institutional affiliation patterns. They shaped not only the fate of the religious left, but also the broader historical trajectory of religious life from the civic-religious consensus of the early Cold War to the organizational fracture of the 1970s.

To tell the story of this interaction, I draw on the records of widely-read theologians, national religious institutions, and grassroots activists from the ecumenical Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish faith traditions. In the realm of ‘religion as prescribed,’ my sources include the published works of such early Cold War intellectual giants as Reinhold Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Martin Buber, as well as those of radical religious critics from the late 1960s, including Harvey Cox and Jacob Neusner. I pair my analysis of their ideas with an examination of their writings’ distribution and impact through denominational social action departments, including the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (Reform)’s Commission on Social

---

22 See especially: Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*. 
Action and subcommittees of the United States Bishops’ National Catholic Welfare Conference. In the realm of ‘religion as practiced,’ I focus on the education and activism of religious youth in national student groups, especially the various incarnations of the national ecumenical Protestant student organization - whose name evolved from the United Student Christian Council to the National Student Christian Federation to the University Christian Movement - and the two main Catholic student organizations, the Newman Club and the National Federation of Catholic College Students. I pair this focus on religious youth with attention to the popular writings and political agitation of activist clergy employed in non-congregational settings, especially campus ministries, from the infamous Yale chaplain William Sloane Coffin, Jr. to the lesser-known University of Chicago chaplain E. Spencer Parsons.

Whether referring to theologians or grassroots activists, national organizations or iconoclastic individuals, I use the term “new-breed” to refer to this particular strand of the religious left. New-breed is an actor’s term, a phrase popularized by Harvey Cox in an influential 1967 article published in the academic journal Daedalus. There, Cox used it to describe the work of activist Protestant clergymen, particularly those involved in anti-poverty organizing on behalf of disempowered social groups. But the term was used more broadly at the time, by both sympathizers and critics, to refer to almost any religious actor who was active in the social movements of the 1960s, from anti-racist Catholic priests to Episcopalian youth

---

playing acoustic guitars in countercultural religious services. As a descriptor, it is both satisfyingly capacious and usefully suggestive. It denotes no specific faith, race, or gender, allowing it to encompass the extraordinary diversity of the religious left in this period. Yet it still invokes the idea that these activists saw themselves as something new, a product of the particularities of the postwar era, and a breed apart, distinct from their co-religionists with regard to their political commitments and from the broader left with regard to their religious ones.

What defined new-breed activists apart was not their denomination, policy prescriptions, or demographic traits. They were bound together by their moral and intellectual worldview. Whether they were Jewish or Catholic, a black clergyman from Nashville or a white Methodist from Ohio, new-breed activists adhered to three basic principles that were fundamental to their religious and political identities. First, they believed that the secular was sacred. Religion could be practiced outside of church walls as well as within them, one’s actions in the world were the truest reflection of one’s religiosity, and all believers were called to engage with the pressing social issues of their day, to work to build God’s kingdom on earth. Second, they believed that civic law needed to be brought into line with moral law. Religious principles of justice were guidelines for structuring social relations and, particularly, the behavior of the state. Believers had a special obligation to confront and reform injustices perpetuated through law, and conversely, to use the tools of the state to remedy injustices perpetuated by society. Third, and finally, they promulgated a social and universalistic ethics. Their religious vision of reform

---

concerned itself with the proper organization of social life, rather than the proper behavior of individuals, and worked to redeem the social order, rather than individual souls. Its principles transcended the particularities of race, class, and gender. Indeed, new-breed activists believed that they were especially called to work on behalf of justice for others, most commonly those unable to advocate for themselves, even if that mission brought them into conflict with their own religious communities.

These ideas were pervasive among new-breed activists in the mid-1960s, yet explaining their emergence presents a bit of a historical puzzle. The early Cold War years, in which most new-breed youth and clergy were raised and educated, was not a particularly radical era for American religion. Histories of the period typically frame their narratives around the explosion of churches and synagogues in mass suburbia, the pervasiveness of militant anti-Communism in religious thought, and the rise of a seemingly shallow civic-religious discourse among both religious leaders and politicians. Moreover, new-breed activists raised in this religious world were overwhelmingly well-to-do. They were disproportionately white, most grew up in middle-class, suburban communities, and they disproportionately enjoyed access to higher education.

How did the chief beneficiaries of the postwar order grow up into some of its sharpest critics?

Historians have typically advanced one of two explanations, which can be broadly characterized as narratives of rebellion and narratives of continuity. In the first instance, scholars portray new-breed activism as a rebellion against Cold War culture, consensus politics, and the

---

stultifying churches and synagogues of suburbia. To quote contemporary critic C. Wright Mills, in his famous “Letter to the New Left,” the argument is that a “young intelligentsia” grew “fed up” with the “complacency” and “bipartisan banality” of their elders. In search of greater authenticity, they forged new and “radical ways” of generating social change.²⁶ In the words of scholars Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, they engaged in “a revolt against the successes of established religion in the years immediately following World War II,” rejecting their parent institution’s “hollowness of purpose” and engaging in a search for a new form of “faith both authentic and fervent.”²⁷ Narratives of rebellion are somewhat out of fashion, remaining most prevalent in participant-observer accounts, but they echo throughout histories of the era that emphasize generational conflict and the ‘newness’ of the New Left.²⁸

The second model instead focuses on continuity between 1960s activism and earlier radical traditions. To borrow the imagery of religious scholar Robert Ellwood, such a narrative explores how “underground rivers” of resistance flowed beneath the surface of the Cold War consensus, only to burst forth in “new fountains” of activism in the 1960s.²⁹ As a rich historiographical tradition has shown, a near-continuous succession of religious activists played a


²⁷ Maurice Isserman and Michael Kazin, America Divided, 252.


key role in shaping and sustaining American radicalism prior to World War II. Antebellum Protestantism was a source of organizational strength for early labor movements and vital to the rise of Northern abolitionist sentiment. Heterodox faiths, spiritualist movements, and female preachers were all in the vanguard of the late-nineteenth century quest to expand women's rights. And from the turn of the century through the interwar years, Protestant Social Gospelers fought for a more economically and racially just society, Jewish immigrants brought with them an Old World commitment to socialist politics, New Deal-era Catholics labored on behalf of the economically downtrodden, and religious pacifists pioneered acts of civil disobedience as a form of nonviolent direct action protest. Narratives of continuity show how

---


activists in these traditions remained active throughout the early postwar years, organizing radical resistance despite the crackdowns of the Red Scare and anti-Communist show trials, surviving long enough to shape the social movements of the 1960s intellectually, organizationally, and interpersonally.\textsuperscript{34}

In contrast to both approaches, I argue that the 1960s religious left emerged not in spite of the decade that preceded it, but because of it. Admittedly, many new-breed activists understood themselves as rebels, and earlier traditions of religious radicalism set important intellectual and tactical precedents for the generation that followed. Yet the emergence of mass activism within mainstream religious traditions, across so many demographic and theological categories, was largely a product of the Cold War consensus. Intellectually, the postwar embrace of ‘God and country’ may seem to be nothing more than a shallow appropriation of religious symbols in an age of anti-Communist nationalism. But it had the consequence of imbuing civic life with spiritual significance for a generation of youth and seminary students, teaching them that the secular world had a sacred dimension, that authentic religion demanded involvement in civic affairs and social problems, and that deeds were more important than creeds. From hard-headed Christian realism to post-Holocaust Jewish theology, elite religious thinkers emphasized the fragility of democratic life, calling on members of Judeo-Christian faith traditions to apply their ethical values to the public sphere and ensure that civic law was brought into line with moral law. They resurrected and tamed earlier traditions of religious radicalism, portraying them as part a mainstream tradition of social engagement meant to encourage youth and clergy to


\textsuperscript{34} See, for example: Houston Bryan Roberson, \textit{Fighting the Good Fight: The Story of the Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church, 1865-1977} (New York: Routledge, 2005); Kosek, \textit{Acts of Conscience}; McKanan, \textit{Prophetic Encounters}.
engage with social problems in their own time. They built an interfaith social action theology, imparting spiritual principles that pushed new-breed activists towards political engagement, with consequences that religious leaders did not always anticipate.

Furthermore, I show that the unprecedented postwar growth of religious institutions enabled the mass dissemination of social action theology and facilitated its translation into concrete action. Religious institutions expanded at a record rate in the postwar years, attaining unprecedented levels of membership, revenue, and organizational growth. Religious youth groups and seminary programs experienced record enrollment as well, which provided religious leaders with educational avenues to impart social action theology to an exceptional number of congregants and clergy. At the same time, they used the resources of their institutions to invest heavily in social action programming. These programs, which ranged from urban volunteer summers to transnational student exchanges, were designed to engage participants with pressing contemporary social problems, with the goal of building an engaged religious citizenry that was devoted to putting their spiritual commitments into action. In the process, religious leaders unintentionally exposed religious youth and clergy to postcolonial critiques of American foreign policy, islands of poverty amidst their world of plenty, and the gap between the nation’s democratic ideals and its practice of racial segregation. When movement leaders like the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. sounded their calls to action, it was thanks to social action programming that so many youth and clergy were primed and ready to heed their words.

Out of this intellectual and institutional environment emerged a wave of social ferment that ushered in a new age, defined by the politics of conscience. New-breed activists came to see themselves as prophets, seeking to redeem their nation by alerting it to its sins and forcing it to live up to its own promises. Framing their political agenda in terms of universalistic moral
imperatives, they tried to build a political consensus among fellow congregants on issues like civil rights and abortion access, making policy arguments in a shared spiritual tongue and publicly performing religious rituals as a form of protest. Adopting strategies of mass civil disobedience, they framed their activism as an outgrowth of their commitment to a higher law, representing their arrest and persecution as a form of religious witness against worldly injustice. Claiming to speak as the ‘conscience’ of the nation, they testified on behalf of reform legislation before Congress and launched massive letter-writing campaigns to politicians, designed to leverage the moral status of clergy and the enormous membership of religious institutions on behalf of political change. To an extent not acknowledged in the extant literature on the postwar period, their efforts infused national liberal politics with the air of a moral crusade, while contributing greatly to the considerable policy successes of the left in the 1960s.

Yet they also faced impassioned resistance. By the mid-1960s, fellow congregants were accusing new-breed activists of betraying their shared religious values, and advanced alternative arguments about what religious belief truly demanded of its adherents. Southern evangelicals decried religious appeals to the federal state on behalf of black civil rights, arguing that racial inequality was the product of interpersonal discrimination, and that true social change could only come from private Christian appeals to citizens’ better angels. Conservative Catholics faced off against activist priests in the streets of Chicago, arguing that their Church existed to protect parish communities, not to tear them apart in the name of racial integration. Jewish neo-conservatives accused their new-breed counterparts of anti-Semitism, arguing that Black Power critiques of white allies and the American left’s support for Palestine demanded that the Jewish people abandon political projects on behalf of others and care first and foremost for their own. Conservative Protestants railed against the new-breed embrace of sexual liberation and support
for liberalized abortion access, accusing them of undermining a traditional Christian commitment to heteronormative family life. Even liberal denominational leaders, who often remained sympathetic to the political ideals of new-breed activists, began to question the wisdom of direct-action protests that sowed such dissension in the ranks of the faithful. These interreligious conflicts spilled over into the political arena, generating massive realignments in partisan affiliations, setting the terms of debate for the oncoming ‘culture wars,’ and undercutting the religious left’s claim to speak as political representatives of their broader faith tradition.

In response, I argue, new-breed activists reformulated their political tactics, shifting from the goal of sweeping reform achieved through national politics to the immediate instantiation of justice in local communities. Their earlier strategies had paired campaigns of civil disobedience with political lobbying initiatives orchestrated through centralized religious institutions, in an attempt to stoke moral outrage and translate it into national political leverage. By the mid-1960s, shaken by conservative opposition from their co-religionists and declining support from liberal religious leaders, new-breed activists increasingly emphasized local organizing over national reform, and turned towards more decentralized organizational models, designed to be independent of national religious institutions and to embody an intellectual commitment to participatory democracy. Their protest strategies shifted from a tradition of witness, in which they publicly resisted unjust laws in order to dramatize their moral opposition, to a tradition of sanctuary, in which they sought to circumvent unjust laws and make their social vision an immediate reality for local communities.

These changing political strategies interacted dialectically with a radical rethinking of the relationship between religiosity and institutional life among new-breed activists. New-breed thinkers like Harvey Cox and Jacob Neusner developed elaborate theological critiques of
centralized religious institutions, arguing that it encouraged organizational forms of thinking that prioritized the pragmatic survival of denominational bodies over the radical call to social transformation that lay at the heart of their religious traditions. New-breed activists increasingly saw organized religious life as inherently opposed to their own professed mission in the world, incapable of practicing what they preached, whether because of the influence of conservative donors or their hierarchical models of authority. In contrast to various declension narratives, which argue that the religious left collapsed, dissipated in a surge of secularization, or abandoned their political goals for the quixotic pursuit of transcendence through alternative spirituality, I show that new-breed activists increasingly defined their religiosity in non-institutional terms and began to practice their faith beyond church walls.  

They engaged in a process that Harvey Cox dubbed “creative disaffiliation,” dissolving their national student organizations and religious press outlets in the name of religious authenticity, arguing that such organizational behemoths could not be true embodiments of the church alive. They stopped attending formal religious services and walked away from social action departments, gathering instead for underground liturgies and in para-church organizations. They preserved their commitment to radical religious activism, in other words, but translated it into decentralized organizational forms.

Whatever else the consequences of this transition may have been, it indisputably made the religious left less visible in the public eye, undercutting the very institutional resources that had previously made them such a powerful influence on the national political stage. At precisely the same historical moment, the religious right experienced the institutional renaissance that historians have since documented in exhaustive detail, motivated by the interreligious battles of

---

35 For more on the late-1960s religious declension narrative, see the historiographical discussion in Chapter Six.

the 1960s and underpinned by demographic factors that stretch much further back into the past. The rising star of Christian conservatism ultimately eclipsed that of their rivals on the left, and they seized the mantle of moral majority for themselves. Their long shadow cast McLoughlin’s vision into obscurity, and has since maintained a powerful influence over historians and pundits alike. In this dissertation, I seek to restore to our historical memory the age that preceded and precipitated that development, from the religious left’s birth in the early Cold War years through its twilight in this moment of closure.
CHAPTER ONE
TO SERVE GOD AND COUNTRY:
POSTWAR RELIGIOUS THOUGHT AND THE CALL TO SOCIAL ACTION

On June 13, 1968, Donald Baty was due to appear in court on charges of draft resistance. He had been selected for service in the Vietnam War, but opposed the conflict on moral grounds and had defiantly burned his draft card at a peace rally in New York City’s Central Park. On the morning of his court date, he failed to appear before the judge as scheduled. Instead, he had sought sanctuary in a local Methodist Church, not “to avoid arrest,” in his telling, but to “continue the moral confrontation” that he was waging against the war. Along with a hundred supporters, including the church’s minister, the Rev. Finley Schaef, he staged an anti-war press conference in front of the altar, broke bread and wine in symbolic communion, and sang several choruses of ‘We Shall Overcome.’ Shortly after noon, six federal marshals entered the church, clambered over the congregants seated around Baty, and carried him spread-eagled out of the door.

1 He was ultimately held in a detention center for nearly a month, during which time he refused to work and went on a twenty-seven day hunger strike, before being found guilty and sentenced to four years in prison.2

What drove Donald Baty to burn his draft card, violate a court order, and initiate work stoppages while in a federal detention facility? When asked precisely that question at his trial, he replied that he “had no choice.” His conscience had demanded it of him. Had he “accepted

---


induction,” he told Judge Mishler, he would “be violating laws that are more binding on me than the laws of the United States… There are duties to God, mankind, and oneself that come before General Hershey [the director of the Selective Service System].” Yet Baty was not born and raised a political radical or a committed religious pacifist. Tracing his intellectual biography back to his youth uncovers a typical postwar, middle-class, white American male childhood. Baty grew up on suburban Long Island, was shaped by early Cold War politics and culture, and was by all accounts a model American citizen. He actively participated in the Boy Scouts, attended his local Methodist Church, and had even sought to enlist in the armed forces, applying to the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy after graduating high school.

In a speech delivered at the press conference held in the Methodist Church, Baty’s mother argued that his draft resistance as an adult was by no means a rebellious break with this childhood. By contrast, she suggested that it was this very “all-American upbringing” that explained her son’s actions, according to a reporter for The New York Times. He had been educated in “schools where he pledged allegiance to the flag and American principle;” worshipped in a “church where he was taught ‘Thou shalt not kill;’” been a member of “the Boy Scouts where he was taught the essentials of good citizenship;” and taken classes in “college where he studied ‘what makes democracy work.’” It was in the name of these traditions of civic-religious engagement, out of his sense of duty as a citizen and his belief that his nation was violating its own values by waging an unjust war, that he had sought sanctuary and resisted the draft. “It is not surprising that Don is here today,” Baty’s mother declared, “when we consider


4 Baty apparently passed most of the admissions tests, but was unable to get his weight up to the minimum required 120 pounds: Lukas, Don’t Shoot -- We Are Your Children!, 309-315.
the spoken ideals of his parents’ generation. He must really have believed what we said we believed. The critical question and the surprising one, Given that millions of men of Don’s generation were raised in the same traditions, why isn’t there one of them in sanctuary every morning in this country?”

Historians often treat the early Cold War years as a time of political retrenchment, in which the promise of New Deal liberalism was subverted, radical organizing traditions came under siege, and the seeds of modern conservatism were sown. Religious life in this period is similarly associated with the rising tide of anti-Communism and a shallow “Eisenhower spirituality,” a civic-religious consensus that merely put the imprimatur of faith on the instruments of American democracy. Yet, as Donald Baty’s mother suggested, these same years planted the intellectual seeds that made a revival of the religious left possible in the years to come. During the 1950s, intellectuals from a wide range of religious traditions argued that authentic faith required social and civic engagement from its adherents. They asserted that secular life had a sacred dimension, that actions ‘in the world’ were fundamentally religious and that, in turn, religious values ought to shape the secular world. They taught that deeds were more important than creeds, that true religiosity lay not in right belief, not in sectarian doctrine or the

---

5 Quoted in Lukas, Don’t Shoot -- We Are Your Children!, 337-8.


fine points of theological debates, but in right action, in a personal commitment to live out one’s values and work for the Kingdom of God on earth. In Cold War America, being a good Protestant, Catholic, or Jew increasingly entailed being a good democratic citizen, and in turn, politics took on much higher spiritual stakes. In short, religious leaders popularized an American “theology for social action,” in the words of one Reform rabbi, which blurred the boundaries between civic and spiritual life for a generation of youth and seminary students.

In this chapter, I trace the intellectual biographies of new-breed activists back to their formative years and analyze the educational programming of postwar liberal religious institutions, revealing the pervasive influence of a Cold War social action theology. I show how longer religious traditions of social engagement, from the Social Gospel to Catholic labor organizing, were resurrected and transfigured by postwar intellectual elites, who refracted their faith’s historical public commitments through new intellectual prisms, ranging from Christian realism to Catholic anti-Communism to post-Holocaust Jewish thought. These high intellectual trends trickled down to the religious grassroots through educational programming designed to foster social engagement and civic leadership, including campus Bible study groups, Catholic civic clubs, and Jewish youth camps. In the process, they made religion an unusually influential part of American public life and laid the intellectual foundations for an emerging politics of conscience, which would eventually transcend historical religious divisions, reject technocratic approaches to public policy, and call for justice on earth in the fiery tongue of the prophets.

**Protestant Social Action: From the Social Gospel to Christian Realism**


Like Donald Baty, Charlotte Bunch was at the forefront of the new-breed student activism in the 1960s. As a member of the Methodist Student Movement, she provided organizational support for the Selma marches, labored at a radical work-camp in Japan, marched on Washington to protest the war in Vietnam, and coordinated Protestant anti-poverty initiatives in low-income neighborhoods. Also like Baty, Bunch’s childhood was not a radical one. Describing her upbringing years later, she characterized it as “somewhat apolitical.” Although her parents taught her “to stand up for our principles,” she recalled, their “views were not sharply defined by ideology” and instead embraced a general commitment to civic engagement. Tellingly, at the age of sixteen, they enrolled her in Girls State, a civics camp run by the American Legion. There, she enthusiastically attended lectures on the superiority of “Americanism,” sang the Lord’s Prayer, discussed the critical importance of Cold War defense spending, and ended every night with a worship service. Upon returning home, Bunch gave her town a presentation on the American way of life, causing one neighbor to enthusiastically compliment her “interest in promoting Americanism” and her love of “the preservation of freedom.” It can be hard to reconcile this model youth with the radical activist she grew into.

Yet a close look at Bunch’s certificate of church membership, issued when she was accepted into her Methodist congregation as a full member in the mid-1950s, reveals the influence of a Protestant social action theology on her early intellectual life. The document described the Christian church as not only “the conserver of the moral and spiritual values of the

11 Bunch, in Evans, ed., Journeys, 123.
13 C.L. Kay to Charlotte Bunch, July 12, 1961, Folder 5, Carton 1, CBP.
past,” but also “the creator of ideals in the present.” “Organized religion must have and hold its vital place in the affairs of men,” it ominously warned, or “else the people perish.” Although the ‘ideals’ it promulgated were not explicitly political, they were nevertheless drawn from “the social teachings of Jesus” - rather than, say, Old Testament proscriptions on sexual behavior - and applied universally, to “all classes and conditions of people... regardless of race or color.” If congregants were to be true Christians, the certificate went on to argue, they had to not only “proclaim” these values, but also “be living examples of those teachings.”

Bunch later recalled that while her religious upbringing “was full of mixed messages,” particularly regarding gender roles, “the imperative that I should become a responsible, active citizen… was never in doubt.”

The ideas embodied in Bunch’s membership certificate - the importance of religious values to democratic life, a social approach to theological ethics, and the imperative for Christians to act upon their beliefs in imitation of Jesus - were central to mainline Protestant intellectual life in the postwar years. Yet they had roots that stretched back at least to the Social Gospel, the turn-of-the-century theological movement that helped to define liberal Protestantism and delineate it from its evangelical and fundamentalist counterparts. Espousing a modernist approach to Biblical exegesis, a postmillennial eschatology, and a progressive commitment to social reform, Social Gospelers argued that the primary obligation of Christianity was to reform society so that it reflected New Testament values. They prioritized social salvation over

---

14 “Certificate of Church Membership,” December 5, 1954, Folder 2, Carton 1, CBP.

15 Charlotte Bunch, in Evans, ed., Journeys, 122.
individual salvation, seeking not just to save a handful of souls, but to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.\textsuperscript{16}

In political terms, this theological vision precipitated widespread involvement in voluntary reform associations and labor organizing, a rich intellectual critique of unregulated capitalism, and an increasing willingness to use the power of the state to reform the social order.\textsuperscript{17} With regard to political economy in particular, intellectual luminaries like Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch railed against the modern worship of “the spirit of mammonism,” arguing that a purely capitalist social system encouraged the profit motive to rule men’s hearts and permitted labor’s exploitation by the unrestrained forces of capital. If the Kingdom of Heaven was ever to be achieved on earth, they argued, economic relations would first and foremost need to be regulated by the principles of the Golden Rule and the social order Christianized.\textsuperscript{18} In the name of these ideals, the Social Gospel reached its high tide in the early twentieth century, when the Federal Council of Churches (FCC) adopted the Social Creed of 1908, acknowledging their duty to “reduce the hardships and uphold the dignity of labor,” and

\begin{footnotesize}


\end{footnotesize}
established a Social Action Department, which persisted in its mission of supporting labor and

An unreconstructed version of the Social Gospel undoubtedly persisted in the postwar
years, where it influenced both new-breed activists and more radical religious groups. The Rev.
Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, credits Rauschenbusch with being the first to inspire him to
connect his faith to his politics. After reading \textit{Christianity and the Social Crisis},
Rauschenbusch’s hallmark 1907 work, King became convinced that “any religion which
professes to be about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic
conditions that scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion only waiting for the day to be
Protestants during and after World War II, as theologians like F. Ernest Johnson defended it from
the critiques of evangelical conservatism and neo-orthodoxy in treatises with such titles as \textit{The

More radical para-church groups of religious activists, such as the Fellowship of
Reconciliation (FOR), similarly fought to preserve the Social Gospel tradition through the
interwar period and beyond. The FOR was a non-denominational Christian pacifist group
founded in 1915, in opposition to military conscription during World War I, which saw itself as
the heir to Walter Rauschenbusch and other leading Social Gospelers. Its members opposed
violence in all forms, speaking out not only against war and military production, but also against such broader systems of coercion as Jim Crow, unbridled capitalism, interwar fascism, and Soviet Communism, all on the grounds that they were un-Christian ways to structure the social order. Of equal importance, FOR members pioneered key nonviolent direct action tactics, using so-called ‘acts of conscience’ to resist unjust laws that perpetuated broader systems of violence. Although nonviolent civil disobedience would come to be associated with Mahatma Gandhi, a figure that the FOR helped to popularize in America, its logic among Fellowship members initially grew out of a “theology of the cross,” the belief that the true essence of Christianity lay in the parable of Christ’s final sacrifice, which brought down the Roman Empire and redeemed mankind through nonviolent witness against injustice.22

These concepts will sound familiar to any student of civil rights activism, of course, and the FOR both presaged and influenced that movement in key ways. The FOR staged interracial sit-ins at a segregated Chicago coffeehouse in 1942 and embarked on an interracial “Journey of Reconciliation” across the South in 1947, predating the better-known incarnations of those protest tactics by eighteen and fourteen years, respectively. Members of the organization included James Farmer, who founded the Congress on Racial Equality; Bayard Rustin, who organized the 1965 March on Washington; James Lawson, who organized the 1960 student sit-ins and helped found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; and A.J. Muste, a long-time labor leader and racial justice advocate, who also organized the National Mobilization Committee to End the War in Vietnam.23 King himself was first introduced to the tactics of nonviolent direct action not from reading Gandhi, but from listening to a speech that Muste gave

23 Ibid.
at Crozer Theological Seminary, where King was a student in the 1950s.  

Yet amidst the rise of global totalitarianism and the onset of World War II, other liberal Protestant thinkers came to see the Social Gospel as hopelessly naive. These ‘Christian realists’ sought to preserve the Social Gospel’s commitment to public engagement, but argued that its advocates had overestimated their ability to usher in the millennium by appealing to mankind’s better angels and underestimated the evil that could be wrought by the misuse of political power in the modern world. The antidote that they prescribed was a return to Christian orthodoxy, a rejection of the belief in the social perfectibility of mankind and an embrace of the Old Testament lessons of the Fall from the Garden of Eden. What society needed was not progressive utopias, which could so easily collapse into statist attempts at social engineering, but Cold War prophets, opposed to the modern Egyptians of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union and ready to rally mainline churches and public opinion to their cause.  

Chief among these Christian realists was Reinhold Niebuhr, himself a former member and eventual apostate of the FOR, who began the interwar years as a pacifist seeking to reconcile Marx and Jesus and ended them as a paradigmatic Cold War liberal.  

For Niebuhr, statist attempts at social engineering necessarily devolved into the abuse of power, while pacifist

---


26 Characterization of Niebuhr’s intellectual evolution and relationship to the FOR drawn from Kosek, Acts of Conscience, 146-190. Note that in his recent work on Christian realism, religious scholar Mark Edwards has rightly and persuasively worked to reconceptualize Christian realism as a transnational movement of scholars, displacing the centrality of Niebuhr. His point is well taken. Yet given the fact that his analysis largely aligns with my own, particularly regarding the extent to which Christian realists preserved the reforming impulse of the Social Gospel, as well as the omnipresence of references to his specific writings in new-breed recollections of their early religious education, here I retain a traditional scholarly focus on Niebuhr. See: Mark Thomas Edwards, The Right of the Protestant Left: God’s Totalitarianism (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
attempts to opt out of the state altogether merely ceded the apparatuses of power to others. The virtuous alternative was democratic engagement, not only because it allowed well-meaning individuals to pursue the common good, but because it acted as counterbalance to those who worked to subvert it. As he famously put it in 1944, “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”

So long as citizens tempered their work for Christian justice with a humble awareness of their capacity for sin, democratic politics could bring about the best of both worlds. Interestingly, Niebuhr warned Americans not to “identify our particular brand of democracy with the ultimate values of life,” and fretted over the tendency “to give a false and idolatrous religious note to the conflict between democracy and communism.” The humility he called for did not always trickle down, but his endorsement of socially-engaged Christian citizens most certainly did.

If postwar Protestant social action theology rested on a three-legged stool, Niebuhr’s neo-orthodoxy was surely its stoutest leg. Yet the work of two other thinkers, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Paul Tillich, were also key sources of support. Bonhoeffer was particularly influential among Protestant youth, who were taken with his Christocentric theology and embrace of the concept of ‘Christian worldliness.’ The defining feature of the Protestant faith, Bonhoeffer argued, was that God had incarnated himself as a man through Christ on this earth, where he was ultimately crucified by a political body for his prophetic preaching. Authentic believers thus needed to affirm a faith that applied its ethical vision to the social order in this world, rather than looking towards its instantiation in the next, and remained true to that mission even in the face of

---


persecution. Although Bonhoeffer’s thought was influential on its own terms, it became particularly popular in the context of his religious resistance to the rise of the Nazi Party in his home country of Germany. After he was executed by hanging for treason, Bonhoeffer’s martyrdom became a powerful symbol for mainline Protestants of the role that religious witness could play in the resistance of evil, as well as an exemplar of the Christian obligation to not just espouse social values, but to act upon them, no matter the cost.  

Paul Tillich’s body of thought, meanwhile, was too complex to do justice to in this limited space, not least because he thrived on the rhetorical use of paradox. But his key contribution to Protestant social action theology arguably lay in his advancement of the idea that reality was unitary, that the divine was immanent in the world, but that the conditions of secular existence alienated mankind from the reality of the sacred. On the hand, this position led Tillich to a biting critique of modern technocracy, on the grounds that it furthered such alienation by turning mankind into an end in itself, a position that would ultimately lead to his deportation from Nazi Germany and influence the New Left’s rejection of consensus liberal policy-making. On the other hand, it also led to a renunciation of otherworldly religion and an embrace of what Tillich called a “passion for the secular.” “Religion, like God, is omnipresent,” he wrote. Authentic Christianity did not exist over and against secular culture or political life, but was

---


embodied in seemingly mundane aspects of the natural world. Only through voluntary action in that world could Christians end their spiritual alienation and engage with the demands of their faith.

None of these postwar intellectual trends had particularly specific political implications, beyond their rejection of totalitarianism and their calls for general social engagement, but they pervasive in the educational world of new-breed clergy. At various times, Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer, and Tillich all served as professors at Union Theological Seminary, where their visions of an engaged ministry influenced a young James A. Pike, who went on to fight for the desegregation of the Episcopal Church and the ordination of female ministers as a controversial bishop, and William Sloane Coffin, Jr., the infamous Yale chaplain and Presbyterian firebrand involved in high-profile civil rights and antiwar demonstrations throughout the 1960s. Coffin had actually decided to enter seminary in the first place after attending a conference talk that Niebuhr gave on religion and politics when he was a college senior. “My main objection was overcome that weekend,” he later recalled, it having been that “the church is really irrelevant.” Having taken Niebuhr’s Cold War liberal teachings to heart, he then dropped out of Union after a year to join the CIA. “The difference between [the] CIA and seminary to me in those days was not that

---


35
great,” he explained, portraying this move as a natural extension of neo-orthodox ministry. “It’s pursuing the same kind of goal of righteousness as I saw it.”

Upon picking his religious education back up in 1956, Coffin enrolled at Yale Divinity School (YDS), another hotbed for Protestant social action theology. The Dean of YDS was then Liston Pope, a Congregational minister and co-chair of Christian Action, a Cold War voluntary organization that sought “to combat the evils in communism, fascism, or any other way of life which degrades man and defies God.” At Yale, alongside Reinhold Niebuhr’s brother, H. Richard Niebuhr, he had been offering popular courses on Christian ethics and social action since the 1940s. These courses not only encouraged reflection on the proper role of Protestants in shaping political life, but also, in the words of a 1949 course description, supplemented study with “firsthand observation and participation wherever possible.” While it’s not clear whether Coffin ever enrolled in one of Pope’s courses, Harvey Cox, the influential theologian who went on to popularize the term ‘new-breed,’ did. And in turn, one of the clergy that Cox called a “hero of the ‘New Breed’” in that very article, the Rev. Eugene Carson Blake, attributed his early

37 Quoted in Goldstein, William Sloane Coffin, Jr., 75.

38 Christian Action Pamphlet, Folder 8, Box 110, SEPC. Although Christian Action counted a wide cross-section of intellectual Protestant elites as members, it never built a grassroots base and fizzled out after a few years. See: Fox, Reinhold Niebuhr, 247-8.

39 For a full record of the Yale Divinity School curriculum, see: YDS Bulletins, Box 26, Yale University Divinity School Memorabilia, Record Group no. 53, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library (hereafter YDS). For more on Liston Pope’s courses in particular, see: Social Ethics Pamphlet Collection, Record Group no. 73, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library (hereafter SEPC).

40 “Bulletin of the Yale University Divinity School for the Academic Year 1949-1950,” Series 45, no. 5 (March 1, 1949), Box 26, YDS, p. 32.

41 See the papers that Cox wrote for two of Pope’s courses: Harvey Cox, “Christian Ethics and Policy-Making in the Administration of Higher Education,” and “A Case Study in New Haven City Politics: Women Voters and the City Charter Issue,” both in Folder 4, Box 70, SEPC.
politicization to Niebuhr’s *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*. Niebuhr taught him that “metaphysics is hardly important to preaching,” he later recalled, “as is theology and ethics,” and taught him “not to be romantic,” but to pursue “proximate justice” in the name of faith.

These ideas also circulated throughout the 1950s church life of youth like Donald Baty and Charlotte Bunch, who grew up to be new-breed activists. In the postwar years, mainline churches increasingly conceived of themselves as democratic bodies, whose purpose was not to save souls or enforce doctrine, but to encourage group Bible study and communal discussion of moral values. In turn, this participatory model of religious education was meant to mirror and shape the behavior of socially-engaged Protestant youth, who might work to align American social life with their religious values. Eleanor Scott Meyers, a feminist theologian who went on to teach at Union Theological Seminary herself, remembers her mother teaching just such a “packed” Sunday school class in their Kansas church in the 1950s. Rooted in the thought of “Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and the Niebuhrs,” her lessons blended Christian realism with a reformist impulse, discussing such issues as “the calling to be a Christian in the world, the social gospel, the relationship between politics and religion, the mission of the church in history… the call for justice found in the Bible, loving your neighbor, and many more.” Meyers recalls her mother once saying “that she went to church because it was the best place to do

---


44 Sociologist Robert Wuthnow describes 1950s religion more broadly in these terms, as “communities of moral obligation, defined by shared expectations, sustained by social interaction.” He suggests that the key intellectual shift in this regard was the decline of “doctrinal validation” and rise of “procedural validation” - that is, the acceptance of the premise that the religious beliefs one held were less important than how one arrived at them. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 54-57; 69.

Meyers’ mother’s emphasis on Christian justice bled seamlessly into the later causes of the 1960s left, but Protestant social action theology spanned political leanings, also emerging in staunchly conservative environments as well. Rebecca Owen, for example, was raised in the rural South and taught to associate Jim Crow’s ‘separate but equal’ paradigm with the social peace of God’s will. But after multiple interracial encounters in national service programs and conferences sponsored by the Methodist Church, which were intended to deepen her commitment to social action, she began to re-think her position. On December 14, 1960, she was arrested in Lynchburg, Virginia for staging an interracial sit-in at a local drug store. She explained her actions in the terms of her religious childhood, citing “the Christian imperative of brotherhood” as the impetus for her civil disobedience and nothing that her jail-time reading included “nothing but the Bible and Bonhoeffer,” the former of which she declared “probably the most revolutionary book I’ve read.”

Protestant student organizations also launched a wide range of programs meant to disseminate social action theology more systematically and explicitly encourage democratic engagement in its name. As early as 1946, the interdenominational Student Y declared that one of its primary goals was to encourage Christian students to “take active responsibility for political affairs in community, state and nation.” To that end, they began running ‘Leadership Schools,’ which offered students courses on the relationship between religious belief and democratic participation. With courses like “Introduction to Social Ethics” and “Religious

---


47 Rebecca Owen, in Evans, ed., *Journeys that Opened Up the World* 66-67; 77-78.

48 “National Program Objectives,” December 27, 1946, Folder 275, Box 27, BMP.
Values in the Modern World,” these schools promised to make participants’ dreams “come true!,” while encouraging social engagement and providing them “skill in leadership.” The Student Y also focused on grassroots politics, running “Y Votercades” in Presidential election years. Using voter registration drives, public forums on election issues, and visits to local party headquarters, they sought to “help young citizens” to “learn how the political system operates,” “know the issues,” and “get out an informed vote.” In case the connection between such civic programs and social action theology was unclear, the Student Y issued recommended reading lists for its staff to keep up to date, which included books by Niebuhr, Bonhoeffer, and Liston Pope.

Looking to transform its intellectual commitment to social action into a more concrete form of politics, the United Student Christian Council (USCC), which served as the umbrella organization for liberal Protestant student groups, established a Political Commission in the late 1940s. “The Social Gospel, we believe, is no longer adequate for our generation,” the Commission declared, in a statement that echoed Niebuhr’s critiques, and Christian students needed a new agenda based on “a serious program of theological study” that drew out “the social and political implications of the Gospel.” This mission in the world was required by their faith, they continued, which affirmed that Christ needed to be “Lord of our total life,” a realm that “by

49 “West Coast Leadership School,” Brochure, 1951, Folder 297, Box 28, Bruce Maguire/Student YMCA Papers, Record Group no. 78, Special Collections, Yale University Divinity School Library (hereafter BMP). For more details, see remainder of folder (“Leadership Training Schools, 1951-66”).

50 “Project Catalyst: Background Information,” ca. 1970, Folder 318, Box 29, BMP.

51 See, for example, “The Christian Understanding of the Contemporary Situation: Suggested Study for Members of the Staffs of the Student YMCA and YWCA, 1953-4,” and “Suggested Outline for Staff Study of the Laity,” ca. 1957, Folder 311, Box 29, BMP.

all means includes the social, political, and economic orders.”

Other articles published in the USCC’s national periodical, *Communique*, made similar points for its student readers throughout the 1950s. A 1957 editorial, “Political Responsibility in the Space Age,” for example, warned Christian students not to forget that “our Lord was crucified on a political charge.” “God has committed Himself to man in the midst of our impersonal political world, just as He did in the world of Pilate and Herod,” it argued. As a consequence, Christians must meet “their crucified and risen Lord in grateful decision, responsibility, and service where He first chose to meet us - in the depth of the world’s political confusion.”

USCC would go on to provide extensive organizational support for the 1960 sit-in movement, including using the pages of this same magazine to advance a Christian defense of civil disobedience, on the grounds that political witness against injustice was a morally legitimate way for youth to meet ‘their crucified and risen Lord.’ The intellectual path that connected Cold War social action theology and radical political activism was a surprisingly direct one.

**Catholic Social Action: From Labor Organizing to Anti-Communism**

Like their Protestant counterparts, the Catholic Church invested heavily in postwar educational programming meant to foster civic engagement among their youth. In the late 1940s, under the direction of the United States Bishops, the Catholic University of America’s Commission on American Citizenship founded the Catholic Civics Club of America, a parallel version of Charlotte Bunch’s American Legion camp. The Commission published official handbooks for the Clubs, entitled “Good Citizens,” which encouraged youth to play-act at democracy and which was distributed to Catholic middle schools across the nation. “Next to

---


God is country, and next to religion is patriotism,” read the opening quote in the 1958 edition, quoting Archbishop John Ireland, and “patriotism is a Catholic virtue.”55 After instructing readers in how to draft a Constitution, explaining arcane rules of parliamentary law, and recommending field trips to local governmental bodies, the handbook went on to suggest a prayer to end club meetings, drawn from the words of Archbishop John Carroll:

“We pray Thee, O God of might, wisdom, and justice, through whom authority is rightly administered, laws are enacted, and judgments decreed, assist, with Thy Holy Spirit of counsel and fortitude, the President of these United States, that his administration may be conducted in righteousness, and be eminently useful to Thy people, over whom he presides, by encouraging due respect for virtue and religion; by a faithful execution of the laws in justice and mercy; and by restraining vice and immorality. Let the light of Thy divine wisdom direct the deliberations of the Congress, and shine forth in all the proceedings and laws framed for our rule and government.”56

This not-so-subtle blending of faith and politics not only gave religious sanction to the workings of American democracy, but also taught Catholic youth that good government, in turn, should be guided by the gentle hand of religious values.

Many historical accounts portray the mid-1960s as a key turning point for American Catholicism, in which the reforms of Vatican II ‘opened up’ the Church, transforming it from a fortress of embattled faith into a modernizing community that sought to reconcile its mission with the secular world.57 Yet the American Catholic tradition of social action extended far deeper into the past, at least to a turn-of-the-century support for labor organizing. While never

55 Good Citizens: The Official Handbook of the Catholic Civics Club of America (Dayton OH: Geo A. Pflaum, 1958), 3, in Folder 58, Box 37, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Youth Department, Collection no. 10, The American Catholic Research Center and University Archives, The Catholic University of America (hereafter CYD).

56 Ibid., 24-25.

supportive of socialist or Marxist movements, which it believed over-emphasized material conditions, the Church had long been critical of unregulated capitalism and its consequences for working-class communities. Pope Leo XIII formalized this Catholic communitarian critique in the seminal 1891 papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. Although mankind had a natural right to reap the fruits of its individual labor in the form of private property, the Pope asserted, it also had a God-given right to economic self-sufficiency and personal dignity, which was becoming increasingly elusive amidst the poverty produced by the industrial capitalist order. The solution that the encyclical put forth called for social reform in largely voluntaristic terms: employers and employees needed to be taught to live up to their moral obligations towards each other, and then peaceful trade unions could function as mediators representing labor’s collective interests and ensuring the establishment of a just wage.\(^{58}\)

In the spirit of this encyclical, early Catholic social action was largely non-statist in orientation and focused on ameliorating local economic conditions, in keeping with the Catholic emphasis on subsidiarity. The Church made extensive investments in a private network of charitable organizations, including Catholic hospitals, schools, and food kitchens, institutionalizing its commitment to combatting the social consequences of poverty.\(^{59}\) And through its Department of Social Action (DSA), an arm of the United States Bishops’ National Catholic Welfare Conference, it also provided extensive support for Catholic labor organizing. The DSA founded labor schools to provide parish priests with “a complete and thorough course in Catholic social principles,” ran study groups for working-class Catholics with names like “The


Dictatorship of Finance-Capitalism,” and distributed drafts of pro-labor sermons to be read from the pulpit. During the same time period, radical para-church groups like the Catholic Worker, led by activists Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, formed intentional communities devoted to communal property, anarcho-syndicalist philosophies, and the social and personal transformations that could be achieved by casting off materialism and devoting oneself to the cause of ending poverty.

During the interwar years, as the Depression set in and privatized approaches to the crisis of capitalism began to seem increasingly inadequate, many American Catholics embraced a redistributive role for the federal state on explicitly religious grounds. Populist rhetoric stirred up working-class Catholics against greedy businessmen and fat-cats, Franklin D. Roosevelt consciously and successfully wooed the Catholic vote, and leading intellectuals argued that laissez-faire economic policy was inimical to Catholic principles, arguing that centralized economic planning was necessary in the name of the common good. The most prominent of such thinkers, the Rev. John A. Ryan, was both a theologian and an economics, and became a liberal New Dealer who grounded his commitment to economic reform in Thomistic principles of natural law. Ryan was not only a key intellectual influence on interwar Catholicism, but also played a direct hand in economic policy-making, drafting Minnesota’s first minimum-wage law

---

60 On labor schools, see: Series 14: Records Related to Workers’ Schools, 1936-1946 and Series 15: Records Relating to Work with Priests, 1937-1946, DSA. Other examples of study group readings include “The Rights of Labor,” “The Living Wage,” and “Christianity and “Private Property,” all in Folder 24: Study Clubs, Box 41, DSA. On pro-labor sermons, see: Folder 30: Sermons and Social Principles, n/d and Folder 31: Sermons and Outlines for Priests, 1941, Box 41, DSA, as well as the periodical Social Action Notes for Priests, also issued by the Social Action Department.


and serving on President Roosevelt’s National Recovery Administration. By the 1940s, his ideas were relatively widespread within the Church hierarchy, and Catholic leaders were actively working with Protestant and Jewish groups to issue joint statements declaring that “the moral law must govern economic life” in calls for price control legislation, subsidized low-income housing, and an increased minimum wage.

This tradition of social action was radically transformed in the postwar years, when Catholic thinkers wedded their commitment to social engagement with the rising tide of Catholic anti-Communism. This trend is often represented by the hyperbolic paranoia of some of the most vocal anti-Communists, such as Cardinal Spellman of New York, who called on fellow Catholics to defend “the rights of God and man against Christ-hating communists whose allegiance is pledged to Satan!” Yet it had more serious intellectual dimensions as well. Catholic critiques of capitalism had been rooted in spiritual humanism, in an emphasis on the dignity of a mankind made in the image of God and opposition to social systems that depersonalized individuals through exploitative labor regimes. Amidst the emerging Cold War, with a rising American economic tide that seemed to lift all boats, capitalism began to seem like less of a problem in this regard than the international menace of Soviet Communism. Catholics were deeply concerned with the Soviet Union’s militant atheism, of course, but they also objected to what they saw as Communism’s failure to respect the dignity of the individual, its


64 “Pattern for Economic Justice: A Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant Declaration,” October 16, 1946, Folder 5, Box 15, DSA.

65 As historian Andrew Preston has put it, "[Catholics] were perhaps the most robustly anticommunist group at a time when communism became the nation's overriding priority and when the validity of someone's patriotism largely depended on their attitude towards Communism." Preston, Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith, 470.

66 Quoted in Preston, 433.
materialistic understanding of human history, and its elevation of mankind and its reason to a position of worship reserved solely for God. They subsumed these grave errors under the rubric of “secularism,” meaning not the mechanistic separation of church and state, but the rejection of any public role for religious values. As the American Bishops put it in 1948, the secularism of the Soviet Union constituted “the most deadly menace to our Christian and American way of living.”

In addition to such intellectual concerns, the Catholic Church faced a more literal threat from the Soviet Union. As a transnational institution with an organizational network that reached throughout Eastern Europe, Russia, and China, the Soviet suppression of religious worship in the Communist bloc affected them directly. Communist leaders were confiscating Church property, arresting and jailing priests on flimsy pretenses, and indiscriminately persecuting Catholic parishioners, often forcing them to flee their homelands. High-ranking Cardinals in Hungary and Yugoslavia were arrested on sham charges, tortured until they confessed to seditious crimes, and then run through show trials in which they were charged with treason. The ranking US diplomat in Hungary called one such cardinal’s arrest there “a direct assault on one of the most vital main streams of the western heritage,” of “major significance.”


68 On the Church as transnational institution, see: Lisa L. Ferrari, “The Vatican as a Transnational Actor,” in Paul Christopher Manuel, Lawrence C. Reardon, and Clyde Wilcox, eds., The Catholic Church and the Nation-State: Comparative Perspectives (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2006).


for the Cold War conflict.\footnote{Preston, \textit{Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith}, 433.}

In the context of this moral and institutional threat, postwar Catholic thinkers transfigured their commitment to social action into calls to roll back Communist advances abroad, particularly in regions of Africa and Latin America with high concentrations of Catholics. Thanks to religious groups who sought to bring social life into line with moral law, they argued, American-style democracy had tamed the beast of unbridled capitalism and could serve as the antidote to the revolutionary appeals of the Soviet Union. Speaking in 1951, on the sixtieth anniversary of \textit{Rerum Novarum}, the Archbishop of Washington declared that for this reason “the Christian tradition of social justice” was needed “now more than ever.” It represented the “only possible basis for a lasting peace” in the developing world.\footnote{“Encyclical Anniversary,” Official Statement of Most Rev. Patrick A. O’Boyle, February 21, 1951, Folder 33, Box 3, DSA.} The Catholic Association for International Peace, an advocacy group founded by John A. Ryan, agreed. It issued reports calling on America to combat Communism via “the expansion of US technical assistance to underdeveloped areas,” which would represent both “a long-term program of self-improvement” and a way to promote “human values, which transcend the purely economic.”\footnote{CAIP, Press Release, August 1951, Folder 4, Box 48, DSA. For more, see: Charles T. Strauss, “Catholicism, Central America, and United States Politics during the Cold War, 1943-1988” (PhD Diss: University of Notre Dame, 2011).} In his 1954 Christmas Address, Pope Pius XII similarly called Catholics to action, declaring that they needed to demonstrate “the capacity of the social action of Christianity” and “efficacy of the social doctrine of the Church” if they were to combat “the enemy of God,” whose materialistic regime
was “producing destruction in souls.”

Postwar Catholic thinkers also advanced religious defenses of democracy on its own terms, rather than as a mere extension of their anti-Communist stance. They were often motivated by the desire to demonstrate that Catholicism did not naturally foster an ‘authoritarian’ attitude - a quest spurred by the fears sparked among non-Catholics by the Church’s recent endorsements of fascist regimes in Portugal, Spain, and Austria. Catholic thinkers like French philosopher Jacques Maritain argued that the origins of democratic thought could actually be traced back to the 13th-century Catholic philosopher Thomas Aquinas, seeking to connect a preference for democratic self-governance to the Thomistic emphasis on individual worth and natural law. American Jesuit John Courtney Murray went one step further, most prominently in *We Hold These Truths*, a haphazard collection of essays that turned out to be popular enough to undergo five printings in just its first year of publication. In its pages, Murray argued that the key distinction of American-style democracy was its reliance on truths held to be self-evident - that is, truths that existed beyond social contracts and the consent of the governed - which he examined by turn and concluded were largely congruent with Catholic social principles.

Murray’s emphasis on external constraints on democratic politics was commonplace to

---

74 Pope Pius XII, “The Bridge of Peace,” Christmas Message, 1954. The Pope’s words were re-circulated among priests via the American Bishops’ Social Action Department. See: “Social Responsibilities of Christians,” *Social Action Notes for Priests*, March 1955, in Folder 20, Box 70, DSA.


Catholic thought in the postwar years, and bled into a broader argument that religious principles were required to keep democracy functioning. In the wake of Hitler’s rise to power through largely democratic means, democracy seemed like a terribly fragile thing to American thinkers, religious or otherwise. So long as rights and liberties stemmed purely from contracts forged by men themselves, they were no more than privileges that could be democratically taken away by those same men. Democracy needed to rest upon the shoulders of something higher than man - which, to postwar Catholics, meant natural law - if democracy were to be preserved and protected from man’s interference, and it was thus the responsibility of religious citizens to ensure that civic law remained in line with moral law. In the words of Murray, religious believers had a unique responsibility to “spiritualize” politics, on the grounds “only he who believes in the fact of God made Man will have a true spiritual idea of man’s essential dignity and freedom.”

This argument was also popular among non-Catholic thinkers; in fact, it may be a position most closely associated with Jewish sociologist and popular author Will Herberg. And it was a point frequently hammered home by politicians emphasizing the stakes of the Cold War, as when the nation’s first Catholic President, John F. Kennedy, used his inaugural address to emphasize that “the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of God.”

The Catholics Civics Club of America, with its prayers for the Holy Spirit to assist the

---


80 President John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1961.
President of the United States, was but one of the vehicles through which Catholic leaders sought to transmit these highbrow ideas and encourage civic engagement among their Church’s youth. The Catholic Youth Department began sponsoring Youth Government Day in 1952, for example, encouraging over a thousand local Catholic youth groups to hold mock elections and put the victors in charge of local city councils for a day, so as to “encourage youth in the ways of moral and civic responsibility.”

A student group devoted to Catholic Action published newsletters for youth, which blurred the boundaries between the sacred and the secular, arguing that “Christian education is not confined to the classroom; it is, rather, a blue print [sic] for natural and supernatural Society.”

Like the Protestant USCC before it, the National Federation of Catholic College Students (NFCCS) created a National Policy Resolutions Committee in 1955, with the mission of issuing “statements of our profession and practice of particular Christian principles” on “issues of national interest.” And also like the USCC, that same Committee would eventually play a key role in facilitating Catholic student support for civil rights activism.

Clergy were similarly called upon to live up to the civic demands of their Church, especially by the Bishops’ Department of Social Action, which published a monthly newsletters called Social Action Notes for Priests. Its articles exhorted parish priests not to fall prey to “misguided supernaturalism” and “make the mistake of “confin[ing] the Church to the ‘strictly religious’ field.” It might feel safer to many parish priests to “remain inside their churches for the sole comfort of those who want to hear them mouth pious nothings about spiritual values,” they admitted. Yet in the mid-1950s, mired in the global Cold War, such an insular attitude

---

81 “Youth Government Day,” Brochure, 1958, in Folder 6, Box 49, CYD.

82 “Leader’s Bulletin,” Catholic Action Students, vol. IV, no. 3 (January 1944), Folder 20, Box 6, SEPC.

violated the true spirit of Catholicism. “Speak out boldly” on the social issues of the day, the DSA encouraged them, for that was the only way to truly “stir up Christianity” among the faithful. Postwar Catholic social action theology may seem a far cry from the radical forms of witness eventually undertaken by Catholic activists like the Berrigan brothers. But in its emphasis on a religious obligation to speak out on the social issues of the day, to make sure that civic law was kept in line with moral law, the latter was deeply indebted to the intellectual precedents set by the former.

**Jewish Social Action: From Secular Socialism to the Post-Holocaust Synagogue**

In a manual written for Jewish synagogues in 1956, Albert Vorspan, Director of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism, told his readers that “the essence of religion,” or at least “certainly of the Jewish religion,” lay in “social action.” True Judaism worked “through synagogues for the advancement of social justice,” he argued, issuing forth in “not only stirring sermons from the rabbis,” but also “effective grassroots action by the men and women who make up the congregation.” Religious communities that shirked this responsibility, holding weekly seders while ignoring their social obligations, were “false to the deepest traditions and values of the Jewish heritage.” By contrast, by engaging with the pressing social issues of the day and working to “commit man to a way of life consistent with God’s will,“ Jews could “bridge the gap between confessional and commitment, between word and deed.” In doing so, he continued, “we bring a sense of greater reality to our faith; and we fulfill ourselves as Jews.”

The heart of Judaism, as the manual’s title implied, lay in the pursuit of justice.

---

84 “The World Could Use a Little More Anti-Clericalism,” *Social Action Notes for Priests*, May 1954, p. 11, Folder 20, Box 70, DSA; “Should a Priest Keep Politics Out of the Pulpit?” *Social Action Notes for Priests*, June 1954, Folder 20, Box 70, DSA.

As Vorspan’s language implies, of the three faith groups under consideration, organized Judaism undeniably exhibited the most continuity between its social action theology of the 1950s and the new-breed activism of the 1960s. Yet unlike their Protestant and Catholic counterparts, American Jews did not have a significant pre-World War II tradition of social engagement through organized religious life. Instead, earlier Jewish political activism was largely dominated by unobservant Eastern European immigrants settling in turn-of-the-century urban enclaves, most often in New York. These Jewish activists were disproportionately represented in radical labor movements, dominating garment industry unions, serving as prominent members of the New York intelligentsia, and affiliating with socialist and Communist political parties.\footnote{Michels, \textit{A Fire in their Hearts}.}

Admittedly, this political tradition drew upon Biblical language and Talmudic principles in its public rhetoric. Abraham Cahan, perhaps the most prominent Jewish lecturer at the time, frequently used religious terms to legitimize radical political concepts, comparing, for example, union cards to \textit{mezuzes} in order to portray them as spiritual shields against evil spirits.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 79-80. For more primary source examples, see: Tony Michels, ed., \textit{Jewish Radicals: A Documentary History} (New York: New York University Press, 2012).} But such invocations of their shared religious tradition might be more properly thought of as a vernacular Judaism, defined in terms of a distinct ethnic identity, public culture, and set of symbolic referents.\footnote{Laura Levitt, “Impossible Assimilations, American Liberalism, and Jewish Difference: Revisiting Jewish Secularism,” in R. Marie Griffith and Melani McAlister, eds., \textit{Religion and Politics in the Contemporary United States} (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 287-289. Michels, \textit{A Fire in their Hearts}, 69-124.}

By contrast, the primary gateway into social engagement for organized Judaism in the United States was anti-discrimination activism, originally undertaken in defense of Jewish civil liberties. Advocacy groups like the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish

\footnote{Michels, \textit{A Fire in their Hearts}.}
Congress, and the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith were founded in the early twentieth century to defend against the political persecution of Jews abroad, but amidst rising domestic anti-Semitism in the 1910s and 1920s, their focus shifted to defending immigrant Jews from charges of subversive activity in the United States.  

During World War II, their activities ramped up on both fronts. Reacting to the rise of European totalitarianism, Jewish defense organizations launched well-studied international efforts to defend German Jews, couching their activism in the increasingly ascendant language of human rights, democratic principles, and religious liberty. At the same time, they mobilized parallel arguments to mount political campaigns at home, challenging domestic discrimination against Jewish Americans on the basis of religion in housing markets and hiring practices.

In the process, American Jewish political rhetoric broadened from a focus on the particularistic defense of their faith community to a more universalistic embrace of the defense of civil liberties as a moral obligation, a way to guard against the encroachment of the state on fundamental rights and protections. As the early Cold War set in, this commitment buttressed aggressive resistance to the domestic anti-Communism of the 1950s. Jewish defense organizations were categorically critical of the rise of loyalty oaths, the banning of Communist Party members from holding public office, and the witch hunts of the so-called Red Scare, led by Senator Joseph McCarthy. Groups like the American Jewish Congress repeatedly filed amicus


briefs on behalf of non-Jewish individuals and organizations accused of ‘subversive’ activities.\textsuperscript{93} The national body of Reform Judaism went so far as to declare that “it is the duty of a Jew \textit{not} to testify before any Congressional committee investigating Communism,” a fact which prompted several concerned FBI follow-up reports.\textsuperscript{94} After the Central Conference of American Rabbis issued a resolution recommending the abolition of the House Un-American Activities Committee in the late 1950s, a particularly worried agent wrote to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover: “Heaven, under any faith, help us if this is an accurate transcript and these are the things Rabbis are supposed to recommend to their congregations.”\textsuperscript{95} It \textit{was} an accurate transcript and rabbis \textit{were} supposed to recommend precisely those things. History had taught them to draw uncompromising lines in the sand when it came to repressive efforts to sniff out subversives and undesirables.

As civil liberties activism shifted from the defense of an ethno-social group to a more general intellectual commitment, many Jewish thinkers began discussing the uniquely religious element that underlay their commitment to safeguarding democracy and civil liberties through active social engagement. Echoing the sentiments of Catholics like John Courtney Murray, they emphasized the need for moral law to constrain and inform the democratic process, preventing mankind from falling prey to totalitarian ideologies that instrumentalized human life. Such a bulwark seemed especially pressing in the wake of the devastation of the Holocaust. As Rabbi Eugene Sack argued in 1939, when the extent of German Jewish persecution was just beginning

\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Ibid.}, 131.

\textsuperscript{94} Quote is from Memo, No Subject, Unknown Author to Unknown Recipient, September 16, 1955, in FBI and Other Agency Files Folder, Box A1-2, MS-873, Religious Action Center Records, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH (hereafter RAC). Italics mine. See remainder of folder for more FBI reports on Jewish activity in the 1950s.

\textsuperscript{95} Memo re: Central Conference of American Rabbis, Unknown Author to Director, FBI, August 26, 1960, in FBI and Other Agency Files Folder, Box A1-2, RAC.

53
to become clear to Americans, secular progressives in Europe had almost universally lost their base to “Hitlerism.” By contrast, “the church, which progressive groups had been wont to despise as ‘the opiate of the people,’ had stood its ground more steadfastly than the rest.” In a speech endorsing “religious social action,” Rabbi Balfour Brickner similarly argued that when Jews “divorce God from politics,” they reduced “politics to a manipulative control of people who are viewed as things.” By the same token, religion required a political dimension to have meaning: “Divorce politics from God, and we reduce God to a series of vague cliches.” The secular and the sacred were becoming increasingly intertwined for organized Judaism in the postwar years.

Like its Christian counterparts, Jewish denominational leadership founded an array of camps and civic service programs to instil a commitment to social action in the next generation. The National Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY) ran Leadership Institutes that trained young Jews in “world leadership tasks,” as well as conferences like the New England Summer Conclave, which encouraged debates over how the Biblical prophets might speak out on modern political issues. Leaders sought to “involve apathetic and unaffiliated Jewish youth in the life of the Jewish community” by looking outward, “emphasizing the contribution of the Jewish people to the development of an American democratic tradition.” The National Jewish Youth

---

96 Proceedings of the First Youth Convention, January 14-15, 1939, in Folder 1, Box 1. MS-266, National Federation of Temple Youth Records, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH (hereafter NFTY).


98 “NFTY Leadership Institutes,” Flyer, August 22 - September 1, 1949; Southern New England Federation of Temple Youth, “First Summer Conclave,” Program, August 28 - September 3, No Year; and others, Folder 8, Box 1, NFTY.

99 Proceedings of the 1950 Annual Assembly, National Jewish Youth Conference, Camp Wel-Met, Narrowsburg, NY, Aug 31 – Sep 8, 1950, Folder 3, Box 2, NFTY.
Conference of 1950 issued recommendations for their fellow young believers to “contribute to the preservation of freedoms guaranteed by the Bill of Rights,” suggesting that they consider “support of legislation, encouraging citizens to exercise their right to vote in all elections, [and] sponsoring educational programs on world and local affairs.”100

Meanwhile, denominational literature aimed at youth stressed the importance of bringing Judaism to bear on American politics. ‘A GOOD JEW IS A GOOD CITIZEN!’ declared a 1948 edition of The Youth Leader, a magazine for Jewish youth groups, before recommending that readers study Congressional bills, write their representatives, keep up with current events, and “tell the men in Washington how we, the citizens, feel.”101 NFTY wrote and distributed modern versions of the Passover seder, in which the traditional Four Questions were replaced with social action alternatives, such as: “How can we do our share to make America a ‘Promised Land’?”102 Youth leaders were given scripts for religious services that lamented “the shame in Munich, when man began to destroy Freedom,” but went on to celebrate that “in the New World, there still was light, and we were thankful unto God for the light of Freedom vouchsafed for America.”103 Time and again, American Jews were taught that the erosion of democracy had helped bring about the Holocaust, but that American religious culture offered an alternative vision of hope. Quoting President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the literature of one International Jewish Youth Day put it succinctly: “Three institutions [are] indispensable to Americans, now as always. The first is religion. It is the source of the other two – democracy and international

100 Ibid.

101 Dorothy Lurie, “National Scene,” The Youth Leader: A Magazine for Jewish Youth Groups XI, no 1 (Spring 1948), Spring 1948, Folder 6, Box 1, NFTY.

102 Program Notes Packet, ca. 1939, Folder 2, Box 1, NFTY.

103 Alice Frieder, “Temple Projects,” The Youth Leader: A Magazine for Jewish Youth Groups XI, no 1 (Spring 1948), Folder 6, Box 1, NFTY.
good faith.”104

Above all else, such educational programming stressed the idea that Jews were
personally obligated to take action in the name of their beliefs, that they had a unique religious
responsibility to object to unjust laws and defend the rights of marginalized groups because of
their own historical experiences of persecution. Theologically, Jewish thinkers mobilized their
faith tradition’s emphasis on obedience to moral law as the heart of their covenant with God to
drive this point home. As one rabbi put it, “salvation for Jews comes solely and completely from
our works.”105 “If a man studies the Torah without the intention of fulfilling it, it were better he
had never been born,” another suggested, more pithily, while Rabbi Perry Nussbaum noted that
Judaism was “a religion not of creed, but of deed.”106 Nussbaum was a Southern rabbi and civil
rights advocate at the time, and his argument was not an abstract assertion, but a specific call to
Jewish action on behalf of justice in the face of reactionary violence. When an Atlanta
synagogue was bombed because of its rabbi’s support of racial equality, Nussbaum expanded on
his point. In the face of segregationist attacks, he said, it may be “tempting to argue in
desperation that we should keep quiet and so go unnoticed.” But if “the Hitler era” taught Jews
anything, he continued, it was that “that kind of thinking has never done anyone - including Jews
- any good.”107 Jewish faith had to lead to bold and consistent public action if it was to live up to
its own values. It required its adherents to “face up to the will of God, not in general, or for some

104 Program Notes Packet, ca. 1939, Folder 2, Box 1, NFTY.
105 “Establishing Ethical Standards Throughout the Congregation,” Speech to UAHC General Assembly, Folder 3,
Box A3-1, Union for Reform Judaism Records, MS-72, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH (hereafter URJ).
106 Roland B. Gittelsohn, “Reform Judaism in Action,” Folder 1, Box 4, NFTY; Perry Nussbaum, “Judaism - A
Living Faith,” April 29, 1956, Folder 3, Box 4, PNP.
107 Perry Nussbaum, “Editorial: (Dis)Honor Roll,” in Folder 1, Box 2, Perry E. Nussbaum Papers, MS-430,
American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH (hereafter PNP).
other time and place, but here and now.”

The emphasis on the action component of social action theology was a centerpiece of educational programming, as with a “warmer-upper” skit, widely distributed by NFTY, which put Jewish slacker Joe Teener on trial for “Don’t-Care-Ism, Don’t-Think-Ism, and Don’t-Do-Ism,” complete with a role for a disembodied voice to boom quotes from the Torah (“Am I my brother’s keeper?”) from off-stage. The skit ended with the judge turning to the audience and asking, “Are you in my custody too?” Such ideas played a prominent role in motivating Jewish youth to join political protest organizations, especially among the student New Left. Bob Ross, a founding member of SDS, for example, attributed his political involvement to “the Jewish thing. If you’re silent, you’re complicit.” And while not Jewish himself, iconic New Left leader Tom Hayden liked to characterize the responsibilities of students with a Talmudic quote: “If not for myself, who will be for me? If not for others, what am I? If not now, when?”

For this reason, in a speech on Jewish social action, Albert Vorspan asked: “How can we interpret what is happening to our kids on the college campuses?” Like Donald Baty’s mother, he suggested that the answer lay counterintuitively in their religious upbringing. “They are acting out their values,” he declared. “They are taking us seriously.” They may be angry with their elders, having “concluded that their parents, rabbis, teachers, etc., prefer to mouth these

---


109 “The Case of Social Action versus Joe Teener,” n/d, Folder 1, Box 4, NFTY.

110 “The Case of Social Action versus Joe Teener,” n/d, Folder 1, Box 4, NFTY.

111 Miller, Democracy Is in the Streets, 35.

112 Ibid., 73.
words about integration, peace, justice, brotherhood.” Yet “the fire in their belly” was nevertheless “a Jewish fire, even if they cannot identify it.”

--------

Even as each faith tradition relied on divergent premises to teach their clergy, youth, and seminary students their particular faith tradition demanded democratic civic engagement from its adherents, the convergence of Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish thinkers on the shared principles of social action theology bred transformations in the relationship between religion and American political life. As long as salvation remained linked to right belief and doctrinal niceties remained the primary marker of religious identity, even the most valiant attempts to bridge denominational divides would hit stumbling blocks over - to name the most obvious example - whether Christ was indeed the son of God. But in the context of the Cold War and the rise of social action, these disputes were cast as increasingly mundane next to the ideological threat of Communism. As President Harry Truman put it, “Minor, and even major, differences in how we choose to worship God strike me as being of relatively little importance in the face of an aggressive foe threatening to destroy all freedom of worship.”

Jesuit priest L.J. Twomey captured this evolving impulse perfectly in a speech to the Union of American Hebrew Congregations in 1959. With the “tyrannical rule” of Communism dominating the life of 37% of the global population and “ignorance” about this threat being the rule of thumb for “most Americans,” Twomey argued that it was time to lay aside those “wide doctrinal, or if you prefer theological, differences [that] exist among us.” Instead, Protestants, Catholics, and Jews needed to focus on the shared Judeo-Christian premise that united them with

113 Albert Vorspan, “Jewish Social Action and Ecumenism,” n/d, Folder: Albert Vorspan Files, General, 1950-1970, Box B1-10, RAC.

114 Quoted in Preston, Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith, 420.
each other, and separated them from the Communists: the idea that “there is a God and man was created in his image.” This premise was to form the basis of “meaningful unity” among religious believers, who could then find “hard thinking and practical programs” to “prove to a skeptical world that democracy is not an illusion.” The alternative would be intellectual in-fighting, victory for their nation’s enemy, and perhaps even “a rain of hydrogen and atomic bombs.”

The three great faiths must unite and take action, Twomey argued, or else the world would perish. Only in the last minutes of his speech did the listener discover what specific goal he had in mind: eliminating “the cancer of interracial injustice,” so that Soviet propaganda could no longer paint the US as hypocritical. Not for nothing would Rabbi Balfour Brickner later declare “interfaith” work the “cutting edge” of political protest in the 1960s.

As an inclusive, interfaith embrace of social action in the name of democracy emerged among religious thinkers, religion, in turn, became increasingly central to political rhetoric and influential for policy-makers. Historians are increasingly acknowledging the influence of this transformation on Cold War foreign policy, arguing that we should see the conflict as “nothing less than a religious war,” to quote historian William Inboden, characterizing President Harry S. Truman’s view of the matter. The chief architects of Cold War policy were not only motivated by their personal religious beliefs and fear of Communist atheism, but also sold military build-up, foreign aid, and muscular intervention to the American public as a religious

---

115 Rev. L.J. Twomey, S.J., “Basis and Motive for Interreligious Cooperation,” Speech to the 45th General Assembly of UAHC, November 18, 1959, Folder “UAHC Social Action,” Box E-5, URJ.

116 Ibid.

117 Balfour Brickner, “Dynamics of Religious Social Action,” Speech, Folder 6, Box 10, BBP.

necessity in the global fight against a godless enemy. Security analysts and military leaders used their growing propaganda machine to mobilize domestic support for military intervention abroad, relying on moral defenses of democracy to ensure that they were not fighting a way of “asymmetric zeal.” Of course, these developments opened the door for later religious dissent on military matters, with peace activists criticizing the Cold War, and especially military involvement in Vietnam, in the very terms that it had originally been justified in.

Domestic political culture reflected these transformations equally well. When President Dwight D. Eisenhower declared that “our system of government,” meaning American-style democracy, “has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply-felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is,” he was not merely expressing a shallow civic-religious impulse, as is commonly suggested. He was inelegantly reflecting the social action theology articulated by postwar Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, especially the fear that democracy could collapse into fascism without religious principles to guide it. In his embrace of civic religiosity, President Eisenhower was not alone among political leaders. “In God We Trust” was added to paper currency in the 1950s, in addition to being declared the national motto and plastered onto US postage intended for international mail. ‘Under God’ was similarly added to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954, at the prompting of a Presbyterian minister who worried that without the mention of a divine

---


122 Morone, Hellfire Nation, 382.
being, he “could hear little Moscovites repeat a similar pledge to their hammer-and-sickle flag in Moscow.” The suggestion turned out to be so popular that Congress introduced seventeen different bills to alter the text of the Pledge. When the President signed the final version, which had passed the Senate unanimously, on Flag Day, he praised it for identifying “our country’s true meaning,” and strengthening “those spiritual weapons which will forever be our country’s most powerful resource.”

The result of these shifts, with regard to political culture and public opinion, was a dramatic expansion of the role Americans expected religious leaders to play in public life. In a 1947 Roper poll asking which social group was doing the most good for the country, only 32.6% of Americans selected “religious leaders,” putting them in third place overall. By 1957, just ten years later, religious leaders had jumped to first place, identified as doing the most good by 46% of Americans. That added up to more respondents than had picked “government leaders,” “business leaders,” “Congress,” and “labor leaders” combined. Religion had long been a powerful force in American history, of course, but the postwar years were unusual in the degree to which the public accepted and even encouraged that role. This transformation would produce political leverage that new-breed activists would unhesitatingly take advantage of in the 1960s.

So although Protestants, Catholics, and Jews most assuredly disagreed over what it meant to be a good American citizen, nevermind which particular moral laws were most important in any given policy context, they nevertheless built a widespread consensus around the positive relationship between religion and democratic life. Youth and clergy who came of age in the 1950s were taught not only that their social values were derived from religion as the basis for a

---

123 Silk, *Spiritual Politics*, 96-98.

proper social order, but also that they were required by religion if America was going to continue to reap the divine rewards that had made it such a blessed nation thus far. Although it is easy to ridicule the excesses to which this religiously-infused patriotism occasionally went, the worldview that the generation of the 1950s inherited was nevertheless a powerful one. Political life was infused with intensely moral stakes, the costs of secular failure had sacred dimensions, and religious values were taken to be the ultimate arbiter in civic decision-making.

Although we rarely talk about continuity between religious life in the 1950s and the civil disobedience of the 1960s, the intellectual developments of the former decade helped make the latter possible. As Jean Audrey Powers put it years later, when explaining her religious commitment to political activism: “My parents are asking me, ‘Where did you get all these ideas?’ And I tell them that I learned it in church. You started me there. The only difference is that I’m acting on them now.”

CHAPTER TWO
EMPOWERING THE FAITHFUL:
POSTWAR GROWTH AND THE INSTITUTIONAL FOUNDATIONS OF NEW-BREED ACTIVISM

During the early 1950s, according to an official retrospective account, the United Presbyterian Church in the USA (PC-USA) was growing seriously concerned about the “general climate of apathy and indifference” exhibited by their youth. Influenced by the rise of social action theology, these religious leaders increasingly believed that authentic religiosity required engagement with modern social problems and civic life. Embroiled in a Cold War imbued with religious significance, they felt a particular responsibility to take action in the realm of international affairs, whether fighting the global creep of Communism or supporting movements for democratic self-governance in post-colonial regions. Yet to their horror, their own children seemed to be maturing into a ‘silent generation,’ far too interested in “their own concerns” and indifferent to “what was happening in other parts of the world.”1 The postwar age, religious leaders fretted, was leading youth into a state of spiritual alienation and political apathy.

Yet they did not just fret. Armed with the unprecedented resources of the postwar religious revival - which brought the membership, church attendance, and revenue of nearly every American religious institution to an all-time high - religious leaders sought to combat youth apathy by investing heavily in so-called ‘social action’ programs. Social action programs were the organizational embodiment of social action theology, initiatives designed to expose participants to contemporary social issues and awaken them to the need for reform, with the goal

1 Cecil Hoffman, “Re-Examination of the Junior Year Abroad Program,” in “Junior Year Abroad: Ten-Year Evaluation, 1953-54 - 1962-63,” Ad Hoc Committee on Overseas Study and Service Projects, June 1965, Folder 125a, Box 22, Margaret Flory Papers, Record Group no. 86, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library (hereafter MFP).
of building an engaged citizenry devoted to bringing civic life into line with religious values. In the case of the PC-USA, that program took the form of Junior Year Abroad (JYA), an academic exchange founded in 1953, which sent hundreds of Protestant students abroad to study at foreign universities. Unlike the few similar programs run by colleges at the time, which almost exclusively sent students to Western Europe, JYA reflected the broad internationalism of religious Cold Warriors. Although some JYA participants traveled to France, Germany, and Spain, over three-quarters studied in postcolonial regions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, including India, Pakistan, Lebanon, Brazil, Ghana, and Nigeria, to name just a few.² There they were called upon not to win converts to Christ, as a previous generation of student missionaries had been, but - in the words of one JYA advertisement - to serve as “unofficial ambassador[s]” for their God and country. Program administrators encouraged participants to grapple with “Christ’s answers for the masses,” “take hold of [their] world” and “confront” the “political, social, and economic problems of today.”³

JYA succeeded in its goals, although not always in the way that religious leaders had anticipated. Participants were indeed jolted out of apathy, exposed to new perspectives on international affairs, and convinced of the need to apply religious ethics to public life. But in the process, many began to question the ‘American Way’ that they were meant to be ambassadors

---


³ “Study Abroad,” Flyer, n/d, Folder 113, Box 21, MFP; Junior Year Abroad Pamphlet, ca. 1953, Folder 113, Box 21, MFP. For the contrast with the evangelistic tenor of earlier transnational student programming, see: Michael Parker, The Kingdom of Character: The Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1886-1926 (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library Publishers, 2008).
Students in Lebanon reported outrage over the “partition” of Palestine and the role their own “country played in making almost one million Arabs homeless.”

Travelers to India questioned the impact of “Western ways of modernization” on local culture, echoing Christian existentialist concerns that they prevented “man” from becoming “his real self.”

Confronted by a Pakistani student about the hypocrisies of American race relations, one participant concluded that although he remained “proud” of his “Christian, democratic heritage,” all that he could “say to this myself is WHY.”

“Our political, moral, and social ideas have been overhauled,” another declared. “We have realized the narrowness of our nation’s understanding and have been bitterly criticized for this.”

Programs like JYA were inspired by the emergence of postwar social action theology, but made possible by the dramatic expansion of American religious institutions during the 1950s. Although that growth is a relatively well-known phenomenon, it is often portrayed as a spiritually shallow one. The postwar religious revival was entwined with mass suburbanization and the institutionalization of modern bureaucracy, and has since been associated with the inauthenticity of both trends. Passionate religious awakenings, of the 19th century revivalist or modern megachurch variety, were not to be found in Levittown. As contemporary sociologist Will Herberg famously put it in 1955, the defining “characteristic of America today is very often a religiousness without religion,” a faith “without real inner conviction,” a belief system that

---

4 Henry Hale Bucher, Letter from Beirut, Lebanon, n/d, Folder 116, Box 21, MFP.

5 Gail Cross, Letter from Nagpur, India, August 22, 1956, Folder 116, Box 21, MFP.

6 Harry Finks, Letter from Beirut, Lebanon, Easter 1960, Folder 116, Box 21, MFP.

7 "Encounter in Study and Fellowship," Manuscript Prepared for Federation News, January 1957, Folder 113, Box 21, MFP.
“has lost much of its authentic Christian (or Jewish) content.” In agreement, religious historian Stephen Prothero more recently dubbed this moment “The Fall,” one of two turning points in American history in which religious leaders “jettisoned content” from their teachings and helped to foster “a nation of religious illiterates.”

Such critiques rather miss the point. In the 1950s, religious leaders were increasingly defining authentic faith in terms of ethical engagement with social life, rather than doctrinal belief or Scriptural knowledge. In that light, the growth of the era produced not a Fall, but a return to Eden. Working tirelessly to build avenues for applied, socially-engaged faith, denominations constructed a vast array of organizations and programs like JYA, which were underwritten by the era’s unprecedented institutional expansion. These developments empowered religious believers at the grassroots level, building the social capital necessary for them to influence public life. In the process, they also exposed students to gaps between the ideals and the reality of postwar America, lighting a spark that would help set fire to American politics in the coming years. Far from a shallow development, 1950s religious growth produced the new breed of clergy and religious youth, committed to challenging injustice and armed with the organizational capacity to do so.

Social action theology had primed clergy and religious youth to see political issues through a moral lens, to believe that they had a personal obligation to bring civic law into line

---

8 Will Herberg, Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), 3, 260. The contemporary debate over the character of 1950s religion was in fact a lively and contested one. But all sides shared the premise that ‘authentic’ religiosity was lacking, even if other measures (such as church attendance or civic expressions of faith) were rising. For a comprehensive overview, see: Martin E. Marty, Under God, Indivisible, 1941-1960: Modern American Religion, Vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 277-353.

with religious principles, but it was not itself sufficient to generate a mass movement. The history of postwar institutional growth fills in the missing pieces. First, it explains why new-breed activists became concerned with the particular issues of racial equality, international peace, and domestic poverty, revealing how social action programs fueled ‘encounters with diversity’ of the sort that historian David Hollinger has described elsewhere, exposing participants to social issues that ranged from postcolonial conflict to the urban crisis. Second, it reveals how new-breed activists obtained the organizational resources and built the interpersonal networks that made them such valuable political players in the years to come. If Cold War intellectual transformations laid the foundations for new-breed politics, postwar institutional growth built a bridge upon those pediments, spanning the gap between the social action theology of the 1950s and the explosion of mass religious activism that defined the 1960s.

**The Boom Years: Religious Expansion and the Rise of Social Programming**

By almost every measure, religious institutions experienced unprecedented growth during the early postwar years. Their expansion was fueled by a circular, self-reinforcing accumulation of members, money, and churches. Increases in membership produced more revenue; that revenue funded new church construction, intended to meet the demands of an expanding and migrating membership; the proliferation of churches and synagogues made religion increasingly central to American associational life; and that centrality attracted still higher membership and revenue growth, fueling even further expansion.

---

First, regarding membership: at the end of World War II, official church membership stood at 71 million, representing 51% of Americans, which was already an historic high.\textsuperscript{11} Between 1946 and 1960, despite the baby boom of those years, religious membership expanded at more than double the rate of the general population, until a whopping 63% of Americans, accounting for over 114 million individuals, were church members by the end of the decade (see Fig. 1).\textsuperscript{12} And if anything, official membership statistics \textit{underreported} religious affiliation, in part because youth were not usually counted as full members until they underwent religious rites of passage.\textsuperscript{13} Extrapolating from census data to include children, contemporary experts argued that by the late 1950s, as many as 84% of Americans might actually have been affiliated with a specific religious denomination.\textsuperscript{14} Public opinion polls reported even more impressive numbers, routinely finding that a sky-high 95% of respondents self-identified as either Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish.\textsuperscript{15} Regardless of whether Americans were officially members of a church or synagogue, they overwhelmingly identified with a religious tradition - or at least wanted pollsters to think they did.

\textsuperscript{11} All statistics not otherwise cited rely on aggregate data collected by the author from annual volumes of \textit{Yearbook of American Churches} (New York: Round Table Press, 1933-1972).

\textsuperscript{12} The general population grew 27.25\% over that decade-and-a-half. Religious membership grew 55.34\%.

\textsuperscript{13} Official membership statistics could also be low due to denominational failure or refusal to respond to surveys, irregular updating of their membership files, or lack of records in the first place.

\textsuperscript{14} See: \textit{Yearbook of American Churches} (New York: Round Table Press, 1959), 302-304. If accurate, this would amount to approximately 39.5 million religious youth. That number is almost certainly an overestimate, but suggestive nonetheless.

\textsuperscript{15} Herberg, \textit{Protestant, Catholic, Jew}, 46-49.
Although membership did not necessitate active involvement in religious life, church attendance and participation in para-church groups was also on the rise. Thanks in part to the influence of postwar social action theology, 1950s religiosity was unusual in the degree to which it invested spiritual significance in one’s personal involvement in the local congregation, rather than in, say, private prayer.\textsuperscript{16} Using aggregate survey data, sociologist Robert Putnam has estimated that over 45% of Americans attended church at least weekly in the late 1950s, an increase of more than a quarter from the early 1940s. Meanwhile, 25% of Americans reported involvement in religious groups outside of churches themselves, a category which included everything from Bible study clubs to social planning committees.\textsuperscript{17} Americans were not only identifying as more religious, but also becoming more involved with religious associations in their communities.

Those sky-high levels of engagement helped fill denominational coffers. As World War II drew to a close, churches and synagogues already had a collective worth of approximately $7

\textsuperscript{16} For this reason, sociologist Robert Wuthnow calls this moment one of “spiritual dwelling,” which he contrasts with the late twentieth century’s age of “spiritual seeking” and personal religious discovery. Robert Wuthnow, \textit{After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 19-51.

billion and were taking in an additional $700 to $800 million annually - a dramatic increase from just a few years earlier, equal to nearly the entire budget of the British government at its height before World War I.\(^\text{18}\) Revenue rose at ever faster rates over the course of the 1950s, not only because there were more congregants donating, but also because congregants were donating more: per capita donations to congregations more than tripled between the end of World War II and the late 1950s.\(^\text{19}\) Overall, between 1946 and 1958, annual religious revenue expanded two-and-a-half times faster than American GDP, which was itself experiencing record growth rates amidst the postwar economic boom. Annual denominational revenue had nearly tripled to over $2 billion annually by the end of the decade (see Fig. 2).\(^\text{20}\)

![Figure 2: Annual Denominational Revenue, 1930-1963](image)

Denominations funnelled a significant chunk of that capital into physical expansion, trying to provide their members with an intimate array of neighborhood churches, despite postwar population migration and the explosion of suburban housing developments. The annual value of new religious construction spiked from a measly $26 million in 1945, to an impressive


\(^{19}\) The average parishioner donated $18.33 in 1945 and $62.31 in 1957, an increase of 240%.

\(^{20}\) American GDP increased 110.17% between 1946 and 1958; religious revenue increased 262.83% over the same period.
$409 million in 1950, to an outrageous $1 billion per year by the start of the 1960s (see Fig. 3). The Catholic Church added nearly six-thousand churches by itself in just the six-year period following World War II, expanding its capacity by over 40%. 21 In the aggregate, the number of American churches and synagogues increased by more than a third nationally, with new suburban construction more than making up for the abandonment of buildings left behind in shrinking urban centers. As a result, denominations ended up with a vast infrastructure of local institutions that could raise funds, recruit members, and deeply influence American public life.

![Figure 3: Annual Value of New Religious Construction, 1920-1963](image)

In order to govern this ever-growing network of local churches and synagogues, religious institutions also invested heavily in their central administrative bodies and dramatically expanded their ministry education programs. They built up the funding and staffing for virtually every arm of their national denominations, including their social action departments, educational agencies, seminary training, domestic and foreign mission groups, and social service programs. 22 The annual budget of the National Council of Churches (NCC) alone increased fourteen-fold

---

21 The Catholic Church reported 14,523 churches in 1945, which grew to 20,443 churches by 1951, an increase of 40.7%.

between 1943 and 1953, rising from $505,000 to $7,210,000 annually. Seminaries, meanwhile, began cranking out clergy to meet the skyrocketing demand for both parish and bureaucratic positions. By 1950, Protestant and Jewish seminary enrollment was nearly twice the pre-World War II total, while Catholic enrollment had risen 30%.

Inspired by postwar social action theology, these central administrative bodies used their growing network of clergy and congregations to expand local social action programming. The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the national denominational body for Reform Judaism, founded a dedicated Social Action Department in 1955. The Department’s goal, according to one of its founders, Rabbi Eugene Lipman, was to create “a social action committee in every congregation” with the “dream” of “giving them data, feeding them this and that” bit of information, in order to stoke local social action on the pressing issues of the day. True to its mission, before the UAHC Social Action Department was in operation for even a year, it had founded a hundred and twenty-five new local committees and secured the affiliation of all three national Reform Jewish lay organizations. Meanwhile, the number of regional Protestant social action councils affiliated with the NCC more than doubled between 1945 and 1960, with councils that already existed dramatically expanding their budget and programming.


26 Those three organizations were the National Federation of Temple Brotherhoods, the National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods, and the National Federation of Temple Youth. Minutes of Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism, June 28, 1954 and June 27, 1955, Folder 1, Box 1, MS-72, Union for Reform Judaism Records, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH (hereafter URJ).

dizzying array of lay Catholic guilds, unions, movements, and presses that cropped up in this era (and the decade prior) are too numerous to list. Their explosive growth has led religious scholar Debra Campbell to dub this period “the heyday of Catholic Action and the lay apostolate.”

Even more striking, however, was the extent of denominational investment in youth organizations, motivated by a desire to meet the demand generated by the era’s baby boom. Youth groups grew dramatically during the 1950s, not only increasing their membership and number of chapters, but also expanding their social action programming. Over the course of the 1950s, the National Federation of Temple Youth (NFTY), which was the national youth group for Reform Judaism, rolled out Leadership Institutes, ‘mitzvah’ service programs, overseas exchanges to Israel and Europe, two news publications, and over 100 annual regional conclaves. According to a subsequent retrospective, these were the years in which NFTY “changed from the corner grocery store to a super-market [sic].”

In contrast to past generations, however, as postwar religious youth grew up, they disproportionately left their local congregations to attend college. Thanks to federal investments in academic research, the passage of the fabled G.I. Bill, and the massive expansion of public higher education, colleges and universities were exploding in size. Attendance grew much faster than the youth population itself, with enrollment rates nearly doubling between 1940 and

---


1960 and increasing another 140% over the following decade. This dramatic expansion revolutionized the world of higher education, ushering in an era of unprecedented university influence and creating a new and growing social class made up of college students.

Religious organizations sought to follow their young members as they transitioned from neighborhood churches to these far-flung campuses. Protestant denominations went on a campus ministry hiring spree, employing almost twenty-two times as many campus clergy in 1963 as they had at the end of World War II, with an equal number of full-time staff persons administering campus programming. Jesuit universities tripled their undergraduate admissions between 1945 and 1965, and were subsequently forced to dramatically increase the number of Catholic clergy and laity in their employ. The Newman Club, which represented Catholic students at secular universities, added one hundred and eleven chapters in the 1950s, employing over five-hundred campus chaplains by decade’s end and wielding a budget that was ten times larger in 1960 than it had been in 1945. Hillel House, meanwhile, opened foundations and counselorships on eighty-six new campuses between 1945 and 1952, nearly doubling their

---


32 I have been unable to find official statistics of religious employment on American campuses, and here rely on estimates from contemporary sociological studies. There were a mere 14 Protestant campus clergymen in 1900; that number grew to 69 by 1942, to 149 by 1950, and to between 1,300 and 1,500 by 1963. Those figures do not include pastors of independent churches near or on campus, nor do they include part-time campus clergy. Another 1,500 staff persons were employed in campus ministry in roles ranging from YMCA/YWCA secretaries to directors of religious policy research. See: Seymour A. Smith, *The American College Chaplaincy* (New York: Association Press, 1954), 8-14; Phillip E. Hammond, *The Campus Clergyman* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 5; Kenneth Underwood, *The Church, The University, and Social Policy: The Danforth Study of Campus Ministries, Vol. 1* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1969), 75-77.


national presence and expanding their membership to encompass approximately half of the American Jewish student population.\(^{35}\)

Denominations expanded their campus ministries not only to try keep their young flock in the fold, but also because they feared that spiritual alienation and political apathy was on the rise among their youth.\(^{36}\) The rapid expansion of postwar higher education had created the so-called ‘multiversity,’ a phrase originally meant as a warm description of modern academia, but which evolved into shorthand for an over-extended, corporatized, and elaborately bureaucratic system of higher education.\(^{37}\) A decade before the secular New Left levelled its famous critiques of these soulless institutions, religious leaders were wringing their hands.\(^{38}\) They feared that modern campus environments generated personal alienation, encouraged conformist tendencies, bred political apathy, and could precipitate a complete abandonment of core religious and ethical values, and sought to combat such outcomes with investments in campus ministry.


\(^{36}\) In fact, many religious organizations explicitly denied that the first motivation was a factor at all. The United Campus Christian Fellowship's foundational “Articles of Union” (1960), for example, stated that the group’s purpose was “not to raise up more faithful Presbyterians or Congregationalists” and “not to preserve itself,” but rather to call students “to carry out [the church]'s mission in the world,” even if doing so meant the church would have to “lay down its life in love and sacrificial service.” See: Verlyn L. Barker, “The United Campus Christian Fellowship,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 32, no. 4 (Fall 1995), 485.


Mainline Protestants were perhaps the most dire in their predictions and the most obsessed with the so-called “University Question.” During the early postwar years, they produced an extensive literature that unfavorably compared the multiversity to turn-of-the-century industrial society, arguing that colleges were devolving into utilitarian “educational factories” specializing in the “unlimited production of ‘mass-minds of mediocrity.’” Higher education favored the “trivialities” of technocratic expertise at the expense of “the basic issues of life,” they argued, while impersonal campus culture was a “blight on the development of sincere and sure convictions,” leaving students “alienated from God” and convinced that they were not “participants in life, but observers.” Protestant thinkers published a spate of books calling for a reinvigorated campus presence, with such titles as Crisis in the University and Not Minds Alone. Popular Protestant periodicals like The Christian Century ran similar articles, raising these concerns to a wider readership, while students themselves used religious student

---


publications to demand a socially-engaged alternative to the “fragmented curriculum” and “cult of neutrality” that dominated the modern multiversity.42

Catholics were no less concerned about student apathy, although the prevalence of private Catholic colleges made them more likely to blame listless youth than universities themselves. In a working paper entitled “A Profile of the American Student,” Catholic observers identified “a lack of commitment” as the primary source of youth disengagement and alarming “conformist tendencies.” The average Catholic student was too “afraid to concern himself with social issues lest he rock the boat,” the report declared. Church leaders needed to provide avenues to a “commitment which grips his emotions and demands from him sacrifices of self-interest for something more” - namely, religious outlets for social engagement on campus.43 To that end, even while Catholic colleges worked to raise educational standards and expand into accredited universities, they maintained a strong curricular and extra-curricular emphasis on holistic personal growth, both spiritual and social.44

Of course, not all Catholic students attended Catholic colleges. Indeed, the number of Catholic youth enrolled at secular universities tripled during the 1940s, until a majority of Catholic students were attending secular institutions for the first time in United States history.45 This trend exacerbated Church fears about the spiritual future of their youth. Indeed, when a


That trend continued over the course of the 1950s, with the number of Catholics attending secular universities nearly doubling again by 1960. Evans, The Newman Movement, 99, 111.
1950 study of students at Cornell University found that a whopping 90% of Catholics attended religious services regularly, compared to just 70% of Jewish students and 60% of Protestants, members of the United States hierarchy focused solely on the fact that 10% of their youth were missing mass. That statistic was “ominous,” they declared, and should be taken as “a spur to much intensive general religious instruction work” on secular campuses. In response, Church leaders drew up “an entirely new framework for expansion” for the Newman Club, the Church’s organization for Catholic youth at non-Catholic universities, in order to assist them in “promoting the Catholic ideal” in secular educational environments. Hoping to combat spiritual disengagement and the withering of “social responsibility,” as Monsignor Paul Tanner put it, they designed programming that would make Newman Clubs more than “a place and provision for Catholic ping-pong,” instead developing “mature, prayerful, and socially conscientious” students.

Jews were equally worried about their apathetic youth, not least because of a fear that postwar universities would encourage cultural assimilation into the American mainstream. In a 1949 national meeting of Hillel administrators, Rabbi Benjamin M. Kahn referred to this as an “inescapably important task,” required to “stem the tide of flight from Judaism.” A year later, the organization’s National Director made clear that the biggest problem facing Hillel was

---


49 Rabbi Benjamin M. Kahn, “The Activities of the Hillel Foundation.” Address to the Conference of Hillel Directors, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, 1949, Folder 1, Box 1, MS-104, Association of Hillel and Jewish Campus Professionals Records, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH (hereafter HJCP).
Jewish youth’s “little appreciation of the values of a religious or cultural heritage.” To combat this view, the organization needed to become “a modern spiritual leader,” able to provide counseling that was spiritual, social, and steeped in the rich traditions of Judaism.\(^{50}\) In an article in *Guideposts*, Hillel’s publication for campus directors, Rabbi Harry Essrig argued that this was best accomplished through socially-conscious programming, designed to make sure that Jewish youth would not “become unmindful of the world without.” Such initiatives were needed to transform students into “bearers of original insights and dreamers of brave, new visions.”\(^{51}\)

Motivated by such concerns, denominations invested not just in campus ministries generally, but particularly in programs that encouraged social engagement in the name of faith. Using established organizations like the YMCA/YWCA, Newman Clubs, and Hillel, they launched social action programs that ranged from policy research initiatives to communal living experiments to international student exchanges like Junior Year Abroad.\(^{52}\) Much of this programming consisted of innovative twists on traditional religious education right on campus. Beginning in the late 1940s, for example, Newman Club leaders began developing monthly study groups for Catholic students, with activities ranging from bibliographies to ‘action projects.’ The recommended agenda progressed through thematic units, beginning with “The Courageous Catholic,” which was designed to develop youth’s personal morality, and culminating with “The Apostolic Catholic,” which engaged students with modern social

\(^{50}\) “Report of the National Director,” B’nai B’rith Hillel Foundation Annual Meeting of the National Commission, Washington, DC, March 15, 1950, Folder 1, Box 1, HJCP.


questions, considered the culmination of a mature religious sensibility.\textsuperscript{53} Similarly, a set of recommendations for expanding the YMCA’s campus presence from 1951 focused on “Christian outreach” \textit{and} “social action,” both of which were seen as “an important part of evangelism.”\textsuperscript{54} Accordingly, the Y worked Christian existentialist philosophy into its study group reading lists and national programming. The 1958 national gathering of Student Y representatives, organized around “The Search for Authentic Experience,” asked participants not only “Who am I?” and “Why am I here?,” but also “To what causes will I commit myself?”\textsuperscript{55} In this manner, it pushed students to connect religious thought to social action on contemporary issues.

Such national religious student gatherings became commonplace among all three major faiths in the postwar years and nearly always devoted time to encouraging individual social action among attendees. The Catholic Youth Department founded a dedicated Social Action Institute in 1948, for example, which gathered students together for long weekends in June to participate in “seminars, discussions, and workshops for the application of Christian principles to the major social, economic and political problems of modern America.”\textsuperscript{56} Reform Jews began putting on Summer Conclaves, Leadership Institutes, and Jewish Youth Conferences, seeking to “involve apathetic and unaffiliated Jewish youth in the life of the Jewish community.”\textsuperscript{57} And

\textsuperscript{53} Evans, \textit{The Newman Movement}, 103.

\textsuperscript{54} “A Forward Program in the Student YMCA,” August 20, 1951, Folder 290, Box 27, Bruce Maguire/Student YMCA Papers, Record Group no. 78, Special Collections, Yale University Divinity School Library (hereafter BMP).


\textsuperscript{57} Quote from Proceedings of the 1950 Annual Assembly, National Jewish Youth Conference, Camp Wel-Met, Narrowsburg, NY, August 31 - September 8, 1950, Folder 3, Box 2, MS-266, National Federation of Temple Youth Records, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH (hereafter NFTY).  See also: Camp Leadership Institute Flyers, Folder 8, Box 1, NFTY; Camp Leadership Institute Flyers, Folder 2, Box 3 NFTY; Summer Conclave Program, Folder 8, Box 1, NFTY.
mainline Protestants ran massive quadrennial student conferences in Athens, Ohio, which attracted thousands upon thousands of international students from a wide range of faiths, including Catholics, Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims, for a week of religious reflection and intellectual debate.\(^{58}\)

Religious student programming facilitated social action more directly as well, offering youth the opportunity to volunteer on domestic work projects, usually in between semesters or over the summer. The YMCA Summer Program initiative, for example, was founded out of a belief in “the responsibility of man to take action on behalf of his fellow men and belief in the relevance of the Christian faith to all areas of life.” It offered students the opportunity to work and worship alongside migrant laborers on the Gulf Coast of Texas; toil away in factory settings in deindustrializing regions of the Midwest; intern as government aides in Washington, DC; or volunteer as social workers in “the blighted areas” of urban centers like New York and Chicago.\(^{59}\) Jewish youth were presented with similar opportunities through the Mitzvah Corps. Rabbi Hank Skirball remembers the program as “a mini-Peace Corps” before its time, committed to embedding Jewish youth in the communities that they had volunteered to serve. Locations ranged from the local, including inner city neighborhoods of Boston and Los Angeles, to the international, including Israel and Mexico, where participants apparently worked with a “tribe of Mexican Indian Jews.”\(^{60}\) The Newman Club funded a similarly wide array of service programs

---


60 Eleanor Schwartz, “The NFTY 50’s,” and Rabbi Hank Skirball, “The NFTY 60’s,” *ani v’atah* (February 2005): 11-12. Unfortunately, I have as yet been unable to locate documentation of the founding of Mitzvah Corps in order to date its precise origins.
for Catholic students, sending them to volunteer in understaffed urban parishes and among Hispanic Catholic migrant laborers in the western United States.\(^6\)

Despite the cost of international travel, denominations also founded an array of programs devoted to service abroad. The United Student Christian Council collaborated with the World Council of Churches to facilitate religious work camps in such regions as Brazil, Mexico, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Malaysia, and the Philippines, sending over a thousand Protestant youth abroad annually.\(^6\) The camps were intentional communities dedicated to Bible study, service work, and international and interreligious reconciliation.\(^6\) Participants participated in everything from construction projects to improve local infrastructure to heady theological debates. By spending summers as “workmen for God” abroad, religious leaders hoped that students would forge “the way to peace among men and nations,” spreading their gospel throughout the Cold War world.\(^6\)

With that same goal in mind, the USCC also teamed up with other religious and international organizations to run a student exchange with the Soviet Union. Participants served as “ambassadors of reconciliation,” in one student’s words, touring “factories, museums, palaces of culture,” and bringing their religious message to a land “totally void of Christianity.”\(^6\)

---

\(^6\) As with the Mitzvah Corps, I am similarly unable to precisely date the founding of these Newman Club social action programs. For specifics on their later incarnations in the 1960s, see: “Summer ’64,” Brochure published by the Foreign Visitors Office, National Catholic Welfare Council, Folder 20, Box 7, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Youth Department, Collection no. 10, The American Catholic Research Center and University Archives, The Catholic University of America (hereafter CYD).

\(^6\) “Ecumenical Work Camps,” Brochure, 1956, Folder 312, Box 27, USCC; “All Together Now!” Brochure, n/d, Folder 312, Box 27, USCC.

\(^6\) “The spiritual significance of work camps,” *Youth Department News Sheet*, World Council of Churches, vol. 6, no. 3 (May-June 1953).


Catholics never sent students that deep into the enemy’s lair, they did run international student exchange programs of their own, sending youth on pilgrimages to European regions, where the Church had deep historical roots, and throughout Latin America, on “mission work” summer programs in such countries as Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Panama. The Newman Club also set up correspondence programs with foreign students, helped to found and fund parallel Catholic student clubs abroad, formed social committees to network with foreign Catholic youth attending American universities, and established a Committee for Aid to Foreign Students to bring more foreign Catholics stateside. From these international exchanges to social service programs to sweeping national gatherings to the expansion of on-campus ministry, the resources generated by the religious boom were funneled into an array of institutional initiatives meant to encourage social action, especially among religious youth.

The Consequences of Growth: Professional Autonomy and Political Awakenings

The consequences of this institutional expansion were twofold. First, it dramatically increased the number of clergy and staff employed in non-parish environments, from campus ministries to denominational bureaucracies, where they enjoyed greater professional autonomy and were relatively insulated from political pressure. The growth of this job sector attracted socially-conscious clergy and laypeople and freed them from the constraints of congregations, both financially and logistically. Second, social action programming exposed youth and clergy to urban poverty, racial inequality, gender discrimination, and the Machiavellian side of Cold War relations in postcolonial regions. Participants described these encounters as political

66 “Background and Beginnings,” The Forum I, no 2 (November 1960), Folder 2, Box 35, CYD; documentation in Folder 9, Box 6; “NF Announces Summer Projects in Lay Missions,” The Forum III, no 6 (April 1963), Folder 17, Box 35, CYD; NFCCS; Application Form to Lay Mission Work-Summer, ca. 1963, Folder 3, Box 7, NFCCS.

‘awakenings,’ moments of moral epiphany that alerted them to the gaps between the professed values of 1950s America and the realities of its foreign and domestic policy, especially regarding race relations, and thus primed them to be receptive to calls to political action in the coming years.

The postwar explosion of non-parish jobs, which by their very nature freed employees from traditional pastoral responsibilities, overwhelmingly attracted clergy and administrators who were predisposed to social action theology. Contemporary studies of Protestant campus ministry, for example, found that campus clergy were set apart from other ministers by their expressed preference for teaching over preaching and for interfaith approaches to religious organizing. They were also highly educated, with an astounding 96% of college chaplains holding degrees beyond the B.A. and an “overwhelming majority” having pursued additional theological education. Compared to the average parish minister, they were more interested in “social issues” than doctrinal debates, more likely to participate in “inclusive interdenominational or nondenominational” groups, and more interested in establishing “projects which develop a sense of social responsibility” or contributed to “the development of interracial understanding.”

Outside of the campus setting, Catholic religious orders were attracting a similar demographic group among their initiates. Beginning in 1952, the Catholic Church instituted sweeping reforms for American women religious, providing them with higher education opportunities, abolishing restrictive cloister regulations, and prioritizing their responsibility for social engagement. Their novitiate numbers surged in response, and they added over 32,000

---

members between 1945 and 1960, an increase of 21%. Historian Amy Koehlinger calls this process the “professionalization” of the sisterhood, arguing that it paved the way for their political activism in the coming decade.

National religious bureaucracies attracted disproportionately well-educated and socially-conscious employees as well. A contemporary study of the National Council of Churches, for instance, found that a majority of its top administrative staff held degrees from a group of just four seminaries, all of which were bastions of social action theology in the postwar years. These included Union Theological Seminary, at which Reinhold Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Paul Tillich all taught, and Yale Divinity School, home to H. Richard Niebuhr and Liston Pope. Many denominational administrators were also former missionaries and New Dealers, with a long history of applying their faith to social issues. Ruth Harris, for example, served as a missionary to China in the late 1940s, where she encountered acute rural poverty and, in her words, “intense anger against the Western countries” that led her to feel “ashamed” about her “own country’s international affairs.” Her experiences abroad left her committed to international reconciliation and efforts to end domestic poverty through “the church alive.” Upon her return to the United States, she pursued work as an administrator of the Methodist Student Movement and the Student Volunteer Movement, where she orchestrated similar transnational encounters for the next generation through social action programming.

69 Dolan, et al., Transforming Parish Ministry, 134.


71 Those seminaries were Yale Divinity School, Union Theological Seminary, Harvard Divinity School, and the Pacific School of Religion: Pratt, The Liberalization of American Protestantism, 113-116.

72 Ruth Harris, in Journeys that Opened up the World, 23-25.
Once employed in these non-parish positions, clergy and administrators were professionally insulated from political backlash. Unlike their parish counterparts, they were not beholden to local congregations, who were on average more wary of mixing faith and politics than religious leaders themselves in the postwar years. In particular, their salaries were only indirectly dependent on congregations, typically coming from organizational endowments, denominational investment portfolios, or universities themselves. Moreover, those who worked in campus settings were able to use academic freedom as a shield for controversial public stances, as the National Association of Hillel Directors did in the 1950s, defending campus rabbis who were “under attack due to a change in the climate of political or social thought” amidst the anti-Communist Red Scare. And in the most basic sense, non-parish employees were more logistically capable of participating in activist demonstrations, of traveling to marches and possibly jailtime for acts of civil disobedience, given their freedom from the daily pastoral responsibilities of religious services, baptisms, weddings, funerals, and the like.

---

73 As early as 1961, a study that included Protestants, Catholics, and Jews indicated that clergy were more likely than laity to think that they should take public stands on controversial political matters or candidates for public office. By the end of the 1960s, sociologist Jeffrey K. Hadden was arguing that this divergence was one of the defining features of modern religion. “The clergyman’s new theology has moved him beyond the four walls of the church and prompted him to express God’s love in concern for the world,” he argued. “The layman, on the other hand… does not understand why ministers are not satisfied to restrict their concern to their own fellowship of believers.” Gerhard Lenski, The Religious Factor: A Sociological Study of Religion’s Impact on Politics, Economics, and Family Life (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 284; Jeffrey K. Hadden, The Gathering Storm in the Churches (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 98-99.

74 For example, consider the compensation structure of the NCC: Pratt, The Liberalization of American Protestantism, 111-112.

75 See: Maurice L. Zigmond, Chairman, Committee on Personnel Policy and Standards, National Association of Hillel Directors to Colleagues, March 14, 1951, Folder 3, Box 1, HJCP. For more on how academic freedom shielded campus employees during this era, see: Lionel S. Lewis, The Cold War and Academic Governance: The Lattimore Case at Johns Hopkins (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993).

76 Contemporary sociologists were particularly interested in the relationship between clergy’s organizational status and their involvement in social action. See, for example: Phillip E. Hammond and Robert A. Mitchell, “Segmentation of Radicalism - The Case of the Protestant Campus Ministers,” American Journal of Sociology vol. 71, no. 2 (September 1965); Jeffrey K. Hadden and Raymond C. Rymph, “Social Structure and Civil Rights Involvement: A Case Study of Protestant Ministers,” Social Forces vol. 45, no. 1 (September 1966): 51-61; Hart M.
As but one illustration, consider the demographics of religious activists who participated in the 1961 Freedom Rides, a major civil rights demonstration that challenged segregation on public transportation by staging interracial rides across interstate lines. White Christian clergy and Jewish activists made up a disproportionate percentage of riders, in part because of direct recruitment efforts by black ministers. Prominent religious participants like Yale chaplain William Sloane Coffin, Jr. and Wesleyan religious scholar John Maguire were persuaded to start their particular Freedom Rides by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. himself, who reportedly called them up to say that the movement needed “every bit of help we can get,” especially from ‘respectable’ religious allies. In response, they drew on their professional connections in higher education and rounded up an interracial group of campus clergy, professors of religious studies, and theological students.\(^77\) Facing opposition to his planning efforts from Yale alumni and their friends in the Kennedy administration, Coffin was able to fend them off by leaning on his right to exercise “academic freedom.”\(^78\) The group of new-breed activists successfully rode from Atlanta, Georgia to Montgomery, Alabama, facing hostility, segregationist violence, and ultimately arrest. In a sermon delivered at New York’s Riverside Church shortly after they returned, the Rev. Robert McCracken praised their example as evidence that “religion at its best is never the opiate of the people.”\(^79\)

---


By contrast, Catholic Josephite priests Phil Berrigan and Richard Wagner had planned to join the first Freedom Ride in Jackson, Mississippi, and had even secured the “express approval” of their superior, George O’Dea, for their participation. But when word of their intentions leaked, seven conservative Southern bishops managed to pressure O’Dea into retracting his permission and demanding that they withdraw.\(^80\) Working within a hierarchical institutional structure and lacking the professional autonomy of campus clergy, Berrigan and Wagner had no choice but to obey. Similarly, in the 1966 Chicago Freedom Movement half-a-decade later, a contemporary study found that the single best predictor of whether clergy would be arrested for civil disobedience was their employment status. In a sample of the hundreds of clergy who were arrested, 78% were employed in non-parish settings. Only 10% were employed in local suburban congregations.\(^81\)

Meanwhile, as a result of the growth of social action programming, which was often shaped by the hand of these clergy and administrators, religious youth and seminary students were increasingly encountering racial inequality, poverty, and global conflict. Through domestic service programs, Jews volunteered in segregated Northern communities, Protestants worked in decaying Rust Belt cities, and Catholics labored in fields alongside Hispanic migrant workers. Years before Michael Harrington’s influential tract, these participants were discovering poverty in ‘the other America,’ not to mention racial discrimination, rural labor exploitation, and the urban crisis.\(^82\) During seminarian Jon Daniels’ first year at Episcopal Theological School, for example, he was assigned to fieldwork in Providence, Rhode Island. White flight was

\(^{80}\) Philip Berrigan to Pal, Transcription of Phone Call, August 21, 1961, Folder 14, Box 89, OGS; Frank Hall to Monsignor Tanner, August 22, 1961, Folder 14, Box 89, OGS.

\(^{81}\) Hadden, *The Gathering Storm*, 164-172.

devastating the city, eroding public services and creating sharp lines of residential segregation, and the Episcopal Church was responding with experimental programs in local black communities. Daniels became involved in neighborhood outreach, Sunday school classes, and an arts workshop for local youth, and in the process, came to appreciate the harsh realities of urban race relations. He had previously seen himself as a scholar destined for the teaching ministry, but after these experiences, which he called “crucial to my own ‘holy history,’” he believed that his faith demanded greater social engagement. Daniels ultimately became a zealous civil rights activist, joining the iconic Selma marches and returning to Alabama repeatedly for demonstrations and community organizing. Although he later narrated his decision to fly south as the product of spontaneous revelation - a “Spirit-filled ‘moment’” following the news of Bloody Sunday - he was primed to see racial injustice as a moral issue in the first place by these earlier encounters.

Even less obvious varieties of domestic social action programming could have politicizing effects, however. By virtue of their diverse national membership, denominational gatherings of religious youth often unintentionally exposed white youth from the Jim Crow South to interracial social environments, shaking their faith in segregation. Rebecca Owen, for example, grew up a conservative Methodist in rural Virginia, and spent her early childhood

---


85 For many student organizations, the integrated nature of such conferences were no accident. The Student Y, for example, explicitly sought to “awaken students to the basic social issues” by “greatly multiplying student interracial experiences” in order to build “interracial inclusiveness” in otherwise non-political contexts. See: “A Forward Program in the Student YMCA,” August 20, 1951, Folder 290, Box 27, BMP.
convinced that racial segregation was the will of God. But when attending the national conference of the Methodist Youth Fellowship in 1955, at the age of fifteen, she found herself in an interracial environment for the first time. Black and white youth were staying in the same dorms, she was listening to speeches from black religious leaders, and to most of her fellow attendees, “it seemed to be no big deal.” Just one year later, at another religious youth conference that was segregated, she entered more explicit “discussions about the injustice of the conference’s segregation” that “unsettled my white southern tribal values,” and ultimately joined a boycott of a nearby segregated swimming pool. Nor was that the end of her relationship with social action programming. Inspired by these experiences, Owen would go on to initiate an interracial sit-in in her hometown in 1960, for which she was arrested and censured by her college, before graduating and becoming involved in religious youth programming from the administrative side, as a young staffer.86

International student programming also had politicizing effects, producing transnational encounters with racial diversity, postcolonial politics, and third-world solidarity movements.87 In the case of the Presbyterian Church in the USA’s Junior Year Abroad, surveys taken both at the time and as part of a fifty-year retrospective found that participants connected their experiences abroad to an invigorated respect for other cultures and a desire to become more socially engaged. One student who studied in India, for example, noted that her time overseas had “broadened” her “world.” She “began to think outside the box,” moving beyond “just an American perspective” and learning to “appreciate different cultures, political viewpoints, and


87 Admittedly, this was not always the case, especially for students who studied abroad in Western Europe. Most of their letters home could have been written by students studying abroad today, filled as they were with unreflective descriptions of Western masterpieces in the Louvre and ski resorts in the Swiss Alps. For example, see: Jean Teague, Correspondence in “Invisible Bridges,” Vol. II (1954-55), 22-23, Folder 114, Box 21, MFP.
especially people who differed from me.”

Others reported that they came to see themselves as “citizen[s] of the world,” developed a religious commitment to “multicultural community,” were inspired by “cross cultural differences,” or had replaced their loyalties in a Cold War battle between “east and west” with a commitment to building “one great fellowship of love.”

In short, as another student summed up their experience at the time, their “political, moral, and social ideas” were “overhauled.”

Beyond such general commitments to multiculturalism, however, many students reported more explicitly political awakenings, frequently as the result of seeing United States foreign policy through the eyes of their postcolonial counterparts. Students who traveled to Lebanon reported outrage at the “partition” of Palestine and the role their own “country played in making almost one million Arabs homeless.”

Even fifty years later, they still felt “terrible that our government backs Israel at the expense of the Palestinians;” were filled with “interest, concern, and compassion” for “our Arab brothers and sisters;” opposed “the tragic injustices which have been imposed and continue to be imposed” on “the Palestinians and other Arab friends;” and remained shaken by the “sobering, challenging glimpses of poverty and refugee concerns” in the area.

Students who studied in southeast Asia described similar experiences. Sunny Peer’s time

--

88 Josephine (Jo) Vamos Honig, JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, Folder 1347, Box 120, MFP.

89 Respectively, Vickie L. Brown, JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, Folder 1342, Box 119, MFP; Elizabeth Speckels Berman, JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, Folder 1342, Box 119, MFP; Barbara J. Burns, JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, Folder 1342, Box 119, MFP; Robert Watson, JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, Folder 1347, Box 120, MFP.

90 “Encounter in Study and Fellowship,” Manuscript Prepared for Federation News, January 1957, Folder 113, Box 21, MFP.

91 Henry Hale Bucher, Letter from Beirut, Lebanon, n/d, Folder 116, Box 21, MFP.

92 Respectively, Bill Altmann, JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, Folder 1342, Box 119, MFP; Allan Belden, JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, Folder 1342, Box 119, MFP; Dale Branham, Entry in JYA Alumni Biographies, Folder 1341, Box 119, MFP; Frances Seasholes, Letter Attached to JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, Folder 1347, Box 120, MFP.
in the Philippines, for example, made him a “lifelong Democrat,” as “seeing a bigger world” led him to reject his former beliefs that “our government always acts in the best interests of everyone” and “our way of living is the only ‘right’ way.” Elizabeth Kodoma, meanwhile, found that her time in Japan exposed her “to ideas and attitudes [that she] had never encountered in [her] short, sheltered life,” leading to “political and social perspectives” so radical that her “mother had trouble talking with [her] at times.” Travelling abroad left her “irreparably changed.”

Other students were confronted about domestic race relations in the United States, a political issue that was especially resonant in postcolonial regions where the United States was claiming to be a beacon for liberty on the one hand, while the Soviet Union was distributing propaganda about Jim Crow on the other. Harry Finks, for example, was taken aback when lecturing a fellow student on the positive role that America played in advancing global democracy, only to be confronted with an angry retort: “I may be dark,” but at least “I know that when I go home to Pakistan there will be no questions or discrimination.” Finks was shaken, and later wrote that while he remained “more proud than ever before of my Christian, democratic heritage,” his time abroad made him confront the gap between those American ideals and the racial “situation in the United States,” to which all he could “say... is WHY.”

Summing up the consequences of similar experiences in Ghana, Jim McCorkel argued that his time travelling in postcolonial Africa fostered his particular “commitment to racial justice issues,” desire to align

---

93 Sunny L. Peer, Email Reply to JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, March 4, 2003, Folder 1346, Box 120, MFP.

94 Elizabeth W. Kodoma, JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, Folder 1344, Box 119, MFP.

95 For more on the relationship between the Cold War conflict, international images of American democracy, and domestic race relations, see: Mary L. Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

96 Harry Finks, Letter from Beirut, Lebanon, Easter 1960, Folder 116, Box 21, MFP.
“US foreign policy” with “justice and economic issues,” and persistent “identification with the plight of third-world people.”

Other transnational social action programs had similar consequences for clergy and youth who would go on to become new-breed activists. Operation Crossroads Africa, a travel program founded by the Rev. James Robinson, a black Presbyterian minister, sent interracial groups of religious Americans abroad to promote democratization and combat Communism in postcolonial African nations. For one of his trips, Robinson recruited the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr. to lead a group of fifteen students on a two-week trip to Guinea. “You’re going to learn as much about your own country as you are about the African country,” Coffin later recalled Robinson telling him. Indeed, in each town they visited, they began with an ‘exchange of views’ that almost invariably revolved around American race relations. Coffin was astonished to discover that after New York and Washington, Little Rock was the best known town in the United States; that the Guinean ambassador had been humiliatingly ejected from a segregated beach in Maryland; and that most villages were keeping up with news of the student sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina. After these eye-opening conversations, Coffin later claimed, student participants could no longer “harbor illusions about American racism” or pretend that Jim Crow was just “a domestic affair.”

Such statements were more than mere rhetoric. Coffin, as already mentioned, went on to become the iconic ‘bus-riding chaplain,’ a leading activist in both the civil rights and antiwar movement. Several of the students who accompanied him to Guinea also became involved in

---

97 Jim McCorkel, JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, Folder 1345, Box 119, MFP.


civil rights demonstrations, while others joined the Peace Corps or pursued a career in social work. Various JYA alumni, meanwhile, went on to become involved in the civil rights movement, the immigrant sanctuary movement, job training for the National Council of Negro Women, and administrative work for War on Poverty programs. Several pursued ordination, becoming activist clergy themselves and directly serving the religious institutions that had forged their politics in the first place. Jean Barker attended Union Theological Seminary and become a community organizer in an East Harlem parish, for example, while David Schilling became a Methodist minister who served as director of the Riverside Church Disarmament Program and a program director for both the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the Interfaith Center for Corporate Responsibility. Schilling later claimed that it was his JYA experience in particular that “impacted [his] vocation and desire to work for a just and peaceful world,” while inspiring him to “affirm the diversity in humanity and oppose senseless policies built on violence.” Meanwhile, although Susan Thompson did not seek ordination, she became employed as a “lay professional” for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, for which she was active in “immigration/refugee services and public policy issues.” As Alice Deakins summed this phenomenon up, participants’ experiences abroad broke them out of “a 1950s limited context” and inspired them to “work against racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia” in a professional setting.

---


101 Respectively, Harry Finks, JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, Folder 1343, Box 119, MFP; Juanita Baker, JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, Folder 1342, Box 119, MFP; Carol R. Cummings, JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, Folder 1343, Box 119, MFP; Sadie King, JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, Folder 1344, Box 119, MFP; Carol Sue Nordengren, Email Reply to JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, Folder 1345, Box 119, MFP.

102 Jean Barker, JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, Folder 1342, Box 119, MFP; David Marvin Schilling, JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, Folder 1347, Box 120, MFP.

103 Susan Thompson, Email Reply to JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, September 5, 2003, Folder 1347, Box 120, MFP.
capacity. The irony, of course, was that the ‘limited’ religious context of the 1950s planted the seeds of that work in the first place.

To facilitate international social action programs like JYA and Operation Crossroads Africa, religious organizations often coordinated with foreign student groups, a development that came with political consequences of its own. The World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) oversaw the aforementioned international work camps, for example, and was initially a much more radical organization than the United Student Christian Council (USCC), its American counterpart. Over the course of their interaction administering the camps, the WSCF and its foreign subsidiaries repeatedly pushed the USCC to engage with the politics of racial equality, nuclear disarmament, and Cold War relations. “Are you so sure,” began one provocative letter from the French federation, that “you really constitute the ‘free world’?”. In an oblique reference to American race relations, the letter went on to declare that “it is not enough for a country to affirm loudly in its constitution its belief in liberty, it must embody it in facts.” According to one participant-observer, such communication sparked heated debates back home, leading in this particular case to the establishment of a Political Commission to clarify USCC’s position on contemporary issues.

Catholics experienced similar transnational through their Church itself, which was of course an international institution, and through Catholic religious orders, most of which had hierarchies that spanned national borders. Daniel Berrigan, perhaps the most famous new-breed

104 Alice H. Deakins, JYA 50th Anniversary Survey Form, Folder 1343, Box 119, MFP.


106 Quoted in Ibid., 141-142.

107 Ibid., 140.
priest of the 1960s, first became involved in political activism while studying amongst radical worker-priests, while finishing his training to be a Jesuit in France - an exhilarating experience that he later compared to having “Cognac for breakfast.” The Newman Club’s External Affairs Department, meanwhile, which was established as a way to connect American Catholic students to their foreign counterparts - especially in Latin America - was inspired by its international communications to begin lobbying Congress on behalf of immigration and refugee issues. And Catholic student groups in South Africa, which were deeply involved in the battle against apartheid, put pressure on their American counterparts to stand up to racial discrimination closer to home. America was supposed to be “a country where democracy almost perfects itself,” the South African branch of the National Federation of Catholic College Students (NFCCSS) wrote to the U.S. branch, yet they had been “dumbfounded” by recent reports of endemic racial discrimination. Indeed, they were beginning to develop sneaking “suspicions” that American diplomats had been hiding “the darker side” of race relations behind a “straw-hat curtain.” What was the U.S. chapter of the NFCCS doing to challenge domestic segregation and live up to their Church’s commitment to racial equality, the writers pointedly asked? Were leaders “actively taking steps to encourage your members to participate in concrete action?” The U.S. NFCCS’s sympathetic Social Action Secretariat used the organization’s national newsletter, Social Action Summary, to republish the letter in full and distribute it to chapters throughout the nation.


110 “Letter from South Africa,” Social Action Summary IV, no 1 (November 1963). Note also such influence also flowed both ways. Consider, for example, the NFCCS’s adoption of “Resolution Condemning the Practice of Apartheid in South Africa” and “Resolution Condemning Racist Policies in Rhodesia,” Folder 6, Box 1, NFCCS. Similarly, the Protestant United Student Christian Council affiliated with the Union of South African Students in
As that example indicates, social action programming not only sent religious youth and clergy abroad, but also brought international affairs home to them. Consider the quadrennial Athens conferences, massive gatherings put on by ecumenical Protestant student organizations, which revolved around internationalist themes and flew in hundreds of foreign students to facilitate transnational dialogue. The 1955 Athens conference attracted approximately 3,500 students to its weeklong gathering, an estimated 40% of which came from beyond America’s borders. Most participants were Protestants, hailing from sixty different denominations, but there were also Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, and Catholic students, the last of which attended without Church authorization. It was believed to be one of the largest, most international, and most ecumenical religious gatherings to have ever been held in the United States.111

As had been the case with JYA, the conference planners intended to use their programming to encourage youth engagement with international social issues, particularly in postcolonial contexts. With that in mind, they scheduled speakers and study sessions that revolved around the theme of “Revolution and Reconciliation,” encouraging a free-wheeling discussion of imperialism, colonialism, the diplomatic responsibilities of the West, and the proper role of Christians in the global Cold War. The prevalence of students from postcolonial regions produced an emphasis on “third-way” revolutionary politics, with foreign speakers calling for international youth solidarity and religious reconciliation to transcend Cold War dichotomies. There were nightly fireside chats on African revolutions, Middle Eastern refugees, “American Negro spirituals,” religious institutions in South India, and Christian attitudes

towards Communism. Students staged a play meant to humanize third-world revolutionaries, explaining that their pursuit of radical change was fueled by understandable reactions to such forces as “nationalism; economic exploitation of workers; unemployment; color prejudice; land hunger; [and] lost faith.”

Retrospective student editorials drew parallels between the American Revolution of 1776 and contemporary struggles for independence, calling anti-colonial resistance a “logical continuation of [Americans’] struggle for freedom,” necessary to guarantee “the dignity God gave to each man.”

Speakers also drew explicit parallels between oppression abroad and racism at home, arguing that authentic Christianity demanded that believers “live [their] faith… obedient to a God who is color blind, acting in the memory of a dark and swarthy Jew in Palestine, in whom all men are made one.”

The following Athens conference, held in 1959, expanded on its predecessor in nearly every respect. Larger and better funded, it included participants from eighty-five countries and territories and was billed in press releases as “the most inclusive student conference, secular or religious, that has ever been held in the Western Hemisphere.”

Building on the themes of the previous meeting, the schedule was organized around discussions of nationalist movements and race relations on postcolonial ‘frontiers,’ with a special emphasis on the Protestant obligation of social engagement, or as the conference newspaper put it, “the bridge whereby [one’s] faith can

---


113 Darius Leander Swan, ”The Crier Calls: A Drama for A Verse Choir,” Play Script, Folder 240, Box 39, MFP.

114 “...of revolution and reconciliation,” Editorial, *Intercollegian* vol. 73, no. 2 (October 1955).

115 Dr. Waldo Beach, “USA - I Love the Negro ...In His Place,” *Intercollegian* vol. 73, no. 2 (October 1955).

lead to works.” To elaborate on these themes, they brought in a star-studded list of speakers, headlined by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. King’s speech began as a sharp critique of international race relations, before crescendoing into a resounding call for racial justice in the United States. James Lawson - a young civil rights activist who had been exposed to the politics of nonviolent resistance as a Methodist missionary in India - spoke as well, delivering a searing account of life as a black man in segregated America, including graphic descriptions of the racial violence then being perpetrated on black civil rights organizers. On the international front, Latin American missionary M. Richard Shaull argued that Christ was present in all movements to reform society, whether religious or secular, Nigerian activist Bola ‘Ige critiqued the bipolar Cold War power struggle as un-Christian, and French-Brazilian Claude Labrunie endorsed postcolonial socialist revolutionaries, presaging the formal development of liberation theology with his insistence that Christianity had a preference for the poor. Martha Morrison, who had attended the 1955 Athens conference as a student, spoke about her subsequent work as a professional activist in interracial organizing. Although American society and religious institutions had indeed taught their children racial prejudice, she argued, they “taught other things, too, things about Christianity and Democracy, about the worth of all men and the equality


118 Rev. Martin Luther King, Original Speech Text, Folder 7298, Box 639, Archives of the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, Record Group no. 42, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library (hereafter SVM).


of all men.” By forcing their nation and their churches to live up to these sacred ideals, she argued, religious youth could change the world for the better.\textsuperscript{121}

Conference attendees took these words to heart. In follow-up surveys, participants overwhelmingly reported an invigorated desire to be involved in social action, describing the conference as a moment of religious and political awakening. One participant said, for example, that their “eyes have been opened,” while another noted that “LIFE! [sic] has been different” and a third that their “total outlook on the world and my place in it has broadened.”\textsuperscript{122} Gone was the indifference that religious leaders so feared (“We will no longer feel apathetic;” “We are not sitting back complacently as we were prone to do”) and in its place was a commitment to acting on their values (“I have become much more interested in ‘doing’ rather than always ‘saying’”).\textsuperscript{123} As Phyllis Watson, a student from Kalamazoo, put it, “I have a much stronger sense of responsibility… [and] have been reading about things in newspapers that I’d ignored for years -- have been working with our campus minister to see what can be done about the apathy… I came away from Athens with much more optimism about what our so-called ‘Beat, Silent, and Hopeless’ generation is going to do in the world.”\textsuperscript{124}

Thanks to the political content of many of the conference’s speeches, respondents often went beyond such generalities and expressed interest in specific political issues, the most common of which was racial inequality. “As a result of the conference,” wrote one student, expressing typical sentiments, “I have become determined to help eradicate racial tensions here

\textsuperscript{121}Martha Morrison, Speech Text, December 30, 1959, Folder 243, Box 39, MFP.

\textsuperscript{122}Quoted in “Some Reactions from Athens’: From Evaluation Reports received from Delegates,” 1960, Folder 245, Box 39, MFP.

\textsuperscript{123}\textit{Ibid.}

\textsuperscript{124}Phyllis Watson, “Evaluation of the 18th Ecumenical Student Conference on the Christian World Mission Held at Athens, Ohio,” Folder 245, Box 39, MFP.
at the university and in Arkansas.”

“No longer am I apathetic toward the important issues of our time, especially the race issue of my Southland,” another declared. Even skeptics with “ardent segregationist attitude[s],” as one attendee described their previous views, came away convinced that they had a religious obligation to “do my best to promote cooperation and understanding between the races.” “Because of the conference and the changes that took place in my heart,” claimed yet another respondent, who had previously “felt Negroes were fine in their place,” “I really believe that color is only skin deep - that we are all children of the Lord - no matter what our color or race.”

Although some of these students surely never acted on such impulses, many others did. Perhaps most tellingly, of the first seventy interracial student sit-ins that took place nationally in the following year, every single one involved at least one student who had been present at Athens.

Making Politics Permanent: The Institutionalization of New-Breed Activism

The unusual thing about student and youth organizations, however, is that their membership necessarily ages out. Juniors have only one year in which to study abroad, and because the Athens Conference convened once every four years, nobody who attended any given meeting was still a student when its successor was held. Graduates went on to become religious activists outside of the university context, of course. Yet once they departed, there was no

---

125 Similar examples, some a bit hyperbolic, include: “The barriers between the races and between countries have been destroyed as far as I’m concerned;” “It has led us into an active integration stand on our own campus and in letters to Vanderbilt and chain stores;” “The Conference has helped to awaken students to the responsibility of agitating for racial equality;” “I think now I will always be conscious of the racial problems and want to work in some way for the abolishment of segregation and discrimination;” and “Those attending the Conference from here have taken a most active part and leadership position in furthering international and racial understanding.” All quoted in: “Some Reactions from Athens”: From Evaluation Reports received from Delegates,” 1960, Folder 245, Box 39, MFP.

126 Both quoted in Ibid.

127 Woo, “From USCC to UCM,” 153.
guarantee that the next generation would pick up where they left off. So why did the Athens Conferences become increasingly radical as the 1960s neared? Why didn’t their sponsoring institutions rein them in or redirect their energies? What prevented any given program or conference or encounter from amounting to a mere flash in the pan?

The simplest answer is that while the membership of youth organizations had high rates of turnover, the ranks of clergy and administrators who oversaw them did not.\textsuperscript{128} Thanks to their experiences in the same social action programming, they began leaning further to the theological left, staking out more explicit positions on political issues, and becoming more supportive of expanding social action programming further.\textsuperscript{129} And due to their professional autonomy, they were able do so without much fear of reprisal. In the process, as one contemporary study put it, a “silent revolution” took place among campus ministers between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s, with the agenda of their ministry shifting decidedly from traditional recreational activities to creating opportunities for social engagement.\textsuperscript{130}

Yet the persistent influence of local campus clergy and program administrators is not a complete explanation, in large part because many student and youth organizations were becoming increasingly autonomous in this period. The postwar expansion of leadership institutes and training camps, intended to produce good religious citizens who championed democratic values, also inspired students to demand that their own organizations become more participatory and democratic. The National Federation of Catholic College Students (NFCCS),

\textsuperscript{128} That said, there was apparently a fair degree of job turnover among campus clergy relative to other professions at the time. See: Hammond, \textit{The Campus Clergyman}, 3-23.

\textsuperscript{129} Hammond, \textit{The Campus Clergyman}, 42-44. Hammond is mostly interested in comparing campus ministers to parish ministers, but they were also becoming more political relative to campus ministers a decade earlier. Compare the results of his study, for example, to a comparable analysis from 1954: Smith, \textit{The American College Chaplaincy}, 88.

\textsuperscript{130} Hammond, \textit{The Campus Clergyman}, 68.
for instance, came into increasing conflict with conservative elements of the United States bishops in the late 1950s, in part over the students’ progressively more vocal political positions. Frustrated, students convened a special Summit Conference in 1960 to demand that organizational power be devolved onto local branches, so that NFCCS could become more democratic and student-led.\(^\text{131}\) Indeed, they threatened to disband NFCCS entirely unless the hierarchy limited its “final authority” to “matters of faith and morals,” leaving members free to act “in conformity with their consciences” when it came to their positions on political and social issues.\(^\text{132}\) After a decade of encouraging social action in the name of religious conscience, Catholic leaders could hardly disagree. As Bishop Ernest Primeau admitted, “the laity are the Church… Without their active and dedicated and intelligent participation, the spread of God’s kingdom on earth would be badly handicapped.”\(^\text{133}\) The hierarchy ultimately gave in, NFCCS adopted a new Constitution embracing independent “thought and action on significant contemporary issues,” and Church resources continued to flow to Catholic students without such tight strings attached.\(^\text{134}\)

Similar developments unfolded within countless other religious student groups. The Catholic Newman Club had staged parallel protests some years earlier, which led to a 1953 agreement that chaplains would “moderate, not run” the Newman Club. Meanwhile, those chaplains were themselves fighting for greater autonomy from the United States Bishops’ Youth

\(^\text{131}\) Eugene Dehner, “Note made concerning the materials in the File-Folder on the Special (‘Summit’) Council on the ‘problems’ of the NFCCS,” Folder 1, Box 1, NFCCS.

\(^\text{132}\) Rev. Msgr. John J. Conniff to NFCCS Moderator, April 5, 1962, Folder 3, Box 1, NFCCS.

\(^\text{133}\) Ernest J. Primeau, Bishop of Manchester, to NFCCS Moderator, May 25, 1962, Folder 3, Box 1, NFCCS.

\(^\text{134}\) See the re-affiliation material, especially “The Social Apostolate of the Student,” Brochure, ca. 1962, in Folder 4, Box 1, NFCCS.
Department, from which they ultimately wrested control of their executive secretaryship away.\textsuperscript{135} The Protestant United Student Christian Council, meanwhile, was a fully autonomous organization until the National Council of Churches attempted to take it over in 1952. Student resistance led to nearly a decade of organizational infighting and reshuffling, culminating with the 1959 founding of the National Student Christian Federation (NSCF). NSCF was an entirely student-led organization that combined the three largest interdenominational Protestant student groups - the USCC, the Student Volunteer Movement, and the Interseminary Committee - and which was funded by denominational resources, but free of clerical control. It pooled those resources among its network of grassroots student groups, but in true participatory democracy fashion, left local affiliates free to set and pursue their own social action agenda.\textsuperscript{136} Indeed, its governance structure devolved even further in 1966, when the NSCF replaced itself with the United Christian Movement (UCM), a federated group that included non-Christians and explicitly sought to avoid “rigid institutional structures that would hinder revolutionary action and response” among members.\textsuperscript{137}

The growth of organizational autonomy gave students more leeway to shape the purpose, programming, and nature of their organizations for each successive generation. In response to their transformative encounters in social action programming, they often used that power to create permanent outlets for political and social activism, especially regarding race relations. Students established permanent study committees and discussion forums, devoted to establishing

\textsuperscript{135} Evans, \textit{The Newman Movement}, 115-118.

\textsuperscript{136} Woo, “From USCC to UCM,” 42-46.

\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Ibid.}, 55-58.
their organizational positions on contemporary political issues. They founded national publications run entirely by students, including *Newman Magazine*, which insisted that its articles “be written by students… and that its distribution and advertising be likewise,” and *motive*. magazine, the official journal of the Methodist Student Movement, which became a national clearinghouse for avant-garde art, theological reflection, political debate, and calls to action. And they created standing Political Committees, Social Action Committees, and Racial Justice Commissions, intending to go beyond the mere debate of social issues by stimulating and coordinating specific grassroots activism among local chapters. These organizational structures not only fostered social engagement in the short term, but also perpetuated that involvement beyond any given individual’s tenure, helping to make politics a permanent part of their organizational mission.

As a result, by the early 1960s, religious youth who gravitated towards campus ministry when they arrived on campus, seeking an extension of the associational life of their childhood, were often unwittingly enlisting in politicized organizations. Charlotte Bunch, for example, recalls that “going to the Methodist Student Center when I arrived at Duke was a natural step for

---

138 Examples include NFCCS’s establishment of a National Policy Resolutions Committee in 1955 and USCC’s founding of a Political Commission in 1948. See: Minutes of Fourth Plenary Session, August 31, 1955, Folder 1, Box 3, NFCCS; Woo, “From USCC to UCM,” 134.

139 For quotation, see: “From the Editor,” *Newman Magazine* I, no 1 (December 1956). Regarding *motive*, youth activist Rebecca Owen remembers that “*motive* gave me unsettling postwar contemporary art, which made visible what cannot be spoken; Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who was to transform my Southern fundamentalism; and a social gospel addressing events in America and the world, honed by the evil of World War II.” Minister Jean Audrey Powers, meanwhile, called the magazine “the most influential religious magazine for students of its time.” Rebecca Owen, in Evans, ed., *Journeys That Opened up the World*, 70; Jean Audrey Powers, in *Ibid.*, 55. *motive* is also an excellent example of the limits of student autonomy. Conflict over the magazine’s politics, particularly regarding a controversial women’s liberation issue, led the Methodist Church to sever financial ties to the magazine

140 Examples include NFCCS’s 1959 Race Relations Program and NSCF’s founding of the Commission on Social and Political Action in 1960. See: Memo from Mary Cahill to XVI National Council, Third Session, Re: Proposed Race Relations Program, August 28, 1959, Folder 5, Box 3, NFCCS; Untitled Document on the “Meeting at the II General Assembly of the National Student Christian Federation,” n/d, Folder 584, Box 45, National Student Christian Federation Archives, Record Group no. 247, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library (hereafter NSCF).
me, because I had been in Methodist activities all my life.” She did not think of it as a political decision at the time, but “rather as a familiar place to find friends and community.” Yet once there, she encountered extraordinary “intellectual and political ferment,” ranging from debates over social action theology to interpersonal encounters with “students from nearby Negro colleges,” all of which ultimately led her to her “first demonstration - an interracial pray-in outside one of the local segregated churches.”

By the time the late 1960s rolled around, social activism even occasionally superseded faith as a criteria for organizational membership. In 1967, for example, the University Christian Movement no longer cared whether you were Christian. But it did issue a “Minimal Political Stance,” which included support for black nationalism, opposition to US intervention in popular revolutions abroad, endorsement of “participation of the poor” requirements for both public and private institutions, and resistance to U.S. military engagement in Vietnam.

Meanwhile, non-student religious groups run by new-breed clergy were also institutionalizing their politics, establishing or expanding permanent national networks dedicated to social action. The Union of American Hebrew Congregations had long had a Commission on Social Action, for instance, but until the mid-1950s, according to former director Rabbi Eugene Lipman, “it had existed theoretically, but had never done anything but exist.” As the decade rolled on, not only did it become a fully fledged and funded department with rapidly expanding local chapters, but it also became more explicitly committed to disseminating political discussion among its member bodies. Convinced that authentic social action needed to begin at the

---


143 Transcript of Interview with Rabbi Eugene J. Lipman, June 26, 1991, conducted by Rabbi Allen S. Kaplan, Unnumbered ‘Interview Transcripts’ Folder, Box 5, ELP.
grassroots, the central office mailed study guides, pamphlets, kinescopes, and film guides on political issues to local branches. Some were apparently in such great demand that they could not accommodate every congregation’s requests for copies.144 Using such materials, new-breed Jewish leaders advanced the idea that “to reduce the function of the synagogue merely to preaching and study… is to distort the entire nature and meaning of Judaism.”145 In that spirit, the Commission on Social Action also coordinated direct outreach to other Jewish denominations, helping to found a parallel department among Conservative Jews and even sharing materials with a few sympathetic Orthodox Jewish leaders. Lipman recalls this historical moment as being a “lovely honeymoon period… when the three congregational bodies were really together in doing social justice and social action.”146

Seeking an even broader audience, the Commission also published a remarkable book entitled *Justice and Judaism*, which was meant to facilitate religious reflection on contemporary social issues. The text was popular enough to go through four printings in just its first three years of publication.147 Staking out ecumenical ground in the Biblical mandate to “do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God,” the book was “written for Jews and Christians everywhere who feel impelled by their religious heritage to give of themselves for the betterment

144 On their belief that social action must be local, see: Rabbi Eugene J. Lipman, “Social Action Must Be Local,” *Religion and Labor* vol. I, no. 4 (Dec-Jan 1957-58), in ‘Articles’ Folder, Box 2, ELP. On kinescopes and unmeetable demand: Minutes of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism, New York City, October 27, 1954, Folder 1, Box 1, URJ. For the other examples: “Twenty Questions on the Synagogue and Social Action,” January 1959, “UAHC Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism” Folder, Box E-8, URJ; “Social Action Film Guide: Prepared for Synagogue Social Action Groups, Adult Study Courses, and Religious Schools,” n/d, “UAHC Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism” Folder, Box E-8, URJ.

145 Rabbi Gittelsohn to Mr. J.E. Bindeman, May 26, 1960, Folder 1, Box 1, URJ.

146 Transcript of Interview with Rabbi Eugene J. Lipman, June 26, 1991, conducted by Rabbi Allen S. Kaplan, Unnumbered ‘Interview Transcripts’ Folder, Box 5, ELP, 42-44.

of their communities so that mankind may move a step closer to the Kingdom of God on earth." This soaring rhetoric, so redolent of the Protestant Social Gospel, prefaced chapters applying Jewish and Biblical ethics to such specific issues as education access, housing equality, civil rights, labor organizing, immigration policy, and international affairs. Readers were called upon to not only reflect, but also to “apply the prophetic precepts to the marketplace, to mine and mill, to street and slum, to factory and farm.” Resources for social action were recommended at the conclusion of each chapter.

Protestants and Catholics had their own denominational social action departments as well, which were also setting up sophisticated mechanisms to educate and mobilize local religious bodies. A contemporary study of the National Council of Churches indicates just how effective these departments became, finding that local councils were extremely “responsive to NCC suggestions on matters of broad national importance.” Remarkably, the author found that an overwhelming 92.2% of local council staff felt “highly favorable” or “generally favorable” about the tenor of NCC pronouncements, 77.1% were “highly favorable” to a list of fifteen sample statements on social issues, and 76.4% had helped to distribute official NCC literature beyond their council. Indeed, in order to run meaningful statistical analyses on his survey data, the author was forced to subdivide his respondents into “consistent supporters” and “ambivalent supporters” of the Council’s statements; too few had expressed antagonistic opinions to be

---

148 Ibid., xi-xii, 5.

As the clergy who ran social action departments became increasingly committed to new-breed politics, they used close ties like these to pull local religious bodies leftward with them.

As religious advocacy arms of established denominational bodies, social action commissions were legally prohibited from engaging directly in political lobbying. Seeking to circumvent this restriction in 1959, the rabbis who ran the UAHC’s Commission on Social Action solicited a private grant of $100,000 to found the Religious Action Center (RAC), an affiliated institution designed to engage in direct political work on behalf of Reform Judaism. In the face of opposition from a lone synagogue in Washington, D.C., which argued that rabbinic influence should be confined to strictly spiritual issues, a two-year battle over RAC’s founding ensued. Echoing the principles of social action theology, the private donor politely told the antagonistic congregation that “there is a special place in Hell for those who, in times of moral crisis, preserve their neutrality.” A majority of Jewish leaders agreed. In a landslide vote at the UAHC’s 1961 national meeting, the RAC was approved by a margin of 1100 to 200.

---


151 According to Lipman, a gentleman named Kivie Kaplan wanted to donate money for youth programming and he and Rabbi Maurice Eisendrath worked to change his mind: “Maurice and I saw Kivie in a room, an empty room, one of the meeting rooms, nobody there. And I watched Maurice at his absolute genius best… convince him that a) we needed a social action center in Washington and b) Kivie should pay for it. He came out of there with $100,000 from Kivie for the social action center.” Transcript of Interview with Rabbi Eugene J. Lipman, Unnumbered ‘Interview Transcripts’ Folder, Box 5, ELP, 28-29.

152 Quoted in Richard J. Birnholz, “The History of the Debate over the Religious Action Center Established by the UAHC in Washington, D.C.,” Term Paper, August 28, 1969, p. 3, SC-12540, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH. Note that the RAC represented both major bodies of Reform Judaism - the UAHC and the Central Conference of American Rabbis (CCAR). Note also that the final vote confined public RAC announcements to topics addressed by UAHC and CCAR resolutions, noted that individual temples had the right to dissent from Social Action Commission resolutions, and also established an Advisory Committee to “give guidance” to the RAC (which had no formal powers over it).
Almost immediately, President John F. Kennedy saluted the organization’s founding in a ceremony held in the White House’s Rose Garden (fig. 4). In his remarks, the President praised “the supremacy of the moral law, initiated, originated, and developed in the Bible,” and received a historic Torah from RAC representatives. It symbolized, in the words of the rabbi who presented it, “man’s divinely inspired search for a life of freedom and justice.”¹⁵³ Two weeks later, the President sent a delegate to the RAC’s dedication ceremony to reaffirm “the responsibilities of religion” for correcting “sectarian injustice” and to express his belief that “ethical and moral principles… should be part of the foundation of any religion.”¹⁵⁴ The RAC became a permanent outlet for such high-profile political connections, serving as the terminus of a thread that tied local Jewish activist networks through national social action commissions and up to the highest office in the land. It would ultimately serve as a catalyst for Jewish social action and political work throughout the 1960s.


¹⁵⁴ Message from President John F. Kennedy delivered by Myer Feldman, Deputy Special Counsel to the President, at the banquet session of the dedication ceremonies of the Religious Action Center of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, at the Sheraton-Park Hotel, Washington, D.C., December 1, 1962, in “Dedication” Folder, Box A1-1, RAC.
The sum consequence of these institutional developments, from campus ministries and religious student organizations to national social action departments, was an accumulation of the social capital necessary to inspire and facilitate effective new-breed activism. Student groups, clergy, and social action departments capitalized upon the era’s growth and their own increasing autonomy to institutionalize their newfound commitment to politics. They built national networks through denominational structures and parachurch organizations, institutionalizing mechanisms for distributing information and mobilizing local activists. Thanks to international experiences, encounters with domestic inequality, and an intellectual commitment to religious action, the clergy and youth that ran these networks were increasingly open to a politics that supported racial equality, international peace, and anti-poverty organizing. And thanks to the dramatic growth of their parent institutions, they had the resources and leverage to effect change far out of proportion to their numbers. All that was needed to complete this picture was an opportunity to exercise that leverage, a morally unambiguous and politically pressing cause.
capable of mobilizing the religious masses, turning the potential generated by social action theology and institutional growth into the reality of new-breed activism.
CHAPTER THREE
TO ‘AROUSE THE DOZING CONSCIENCE OF THE NATION’:
THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT AND THE RISE OF NEW-BREED
ACTIVISM

When the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. stepped up to the podium in Athens, Ohio, in December 1959, he prepared to address an unusually diverse audience on the subject of religion and race relations. Thousands of students had gathered to hear him speak, hailing from a bewildering variety of religious affiliations and racial backgrounds, representing eighty-five different countries and territories. Some of his listeners had been primed to see racial discrimination as a pressing moral concern, either because they had experienced it themselves or as a result of interracial encounters in international student exchanges and domestic volunteer programs. But many more had never thought seriously about the state of American race relations, while others were dyed-in-the-wool segregationists. What they all shared was a commitment to social action theology, to the premise that the political values of liberty and equality had sacred significance, and that believers were obligated to bring civic life into alignment with religious principles. This commitment was one that King, as an ordained minister and masterful rhetorician, was extraordinarily well-suited to tap into.¹

The Athens Conference’s theme revolved around international frontiers, and so King began with a sharp critique of Western imperialism, condemning the “old order in Asia and Africa,” in which “the colored peoples of the world” were “segregated and humiliated by foreign powers,” as a violation of Christian principles. Change was in the air, he continued, and “the old idea of paternalism, colonialism, racism” was on the wane - yet “not without opposition.”

¹ For more on King’s use of religious rhetoric and sermon structures when speaking to white audiences, see: Keith D. Miller, Voice of Deliverance: The Language of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Its Sources (New York: The Free Press, 1992).
Segregationists continued to oppose democratic liberation not only abroad, but also right here in the United States, resisting the expansion of equality from the streets of “Johannesburg, South Africa” to the schoolhouses of “Little Rock, Arkansas.” The fight to overcome them was “not merely a political issue.” It was part of a larger battle “between the forces of light and the forces of darkness” for the world’s soul. Segregation denied the fact that “all men are created in the image of God.” It relegated “individuals to the status of things,” and was thus “diametrically opposed to the underlying philosophy of Christianity.” As a consequence, true Christians were morally obliged to personally oppose it. They were called by their self-professed religious values to stand in solidarity with “negroes” in the United States and all “the colored people of the world,” to help them break “loose from the Egypt of slavery” and achieve “first class [sic] citizenship” across the globe. Go forth, King proclaimed to his audience, “press on for justice and righteousness,” fight for the “fulfillment of God’s Kingdom,” and “arouse the dozing conscience of the nation.”

And so they did. New-breed activists played a pivotal role in a range of 1960s social movements, but they were perhaps never again as influential or as broadly engaged as they were in the struggle for black civil rights. Every single one of the first seventy interracial sit-ins of 1960 included at least one attendee from the Athens conference, who had listened to King’s speech and heeded his call to action, and they were assisted by national religious student organizations, which printed extensive press coverage of the demonstrations and marshalled defense funds and legal representation for participants. The iconic Selma marches relied on

---

2 Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Original Speech Text, Folder 7298, Box 639, SVM.

interfaith solidarity to appeal to the nation’s conscience, producing powerful press images of King marching arm-in-arm with Catholic nuns, Jewish rabbis, and Protestant ministers, many of whom had been recruited in the first place through the campus ministry networks of the Methodist Student Movement. Top denominational brass from the National Council of Churches, the National Catholic Welfare Conference, and the Synagogue Council of America repeatedly testified before Congress on behalf of civil rights legislation, making stirring moral arguments in favor of sweeping political reform. More ink has surely been spilled on religious civil rights activism than on religious involvement in all other 1960s social movements combined.

Yet it remains unclear why such an astonishing number of religious activists - particularly white clergy and religious youth from the North, Midwest, and coastal West - came to see it as their moral obligation to join political demonstrations for black equality from

---


5 See, for example: Testimony on Civil Rights Legislation Presented to the Committee on Judiciary, House of Representatives, by the National Catholic Welfare Council, Synagogue Council of America, and National Council of Churches, July 24, 1963, Folder 25, Box 67, CDSA.

Birmingham to Selma. Those who flew south, after all, were the prime beneficiaries of the postwar order. What drove them to risk their lives and livelihoods to challenge it? Part of the answer lies in King’s speech at Athens. In the postwar years, black civil rights leaders and their white religious allies took radical political arguments for racial equality and intertwined them with the civic-religious rhetoric of Cold War America. Their appeals for racial reform drew on widespread theological touchstones, referenced a universalistic faith that spanned race and nation, and thundered with the charged calls to action of the prophets of old. Moreover, the institutional capacity of the new-breed networks that had proliferated throughout the 1950s enabled their jeremiads to reach an unusually broad cross-section of religious Americans. Civil rights speeches and editorials were disseminated by social action departments, reproduced on the pages of student-run religious publications, and distributed as the framing questions for campus Bible study sessions. Thanks to the influence of social action theology and experiences in social action programming, these venues reached an audience that was primed to see race relations as an issue replete with religious implications and to feel obligated to take action when civic law was perceived to conflict with moral law.

The result was the emergence of mass political activism among religious youth and clergy, with transformative consequences for both the civil rights movement and new-breed activists themselves. Movement leaders relied on religious allies for institutional resources, national communication networks, and moral authority, depending on student organizations to coordinate campaign logistics and recruiting clergy to stand on the front lines of protests. New-breed activists, in turn, deployed symbolically-rich protest tactics, kneeling and praying in the face of segregationist violence, in an effort to make their political appeals resonate with faith communities throughout the nation. In the process, they embraced tactics of civil disobedience,
framing the violation of unjust laws as a morally legitimate way to bear witness to their values and bring redemption to their nation. Sanctioning such tactics as an authentically religious pursuit, a moral obligation required of believers regardless of the short-term social discord it caused, constituted an intellectual sea-change for mainstream religious groups. It turned civil disobedience into the new breed’s defining political tactic for years to come.

More broadly, the mass mobilization of new-breed activists had national political consequences that continue to shape the discourse surrounding American race relations and regional party alignments. By claiming to speak as the ‘conscience’ of the nation on matters of faith, new-breed leaders helped to frame civil rights as a universalistic moral issue, wrapped up with values that were central to the nation’s identity in the postwar age, rather than a mere matter of regional culture, state policy, or local power relations. In response, opponents of civil rights reform built up religious counterarguments against radical change, sparking sharp interreligious disagreement over the proper relationship between conscience, racial reconciliation, and the state. In the short run, this conflict may actually have helped the civil rights cause. It was largely sectional in nature, mapping onto historical religious divides between Southern evangelicals and mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, and it thus contributed to the myth of Southern exceptionalism that enabled consensus liberals to pass federal civil rights reform.7 When push came to shove, moderate legislators from majority-white, non-Southern districts thought they knew which side of this interreligious conflict their constituents would be on. But in the long run, such conflict set into motion disagreements over the political implications of authentic religiosity that would lead to deeply polarizing debates as the national focus of civil

rights activism shifted further north and other political issues, from the Vietnam War to abortion law, moved closer to center stage.

**Sounding the Trumpets: Religious Outreach and the Civil Rights Cause**

King’s speech at Athens was particularly eloquent and had an unusually sweeping impact, but it was far from unique. In the postwar years, black religious activists engaged in concerted outreach to white religious leaders and new-breed organizations in settings like Athens and on the pages of religious periodicals. Through their speeches and editorials, they drew parallels between the persecution of Jews in Egypt and that of black citizens of the South; they cast civil rights activists as modern-day prophets, challenging unjust secular laws in the name of divine principles; and they called on others to imitate Christ, following his path through resistance and physical suffering to redemption.

These appeals often came from black members of majority-white religious institutions, whose shared associational identity gave them credibility when they argued that racial inequality and discrimination was incompatible with their faith tradition. Their influence was especially apparent within the Catholic Church, where black Catholics had a growing postwar presence - numbering 500,000 in the mid-1950s, with 12,000 converts added annually - and where their Church practiced systematic segregation in its parochial schools and social services.⁸ Appealing to shared values and their common identity, black Catholics framed such racial divisions as a violation of their institution’s universal message of salvation. In a statement issued by black Catholic members of the National Federation of Catholic College Students (NFCCS), for example, students argued that the “Church keeps preaching that it’s open to everybody” and that

---

⁸ On the number of black Catholics in this era, see McGreevy, “Racial Justice and the People of God,” 225. For comparison, see the number of black Protestants in majority-white denominations in Newman, *Getting Right with God*, 168-9.
“the Mystical Body of Christ… is currently the only genuine form of supranational solidarity in the world.” Yet its institutions did not reflect this universality and segregated its “one, holy Church” into separate and unequal components. “The best reason for being integrated,” they argued, was not political or pragmatic. It was “because we are Catholics,” and “as Catholics we have no acceptable excuse for segregating the races.”\(^9\) Such arguments were distributed in new-breed periodicals dedicated to racial reconciliation, such as the NFCCS’s own *Cross and Color* and the Catholic Interracial Council’s *Interracial Review*, the latter of which was a journal whose circulation was relatively small, but whose influence was not, in part because it distributed free copies to bishops, rectors, Jesuit houses, and seminaries, while using the United States Bishops’ National Catholic Welfare Conference’s News Service to reprint its articles as ‘press releases.’\(^10\)

Yet King was indisputably the most influential black political voice within white religious circles. New-breed activists consistently pointed to his rhetorical appeals as the single most important reason they became involved in the civil rights movement, repeatedly describing him as a larger-than-life prophet. Southern Methodist M. Sheila McCurdy, for example, traced her civil rights commitments back to her attendance at a sermon delivered by King near her Alabama college. She had heard of King, mostly through negative press coverage in local newspapers, but had “never read any of his writings” and wanted to see what all of the fuss was about. She later likened the event to a “conversion experience.” King expounded on a vision of racial justice that was rooted in Scripture, his “prophetic words” leading her to experience “the

---

\(^9\) “We Don’t Take Negroes Here,” *Interracial Review* XXIX, no. 7 (July 1956). Emphasis in original

liberating spirit of the God of Exodus in a new way.” Police surrounded the church with baying dogs, attempting to break up the interracial gathering, but the crowd linked hands and sang “We Shall Overcome” in joyful defiance. “A strange calmness overcame my fears” as they sang, McCurdy recalls, and “I experienced God in a powerful way.” Upon returning to campus, she faced repeated threats from the local Ku Klux Klan, which burned a cross outside of her dormitory window that night, as well as from the university administration, which threatened her with expulsion for behavior that was not “appropriate for a Southern lady” and ominously warned her that she could “no longer expect to be protected when on campus.” Yet, inspired by the “vision that [King] so powerfully proclaimed,” she defied her campus elders and worked for a Montgomery Improvement Association voter registration project, participated in a wave of interracial pray-ins at local segregated churches, and organized resistance to arch-racist George Wallace’s reelection campaign.**11**

  McCurdy had to go to King, but in the case of most new-breed activists, King came to them. Replying on interpersonal religious networks, particularly among liberal Protestants and Jews, he went on barnstorming tours of Northern churches and synagogues and published numerous jeremiads in popular religious publications like *The Christian Century* and *Pulpit.***12** Perhaps the most famous of these was his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” a tract that is most commonly understood as a justification of civil disobedience, but which was also replete with social action theology and calls to action aimed at a liberal religious audience. The letter referenced Amos’ prophetic demand that godly people help “justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream,” compared civil rights activists to Christian apostles

---


preaching a “gospel of freedom” to the nation, and made reference to the work of such theological luminaries as Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, and Martin Buber. It castigated religious institutions that had remained aloof from the civil rights struggle for betraying their social mission and making “a strange, unbiblical distinction… between the sacred and the secular.” And it doled out praise to white religious allies who had stood in solidarity with the movement, arguing that their activism “preserved the true meaning of the gospel.” Defining authentic religiosity in terms of social engagement in moments of moral crisis, it masterfully mobilized Cold War civic-religious thought, grounding its “echoing demands” for black equality in “the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God.”

Remarkable as this rhetoric was, it might never have become one of the most well-known persuasive essays in United States history without the tremendous growth of new-breed networks in the postwar years. Mainstream media outlets initially rejected the letter for publication. According to historian Taylor Branch, they saw “no news in what appeared to be an especially long-winded King sermon.” By contrast, the religious press, whose readership was reaching peak levels amidst the postwar religious revival, was especially interested in distributing the letter to the American public. After heavily edited excerpts appeared in Christianity and Crisis in late May, the letter was first published in its entirety as a Quaker pamphlet entitled Tears of Love, in a print run of fifty thousand that was distributed to religious groups and left-liberal organizations throughout the nation. Over the course of June and early July, it was then

---

13 Clayborne Carson, ed., The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 187-204. Note that much of the language in the letter had already been used in the Athens speech, including Buber’s critique of social systems that substitute an “I-it” relationship for an “I-thou” relationship, thus immorally reducing fellow human beings to objects. See Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Original Speech Text, Folder 7298, Box 639, SVM. For more on the theological elements of the letter, see: Jonathan Rieder, Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Letter from Birmingham Jail and the Struggle that Changed a Nation (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 47-100.

14 See: Branch, Parting the Waters, 744-745, 804; Rieder, Gospel of Freedom, 103.
republirschdenominational organs as *The Mennonite* and the Episcopalian journal *The Witness*, on the influential pages of the Catholic *Interracial Review*, and in the other flagship journal of ecumenical Protestantism, *The Christian Century*, which paired it with an editorial appeal to send donations to King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. By contrast, the *Saturday Evening Post* ran excerpts of the letter in mid-June alongside a highly critical condemnation of King entitled, “Apostle of Crisis.” The letter’s first unedited publication in the secular press did not come until August, in the pages of *The Atlantic Monthly*.

By all accounts, the letter’s reliance on the touchstones of social action theology led to an outsized impact on religious readers. Subscribers to *The Christian Century* wrote letters-to-the-editor lavishly praising King for opening their eyes to the moral dimensions of the civil rights struggle. One Pennsylvania minister declared that his “conscience” had been aroused, and vowed to “not rest until my voice and energy are aroused from silence.” Another reader claimed that they had never “been more moved” by an issue of the magazine. “If the canon of Holy Scriptures was not closed,” they continued, “I would nominate Martin Luther King’s statement… as an addition to the Epistles in the best tradition of the Pauline prison letters.”


Joseph Durick, one of the eight white clergymen who had originally denounced the demonstrations in Birmingham and precipitated King’s letter, was similarly moved. In his recollection, although he had previously “seen segregation as wrong,” he had never before understood the depth of its evil “as [King] had portrayed it.” Combined with the impact of *Pacem in terris*, a papal encyclical released just months earlier, which declared that “racial discrimination can in no way be justified” by Catholics, Durick felt “converted” to the cause. Making “up for lost time,” as he put it, he became an outspoken critic of segregation and founded Project Equality, an interfaith civil rights initiative that fought against employment discrimination, ran voter registration projects in the rural South and urban North, and pressured religious denominations to voluntarily desegregate their own institutions.\(^\text{19}\)

The publication of King’s letter is illustrative of the catalytic role that the religious press played in disseminating news coverage of and sympathetic editorials about the civil rights movement to religious audiences. The National Student Christian Federation distributed dedicated civil rights newsletters to their regional chapters throughout the early 1960s, while devoting increasing amounts of print to United States race relations in their regular journals as early as the mid-1950s.\(^\text{20}\) The semestery *Social Action Summary*, the newsletter of NFCCS’s Social Action Secretariat, summarized months’ worth of civil rights news coverage from *The


\(^{20}\) For an example of civil rights newsletters, see the following publications by NSCF, discussed at greater length later in this chapter: Folder 431, Box 35, NSCF. *Communique* began systematically covering race relations in the January 1953 issue; for an archetypal example of their early coverage, see the following issue dedicated to the subject: *Communique* XIII, no. 10 (April 1957). Note, by contrast, that *Newman*, the official publication of the national Catholic student Newman Club, paid almost no attention to race relations whatsoever. As an organization that represented Catholic students at non-Catholic universities, they appear to have been more concerned with religious identity and discrimination within higher education. For the 1950s few exceptions that prove the rule, see: Jerre Lloyd, “A Student Reflects on Integration,” *Newman* I, no 3 (Pentecost 1957); James Brodrick, S.J., “St. Benedict, U.F.M. and the King of Dahomey,” *Newman* III, no 2 (March 1959); Charles Diener, “Aspects of Catholic Negro Education,” *Newman* III, no 3 (May 1959).
New York Times in each of its issues, alongside original articles on everything from progress in university desegregation efforts to SNCC’s latest civil rights campaigns.\(^{21}\) Even when such articles were published in journals with relatively small circulations, new-breed activists used their organizational networks to distribute their content among a wider audience, as when the Catholic Review published a racial justice issue and the NFCCS mailed copies to all regional presidents, who were asked to mimeograph them and continue distributing them further down the line.\(^{22}\)

In addition, social action departments and denominational administrators produced extensive educational material designed to foster discussion of the relationship between faith and civil rights at the grassroots. The Religious Action Center, the political arm of Reform Judaism’s Union of American Hebrew Congregations, mailed civil rights ‘sermon starters’ to local congregations, filling them with Biblical and Talmudic quotations meant to assist rabbis with High Holy Day services. Suggestions included: “Seek justice, relieve the oppressed” (Isaiah 1:17); “The sword comes into the world because of justice being delayed” (Aboth V); and “God declares: the righteousness and justice you perform are dearer to me than the Temple” (Deuteronomy Rabba V).\(^{23}\) The ecumenical Protestant United Student Christian Council, meanwhile, distributed study guides on racial integration that included discussion sparker

\(^{21}\) For an example of news summary, see “Across America,” Social Action Summary I, no. 2 (April 1961); “Washington March,” Social Action Summary IV, no 1 (November 1963). For an example of original news coverage, consider the April 1963 issue, which included articles on Southern colleges that were voluntarily desegregating, details on upcoming SNCC initiatives, information on legal charges leveled against student demonstrators, and coverage of the Northern Student Movement’s summer projects, complete with information on how to sign up: Social Action Summary 3, no. 2 (April 1963), Folder 6, Box 6, NFCCS.

\(^{22}\) Catholic Review, March 1, 1963. Dianne Cassens to “Father,” March 1963, Folder 6, Box 6, NFCCS.

questions (“How do we foster within campus Associations specific action in race relations?”) and an annotated bibliography for further reading, designed to awaken “concern on the part of individual students.” In 1959, the Catholic NFCCS pioneered a more comprehensive approach by establishing a national race relations program. Its agenda involved surveying racially discriminatory practices at Catholic colleges, distributing official Church teachings on race relations to local chapters, tracking data on racial inequality in housing and employment, funding a monthly news bulletin on race relations, and staging an annual Interracial Justice Week.

Like King and other black religious leaders, these press outlets and educational materials advanced the idea that support for the civil rights cause was not merely the right thing to do, but an obligation linked to the core values of one’s faith. Unlike the ecumenical appeals of King, however, they typically grounded their arguments in the specific content of their own faith traditions, and so reveal some of the key intellectual reasons that particular religious audiences were persuaded by these calls to action. Among Jewish groups, new-breed activists frequently drew parallels between the historical experiences and religious narratives of black Americans and Jews. Writing to fellow Reform Jews in a rabbinical journal, for example, Rabbi Richard Rubenstein described the Southern black community’s commitment to “Mosaic religion.” Black religious services contained “almost no Christological references,” he assured his readers, and their “basic religious metaphor” was not Christ, but the liberation of “Moses and the children of Israel.” The black cause and the Jewish cause were one, he argued: both groups were “children of God... seeking the promised land of freedom,” who remained marginalized in their own lands.

24 L. Maynard Catchings, “American College Students and Racial Integration,” November 23, 1956, Folder 429, Box 35, NSCF.

25 Mary Carol Cahill, Report on Social Action Division, NFCCS Annual Report, August 20, 1959, Folder 5, Box 3, NFCCS; Memo from Mary Cahill to XVI National Council, Third Session, Re: Proposed Race Relations Program, August 28, 1959, Folder 5, Box 3, NFCCS.
Even black freedom songs, he claimed, somewhat incredibly, were “no longer spirituals” in the Christian sense, but rather “folk songs” with a “deep scriptural affinity” to the Jewish tradition. In fact, he continued, he had taught Jewish hymns to a black congregation in Birmingham and the group spent a night “locking arms and singing *Hineh ma tov* as if they were around a *kibbutz* campfire.” These religio-historical ties were at the heart of black-Jewish “solidarity,” in Rubenstein’s eyes, and he hoped that his description of them would inspire more Jews to join the civil rights cause. 26

Such parallels involved a certain amount of cherry-picking. Many Jewish activists expressed discomfort with the civil rights movement’s gospel music, revivalist aesthetic, and emphasis on spiritual redemption through suffering. In an article published in the same rabbinical journal just a year prior, for example, Jewish activist Betty Altschuler compared King favorably to Moses. Yet she also dwelt upon the “gulf” that separated black Protestant and Jewish religiosity, citing her own uneasiness with their “spirit of confession and atonement for their own sins” and belief that “jail could be a catharsis for their spirit.” 27 That said, their shared

26 Richard L. Rubenstein, “The Rabbis Visit Birmingham,” in Staub, ed., *The Jewish 1960s*, 26-27. Originally published in *The Reconstructionist*, May 31, 1963. Similarly, Rabbi Richard Winograd, the director of the University of Chicago Hillel, argued that “the spark of Negro liberation” was lit not by Christ, but “by Moses in Egypt,” whose historical opposition to slavery fanned “a blazing flame in the black churches of the South.” American Jews had recently embraced the Zionist movement, which was the culmination of “the spark of Jewish liberation,” Winograd argued. Now they were obligated to support similar forms of political self-determination for the black community. See: Rabbi Richard W. Winograd, “Birmingham - A Personal Statement,” November 1963, in Folder 6, Box 2, NFCCS. Note that Catholics occasionally made similar analogies to their past persecution as white ethnic immigrants in America. In a 1956 address later republished by the Catholic *Interracial Review*, for example, Archbishop Patrick O’Boyle made just this point. Combatting the argument that integration would create “intolerable tensions” due to the “cultural and educational” gap between black and white Americans, O’Boyle suggested that Catholics “go back into history and read what was said about our own ancestors.” Catholic immigrant groups were derided by nativists as “the dregs of Europe” and “products of old-world slums,” he declared, incapable of making it in American society. Their eventual assimilation was not simply the result of working hard, but, according to O’Boyle, was “in large measure the accident of color.” Modern-day Catholics would do well to consider such historical parallels when evaluating the ethics of integration. Patrick A. O’Boyle, “A Call to Catholic Lay Action,” *Interracial Review* XXIX, no 4 (April 1956).

emphasis on Old Testament liberation parables held undeniable power for both faith groups. Upon leaving Birmingham, in fact, Rabbi Rubenstein and his delegation gifted yarmulkes to their local hosts. When a much larger group of rabbis returned south to march in Selma years later, the Birmingham activists were still wearing them, calling them “freedom caps” and symbolically tapping into a religious vision of justice that stretched back to Hebraic times.28

New-breed Jewish leaders also drew on their tradition’s roots in monotheistic theology to advance a civil rights argument from religious humanism, based on the idea that all men were made in the image of God. As Reform rabbi Richard Hirsch put it, in a speech delivered at Selma that drew heavily on the Midrash, God “created only one man at the beginning” and “used every color of dust in the process.” His intent was that nobody should “ever be able to say, ‘The color of my skin is greater than the color of your skin,’” a principle that Jim Crow manifestly violated, and that Hirsch believed Jews were consequently obligated to defend.29 In addition, belief in a single God necessitated a belief in a single divine law, a universally applicable


29 Quotations are from a speech delivered at Selma, recalled in an oral history interview: Transcript of interview with Richard Hirsch, SC-15474, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH. Protestants and Catholics frequently expressed similar arguments based on ethical monotheism and loose forms of monogenesis. Consider Greek Orthodox minister Alexander Schmemann’s address at the 1963 Athens Conference: “There is no such thing as the American Negro, but there are millions of Negroes who are all unique… There are no white people but only men whom God has created, each in His image and yet on every one of them he has smiled in a different way.” Alexander Schmemann, Address on Mission, Religion, and Race, Presented at the 19th Athens Quadrennial Conference, ca. December 1963, Folder 252, Box 40, Margaret Flory Papers, Record Group no. 86, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library (hereafter MFP). Or as Jesuit priest William J. Kenealy put it, speaking at a 1959 national conference on race relations, in the eyes of God, “there is neither white nor black nor red nor yellow nor brown; neither Jew nor Gentile nor Barbarian nor Cythian, but all are brothers in Jesus Christ.” William J. Keanaly, S.J., “A Christian Conscience and Interracial Justice,” Presented at the First National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice, January 16, 1959, in Folder 15, Box 50, Records of the Catholic Interracial Council of New York, Collection no. 77, The American Catholic Research Center and University Archives, The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. (hereafter CIC). Among Catholics, at least, this argument undergirded opposition to discrimination against a wide variety of minority groups. Consider the following editorial, which prioritized the “negro-white question” also suggested that readers combat “prejudice and discrimination” against “Mexicans,” “Orientals,” “Jews,” and “Italians in many parts of the country:” “The Field Is Wide,” Interracial Quarterly, ca. 1950.
standard of justice. In an article published in the official journal of Reform rabbis, Rabbi Samuel G. Broude used this premise to condemn Jews who limited their ethical reasoning to “situations where Jews are involved,” arguing that “the obligation of Kiddush haShem,” or sanctifying God’s name, “applies wherever God’s image is not permitted to be reflected clearly on the face of all of His children.” Jim Crow committed this sin; Jews were thus obligated to “stand with the Negro” in their resistance.\textsuperscript{30} Or as influential theologian Abraham Heschel put it, somewhat more starkly, while Judeo-Christianity’s essence lay in the declaration that all of mankind was “God’s beloved child,” segregation sought to “sunder, to slash, to dismember the flesh of living humanity.” It was “satanism,” pure and simple: “unmitigated evil.”\textsuperscript{31}

With its reference to beloved children, Heschel’s argument evoked the fatherhood of God, a familial metaphor that new-breed Catholics often used in their own critiques of segregation.\textsuperscript{32} In doing so, they contrasted an idealized vision of social relations, in which the family served as a metaphor for spiritual unity and interpersonal harmony, with systems of racial segregation, which they represented as a broken home. As an editorial published in an NFCCS journal put it, the nation was meant to be “one group of loving brothers under one God and one democratic ideal.” Yet racial discrimination had fractured it into “many groups of brothers” divided by “race or creed.” Catholics were thus called to become “shining trumpets sounding


\textsuperscript{32} This metaphor was deployed by Protestants, as well. Consider the NSCF’s study paper on segregation, which argued that “there is only… one God and Father of us all,” and so support for desegregation was an “obvious” obligation of modern Christians: “Students and Segregation,” Group Study Paper, National Student Christian Federation General Assembly II (1960), Folder 584, Box 45, NSCF. Or a 1955 statement of the USCC in support of integration on grounds that “we are all brothers in Christ,” reproduced in their national journal: “USCC Takes Action on Racial Problem,” \textit{Communique} XII, no 1 (February 1956).
against racial prejudice,” battling systems of discrimination in the name of “brotherly love.”\footnote{“Editorial: The Minority Groups in America,” Social Action Summary II, no. 1 (October 1961), 2. See also “Resolution Commemorating Social Justice,” Social Action Summary I, no. 2 (April 1961), 1, which quotes “Quadresigesimo Anno to argue that all men were “members of a single family and children of the same Heavenly Father.” Consequently, it concluded, American life must be rid of systems of social division, especially those that supported “discrimination on the basis of race, creed, or color.” Catholic activists also argued that mankind was united in a more literal sense, thanks to “Mystici Corporis Christi,” an influential papal encyclical released in 1943. The document declared that humanity was not an aggregation of autonomous individuals, but a mutually dependent community that was mystically united in the Body of Christ. Racial segregation fractured that community, failing to grant human beings the temporal equality that their universal membership in the supernatural Body demanded.\# This communitarian critique resonated especially with Catholic youth, who came of age shortly after it was issued, and the NFCCS repeatedly framed its discussions of Southern race relations in these terms for its members. An entire regional workshop on race, held in 1953, was thematically organized around “The Mystical Body in Race Relations,” for example. And in a front page article of Interracial Quarterly, another NFCCS publication, which called the “negro-white question… perhaps the greatest problem of American democracy,” the editors declared their mission “the practical application of the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ.” See “A Report to the Region,” Cross and Color I, no. 3 (March 1953), 1-2; “The Field Is Wide,” Interracial Quarterly, ca. 1950; Karen Joy Johnson, “Healing the Mystical Body: Catholic Attempts to Overcome the Racial Divide in Chicago, 1930-1948,” in J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, eds., Christians and the Color Line: Race and Religion after Divided by Faith (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), esp. 57-60.}

Mankind was meant to be united through the “Mystical Body of Christ,” a Catholic priest and law school dean argued, in a speech reprinted in Interracial Review, yet Americans were “rending” this body in two through the practice of segregation. Catholics were obligated to oppose such divisive social systems and pursue “unity” in the name of “Christian Humanism.”\footnote{“A Christian Conscience and Interracial Justice,” Interracial Review XXXI, no 9 (Sept 1958)}

New-breed Protestants, similarly, disseminated arguments from religious humanism that were grounded in the universality of the Christian Gospel. They argued that Christ had sought to redeem all of mankind, including his enemies, and that all of mankind had been metaphysically united through his sacrifice. As good Christians, the General Assembly of the USCC declared, in an open letter on “the racial situation,” Protestant students were duty-bound to acknowledge the “incompatibility of Christ’s gospel and the status quo.” If they wished to live up to their faith’s demands and imitate “Christ’s reconciling love for all men,” students were obligated “to
change laws which perpetuate injustice and inequality” or were “discriminatory in intent.”

Notably, evangelicals advanced a parallel version of this critique as well, framed in terms of universal access to salvation: that is, the idea that anybody could be saved if they accepted Christ into their heart. On these grounds, evangelical leader Billy Graham famously refused to preach to segregated audiences after 1954, arguing that as good Christians, men must ultimately be “obedient to spiritual laws.” The promise of salvation was open to all, regardless of race - in his words, there was “no color line in heaven” - and proper social relations ought to reflect that fact.

Beyond these faith-specific arguments, new-breed networks also advanced the idea that segregation was not only immoral, but also a liability in the ongoing Cold War. Such themes were expressed by many secular civil rights advocates, of course, but they were freighted with greater meaning for religious communities who invested the global conflict with near-apocalyptic stakes. Anti-Communist Catholics were especially likely to warn their readers that a failure to roll back racial discrimination in the South would lead to global advances for the Soviet Union in contested regions abroad. “The Eyes of Africa are on the US,” one headline in the Catholic Interracial Review declared, before diving into a global analysis of postcolonial regions and their interest in “the status of the Negro in America.” “Race strife here is big news

---

35 “An Open Letter to Students in the United States of America,” *Communique* XV, no. 1 (October 1958). Catholics made arguments based on Christ’s universal love and sacrifice, as well. A publication of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, for example, argued against racial inequality on the grounds that Pope Pius XII had decried social systems that forget “that law of human solidarity which is dictated by… the redeeming Sacrifice offered by Jesus Christ on the Altar of the Cross to His Heavenly Father on behalf of sinful mankind.” See “Negro Problems in the Field of Social Action,” National Catholic Welfare Conference, November 1946, Folder 8, Box 23, Social Ethics Pamphlet Collection, Record Group no. 73, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library (hereafter SEPC).


there,” the author summarized, quoting a United States official. So long as segregation persisted, “the Communists don’t need to do a thing except sit back and laugh and reap the fruits.”38 Other articles played on anti-Communist fears closer to home, warning that black Southerners were being actively “courted by front organizations,” which used “racial prejudice and injustice” as material for recruitment propaganda. The only way to counteract such outreach and save the nation from “moral and spiritual death,” in the author’s estimation, was for Catholics to work to “remove the barriers of prejudice” and “build social and interracial justice.”39

In yet another form of internationalist Catholic pressure, the Vatican itself seemed to agree. When the Truman administration founded the President’s Committee on Civil Rights, the Holy See wrote to the American hierarchy to declare itself “intensely interested” in the committee’s findings and request updates on its recommendations. In response, the United States bishops began conducting and distributing extensive surveys on racial reform efforts.40 The resulting documents included remarkably comprehensive coverage of party positions on reform legislation, civil rights policy initiatives, the work of secular civil liberty organizations, and the state of the black press. (By its own account, the Catholic Church was “far out in front of the field of race relations” among religious groups, albeit mostly because of the “failure of the

38 The article was quoting Dr. Francis M. Hammond, a black Catholic and representative of the United States Information Agency. Pat McGerr, “The Eyes of Africa Are on the U.S.,” Interracial Review XXIX, no 7 (July 1956). For similar example from the same publication, see: “Brainwashing a Continent,” Interracial Review XXIX, no 10 (September 1956). For a discussion of similar coverage in the ecumenical Protestant journal Christianity and Crisis, see Hulsether, Building a Protestant Left, 51-52.


40 Archbishop of Laodicea to Right Rev. Msgr. Howard Carroll, January 22, 1948, in Folder 6, Box 85, OGS. The first survey was issued a month later: “Survey on Civil Rights,” February 29, 1948, in Folder 6, Box 85, OGS.
Protestant churches.” These surveys were distributed throughout the American hierarchy and among Catholic organizations in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and in the process, gave a papal imprimatur to Catholics who were already engaged in anti-racist activism. The documents praised Southern Bishops who banned segregation in their churches, consolidated interracial parishes, and distributed letters “to all pastors to be read during the Sunday Masses demanding that segregation in Catholic worship be abolished,” as New Orleans Archbishop Joseph Rummell did in 1951. They commended Catholic organizations with strong records of civil rights activism, such as the Catholic Conference on Industrial Problems and the Catholic Committee of the South, for “doing the most effective work.” And they called out those with weaker records, such as certain local Catholic Interracial Councils, for being “more or less inactive.” It was no coincidence that NFCCS, a regular recipient of the surveys, wholeheartedly endorsed national civil rights legislation at the relatively early date of June 1950. The dissemination of such material through national new-breed networks deeply shaped grassroots religious understandings of United States race relations, appealing to shared religious principles in an effort to mobilize clergy and religious youth on behalf of the civil rights cause.

**Obeying A Higher Law: The Emergence of Mass Religious Civil Disobedience**

As black religious leaders and their white allies sounded these calls to action, clergy and religious youth began to respond, taking to the streets and engaging in mass civil disobedience on an unprecedented scale. Through social action networks and new-breed press outlets, they

---

41 Survey on Civil Rights, October 22, 1948, Folder 6, Box 85, OGS.
42 Survey on Civil Rights, April 30, 1951, Folder 7, Box 85, OGS; Survey on Civil Rights, October 16, 1953, Folder 7, Box 85, OGS.
43 Survey on Civil Rights, October 22, 1948, Folder 6, Box 85, OGS.
44 Survey on Civil Rights, June 9, 1950, in Folder 7, Box 85, OGS.
publicly framed their activism as an act of religious witness, advancing the sorts of moral justifications for civil disobedience that King would later crystallize in his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” and framing their protest as a public incarnation of their faith commitments. In addition, they used their national organizational networks to recruit scores of sympathetic clergy and youth to join key demonstrations and stage sympathy protests, fueling the grassroots spread of religious civil rights activism and giving the impression that religious communities overwhelmingly supported the civil rights cause. Civil disobedience was not just a disruptive method for attracting the attention of news crews, as it is so often portrayed in the literature, but also a strategy that imbued political acts with sacred significance to appeal to the nation’s conscience.

Such strategies stand in contrast to the approach of a previous generation of religious leaders, who generally sought to improve race relations through local interracial reconciliation and rarely made explicitly political appeals. The first generation of Social Gospelers, for example, focused on investment in black educational institutions, such as the Hampton Institute, which sought to help black citizens ‘earn’ an equal place in society by providing them with “mental discipline and moral nurture.” Groups like the American Friends Service Committee (Quaker) launched moral education programs meant to ‘correct’ the ignorance that underlay racism, engineering interracial encounters and holding an annual Institute of Race Relations.

45 For a comprehensive overview of Social Gospel Protestantism and racial reform, from the postbellum years to the age of the Federal Council of Churches, see .


Ecumenical organizations established interracial cooperatives in the South, such as Koinonia Farm, located in Americus, Georgia, which were intended to soften the attitudes of local segregationists by demonstrating that social harmony could exist across racial boundaries.48 Several Catholic groups, particularly the Josephite religious order, had been involved in advocacy on behalf of black Catholics for decades, working for parish desegregation and recruiting black members to the priesthood.49 Yet they typically eschewed confrontational protests and statist solutions, conceiving of interracial conflict as a moral and social problem to be addressed through interpersonal encounters and religious education.50

More radical religious pacifists, on the other hand, pioneered many of the civil disobedience tactics that would become central to civil rights protest strategy. Yet their short-term impact was relatively limited. As part of nonviolent direct action campaigns against lynching, segregation, and colonialism abroad, members of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and Catholic Worker movement staged the nation’s first draft card burning in 1947, held interracial sit-ins at a Chicago coffeehouse in 1942, and set off on an interracial 1947 “Journey of

48 Tracy Elaine K’Meyer, Interracialism and Christian Community in the Postwar South (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1997); Ann Louise Coble, Cotton Patch for the Kingdom: Clarence Jordan’s Demonstration Plot at Koinonia Farm (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2002).

49 The Josephites were the only American Catholic order exclusively committed to ministry and outreach to black communities. They became increasingly committed to parish desegregation and the ordination of black priests in the interwar period, in the wake of racial violence between fellow Catholics in Northern industrial centers, on the grounds that it would foster social harmony within the Church. See Stephen J. Ochs, Desegregating the Altar: The Josephites and the Struggle for Black Priests, 1871-1960 (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1990). On Catholic Interracial Councils, see: Martin A. Zielinski, “Working for Interracial Justice: The Catholic Interracial Council of New York, 1934-1964,” US Catholic Historian 7, no. 2/3 (Spring / Summer 1998). Catholic opposition to discrimination in employment encompassed a variety of social groups in addition to black Americans, and had roots in Catholic anti-Communist unionism, New Deal thinkers like John A. Ryan, and papal encyclicals such as Rerum Novarum (1891) and Quadregesimo Ano (1931). See David W. Southern, John LaFarge and the Limits of Catholic Interracialism, 1911-1963 (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), 186-242.

50 Southern, John LaFarge and the Limits of Catholic Interracialism, esp. 105-146, 360-365.
Reconciliation,” which served as a model for the better-known 1961 Freedom Rides. Yet none of these actions snowballed into mass demonstrations throughout the nation. The 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, for example, had difficulty recruiting Southern participants because of a lack of organizational connections in the region, attracted no press coverage beyond black newspapers, and terminated after its first set of rides. It was a courageous and trailblazing act of witness in its own right, but it predated the rise of social action theology and construction of new-breed networks that sustained later activism.

By contrast, the direct action campaigns of the early 1960s were able to rely on new-breed resources for recruitment, publicity, and institutional support. Consider the example of the 1960 sit-in movement. It began in Greensboro, North Carolina, the seemingly spontaneous act of four black students of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College, who walked into a local Woolworth’s, sat down at a segregated lunch counter, and refused to get up until they were served. James Lawson, a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation and student at Vanderbilt Divinity School, who had spoken at the Athens conference just months earlier, was part of a church-based activist group in Nashville that had already planned a sit-in campaign of their own and gone through two test runs at local department stores in late 1959. Hearing about the Greensboro protests, they sprang into action, coupling sit-ins of their own with community-wide

---


News of the sit-in movement spread through new-breath press outlets, which provided the demonstrations with national exposure. Mainstream media outlets had surprisingly few reporters assigned to the story. \textit{The New York Times} had only one reporter stationed in the South at the time, who could not possibly have covered the actions of a moment stretching from Greensboro to Tallahassee.\footnote{Roberts and Klibanoff, \textit{The Race Beat}, 225.} Activists initially expressed “real exasperation with the public news media and a sense of being isolated,” according to a National Council of Churches administrator, who was touring several of the sit-in sites and was struck by the need to “do something to get the story out.”\footnote{“Information Letter #6,” April 1, 1960, Folder 438, Box 35, NSCF.} In that spirit, the Protestant NSCF issued a request for “accurate information about developments” in the movement in the April issue of \textit{Communique}, their national student magazine, and through crowdsourcing, collected and distributed the public statements of protesters, city-by-city survey reports on the number of students arrested and convicted, and the names of business chains that were the target of demonstrations.\footnote{“Suggestions of Response to Student Demonstrations,” \textit{Communique} XVI, no. 6 (April 1960); “A Survey of the Southern Student Sit-In Movement and Nationwide Student Activity,” April 22, 1960, Folder 441, Box 53, NSCF; “Survey Report on Lunch Counter Sit-In Demonstrations,” attached to “Information Letter #4,” March 16, 1960, Folder 438, Box 35, NSCF; “Information Letter #5,” ca. March 1960, Folder 438, Box 35, NSCF; “Information Letter #6,” April 1, 1960, Folder 438, Box 35, NSCF.} The newsletters were so influential that the \textit{New York Times} named the organization one of only two “clearing houses” of information on the sit-ins, noting that it served as the source of “facts and counsel” for both
students and press outlets throughout the nation. In the wake of the Times article, NSCF administrators not only experienced a spike in the incoming “stream of information by mail and telephone,” but also received “an overwhelming request for distribution of material that [they had] been sending.” In response, they called upon local affiliates to continue to help “get this information into the hands of… others who may be able to use it in their work on the racial frontier.”

New-breed organizations used their publications not only to provide news coverage of the demonstrations, but also to frame them as a respectable form of protest and exhort their readers to take action in support of them. The National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice (NCCIJ), for example, quickly and unanimously passed a resolution recommending the sit-ins “and other forms of peaceful protest to our fellow Catholics as a morally legitimate form of activity.” In follow-up interviews, Jesuit priest and NCCIJ member William Kenealy suggested that there was a uniquely Catholic obligation to support them, calling racism “basically a moral problem” and warning readers not to use “the great cardinal virtue of prudence” as an excuse “for not practicing the great moral virtues of justice.” Meanwhile, an entire edition of Communique was devoted to the sit-ins and not very subtly “dedicated to the God… who calls us to join Him in the conflicts and events of our time.” It provided a list of


58 “Information Letter #5,” ca. March 1960, Folder 438, Box 35, NSCF.

59 The NCCIJ was an autonomous Catholic para-church organization founded in 1960 to coordinate the work of local Catholic Interracial Councils. “Sit-In Demonstrations Endorsed by Catholic Racial Justice Group,” Press Release, August 29, 1960, Folder 16, Box 50, CIC.

60 Quoted in “Sit-In’ Demonstration Defended by Moralists,” The Pilot, September 3, 1960, Folder 17, Box 50, CIC.

61 “Outside the Camp?” Communique XVI, no. 6 (April 1960).
suggested actions, asking students to liaison with local activist organizations, invite sit-in
demonstrators to speak on campus, visit protesters who had been incarcerated, and (of course)
organize or join local sit-ins themselves. In a move that made national news, the NSCF also
sent out a public appeal for support to over 3,000 other student organizations, both religious and
secular, nationwide.

In response, clergy and religious youth joined existing demonstrations and began ones of
their own, often - especially in the case of religious youth in the South - at great personal cost.
Rebecca Owen, of Lynchburg, VA, for example, organized a sit-in at a local drugstore with an
interracial group of students whose “commonality” was that they “took the gospel very
seriously.” Their protest made national news and led to her arrest. In the process, she was
threatened by local law enforcement with charges of sedition; found guilty of “conduct
unbefitting a lady” by her college judiciary committee, which broke its own confidentiality
regulations to reprimand her in front of the full student body; and was privately lectured by a
“highly decorated military officer” on the “disgrace” that she had brought on her nation, which
the officer suggested must have been caused by “some perverse sexual desire for the African
American male.” Her parents were equally horrified by her transgression of regional racial and
gender norms, for which her father “blamed the Methodist Church.” She did not disagree.
Indeed, she responded by citing the example of Jesus, declaring that he “certainly did not come
to the privileged of his day, and those of position were least able to hear him.” Primed by social
action theology and interracial encounters, her faith now called her to her own witness against

62 “Suggestions of Response to Student Demonstrations,” Communique XVI, no. 6 (April 1960).

Groups to Aid ‘Sit-Iners’: Start Legal Fund to Help Arrested,” The Chicago Defender, April 20, 1960.
injustice, even at the cost of her reputation, college standing, and family relations: “This is a burden we must bear.”

Religious youth across the nation took similar action in solidarity with the sit-in movement. Members of the National Federation of Catholic College Students traveled from New York to Baltimore to join a one-day wave of sit-ins scheduled throughout the city, coordinated by a CORE chapter and run out of the local Methodist Church. Over three hundred students and faculty at Yale Divinity School, a hotbed for social action theology, took to the streets in a silent march supporting the sit-ins, and then successfully lobbied the University to remove racially discriminatory landlords from their Housing Bureau list. Amherst’s Christian Association organized a sympathy march on Washington later that April, getting approximately 150 students to pay for their own travel and demonstrate outside of the White House on Good Friday. An estimated one hundred sympathy demonstrations took place on Northern campuses before the end of the 1960 spring semester alone.

As their members joined the demonstrations, new-breed organizations began leveraging their resources to provide financial and legal support. When James Lawson was expelled from Vanderbilt Divinity School following his arrest for participating in the Nashville sit-ins, the National Student Christian Federation (NSCF) leapt to his aid. Herluf Jensen, the NCC administrator who was serving as NSCF General Secretary at the time, established a legal fund.

---

64 Rebecca Owen, in Evans, ed., Journeys That Opened Up the World, 66, 75-81.

65 “Sitting-In,” Social Action Summary II, no. 2 (December 1961).


68 This number was an estimate by contemporary observers, and the actual number of sympathy demonstrations was likely higher: Morris, The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement, 221-222.
for his defense, which was almost immediately expanded to provide assistance to all “arrested and expelled students” in the sit-in movement. It raised over $11,000 in a matter of months (approximately $88,000 in 2014 dollars).\textsuperscript{69} Methodist students, among them Rebecca Owen, were similarly assured by the Woman’s Division of the Methodist Board of Missions that they would be provided with bail money should they be arrested.\textsuperscript{70} Even with the availability of such funds, Southern students often had trouble finding local lawyers willing to represent them. In response, Episcopalian lawyer and lay theologian William Stringfellow reached out to legal contacts, who, in turn, wrote to colleagues that lived near the demonstrations, compiling a national network of sympathetic lawyers for the NCC.\textsuperscript{71}

As these interpersonal networks grew, they expanded the ability of new-breed organizations to provide resources civil rights demonstrators, providing a foundation that could be adapted to support future campaigns. When the Freedom Rides took off the following year, for example, the NCC tapped into the legal network that it had assembled during the sit-in demonstrations, sending riders contact information for lawyers located along their travel routes and attaching recommendations of local organizations and personal acquaintances who might be able to help with bail money.\textsuperscript{72} Looking to attain similar forms of assistance, Jewish Freedom Riders reached out to their synagogues, either directly or through their national social action

\textsuperscript{69} The “Legal Aid and Scholarship Fund” was initially established to raise money for James Lawson, a civil rights activist and seminary student who was expelled from Vanderbilt Divinity School for participating in demonstrations. It was almost immediately expanded to provide aid to all “arrested and expelled students” involved in sit-in protests. “Information Letter #3,” March 14, 1960 and “Information Letter #4,” March 16, 1960, Folder 438, Box 35, NSCF. For an estimate of the total amount raised, see: Woo, “From USCC to UCM,” 151.

\textsuperscript{70} Ruth Harris, in Evans, ed., \textit{Journeys That Opened Up the World}, 30-31.

\textsuperscript{71} See, for example: William Stringfellow to John Hobson, June 23, 1960, Folder 432, Box 35, NSCF; remainder of folder includes similar examples.

\textsuperscript{72} For example: William Stringfellow to Rev. John B. Morris, August 14, 1961, Folder 432, Box 35, NSCF.
departments. According to Albert Vorspan, director of the UAHC’s Social Action Department at the time, the “prevailing response” was one of “pride.” Synagogues raised bail money for their members, collected donations for CORE, and invited demonstrators to deliver speeches about their experiences afterwards, in some cases directly from the pulpit.\textsuperscript{73}

Perhaps the most useful assistance that new-breed organizations provided to civil rights campaigns was financial. Looking to provide transportation for rural voter registration drives, the Student Christian Movement of New England (SCM-NE) obtained used vehicles and sold them to SNCC for the minimum legal price of $1.\textsuperscript{74} They also provided financial support for alternative presses, such as the \textit{Southern Courier}, an underground civil rights newspaper intended to counter the “unethical journalism” of the Southern white media, for which SCM-NE solicited tens of thousands of dollars in checks and stock options from Christian donors and charitable foundations.\textsuperscript{75} Similarly, the NSCF raised funds for so-called Freedom Radio Stations, which were intended to transmit civil rights news, speeches, and “freedom folk music” to Southern black communities.\textsuperscript{76} And NFCCS held a food and clothing drive for black communities in Tennessee suffering economic deprivation as retribution for trying to register to vote, coupled with a list of the addresses of national companies that were refusing to sell to black customers and a recommendation that readers write to their Congressmen in opposition to such


\textsuperscript{74} See, for example, the bills of sale for two 1960 Pontiac Catalinas (June 30, 1965 and August 20, 1965), a 1961 Dodge Seneca (May 13, 1965), and a 1959 Oldsmobile (May 27, 1965), in Folder 447, Box 33, SCM-NE.

\textsuperscript{75} See the extensive documentation of donations in Folder 446, Box 33, SCM-NE, including (for example) $4,300 from Anne L. Farnsworth of Boston (November 1966) and $8,995 from the Roberts Family Foundation (May 30, 1966), both by way of SCM-NE.

\textsuperscript{76} “Fund Supports Radio Stations in Deep South,” \textit{Wind and Chaff} I, no. 6.
discrimination. Religious student groups engaged in more curious solicitations on behalf of civil rights groups as well. In 1966, SCM-NE applied for and received a $20,000 grant from the NAACP’s Fund for Education and Legal Defense, earmarked for programs “in the area of education among the poor.” Three weeks later, James Forman, then the Office Director for SNCC, wrote SCM-NE a letter thanking them for their “contribution” of $19,990.

Along with money came public endorsements, as an unprecedented number of religious bodies, largely through denominational departments run by new-breath administrators and clergy, issued statements defending acts of civil disobedience as a morally legitimate form of protest. Among mainline Protestants alone, public statements of support for the sit-in movement were issued by the National Council of Churches, the Board of United Church Women, the National Council of the Protestant Episcopal Church, the Board of Home Missions of the Congregational and Christian Churches, the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church, the National Board of the YWCA, the American Friends Service Committee, and the Council for Christian Action of the United Church of Christ. The Executive Director of the Episcopal Society of Cultural and Racial Unity sent public telegrams to both Presidential candidates, urging them to endorse the sit-ins. Although the Catholic Church made no official statement on the subject, sympathetic priests and students expressed their support on the pages of *Interracial Review* and *Social Action Summary.*

---


78 Michael B. Standard, Secretary of FELD, to Charles E. O’Connor, June 8, 1966, Folder 447, Box 33, SCM-NE.

79 James Forman, Office Director of SNCC to Charles E. O’Connor, June 29, 1966, Folder 447, Box 33, SCM-NE; Receipt #5948, Student Christian Movement to SNCC, June 21, 1966, Folder 447, Box 33, SCM-NE.


During the following year’s Freedom Rides, statements of support similarly rolled in, expanding on religious justifications of civil disobedience, portraying demonstrators as martyrs, and calling for religious solidarity. At its annual Congress in 1961, the National Federation of Catholic College Students not only passed a resolution supporting the Freedom Rides, but also called for an extension of the President’s Civil Rights Commission, condemned the House Un-American Activities Committee, and declared that students had both a civic and a religious “Right to Protest.” In a publication of the Catholic Interracial Council, Protestant Rev. Robert L. Wilken compared the suffering of Freedom Riders directly to Christ. Quoting Matthew 5:10, he declared that “blessed are they who suffer persecution for justice’s sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven,” before going on to rail against moderates who “piously and pusillanimously” preached “prudence for others” while benefiting from systems of racial injustice themselves. Connecting integration to the ideal of interracial brotherhood, he concluded that the “two-caste” system of segregation was fundamentally immoral, “a denial of humanity, democracy, and any reasoned or revealed theology.”

These statements imbued civil disobedience with religious significance, a move meant to legitimate demonstrations in the eyes of fellow congregants throughout the nation. At the most general level, as sociologist Martin Oppenheimer has argued, the support of groups with strong anti-Communist credentials, particularly Catholic organizations, helped to construct a “good

---

82 Report of the Resolutions Committee, XVIII National Congress of NFCCS, Folder 1, Box 4, NFCCS. The ‘Right to Protest’ resolution cited both an American tradition of dissent, including the founders’ “use of the boycott,” and Pope John XXIII’s recent encyclical, “Mater et Magistra,” which taught that the state must sometimes intervene in social life in order to pursue the common good and promote justice. Implicitly referencing their Church’s silence in the face of the recent horrors of World War II, it concluded that Catholics had an obligation to actively oppose racial inequality, for “in our modern world silence gives consent.”

public image” for the protests. But more specifically, these statements framed civil disobedience as a moral obligation demanded by one’s religious faith when civic laws stood in conflict with moral law. “Respect for the law is one of the foundation stones of our society,” the National Federation of Catholic College Students declared. Yet “civil laws which institutionalize evil contrary to justice and human dignity within a society cannot be respected by citizens.”

Legal segregation was precisely such an evil, and activists who broke such laws were engaging in Christian “witness,” according to the National Council of Churches, exposing injustice on earth in an attempt to bring the laws of the land “into conformity with the law of God.”

The suffering that activists endured in the course of demonstrating, from both violent segregationists and a police state committed to enforcing unjust laws, was an act of moral redemption for the American people, echoing the suffering that Christ underwent at the hands of the Romans for mankind. Jewish activists did not rely on this particular analogy, of course, and instead couched similar rationales for civil disobedience within discussions of the prophetic tradition and the recent legacy of the Holocaust. “It is possible to be legal but immoral,” Rabbi Samuel Broude argued, reminding his readers that “the Nazis passed laws” too. Thus “it may be necessary, in order to be moral, to be illegal… Each of us must choose: do we obey man - or God? There is no neutral ground.”

84 Oppenheimer, The Sit-In Movement of 1960, 80.

85 “Concerning ‘Sit-In’ Demonstrations,” Resolution of the 17th National Congress of the NFCCS, August 1960, Folder 6, Box 3, NFCCS.

86 “Resolution of the Sit-In Demonstrations,” Adopted by the General Board of the National Council of Churches, June 2, 1960, Folder 438, Box 35, National Student Christian Federation Archives, Record Group no. 247, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library (hereafter NSCF).

87 Samuel G. Broude, “Civil Disobedience and the Jewish Tradition,” Central Conference of American Rabbis Journal, January 1965. Although this particular article was penned after the sit-ins, in 1965, its logic resonated throughout Jewish discussions of civil disobedience from the era. Similar arguments stretched back at least to 1950, when Theodor Adorno argued that a “syndrome of unenlightenment” underlay discriminatory state practices, and
To further advance the perception that civil disobedience was at heart a moral endeavor, meant to prick the conscience of national religious communities, civil rights organizers actively used new-breed networks to recruit clergy participants, who served as a visual embodiment of the movement’s respectability and religiosity. The 1965 Selma marches were perhaps the most powerful incarnation of this trend, and they continue to resonate in the nation’s consciousness today in part because of the mass participation of religious activists and self-conscious deployment of images of interfaith, interracial solidarity. The proximate cause of the marches was the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a young, black activist who was shot to death by a white police officer during a civil rights rally. In response, the SCLC staged a march meant to wend its way fifty-four miles to the state capital of Montgomery. It never made it out of the city, as state troopers blocked access to the Edmund Pettus Bridge and deployed bullwhips and tear gas on the peaceful protesters, in a frenzy of police violence now known as ‘Bloody Sunday.’

Sensing an opportunity to seize national headlines, King called for a second “Minister’s March,” meant to embody the moral stakes of the conflict, and launched a massive national recruitment drive for clergy. “The people of Selma will struggle on for the soul of the nation,” he declared, in a resounding call for participation that was distributed widely through new-breed networks, “but it is fitting that all Americans help to bear the burden. I call therefore, on clergy

that prejudice against any social group would eventually extend to all marginalized social groups. On these grounds, Jewish activists argued, Jews were obligated to stand against such laws if they wished to protect their own people in the future. As a 1959 statement of the Southwest Regional Conference of the American Jewish Committee put it, “some Southern Jews believe that because the Negro is the traditional target of hostility, they can ward off trouble by staying out of the desegregation battle. History has shown the fallacy of this position time and again… Quite aside from the moral obligations of citizenship, Jews cannot expect to be permitted to remain on the sidelines.” For more, including the source of both quotations, see Forman, Blacks in the Jewish Mind, 24-54.

of all faiths... to join me." SCLC staff spent two entire days locked in their hotel rooms, contacting clergy who had previously expressed sympathy for the civil rights cause, while members of the Methodist Student Movement tapped into campus ministry networks to do the same. Ministers like Unitarian James Reeb, then a community organizer in Boston, felt “shocked and moved by the brutality shown in Selma” and upon receiving King’s direct appeal to clergy, came to believe that “it was time for those of us who believe in human freedom to make a direct witness.” More than five hundred clergy like Reeb, in addition to untold numbers of laypeople, dropped what they were doing and travelled to Selma in the forty-eight hours between Bloody Sunday and the Minister’s March.

The centrality of these clergy - particularly white clergy from Northern religious communities - to the public perception and political impact of the Selma marches was tragically illustrated by the death of Reeb. Following the Minister’s March, Reeb took a wrong turn on his way home and stumbled across a group of white segregationists, who beat him unconscious and left his skull seriously fractured. Two days later, he passed away. Although Bloody Sunday is often cited as the march’s most influential media phenomenon, daily print media coverage of Selma was nearly three times as high in the wake of the attack on Reeb. Eleven House

89 Quoted in Ibid., 78.


92 Friedland, Lift Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet, 119-123.

93 Using the Proquest Historical Newspapers database, the author found an average of 54 articles about Selma per day for the four day period surrounding Bloody Sunday (March 6-9, 1965) and an average of 156 articles about Selma per day for the four day period surrounding the attack on Reeb (March 10-13, 1965).
representatives and Senators promptly gave floor speeches in support of a voting rights bill, with several of them specifically citing Reeb’s beating as a spur to action. Dozens of sympathy marches were held in major Northern cities, with the rally in Boston, Reeb’s hometown, drawing an astounding twenty-thousand people. Upon receiving official word of Reeb’s death, Senators Bobby and Ted Kennedy publicly issued letters of condolence to Reeb’s widow. President Johnson sent roses and made his jet available to transport her to Alabama for the memorial service.

This outpouring of support was deeply troubling, given the comparative lack of attention afforded to black martyrs similarly slain in service to the civil rights cause. “I’m not saying we shouldn’t pay tribute to Rev. Reeb,” an angry Stokely Carmichael declared, “[but] I think we have to analyze why he [President Johnson] sent flowers to Mrs. Reeb, and not to Mrs. Jackson.” Yet such an outcome followed from the intent of march organizers precisely. Putting white religious leaders on the front lines in Selma, where they would undoubtedly experience police violence, was intended to engage national public opinion in ways that the repeated slaying of black activists, stretching back decades, never had.

In the wake of Reeb’s death, civil rights leaders launched a third and final phase of protest, doubling down on their efforts to involve new-breed activists and shape their public image around a strategy of religious witness. They held a massive, ecumenical memorial service for Reeb and scheduled yet another march from Selma to Montgomery, amping up their calls for clergy to travel from afar to attend both. In response, the number of new-breed activists in

---

94 Garrow, *Protest at Selma*, 91, 102-103

95 Friedland, *Lift Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet*, 125.

96 Quoted in Carson, *In Struggle*, 161.
Selma soared well into the thousands, if not tens of thousands. To headline the gathering, King flew in an all-star group of religious leaders, including Episcopalian bishop James A. Pike, Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel, and Rabbi Richard Hirsch, head of the Religious Action Center in Washington, D.C. The influx of demonstrators overwhelmed the capacity of organizers to accommodate them, and Rabbi Hirsch ended up sharing a motel bed with Bishop Pike. Asked about it by the press, Hirsch replied, “I knew that sooner or later I would sleep with the Lord, but never in my wildest imagination did I ever think I would sleep with a Bishop.” Thanks in part to President Johnson’s mustering of the National Guard, marchers finally succeeded in completing the fifty-four mile trek, in which they were accompanied by hordes of reporters who produced daily front-page articles about their progress. This press coverage almost invariably described the demonstrations as having a spiritual dimension, noting, as one reporter for the New York Times put it, that the procession had “a grandeur that was almost Biblical.”

The national response to the Selma campaign was tremendous. Speaking in front of the Capitol building upon finally reaching Montgomery, King called the public outcry “a shining moment in the conscience of man.” As Chicago-area priest Daniel Cantwell later put it, the marches were seen among sympathetic religious communities as “a sacramentalizing of the national conscience,” a demonstration made “so clearly religious and moral in character” that

---

97 Friedland, Lift Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet, 129-132.

98 Transcript of interview with Richard Hirsch, SC-15474, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.

99 Quotation and account of march from Garrow, Protest at Selma, 114-116

100 Quoted in Garrow, Protest at Selma, 117.
they became “undeniable manifestations of the Christian spirit.”

They epitomized the importance of the politics of conscience to civil rights demonstrations, using new-breed involvement to appeal to national religious constituencies with a self-constructed aura of interracial, interregional, and interfaith unity, featuring black ministers, habited nuns, and long-bearded Jewish theologians, collectively facing down violence and injustice in service of a higher moral purpose.

From the Streets of Selma to the Halls of Congress: Politicizing Moral Outrage

One of the primary reasons that the Selma marches were considered such a success, both at the time and today, was that they leveraged moral outrage into the passage of sweeping political reform at the federal level. As historian David Garrow has argued, Selma precipitated “the largest and most intense congressional and public reaction of any of the SCLC’s southern campaigns,” guaranteeing that the pending Voting Rights Act “would be enacted into law, and with only minimal delay and no weakening amendments.”

That outcome was no accident. Throughout the civil rights movement, new-breed activists systematically paired strategies of civil disobedience with coordinated political outreach to sympathetic religious communities. Their demonstrations were designed not to heal the hearts of local racists, but to precipitate conflict with them, with the goal of capitalizing on regional religious divisions to rally the rest of the flock to the civil rights cause. In the process, they politicized moral outrage, translating it into letter-writing campaigns, political rallies, Congressional testimony, and threats to preach against politicians come Election Day.


102 Garrow, Protest at Selma, 134.
Consider the civil rights campaign in St. Augustine, Florida, which was widely deemed a failure for its inability to bring about local change, but which nevertheless had a national political impact on liberal religious groups.  

Beginning in early 1964, the SCLC and local civil rights organizations orchestrated a wave of demonstrations in St. Augustine, which included interracial motel sit-ins, night marches to historic slave markets, and swim-ins at segregated beaches and pools. As they had for the Freedom Rides and Selma marches, civil rights leaders solicited the involvement of Northern clergy to infuse their demonstrations with moral stakes that would resonate with religious communities outside of the South. “I would imagine that some 30 or so rabbis would make a tremendous impact on this community and the nation,” particularly if the were “prepared to submit to arrest,” the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote to Rabbi Israel Dresner, a new-breed activist who had participated in the Freedom Rides and invited King to preach from the pulpit of his New Jersey synagogue. Come to St. Augustine, another SCLC representative wrote to Rabbi Eugene Lipman, requesting that he bring “as many persons as you possibly can.”

Lipman was then Director of the Commission on Social Action of the UAHC, and drawing on his organizational resources, he teamed up with Dresner and subsidized travel to St. Augustine. 

---

103 The exception to this rule is historian David Colburn, who has weighed SCLC’s failures in St. Augustine against the fact that local activist efforts would probably have collapsed without their assistance, while also emphasizing unique local factors that were out of organizers’ control (like the presence of other ethnic minorities and the fact that older black residents were often employed in the tourist industry that SCLC was threatening for political leverage). See Colburn, *Racial Change and Community Crisis*, especially 205-218.


106 Lipman had previously contacted a number of civil rights organizations to volunteer his involvement. See letters from Eugene Lipman, ca. April 1964, in Folder 15, Box 5, ELP; C.T. Vivian, Director of SCLC Affiliates, to Eugene Lipman, June 9, 1964, Folder 15, Box 5, ELP.
expenses, pledged bail money, and coordinated legal representation for a group of fifteen rabbis willing to travel to St. Augustine.\textsuperscript{107}

As had been the case in other civil rights campaigns, the rabbis publicly portrayed their activism as a moral obligation, an act of prophetic witness. Upon being arrested - some for participating in an interracial sit-in at a restaurant, others for praying in an integrated group on the sidewalk outside - they released a public letter explaining their actions. “As Jews,” they argued, they “could not stand silently by our brother’s blood” as other people had “done too many times before.” Instead, remembering “the millions of faceless people who stood quietly, watching the smoke rise from Hitler’s crematoria,” they felt compelled to break their “silence” and renew “faith in man’s capacity to act.” Their decision to break civic law was done “as much in fulfillment of our faith” as it was “in service to our Negro brothers.” “Baruch ata adonai matir asurim,” they signed off. Blessed art thou, O Lord, who freest the captives.\textsuperscript{108}

Although the St. Augustine campaign never resonated nationally in the way that Birmingham or Selma did, the particular involvement of the rabbis stimulated political engagement among sympathetic Jewish communities back home. Their actions were the subject of multiple front-page articles in the national press, which framed their protest and arrest as a “religious experience,” to quote one headline.\textsuperscript{109} Letters of support came in from sympathetic

\textsuperscript{107} Al [Albert Vorspan] and Brick [Balfour Brickner] to The St. Augustine Crew, July 1, 1964, Folder 15, Box 5, ELP.

\textsuperscript{108} Joint letter from St. Augustine Participants, June 19, 1964, Folder 15, Box 5, ELP.

Jewish readers, who praised the rabbis for “fighting for the human dignity of all mankind.” Upon Lipman’s return to Washington, DC, twice as many congregants as usual had gathered at his temple to hear him speak about his experiences. Another rabbi had already begun the service with quotations from Thoreau, the Hebrew prophets, and Justice & Judaism, a casebook on social action theology penned by Reform leader Albert Vorspan. When Lipman took to the pulpit, he used “the word ‘witness’” as his theme, called for comparable action from his listeners, and laid into “the ‘kosher dinner’” types who reduced Judaism to empty rituals and failed to live up to its call for justice. The congregation’s reaction was “marvelous,” according to Lipman. Listeners were filled with “such excitement! [sic]” that they began raising bail money for other St. Augustine demonstrators on the spot.

Other new-breed leaders similarly sought to mobilize fellow members of their faith, especially those who were unwilling or unable to fly to places like St. Augustine, on the grounds that their faith required solidarity with the civil rights cause and that they might be best able to contribute through rallies and letter-writing campaigns. As a Newman Club mailing to Catholic students put it, even if members could not be “front line warriors,” they could still participate in the “civil rights battle” through the political process. In support of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the Catholic Interracial Council urged its local chapters to involve congregants in a national Catholic lobbying campaign, organizing delegations to visit their Congressional representatives,

110 Quotation from: Mildred D. Tolloway and Members of the Volunteer Junior Youth Corps, Telegram, June 20, 1964, Folder 15, Box 5, ELP. See also: Miki Rosenthal to Eugene Lipman, June 20, 1964, Folder 15, Box 5, ELP; David Dreiman to Eugene Lipman, Folder 15, Box 5, ELP; William Breiterman to Eugene Lipman, June 22, 1964, Folder 15, Box 5, ELP.

111 Account drawn from: Eugene Lipman to Martin Luther King, June 20, 1964, Folder 15, Box 5, ELP; ejl [Eugene Lipman] to Al [Vorspan], June 20, 1964, Folder 15, Box 5, ELP.

112 “Social Action Programming: The Civil Rights Battle,” ca. 1963-64, Folder 20, Box 7, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Youth Department, Collection no. 10, The American Catholic Research Center and University Archives, The Catholic University of America (hereafter CYD).
urging priests to deliver sermons supporting reform, and distributing handbills after Mass that
provided the contact information of swing-vote legislators. 113 Meanwhile, the National
Federation of Catholic College Students coupled educational programs on race relations with
specific recommendations for political action. Their annual Interracial Justice Week habitually
facilitated not only group discussions of Catholic values and racial equality, but also mass-
telegram initiatives expressing support for the sit-in movement and letter-writing campaigns
decrying Alabama’s treatment of the Freedom Riders. 114 Similarly, the Protestant NSCF used its
mailing list to instruct students on how to obtain copies of proposed civil rights legislation,
suggest that they write to their representatives, and even offer housing arrangements for those
able to travel to Washington, D.C. and lobby their representatives personally. 115 The Newman
Club mailing about ‘front line warriors’ offered similar suggestions, ranging from contacting
Congressmen to convincing hometown priests to “deliver sermons dealing with the immorality
of discrimination and calling for legislative remedy.” In case readers didn’t get the point, the
mailing concluded by noting that “the greatest political impact on Congress comes from the
Churches and Synagogues back home.” 116

Perhaps the most dramatic effort to translate moral outrage into political pressure went
into organizing 1963 March on Washington. Best known as the venue in which King delivered

113 Mathew Ahmann to Council Presidents and Chaplains, et al, Re: Pending Federal Civil Rights Bill, March 19,
1964, Folder 3, Box 21, CIC; “Fellow Catholics,” Flyer, Catholic Interracial Council of Pittsburgh, Folder 3, Box
21, CIC.

114 Working Papers, XVIII National Congress, 1961, Folder 1, Box 4, NFCCS.

115 “In the Midst of Strife: NSCF Civil Rights Newsletter Report on Civil Rights Legislation,” n/d, Folder 433, Box
35, NSCF. NSCF sent out many other memos and newsletters encouraging work on civil rights legislation, some of
which have been collected in Folders 431 and 433-436, Box 35, NSCF.

116 “Social Action Programming: The Civil Rights Battle,” ca. 1963-64, Folder 20, Box 7, United States Conference
of Catholic Bishops Youth Department, Collection no. 10, The American Catholic Research Center and University
Archives, The Catholic University of America (hereafter CYD).
his famous “I Have a Dream” speech, the rally also featured speeches from Eugene Carson Blake, a former President of the National Council of Churches; Joachim Prinz, President of the American Jewish Congress; and Catholic Archbishop Patrick O’Doyle.\footnote{Respectively: Eugene Carson Blake, “Late We Come,” in Houck and Dixon, eds., \textit{Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement}, 581-583; Friedland, \textit{Left Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet}, 89; Archbishop Patrick O’Boyle, “Invocation for the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” in Houck and Dixon, eds., \textit{Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement}, 583-584.} The NCC’s Commission on Religion and Race heavily recruited religious participants, while Protestant publications like \textit{The Christian Century} advertised the event, telling readers that even “if vacation plans had not included a trip to Washington,” “plans can be changed!”\footnote{Friedland, \textit{Lift Up Your Voice Like a Trumpet}, 86-87.} The National Federation of Catholic College Students made it their goal to get “50,000 Catholics to participate” and sent memos to all regional presidents asking whether they were prepared to travel to Washington to “witness publicly to our belief, as did the early Christians?”\footnote{John P. Sisson, to Council Presidents, Council Chaplains, Catholic Race Relations Leadership, Memo re: March in Washington, ca. Summer 1963, Folder 3, Box 7, NFCCS; Mary Wilker, Coordinator, N.F. Student Demonstration, to Regional Presidents, Student Council Presidents, N.F. Delegates, Dean of Students, Moderators, Memo Re: Washington March for Jobs and Freedom, ca August 1963, Folder 3, Box 7, NFCCS.} Recruiting fifty-thousand Catholics was, of course, a wildly unrealistic goal. But thanks to such efforts, approximately ten thousand participants in the March on Washington were there as representatives of religious organizations, a number that would account for between one-third and one-half of the total. Not for nothing did the \textit{New York Times} liken the event to a “church outing.”\footnote{Russell Baker, “Capital Is Occupied By a Gentle Army,” \textit{The New York Times}, August 29, 1963; “Three Faiths Join in Rights Demand,” \textit{The New York Times}, August 29, 1963.}

Against the backdrop of this outpouring of religious support, denominational leaders from the National Council of Churches, the Synagogue Council of America, and the National Catholic Welfare Conference presented joint testimony to Congress on behalf of pending civil
rights legislation. “God is the creator of all men,” they testified, and thus “in every person there is an innate dignity which is the basis of human rights.” Yet while those rights “must be honored by all persons and by the State,” segregationist laws systematically denied them to black citizens. They were thus fundamentally “immoral.” Representing the “religious conscience of America,” they declared that they were obligated to join hands in front of their body of political representatives and condemn state-sanctioned “racism as blasphemy against God.”

Jewish observers noted that this joint testimony constituted “an unprecedented action,” the first time that such an ecumenical group, representing the mainstream bodies of all three major American faiths, had ever spoken with a single political voice in front of Congress.

It would not be the last, however. In the coming years, religious leaders would repeatedly testify on behalf of civil rights legislation on similar grounds, seeking to persuade legislators that they represented the religious conscience of the nation, and thus of many legislators’ constituencies. Their testimony was consistently and broadly ecumenical, meant to reach representatives from a diverse range of religions and regions. When Catholic priest John F. Cronin testified on behalf of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, for example, he not only quoted statements of the United States Bishops (“No Catholic with a good Christian conscience can fail to recognize the rights of all citizens to vote”), but also invoked the Protestant “spirit of Lexington and Concord” and quoted the Synagogue Council of America (“The right to vote and participate in the affairs of government is necessary… to the establishment of the dignity of

---

121 Testimony on Civil Rights Legislation Presented to the Committee on Judiciary, House of Representatives, by the National Catholic Welfare Council, Synagogue Council of America, and National Council of Churches, July 24, 1963, Folder 25, Box 67, CDSA.

122 In addition to the House Judiciary Committee cited below, the group also testified before the Senate Commerce Committee and the Committee on Employment and Manpower of the Senate Labor and Public Welfare Committee. Rabbi Balfour Brickner and Seymour Hirsch to UAHC Rabbis, et al., “Of Immediate Concern Regarding the Racial Crisis,” August 7, 1963, “Social Action, 1961-1965” Folder, Box B1-10, RAC.
man”). The “task of religious leaders is to articulate the conscience of America,” Cronin continued, suggesting that he was merely reflecting the values of his faith and its adherents, rather than shaping them. And that conscience demanded, “clearly and unequivocally,” legislative remedies to racial voting restrictions that were “prompt and completely effective.”123

These new-breed leaders were not actually speaking as the conscience of America, of course, and their activism and lobbying was opposed by many Americans on explicitly religious grounds, leading to competing interpretations of what a truly authentic faith would require in the realm of civil rights politics. Although Lipman’s demonstration in St. Augustine energized his home congregation in Washington, D.C., for example, it also met resistance from Southern Jews who denied any religious responsibility to defend the rights of black Americans, particularly if doing so jeopardized the safety of Southern Jewish communities. Sunny Weinstein, the president of a local Florida synagogue, was so outraged by the involvement of Jewish rabbis in the protests that he visited them in prison to berate them. He found them in the middle of a Ma’ariv service, which he indignantly interrupted to question their religiosity, disparaging them as “purported rabbis” and lecturing them on the sin of praying with bare heads. (The rabbis were unable to obtain kippahs while incarcerated.) In reply, Lipman accused Weinstein of a parallel brand of inauthenticity, firing off a blistering letter condemning him for claiming to be “a Jewish leader” while espousing odious defenses of “human inequality” and speaking “with a complete lack of derech eretz to your teachers.” Although Jews could rightly disagree on many matters, Lipman argued, there was no room for compromise on the “basic moral principles” that defined

123 John F. Cronin, Testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives, March 25, 1965, Folder 10, Box 85, OGS.
the faith, including the unequivocal “duty” to “work to change [laws] in the direction of moral 
rightness,” by which, of course, he meant opposing segregation.\textsuperscript{124}

Similar disagreements emerged among Protestant groups, particularly between mainline 
churches affiliated with the NCC and Southern evangelicals. As already mentioned, moderate 
evangelical leaders like Billy Graham had expressed anti-racist sentiments on explicitly religious 
grounds throughout the 1950. Yet they simultaneously opposed federal civil rights legislation, 
drawing on their individualistic theological framework to argue that racial inequality was the 
product of interpersonal intolerance, rather than structural conditions, and that no federal 
legislation could change what was ultimately a matter of the heart.\textsuperscript{125} Furthermore, they objected 
to their liberal counterparts’ embrace of civil disobedience as an expression of religious witness, 
arguing that Christians had an overriding obligation to preserve law and order in the name of 
God’s peace. When Graham was asked to comment on the sit-in movement, indicatively, he told 
reporters that “no matter what the law may be - it may be an unjust law - I believe we have a 
Christian responsibility to obey it.”\textsuperscript{126}

Hard-line segregationists, meanwhile, had rarely mounted explicitly religious defenses of 
Jim Crow during the early Cold War years, but they changed tack in response to new-breed 
activists arguing that segregation was inherently immoral and un-Christian. Reviving an 
interpretative tradition with roots in antebellum defenses of slavery, they disputed the idea that 
segregation violated religious principles of mankind’s unity, using Biblical examples from

\textsuperscript{124} Eugene Lipman to Sunny Weinstein, June 21, 1964, Folder 15, Box 5, ELP.


Noah’s flood to the Tower of Babel as evidence that God himself established social barriers among men and that those who sought to tear them down suffered his wrath.\textsuperscript{127} Seen through this lens, such civil rights measures as school integration were more than just threats to the Southern social order. They were a defiance of God’s will, which would lead to sort of interracial fraternizing and miscegenation that could invite divine punishment on mankind. It was not for man or his churches to interfere with distinctions that God had wrought.\textsuperscript{128}

Yet such disagreements tended to break down along explicitly sectional and theological lines. Given the historical tensions between Southern evangelicals and mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, interreligious conflict over civil rights actually \textit{benefited} the movement politically, suggesting to non-Southern legislators that religious constituencies within their district were more likely to side with the cause of civil rights reform. Evangelical and mainline Protestant denominations had originally split over the issue of slavery, after all, and despite evangelical outmigration, the latter group retained its demographic majority north of the Mason-Dixon line.\textsuperscript{129} Although Southern Jews and Catholics had a complicated relationship with the civil rights cause, the majority of both religious groups resided north and west of the Bible Belt and their historical persecution as religious minorities at the hands of groups like the Ku Klux


Klan lent itself to the idea that they would stand in solidarity with other victims of Southern white Protestant intolerance.\textsuperscript{130} When push came to shove, in other words, moderate legislators from outside the South had reason to believe that they would pay a political price for siding with opponents of federal civil rights reform.

New-breed activists advanced this perception and capitalized on the sectional nature of interreligious conflict by launching regionally-specific lobbying campaigns, targeting moderate legislators who had few black Americans in their home districts, but could be persuaded that the majority-white religious groups they represented stood in solidarity with the activists demonstrating in the streets of the South. The National Federation of Catholic College Students (NFCCS) launched a letter-writing campaign in the spring of 1963 that singled out “Congressmen and Senators who most need our urging to get behind the bill” - namely, non-Southern Democrats and moderate Republicans, especially key members of the House Judiciary Committee, who would be susceptible to appeals from Catholics.\textsuperscript{131} The NFCCS also ran an “Adopt a Senator” campaign, in which Catholic students from Southern states wrote to representatives from the North and Midwest, saying that they were temporarily ‘adopting’ them on the grounds that their own representatives were failing to represent Catholic interests in Congress. For recipients representing districts with a sizeable number of Catholic voters - as well as the offending Southern senators, who received carbon copies of the letters - the message


\textsuperscript{131} NFCCS National Office to National Council, Senior and Junior Delegates, Student Government Presidents, Moderators, Memo Re: Civil Rights Legislation, Spring 1963, Folder 7, Box 3, NFCCS.
was clear: civil rights was a moral and religious issue that transcended regional loyalties, and legislators willing to take a stand could reap political benefits among Catholic voters.¹³²

New-breed Protestants and Jews also launched regionally-specific letter-writing initiatives of their own. Early in 1964, campus minister Ernest Reuter generated a map of the United States that identified each United States Senator’s specific position on the pending Civil Rights Act, which he distributed it to a variety of Protestant and Catholic groups.¹³³ The map was intended to help new-breed activists target religious voters in regions represented by wavering legislators, especially those “in the Middle Western and Rocky Mountain states,” who Reuter believed would ultimately “hold the balance of power in this matter.”¹³⁴ In the meanwhile, the UAHC’s Commission on Social Action was distributing lengthy memos on how to target swing representatives and senators, accompanied by detailed analyses of which Congressmen would be most likely to buckle under Jewish pressure to get civil rights bills out of committee.¹³⁵ To help sympathizers who lacked the time to wade through such documents, other clergy, such as UCC campus minister Paul E. Gibbons, distributed pre-addressed form letters targeting vulnerable swing votes that congregants and students could quickly fill in and mail off.¹³⁶

¹³² “Numerous Projects Underway,” ca. 1963, Folder 5, Box 2, NFCCS. For other examples of Catholic student lobbying initiatives, see various documents in Folder 6, Box 1 and Folders 5 and 6, Box 2, NFCCS.

¹³³ Ernest Reuter to “Fellow Citizen,” dated “The First Week of the Senate Civil Rights Debate, 1964,” Folder 6, Box 2, NFCCS.

¹³⁴ Mailing from Ernest Reuter, February 28, 1964, Folder 6, Box 2, NFCCS; mailing from Ernest Reuter, March 9, 1964, Folder 6, Box 2, NFCCS.

¹³⁵ Minutes of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism, New York, NY, April 16, 1962, Folder 3, Box A3-1, URJ; “Concerning Administration’s Civil Rights Bill as Background,” July 2, 1963, Folder 3, Box A3-1, URJ.

¹³⁶ Paul E. Gibbons, Memo to “Town and Campus Ministers, Students, University Faculty, Civil Rights Leaders,” April 20, 1964, Folder 6, Box 3, NFCCS.
By most accounts, these interfaith attempts to force the hands of Congress were decisive. Vice President Hubert Humphrey personally thanked Jim Hamilton of the NCC for his organization’s lobbying efforts on behalf of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, declaring that without the churches’ “unremitting support… this bill could never have become law.”\textsuperscript{137} Senator Richard Russell, a Southern opponent of the legislation, made the same point more grudgingly, blaming the bill’s passage on the work of those “cardinals, bishops, elders, stated clerks, common preachers, priests, and rabbis” who had “come to Washington to press for the passage” of civil rights legislation. In a word, he said, “the preachers did us in.”\textsuperscript{138} In agreement, journalist Clay Risen has recently called religious organizations “more critical” to the passage of the Civil Rights Act than any other social group, noting in particular their influence over white voters in regions where “unions and civil rights groups” could not build comparable political support.\textsuperscript{139} Historian James Findlay has catalogued the correspondence of several Congressmen from the Midwest who cast swing votes in favor of civil rights legislation, selecting subjects who were initially dubious about the bills and had few black constituents, yet went on to play key roles in their passage. He found that a remarkable 37\% to 44\% of their letters on the subject came from supportive citizens who primarily identified themselves as “church people.”\textsuperscript{140}

The success of these religious campaigns for reform was the culmination of nearly a decade’s worth of organizing. New-breed activists couched radical political demands for racial equality in the language of the civic-religious consensus, pairing the twin tactics of direct action

\textsuperscript{137} Quoted in Findlay, \textit{Church People in the Struggle}, 62.

\textsuperscript{138} The Congressional Record - Senate, June 10, 1964, p. 13309; Breckenridge, \textit{Eugene Carson Blake}, 104.


\textsuperscript{140} Findlay, \textit{Church People in the Struggle}, 56-57, 70f37.
protest and political lobbying to exert extraordinary influence over the fate of civil rights legislation. In the process, they transformed the potential power generated by social action theology and the growth new-breed organizational networks into a specific political machine. That machine would be brought to bear on other political issues in the coming years, but never again would it wield such extraordinary influence.
CHAPTER FOUR
“LET HIM JOIN THE DEVIL”:
INTERRELIGIOUS CONFLICT AND CIVIL RIGHTS IN THE URBAN NORTH

On August 5, 1966, just a year and a half after the dramatic marches in Selma, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. led another interracial procession of eight-hundred activists into Marquette Park, an all-white, working-class neighborhood on the southwest side of Chicago. Black Chicagoans had been systematically denied access to Marquette Park’s housing market for decades, thanks to the discriminatory effects of restrictive housing covenants, racial steering among realtors, and federal mortgage-rating policies.¹ Like its predecessor in Selma, the Marquette Park march was intended to dramatize that regime’s injustices for a wider audience, using nonviolent direct action to precipitate local conflict and appeal to the ‘conscience of the nation.’

Playing their anticipated role in this script, white residents met the marchers with incendiary displays of violence. Thousands of hostile onlookers bellowed racial slurs and hurled bricks and bottles at the protesters. King was struck in the head with a rock. National newspapers led with front-page coverage the next morning, printing dramatic pictures of

demonstrators ducking projectiles, next to columns that focused critically on the “surging, screaming mob of whites,” in the words of the *Los Angeles Times*. Two and a half weeks later, the *Wall Street Journal* printed an editorial entitled, “Selma in Chicago?” The essay compared the Marquette Park march to Bloody Sunday, arguing that thanks to the lamentable introduction of “jeers and bricks,” “the issues are now clearer, and battle lines are drawn.”

At least one other parallel existed between the two demonstrations. As had so many campaigns throughout the South, the Marquette Park march relied heavily on the participation of religious activists, the organizational resources of new-breed networks, and the public use of spiritually-symbolic protest tactics. The demonstration was orchestrated out of New Friendship Baptist Church, a historically black congregation on the South Side, and its leadership was populated by local ministers. Catholic priests and nuns were recruited to march on the front lines, the National Student Christian Federation assigned a full-time staff member to provide logistical support, and rabbis worked to disperse hostile onlookers. After King was struck with a rock, demonstrators responded with religious ritual, kneeling in the streets in group prayer and then rising to sing gospel freedom songs as they marched on. When the march ended, religious participants used national new-breed networks to spread the word, portraying their activism as a form of prophetic witness, calling fellow congregants to battle, and trying to build a political coalition in favor of federal open housing reform.

---


Yet if the tactics of the Selma and Chicago marches were similar, the religious contexts in which they unfolded could not have been more different. Southern civil rights campaigns relied heavily on outside clergy, hailing from faith traditions with historical animosities towards local segregationists, a dynamic that redounded to their symbolic and political advantage. In the urban North, by contrast, new-breed activists faced off against conservative members of their own flock, while liberal religious leaders - many of whom had rallied in defense of protesters after Bloody Sunday - found themselves instead working to keep the peace and preserve congregational unity. The emergence of this new form of interreligious conflict deeply shaped public perceptions of the campaign, shattering any illusion that there was consensus on civil rights among Northern religious groups, and sapping new-breed activists of the political leverage that had made them so valuable to the passage of federal legislation in the past.

Most liberal religious leaders in the urban North had long worked to combat racial inequality and discrimination, but their strategies revolved around a politics of community. Their commitment to civil rights grew out of the impact of white flight and the postwar urban crisis on neighborhoods in which they had a historic institutional presence. Over the course of the 1950s, Catholic parishes became increasingly black and poor, urban Jewish communities suffered similar discrimination as black residents, and Protestant urban ministry increasingly bred encounters with the racial dimensions of urban poverty. The remedy that these leaders proposed was correspondingly local. They challenged legal discrimination through urban and state legislatures, worked for the integration of neighborhood services, and invested heavily in community organizing, with the goal of empowering underserved constituencies. New-breed activists contributed significantly to this vision of reform, particularly in the wake of federal civil rights legislation, which seemed to provide the necessary tools to transform the promise of civil
rights into a reality. Drawing on the resources of their national organizations, they supported
community organizations that organized tenant unions, registered minority voters, and invested
in black economic development. Such work was by no means devoid of interreligious conflict,
but neither was the appearance of moral solidarity central to its strategies.

Yet new-breed activists and civil rights leaders also favored a politics of witness.
Inspired by the successes of direct action campaigns in the South, they worked in parallel to
‘bring Selma north,’ staging provocative demonstrations designed to appeal to the conscience of
the nation and leverage moral outrage into political pressure for federal reforms. The Marquette
Park march is a superb illustration of this strategy, but it was just one of a multitude of
demonstrations orchestrated by the 1966 Chicago Freedom Movement (CFM), a joint initiative
of local civil rights organizations and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Southern Christian
Leadership Conference. As had their predecessors in Selma, CFM organizers solicited support
for their campaign from white religious allies, and received it from nearly every corner. But as
they turned increasingly toward provocative direct-action protests in the summer of 1966,
precipitating violent reactions from conservative congregants throughout Chicago, their coalition
began to fracture. National new-breed organizations and professionally autonomous activists
remained staunch allies, facing down violence and risking arrest in the name of racial justice, but
local religious leaders and clergy beholden to nearby congregations became increasingly critical
of the protests, exposing dissension within the ranks.

The evolution of religious opposition to civil rights campaigns in the urban North had
roots in long-standing racial and class dynamics, but was expressed in fundamentally religious
terms and was shaped by competing visions over the purpose of religious institutions.⁴ New-

---

⁴ For more on the role of race and class in political opposition to civil rights efforts in the urban North, see: Jonathan
Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University
breed activists ascribed to a universalistic faith, which was committed to human equality for all of God’s children and demanded that they personally oppose laws that perpetuated injustice for any social group. By contrast, white religious moderates and reactionaries hewed to a more particularistic vision of faith, embodied in the parochial school or the Jewish community center, its primary purpose to define and protect its own community identity. In the course of battles over urban desegregation, both sides accused the other of betraying the bedrock principles of their shared faith, of practicing a politics that was fundamentally un-Christian or anti-Semitic. In response, liberal religious leadership staked out a middle ground that satisfied neither side, affirming their theological commitment to racial equality, while preaching caution in the name of congregational peace. The emergence of this interreligious conflict set into motion disagreements that would transform organized religious life, convincing conservatives of the need to organize politically in order to defend their vision of faith, while planting seeds of doubt about the true allegiances of their parent institutions in the hearts of new-breed activists.

The Politics of Community: Interracial Organizing in the Urban North

Although historians have lavished far more attention on religious involvement in Southern civil rights campaigns, liberal religious communities in the urban North had long criticized local racial inequality just as surely as they had opposed Jim Crow. New-breed

---

5 This lack is due in part to the youth of the field of Northern civil rights scholarship, which is expanding rapidly in the wake of recent appeals from leading historians, including: Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (March 2005); Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008). Studies of local civil rights organizing in the urban North frequently refer to local clergy and congregations, in part due to their high levels of involvement. But few focus specifically on how religion influenced their activism (intellectually or institutionally) and fewer still connect them to national developments in United States religious
organizations that played key roles in demonstrations from St. Augustine to Selma were simultaneously critiquing race relations closer to home, on the grounds that any form of segregation violated the theological unity of mankind and denied citizens the dignity of democratic control over their political, economic, and social lives. Catholic press outlets, including Interracial Review and the National Federation of Catholic College Student’s Social Action Summary, ran dozens of articles focused on racial inequality in Northern housing markets.⁶ Jewish defense groups published reports on local anti-discrimination legislation, critiques of Northern white backlash to civil rights gains, and a “Negro Press Digest,” designed to educate Jews about “the problems, aspirations, and frustrations of the Negro community.”⁷ Grassroots new-breeding organizations, such as the Northern Student Movement, launched “comprehensive programs of study” devoted to raising awareness about Northern discrimination life. Exceptions include: John T. McGreevy, Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Angela D. Dillard, “Religion and Radicalism: The Reverend Albert B. Cleage, Jr., and the Rise of Black Christian Nationalism in Detroit,” in Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Patrick D. Jones, The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).


⁷ Re: legislation, see: Joint Memorandum of The American Jewish Committee and The Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, Re: Recent City Ordinances Against Discrimination, November 18, 1963, Folder 3, Box 32, Records of the Catholic Interracial Council of New York, Collection no. 77, The American Catholic Research Center and University Archives, The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C. (hereafter CIC-NY), which reported on legislative gains in cities as diverse as Chicago, Ann Arbor, MI, Tacoma, WA; St. Joseph, MO, and Erie, PA; and Summary of 1962 and 1963 State Anti-Discrimination Laws, Commission on Law and Social Action of the American Jewish Committee, December 23, 1963, Folder 7, Box 32, CIC-NY, which was the fourth in a series of biennial reports on state anti-discrimination laws. Re: white political reaction, see: “Elections, 1963: Civil Rights and White Reaction, A Research Report,” The American Jewish Committee’s Jewish Information Service, December 1963, Folder 3, Box 32, CIC. The report concluded, somewhat ahead of its time, that civil rights gains were causing defections of white, working-class voters from local Democratic tickets, and suggested that activism focus on the “common cause of the disadvantaged to improve the lot of all.” The Negro Press Digest was an initiative of the New York chapter of the American Jewish Congress; see, for example: Negro Press Digest, April 28, 1964, Folder 3, Box 32, CIC-NY.
“in housing, education, employment, public accommodations and voting procedure,” which resulted in literature that called upon students to turn their “intellectual commitment” into “action” and make “discriminatory practices” a relic of the past.8

The inspiration for such robust attention to local racial inequality was partly institutional, a product of the postwar presence of churches and synagogues in cities wracked by the urban crisis. As black migration to Northern cities spiked during and after World War II, religious leaders were forced to deal with emerging racial strife within their congregations, as their interracial flocks clashed over access to housing, schools, and even church services.9 Subsequent white flight left clergy ministering to neighborhoods that were increasingly poor and disempowered. They responded not only with critiques of these postwar developments, but also by lobbying for anti-poverty funds, fighting for anti-discrimination legislation, and investing in community outreach and organizing. Their motivations were both intellectual, inspired by their postwar commitment to social action theology, and practical, in that impoverished neighborhoods had more difficulty filling their coffers.

The Catholic Church, with its community-based parish structure and extensive urban presence, was especially affected by the impact of “changing neighborhoods,” as Archbishop Albert Meyer of Chicago delicately put it in 1960. Meyer was so concerned with this phenomenon that he convened a diocesan conference, which all Chicago priests were required to

---


attend by canon law, to address urban racial inequality and command listeners to “defend and assert the rights of the Negro generally, apart from any consideration to bring him into the fold of the Church.” Catholics had a moral obligation to oppose all forms of segregation, he declared, for any artificial barriers to social equality violated the Catholic commitment to “the basic unity of mankind” and a faith that “is of its nature universal.” Drawing on the Church’s social action tradition, with its roots in local labor organizing, he called on them to help black residents achieve “not only political equality,” but also “fair economic and educational opportunity, a just share in public welfare projects, good housing and without exploitation, and a full chance for the social advancement of their race.”

The issue of ‘good housing’ was of particular concern to local Catholic leaders, given the role of practices like blockbusting and scare selling in devastating parish neighborhoods and their attendant property values. By the mid-1950s, both lay activists and members of the hierarchy were calling housing discrimination “the central issue in race relations today,” describing it as “the many-headed Hydra which guards the crumbling bastions of prejudice and racism.” The editors of the Catholic Interracial Review devoted an entire issue to racial housing inequality in 1959, in which they reprinted testimony that Archbishop Meyer had given

10 The text of Meyer’s speech, along with news coverage of the clerical conference, was reproduced in “The Mantle of Leadership,” Community, July 1961, 4-10. His call for economic and social equality quoted a 1943 statement of the American Bishops.

in favor of open housing legislation before the President’s Commission on Civil Rights. Over the course of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Catholic activists fought for local fair housing regulations, the American Bishops established an official position demanding racial justice in housing and urban development, and the NFCCS called for a ban on segregation in housing that received federal funds, on the grounds that “racial and ethnic discrimination is a moral and social evil.”

Jewish activists became similarly engaged with housing inequality in the urban North, largely because they were subject to many of the same forms of discrimination as black residents. In Chicago, for example, when sellers listed their property as ORTR - an abbreviation that stood for “owner reserves the right to refuse and reject any or all offers” - it was understood that realtors were to steer both Jewish and black applicants away. Responding to complaints of ORTR discrimination from within the Jewish community in the 1950s, the local chapter of the

---


Anti-Defamation League of B’nai Brith (ADL) began gathering neighborhood-level data on the rate of ORTR listings and percentage of recent move-ins that were Jewish.\textsuperscript{14} When a given neighborhood, realtor, or apartment building had a disproportionately low rate of Jewish residency, the ADL ran formal housing discrimination tests, initiating fake realty inquiries with stereotypically Jewish names and then pursuing legal action if they found evidence of discrimination.\textsuperscript{15}

In order to better battle such discrimination, Jewish defense groups made common cause with local black civil rights organizations. The ADL joined the Chicago Council Against Racial and Religious Discrimination in the 1940s, for example, helping to draft model fair housing legislation and providing joint testimony to urban legislative commissions considering open housing reforms. The question at stake, according to one such round of testimony, was whether “the community - the very basis of our American society - shall serve democratic purposes,” or whether, evoking the recent Jewish past in Europe, segregation would triumph and “confine thousands of Americans behind a barbed wire of ghettos.”\textsuperscript{16} Similarly, such national Jewish

\textsuperscript{14} For examples of such reports, see “Survey of Discriminatory Limitations in Cooperative Listings of the Evanston-North Shore Real Estate Board,” ca. 1958, Folder 4, Box 81, Anti-Defamation League, Chicago Office, Collection no. 37, Chicago Jewish Archives, Spertus Institute (hereafter ADL); “Proportion of Discriminatory Limitations on Improved and Vacant Property Cooperatively Listed by the Evanston-North Shore Realty Board,” ca. 1958, Folder 4, Box 81, ADL; Attachment, Albert J. Weiss to Edward Ayers, June 5, 1961, Folder 4, Box 81, ADL. Reports are organized by neighborhood (if within the city limits of Chicago) and suburb (if outside of city limits) in Boxes 76-83, ADL.

\textsuperscript{15} For illustrative examples from a range of neighborhoods and dates, see: Albert Weiss, Memo re: 63-69 E. Division, Hogan & Farwell, August 26, 1959, Folder 1, Box 76, ADL; Anne Rubman to Al Weiss, Memo re: 608 Oakton Street Building, Evanston, IL, September 18, 1958, Folder 1, Box 76, ADL; Albert J. Weiss, Memo re: 4162 Marine Drive, 655 Junior Terrace, L. W. Moore Real Estate Company, February 24, 1965, Folder 1, Box 76, ADL; “A.D.L. Discrimination - Report & Disposition Control Card,” Re: Building at 6600 N. Bosworth, June 1954, Folder 1, Box 76, ADL; AEB to SG, Memo re: Chandler, 6911 Paxton Ave, June 10, 1946, Folder 1, Box 76, ADL. For a detailed account of an ORTR follow-up, see: Albert J. Weiss, Memo, May 14, 1963, Folder 6, Box 81, ADL.

bodies as the Commission on Law and Social Action of the American Jewish Congress prepared reports on pending fair housing legislation, praising stiff regulations as breakthroughs “against the most pernicious form of discrimination outside of the South.”

Suburban congregations and national para-church organizations largely lacked such personal and institutional pressures to address racial inequality in the urban North. Yet many new-breed activists nevertheless encountered urban segregation through volunteer ministry programs, as Episcopal seminarian Jon Daniels had in Providence, Rhode Island, while others were struck by the hypocrisy of condemning Southern segregationists from the comfort of a lily-white Northern suburb. As early as 1955, members of the Student Christian Movement of New England were arguing that if students’ “desire for commitment” in the field of racial equality was “so strong,” they should not be harrying off on “a mission to the South,” but rather focusing on more local and “concrete” goals “where the racial problem impinges on them on their campuses” and in nearby “urban areas.” Ten years later, Reform Judaism’s Commission on Social Action issued a similar call for more “intensive and imaginative attention” to “the urgent problems of the center city” and “the problems of segregation and pockets of poverty in the suburbs.” While religious support for Southern demonstrations had been vital, the statement argued, the “best contribution” that religious individuals could make was towards “the achievement of an open society is in his own community.” Its suggestions for action included pilot community organizing programs, an expansion of the Mitzvah Corps, programs to purchase housing in


18 Student quoted in Nancy Simons to Doris Wilson, July 6, 1955, Folder 406, Box 30, Papers of the Student Christian Movement in New England, Record Group no. 57, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library (hereafter SCM-NE).
majority-white neighborhoods for prospective black residents, and local ‘parlor meetings’ to awaken “our congregations and our communities to the moral choices confronting us in the de facto segregation of the North.”

As the scope of these suggestions makes clear, even when national new-breed organizations were involved, religious civil rights organizing in the North initially focused on local political goals intended to make the promise of civil rights a social reality for particular communities. In the wake of such federal legislative victories as the 1964 Civil Rights and 1965 Voting Rights Acts, such a strategy seemed all the more logical. As the student chairman of the NFCCS’s social action division put it, the Civil Rights Act was the exceptional “witness of the law-makers” to the Biblical demand that we “carry one another’s burden.” Yet the fight could not end with its passage: “now those Church people and young people who so forcefully pushed those laws to final enactment carry the burden of implementation.”

Benjamin Payton, the chairman of the National Council of Churches’ Commission on Religion and Race, agreed. “The rights which have been couched in law are now being sought in life as practical social and economic matters,” he declared. If the NCC would enact his proposed “program of economic

---

19 See the report on race relations summarized in Minutes of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism, Washington, D.C., March 3, 1965, Folder 3, Box A3-1, Union for Reform Judaism Records, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH (hereafter URJ). Similarly, Rabbi Richard Winograd, the director of the University of Chicago’s Hillel House, returned from his participation in the 1963 Birmingham protests to face the “challenge of translating my commitment to action in my own community,” particularly because of his university’s physical proximity to the “Negro ghetto.” He incorporated a commitment to “community service projects in the neighboring areas” to his Hillel programming and his annual United Jewish Appeal to the community, which apparently met with “considerable approval, and substantial success.” Rabbi Richard W. Winograd, “Birmingham: A Personal Statement,” November 1963, Folder 6, Box 2, NFCCS. For a comparable example from Protestant students, see: Harold Walker, Jr. and Carl Zietlow, “Guidelines for Christian Social Action in the Urban North,” *Communique* XX, no 3&4 (May 1964).

20 “Chairman’s Comment,” *Social Action Summary* V, no 1 (Nov 1964).
development,” it would fulfill its commitment to the cause and enable local communities “to
make civil rights real, in housing, employment, education and health care.”

Community-based development programs like the one that Payton had proposed became
widespread among religious organizations in the mid-1960s. In 1966, for example, the national
body of Reform Judaism cemented an alliance with the Upper Park Avenue Community
Association (UPACA), a neighborhood organization in East Harlem staffed almost exclusively
by local black women. Members of UPACA had staged a sit-in at a city anti-poverty agency
earlier that fall, demanding that the city address their neighborhood’s substandard housing, when
a sympathetic Jewish employee convinced them to meet with Rabbi Balfour Brickner, then
director of the United American Hebrew Congregations (Reform)’s National Commission on
Interfaith Activities. Brickner and the UAHC were looking “to play a meaningful role in the war
against poverty,” in the words of a *New York Times* reporter, and they offered to work with
UPACA to apply for and administer federal grants directly. In conjunction, the two
organizations were awarded $90,000 in annual city anti-poverty funding and a $5.5 million
Federal Housing Authority grant to rehabilitate neighborhood buildings, which would be jointly
managed by a housing corporation run by residents and UAHC members. With the additional
help of an anonymous private grant, they launched a children’s center with tutoring and
afterschool programs, a job placement and training program, a daycare center for working
mothers, and a tenant and consumer education program run in partnership with a professor from

---

21 Payton quoted in James F. Findlay, Jr., *Church People in the Struggle: The National Council of Churches and the
Archbishop Meyer suggested, in a 1963 pastoral letter, instead of giving up candy for Lent, Catholics should join a
community organizations like those affiliated with CCCO. Meyer’s letter is referenced in “Not Peace, but the
Cornell University. Buoyed by the program’s success, the UAHC published guides on how to leverage federal and local grants to fund community-run urban housing programs, which they distributed to local synagogues and social action councils.

National religious organizations had substantial funds of their own, of course, and many invested more directly in local community organizing efforts. Saul Alinsky, the extraordinarily influential Jewish activist, pioneered his community organizing techniques with hundreds of thousands of dollars of seed money from the National Council of Catholic Charities, as well as financial and organizational support from local chapters of the YMCA, B’nai B’rith, and multiple Protestant denominations. National denominations adopted a more centralized approach to such ecumenical funding in 1967, when a group of New York-area Catholic priests, Protestant ministers, and a Jewish rabbi founded the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO), which collected millions of dollars in bulk donations from majority-white religious institutions and disbursed them to community organizations run by black residents. A wide array of religious institutions contributed funds, including the American Jewish Committee, the National Catholic Conference, the National Council of Churches, and almost every national mainline Protestant denomination.

22 “Harlem Wives and Jewish Group Join to Improve Housing,” *The New York Times*, March 13, 1968; Anita Miller, “The UPACA Story,” *Dimensions*, Spring 1968, Folder 3, Box A3-1, URJ. Note that the latter article has a different account of how the two organizations met - it claims that the UAHC independently approached an unnamed city anti-poverty agency to offer its services, which somehow “brought about” a meeting with UPACA. Due to the relative lack of detail and mildly hagiographic tone of the article, I’ve trusted the *Times’* account of the alliance’s origins.

23 Minutes of the Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism, Washington, D.C., December 5, 1966, Folder 3, Box A3-1, URJ.


Religious youth organizations had fewer financial resources, but offered the service of their members to local communities in mid-1960s student volunteer initiatives designed to challenge local racial inequality and employ students on behalf of community organizations in the urban North and West. In the summer of 1964 alone, the NSCF Ecumenical Volunteer Service Project - a program intended to target the most “crucial areas of the civil rights revolution” - offered opportunities to organize the residents of public housing projects in West Dallas, Texas; register voters in Washington, DC; join an interracial “reconciliation” project in Roxbury, Massachusetts; and combat “de facto segregation” in Philadelphia housing markets, a project which included organizing tenant unions, liaising with the local Fair Housing Council, and promoting open occupancy reforms in the surrounding, lily-white suburbs.27 The same summer, the National Catholic Welfare Conference’s Youth Department ran programs in which students worked alongside migrant laborers on “neighborhood development;” participated in interracial living programs in Elgin, Illinois; and joined “work-study weeks” on race in Chicago, where they were intended to “come to deeper realization of the flesh and blood reality of the race problem” in the urban North and develop an “awareness of the Christian response to the challenge.”28


27 “In the Midst of Strife,” NSCF Civil Rights Newsletter, ca. Fall 1963, Folder 433, Box 35, National Student Christian Federation Archives, Record Group no. 247, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library (hereafter NSCF).

Drawing on its membership of just under 100,000 students, the National Student Department of the YMCA launched an even larger community organizing initiative, intended to “transform the structures” that produced local racial and economic inequality in such cities as Boston, Newark, Philadelphia, and Oakland. Just as “civil rights was the crucial social issue” of the early 1960s, one Spectrum newsletter declared, so “community development” had become the priority “at midpoint in the decade.” In service of that goal, programs paid students to work for community-led organizations that could otherwise not afford extra staff members, assisting them in their efforts to improve “the conditions of their lives” and achieve greater “dignity, self-reliance, and competence.”

New-breed students engaged everything from playground construction to door-to-door voter registration to canvassing for the Corporation for the Poor, an entity that sought to elect residents to local political posts.

The very first Spectrum program, however, took place in Chicago in the summer of 1966. Jointly funded by the Student Y and a $25,000 grant from the Ford Foundation, Spectrum ‘66 explicitly framed community organizing in the urban North as an extension of the Southern civil

---

29 On Student Y membership numbers: “A Brief Inventory of Opportunity, Resources, and Potential: The YMCA and College and University Students,” Memo, August 15, 1967, Folder 274, Box 27, Bruce Maguire/Student YMCA Papers, Record Group no. 78, Special Collections, Yale University Divinity School Library (hereafter BMP). Quotations from the recruitment notice for the 1967 Oakland Flatlands Project. The same flyers included opportunities in Boston (“programs of cultural assistance, Latin American literacy, tutorial programs, community organization and community action”), Chicago (“work in the ghettos with community organizations on recreation, education, block improvement, employment training and placement”), Newark (“grassroots involvement in and through a ‘broad SPECTRUM’ of social service and social (structure) change”), and Philadelphia (“live in and work for social change in the ghetto area”). There were also programs in such smaller metropolises as Meriden, CT (“volunteer leaders in recreational projects in slum neighborhoods”), and Worcester, MA (“flexible inner-city projects in industrial city”). See: “Student Power (Man Power & Woman Power) Needed,” ca. 1967, Folder 302, Box 28, BMP; “So You Want to Be Involved,” ca. 1967, Folder 302, Box 28, BMP. Note that the Student Y also support anti-poverty community organizing in rural areas, such as Appalachia (“seek to develop indigenous leadership”). See “1967 Student Appalachia Project: Ohio-West Virginia Area Council of YMCAs,” Proposal, Folder 328, Box 30, BMP.

30 “’Y’ Notes,” The University of Texas YMCA and YWCA, April 1966, Folder 330, Box 30, BMP.

31 Examples from the Oakland project’s newsletter: Vista Horizon, I, no 1 (July 6, 1967), Folder 329, Box 30, BMP.
rights movement and an opportunity for religious engagement with civic life. Quoting an article from Life magazine, recruitment material raised questions about the precarious future of the American city: “Will it be a fully democratic city with equal opportunities for all?,” flyers asked. “What will be its moral, esthetic [sic], and intangible values?” For Christians looking to answer these questions, it went on, the only solution was action in the vein of “the non-violent philosophy of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, under the direction of Martin Luther King,” which would form the “focal point” of the “struggle against poverty and slums” in Chicago. Participants were told that they would contribute to the mission of organizations ranging from “grass roots [sic] community organizations” to “churches, settlement houses, and YMCA’s and YWCA’s.” Although the work would not be “glamorous” (indeed, the ads ominously warned students that their tasks might be “routine, indirect and difficult”), it would ultimately “transform the structures” of racial inequality and poverty in the North by providing service to those who were “struggling to assume their own right for self determination and leadership.”

An interracial group of over one hundred students from across the nation responded to this call, hailing from the Northeast and mid-Atlantic, campuses across the Rust Belt, pockets of the Old South, and the urban centers of the West Coast - although, notably, not the growing evangelical strongholds of the Sunbelt South (see Fig. 1).

---

32 On Ford Foundation funding, see “Memorandum #2,” January 6, 1967, Folder 294, Box 28, BMP. Note that the Student Y applied for a much larger grant in 1967, intended to fund an expansion of Spectrum programs, but were turned down and had to fund the community organizing initiatives mentioned previously independently. See relevant application material in Folder 294, Box 28, BMP; Folder 302, Box 28, BMP.

33 “Chicago Spectrum: Summer 1966,” Flyer, Folder 300, Box 28, BMP.

34 All discussion of the origins of participants not otherwise cited is based on data analyzed and mapped by the author, drawing from: “Schools from which Spectrum Participants Came,” January 18, 1967, Folder 300, Box 28, BMP. Images of interracial nature of volunteers from Kirk Fraser, “College Students Experience Horrors of Poverty in Twilight Zone of Chicago Ghetto During Two-Month Action Program,” YMCA Bulletin, October 1966. Note also that the program used travel grants to explicitly ensure “economic, geographical, and racial balance”; “National Student Councils YMCA & YWCA: Spectrum Project 1966,” Report to the National Student Assembly YMCA and YWCA Policy Committee, October 1, 1966, Folder 294, Box 28, BMP.
Nearly half of all participants were Community Action Interns (CAIs) assigned to volunteer with community organizations and live with families in the segregated, underserved neighborhoods that they were tasked with organizing. Their jobs included volunteer work at day camps, block clubs, and recreation programs, but mostly involved going door-to-door to speak with residents about opportunities for political engagement and community empowerment.\textsuperscript{35} One participant, for example, collected signatures for petitions to city agencies designed to increase resident control over public housing and urban renewal programs in their neighborhoods. Another recruited members for a tenant’s union, called the Union to End Slums in East Garfield Park, which used actions like rent strikes to try, in the student’s words, “to

\textsuperscript{35} “National Student Councils YMCA & YWCA: Spectrum Project 1966,” Report to the National Student Assembly YMCA and YWCA Policy Committee, October 1, 1966, Folder 294, Box 28, BMP.
achieve open occupancy in the city and collective bargaining agreements with landlords in slum areas.”

Spectrum ‘66 participants who were assigned to other positions were noticeably dissatisfied with being so far removed from community organizing efforts. Career Try-Outs (CTOs), for example, worked temporary jobs in local business and industry, split evenly between blue- and white-collar positions. In a subsequent evaluation, CTOs expressed “frustration” at the disconnect between their jobs and their aspirations for social change, and mentioned that it “confirmed previous suspicions” about the banality of life in the business world. Urban Field Study Aides, by contrast, worked for local universities to gather “research for informed social action” in specific Chicago communities and on more general issues of inequality such as “housing, education, [and] employment.” According to the same evaluation, although the Aides were initially disappointed with a job that they did not see “as real involvement,” they ended up disproportionately using the work-study money to study and volunteer for community organizations, connecting their academic work with more direct forms of social action.

As a result of this extensive religious commitment to the politics of community, which encompassed both local church hierarchies and national new-breed organizations, community organizations were disproportionately dominated by religious representatives. Chicago’s

---


37 “National Student Councils YMCA & YWCA: Spectrum Project 1966,” Report to the National Student Assembly YMCA and YWCA Policy Committee, October 1, 1966, Folder 294, Box 28, BMP. Similarly, the Y’s 1967 Philadelphia project placed students in “business and or industrial jobs,” but had them live in “a depressed neighborhood” and spend their “evenings and weekends [working] with action oriented organizations, or within public housing projects for social change.” See recruitment advertisement attached to: “PAID,” Memo, ca. 1967, Folder 329, Box 30, BMP.

38 “Chicago Spectrum: Summer 1966,” Flyer, Folder 300, Box 28, BMP.

39 “National Student Councils YMCA & YWCA: Spectrum Project 1966,” Report to the National Student Assembly YMCA and YWCA Policy Committee, October 1, 1966, Folder 294, Box 28, BMP.
Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCO) for example, was a coalition of civil rights groups that sponsored local civil rights litigation, anti-discrimination boycotts, and voter registration drives in majority-black neighborhoods. Its membership was interracial and unusually diverse, with affiliated organizations ranging from the conservative Urban League to the radical Chicago Area Friends of SNCC, all committed to ending racial discrimination and empowering minority communities. And it was also overwhelmingly religious. In a 1968 survey of CCCO delegates, 82.4% of respondents reported a religious affiliation, with 5% identifying as Jewish, 17% as Catholic, and 78% as some variety of Protestant (see Fig. 2). Slightly more than a fifth were professional clergy, nine out of ten of whom were white men. When asked what other civil rights groups they had been active in within the previous five years, nearly a quarter of delegate responses mentioned national religious organizations with local chapters, including the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity (ESCRU), the Quaker American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), and the Catholic Interracial Council (CIC).

---


41 All data drawn from a 1968 survey was conducted by religious scholars Alan B. Anderson and George W. Pickering, in collaboration with the National Opinion Research Center of the University of Chicago. All figures and analyses not otherwise cited were generated by the author with the survey’s raw data, reprinted in the following appendix: Anderson and Pickering, *Confronting the Color Line*, 453-457.

42 23.7% of responses named explicitly religious groups, but because delegates could provide multiple responses and these religious groups were largely denominational, the percentage of individuals involved with them was likely much higher. (Whereas a Catholic might work for both a Church-affiliated and a secular civil rights organization, for example, he or she would be unlikely to also work for a Quaker group.) Also note that the other organizations mentioned in responses, including Operation Breadbasket, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and the generic “community organizations” response, had no official religious affiliations, but nevertheless had high religious representation in both their membership and their leadership.
Figure 6: Religious Identification of CCCO Delegates

CCCO delegates were also overwhelmingly locals. Barely over 5% of them had lived in Chicago for less than five years, and the mean duration of their residence in the city was a whopping 26.6 years. Although national new-breed organizations invested significant personnel and resources in the politics of community, localized approaches to civil rights remained overwhelmingly the priority of local religious residents. National new-breed activists, by contrast, saw additional potential for social change in the competing strategies of a politics of witness.

The Politics of Witness: Dramatizing Injustice in the Streets of Chicago

The politics of witness, which used nonviolent direct action to dramatize social injustice and appeal to the moral sensibilities of outside observers, was not new to the city of Chicago. One of the nation’s first interracial sit-ins took place in a segregated coffeehouse on the city’s South Side, under the guidance of James Farmer, a member of the Fellowship of Reconciliation. But it gained new momentum among new-breed activists in the wake of

---

Selma. Consider the so-called Willis demonstrations, named after the controversial Superintendent of Chicago Public Schools, who staunchly opposed educational desegregation. In October of 1963, when the city approved a plan to transfer high-performing black students to all-white schools so that they could enroll in advanced honors courses, Willis refused to implement the program and tendered his resignation when a court order overruled his decision. The Chicago branch of the Catholic Interracial Council (CIC) swiftly issued a statement calling on the Board of Education to accept. The statement argued that “the letter and the spirit of the Supreme Court decision of 1954,” referring to *Brown v. Board of Ed*, applied “to the north as well as the south.” All cities had an “obligation” to combat segregation in education, “regardless of whether it is caused by administrative action or de facto by reason of housing patterns.” In either scenario, separate was unequal. Yet the all-white Board seemed to disagree, and hired Willis back. The CIC did no more.

When the Board went on to renew Willis’ contract in 1965, less than three months after the Selma marches, outraged members of the Chicago CIC did not issue another statement of protest. They took to the streets. Demonstrators held disruptive protest marches almost daily from mid-June through July, demanding that Willis resign and that the city address systemic racial inequalities in its educational system. On June 12th, hundreds of activists diverted from a

---

44 Although Willis became the focal point of protests, debates over segregation in Chicago public schools had deeper roots and involved a wider range of concerns. Community activist groups, including the CCCO, had been pursuing a range of legal and political strategies to end racial inequality in education since the early 1960s. They were concerned not only with high-performing black students that had unequal access to honors courses, which precipitated the 1963 student transfer plan, but also with overcrowding in majority-black neighborhood schools and studies that showed that school districts were more segregated than neighborhoods themselves. The later protests discussed in this text were indebted to this earlier round of organizing, which resulted in school boycotts, picketing, and civil rights rallies. Ralph, *Northern Protest*, 19-24; Anderson and Pickering, *Confronting the Color Line*, 69-149.

45 “For Justice, Progress, and Peace in our Schools,” A Policy Statement by the Catholic Interracial Council of Chicago, October 10, 1963, Folder 8, Box 33, CIC-NY. For a similar sentiments from another Chicago religious organization, see: “Education and Race,” Position Paper of the Chicago Conference on Religion and Race, December 18, 1963, Folder 8, Box 34, CIC-NY.
planned march route and staged a sit-in at the intersection of State and Madison streets, known as “the world’s busiest intersection.” The police responded with mass arrests, carting away a group of approximately two-hundred demonstrators that included ministers, nuns, and priests. The arrests of the nuns, in particular, made waves in the press, which published front-page images showing officers hauling away women in full habits (see Fig. 3). It was believed to be the first time that Catholic women religious had been arrested for an act of civil disobedience in the history of the United States.

![Nuns on Way to Jail](image)

Figure 7: Press Coverage of Religious Arrests in Willis Demonstrations, June 12, 1965

---


In open letters released in short order, new-breed priests - mostly ones who represented interracial parishes - drew on the tenets of social action theology to argue that participation in the demonstrations was not mere rabble-rousing, but a profoundly religious act. Their statements of support described the marches as a call for “justice and human dignity” and declared civil disobedience “an appropriate and religious act” for “consecrated persons.” Indeed, they suggested, it was precisely the consecration of religious leaders that made their presence valuable, as it reminded onlookers that segregation was not a “mere social issue,” but a “moral and religious issue” that demanded the “genuine concern and responsibility of all men who commit themselves to rule of God.”

Writing in a local Catholic periodical, Father Thomas W. Heaney drew heavily on civic-religious ideas to justify his own participation and arrest in the demonstrations. When “the Word [was] made flesh in the Jesus of Nazareth,” he argued, it affirmed that religious obligations involved “more than a spiritual reality.” Catholic rituals of baptism united believers with Christ, and so required them to imitate his life and “risk all to attempt to incarnate the Gospel in the contemporary world.” Directly comparing the Willis marches to those undertaken in Selma, Heaney justified religious involvement in both as “an ‘incarnation’ of the everlasting truth of man’s dignity” through nonviolent opposition to social systems that “perpetuated man’s disregard for man by acceding to racial boundaries.”

---


49 Father Thomas W. Heaney, “Why I Did,” Community, November 1965. In the same issue, Father Daniel Mallette, also a participant, used an analogy to describe his religious obligation to be involved in worldly social action: “The whole situation was more or less crystallized for me when I saw pictures of Pope Paul VI visiting flood-ravaged sections of Italy and seeing the faces of people who were yelling, ‘Forget the blessings and send us some money.’ So the Pope gave them some money.” Overall, he concluded, “I am thinking I would be more of a priest if I were out with the volunteers knocking on doors rather than” writing a column about social action. Father Daniel Mallette, “Why I Did,” Community, November 1965. Note that the same issue contained two columns from priests who chose not to participate in the marches, which this chapter will return to later.
At precisely the same time, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) began to turn their attention northwards, hoping to adapt direct action protest tactics to campaigns against what King described as a system of “ghetto prison[s]” that produced “spiritually crippled wards.” The Willis demonstrations caught their eye.\(^5^0\) In an article that addressed racial inequality in schools, housing, and employment markets, King announced SCLC’s intention to create a “pilot” project in Chicago that would be modeled after Selma. Its professed goal was to build a “broadly based vibrant nonviolent movement” in “one of the most segregated cities in the North,” which could use direct action protests to attract national media attention, dramatize abstract injustices, and “arouse the conscience of this nation.”\(^5^1\)

King’s Chicago outreach began with a four-day, whirlwind visit of rallies, marches, and meetings with the city’s activist leadership, including new-breed religious activists, who had been such key supporters of previous civil rights campaigns. In a breakfast meeting with the Chicago CIC, he praised Catholic involvement in the Willis demonstrations, singling out nuns in particular for being “an immense, moral force in the affairs of men.” According to one of the meeting’s attendees, he even retracted the critiques laid out in his famous “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” applauding the extent to which religious groups had since become “deeply involved in the struggle for justice.” When SCLC announced their 1966 Chicago campaign just over a month later, that same observer celebrated the news as a chance “to build the Kingdom of

\(^5^0\) Anderson and Pickering, *Confronting the Color Line*, 160. Other reasons for selecting Chicago included SCLC’s organizational connection to the city (especially through James Bevel, a former SCLC director, who had taken a position with the West Side Christian Parish, a white Protestant outreach ministry), his belief that Daley wielded enough power to single-handedly transform city policy on race, and the fact that both New York and Philadelphia had rejected SCLC’s advances. Ralph, *Northern Protest*, 28-42.

God on earth.” He hoped only that religious institutions had not “grown too old and gotten too tired to listen.”

SCLC organizers worked to ensure that those institutions were listening, tired or not. They solicited personal meetings with the city’s top religious leadership and lay activists, securing alliances with the Chicago Conference on Religion and Race, the executive director of the Church Federation of Greater Chicago, and Reform Jewish leaders Rabbis Samuel Karff and Jacob J. Weinstein, both graduates of Hebrew Union College, a hotbed for Jewish new-breed education. They were particularly interested, however, in winning over the Catholic Archbishop of Chicago, John Cody. Not only did Cody preside over the single largest religious denomination in the city, but he had overseen the desegregation of New Orleans parish schools and developed a reputation as an ally of civil rights and labor advocates. After coming under fire from the arch-racist White Citizen’s Council during the Willis marches, he reportedly told a labor leader that “there is something that bigots in this area do not quite understand… I am Irish and I love a fight.”

Hoping to enlist Cody in his fight, King met with him personally, in a private meeting at Cody’s personal residence, where they had, in King’s words, a “very friendly and I might say fruitful discussion.”

National new-breed organizations, meanwhile, were eager to replicate their successful contributions to previous civil rights campaigns, and the National Student Christian Federation

---


53 Ralph, Northern Protest, 73-75.

54 Bluestone was then serving as administrative assistant to Walter Reuther, President of the United Auto Workers (UAW). Irving Bluestone to George G. Higgins, June 24, 1965, Folder 1, Box 10, George Gilmary Higgins Papers, Collection no. ACUA 129, The American Catholic Research Center and University Archives, The Catholic University of America (hereafter GGH).

55 Ralph, Northern Protest, 73.
(NSCF) assigned Patti Miller a full-time staffer to the CFM. Miller had originally gotten involved in civil rights activism through her Methodist student group at Drake University and participated in 1964’s Freedom Summer, canvassing local churches to convince white clergy to condemn racial violence in their sermons. In Chicago, CFM organizers charged her with similar outreach to both local clergy and national student groups, with the goal of developing an activist base for a summer of direct-action protests. She used NSCF mailing lists to distribute mass mailings to campuses throughout the nation, calling on youth and clergy to fly to Chicago for the summer. Given the “crucial questions being raised today about the relevancy of the church, especially in the university,” one of her mailings read, playing on the same fears that had driven the expansion of student social action programming in the 1950s, “campus ministers [must] be involved in the revolutions of the day.” At the same time, she helped craft the CFM’s mission statement, held campus workshops, organized for the Union to End Slums, and produced

---


57 Patti Miller, “A Call to Campus Ministers from the National Student Christian Federation Field Staff in Chicago,” ca. April 28-29, 1966, Folder 173, Box 12, UCM. See also “Opportunities for College Students in the City,” Flyer, ca. 1966, Folder 174, Box 12, UCM; “Please Post Immediately and/or tell friends now!,” Flyer, ca. 1966, Folder 174, Box 12, UCM. UCM (formerly NSCF) national offices also used their centralized networks to help Miller distribute her appeals for involvement. See: UCM New York Office to “Some University Christian Movement Contacts,” Memo re: Christmas Vacation in Chicago, ca. 1966, Folder 174, Box 12, UCM. Despite this effort, the recruitment drive did not come even remotely close to its target of a thousand volunteers, at least in part because of a lack of funding capacity. Historian James Ralph has estimated that the CFM could not have handled more than fifty student volunteers and probably recruited less than that number. That said, such calculations don’t include volunteers working for organizations allied with CFM - Spectrum ‘66 participants alone accounted for more than double Ralph’s estimate, for example. Ralph, Northern Protest, 93.
assessments of the political engagement of local student groups. Her only requirement for volunteers: “We want a minimum amount of beards.”

Miller’s work in Chicago was part of a broader initiative of the NSCF Field Services Committee, which employed full-time Field Staff on behalf of similar direct action campaigns throughout the nation. Field Staff were intended to serve as liaisons - or, as Miller put it, “apostles” - between university campuses, religious institutions, and underserved communities. According to their statement of “self-understanding,” their three goals were to “catalyze” students towards social activism, create permanent community organizations in low-income and minority neighborhoods, and awaken middle-class communities to the structural nature of inequality through educational programs. In theory, their work was deeply religious, intended to build “a community of love, scholarship, worship, and action” that would bring out in participants “a new awareness” of the “potential of the spirit.” In practice, it closely resembled the New Left organizing initiatives of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), especially their Economic Research and Action Programs (ERAPs) and their Radical Education Project (REP).

58 Patti Miller, “Chicago Freedom Movement,” Field Staff Report, September 1966, Folder 173, Box 12, UCM. With regard to the last activity, note that she found SDS and civil rights groups to be very active, but thought that campus “religious organizations on the whole in the area are either non-existent or insignificant.” Patti Miller, “Chicago Field Staff,” Field Report, ca. February 1966, Folder 166, Box 12, UCM.


60 ‘Apostles’ quote from Patti Miller, “Chicago Freedom Movement,” Field Staff Report, September 1966, Folder 173, Box 12, Archives of the University Christian Movement in New England, Record Group no. 88, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library (hereafter UCM).

61 The Christian existentialist sentiments were quotations that Bunch reproduced from Jack Kettridge, a Field Staff member, in his March 1966 report to the NSCF Central Committee. Charlotte Bunch, “A Tentative Statement of Field Staff ‘Self-Understanding’ from Central Committee Meeting, March 1966, Folder 153, Box 10, UCM.

Indeed, the REP had an NSCF Field Staffer of its own, who facilitated “contact between ‘movement’ radicals and the growing number of concerned clergy and laymen in religious groups.”

Field Staff members were involved in an exceedingly wide range of activism, including both community organizing and direct-action protests. They ran alternative higher education programs called Free Universities; served as NGO representatives to the United Nations; organized opposition to the Vietnam War through campus ministries and for the Mobe; traveled throughout Latin America to network with third-world solidarity activists; and worked for Washington think tanks. Even within the context of Northern civil rights campaigns, the role of Field Staff members varied considerably. In Newark, NJ, for example, Sheila McCurdy - the same Methodist student who had snuck off her Southern campus to hear King deliver a civil rights sermon and been censured in front of the student body for ‘unladylike’ behavior - was assigned to network with community organizing groups, campus clergy at Rutgers, the local YMCA, and the Greater Newark Council of Churches. The strength of local welfare rights activism, however, led her to shift her focus to direct action. She began to work as a “resource person” for mothers in welfare rights organizations, picketing the homes of slumlords, holding

---

63 Stuart and Janet Dowty to Henry Bucher, August 31, 1967, Folder 114, Box 8, UCM. This letter was a request for further assistance from UCM (formerly the NSCF), including a proposal to hire and pay two members of SDS to serve as REP staff members. Unsurprisingly, the UCM Field Secretary declined: Henry Bucher to Stu and Jan Dowty, September 27, 1967, Folder 114, Box 8, UCM.

64 “Nitty Gritty on Field Staff,” April 14, 1967, Revised April 18 for Field Services Committee Meeting in Chicago, May 6, 1967, Folder 153, Box 10, UCM.

65 Sheila McCurdy, “UCM Field Staff Proposal,” September 1, 1967, Folder 172, Box 12, UCM. Interestingly, McCurdy originally moved to Newark under the auspices of the religious Southern Student Organizing Committee, which assigned her to Trinity United Methodist Church. The church’s pastor disapproved of her cooperation with the Newark Community Union, a local SDS initiative, however. After being arrested for picketing a local grocery that overcharged welfare recipients, he asked her to leave. The UCM (formerly NSCF) Field Services Committee apparently had no problem with extralegal forms of witness, and agreed to take her on so that she could continue her work. M. Sheila McCurdy, in Sara M. Evans, ed., Journeys that Opened Up the World: Women, Student Christian Movements, and Social Justice, 1955–1975 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 166-167.
“teach-ins on welfare” in suburban communities, and recruiting a group of twenty-five Rutgers law students to serve as pro bono legal representatives for welfare recipients. Her work was so impactful that King personally invited her to assist in the planning of SCLC’s 1968 Poor People’s Campaign in Washington, D.C. Perhaps more indicatively, the Senate Intelligence Committee investigated her role in supposedly inciting the 1967 Newark riots.

Back in Chicago, the CFM kicked off its summer of direct-action protests with a series of public events that were infused with religious rhetoric and symbolism. The campaign formally began on a Sunday - July 10, 1966 - with a rally that drew tens of thousands of attendees, despite blistering summer temperatures that rose nearly into the triple digits. King delivered a rousing speech that called on black residents to “declare our own emancipation proclamation” and for activists to “fill up the jails of Chicago, if necessary, in order to end slums.” “We are tired of being lynched physically in Mississippi,” he thundered, but we are also “tired of being lynched spiritually, psychologically, and economically in the North.” King’s preacherly invocation was followed by an official statement penned by Archbishop Cody, which the New York Times characterized as “sweeping support” for the CFM. Focusing specifically on the issue of housing discrimination, Cody declared that real estate sales were not only “financial transaction[s],” but “moral decision[s] as well,” and went on to endorse federal open housing legislation and

66 Sheila McCurdy, “UCM Field Staff Proposal,” September 1, 1967, Folder 172, Box 12, UCM; Sheila McCurdy, “Role During the Past Few Months and Future Plans,” May 27, 1968, Folder 172, Box 12, UCM.

67 Henry Bucher to Dr. Philip Edwards, March 11, 1968, Folder 172, Box 12, UCM; M. Sheila McCurdy, in Evans, ed., Journeys that Opened Up the World, 168.

68 Estimates of the crowd’s size varied significantly, with King pegging the figure at 65,000, park district officials at 23,000, and police at 30,000: “Thousands Go to Soldiers’ Field Rights Rally,” Chicago Tribune, July 11, 1966.

69 Quoted in “Thousands Go to Soldiers’ Field Rights Rally,” Chicago Tribune, July 11, 1966.

70 Quoted by UCM Field Committee staff in Patti Miller, “Chicago Freedom Movement,” Field Staff Report, September 1966, Folder 173, Box 12, UCM.
announce plans for the Church to build non-discriminatory, low-income housing developments throughout the city. Cody had required every parish priest in the city to read a similar pastoral letter during that morning’s Mass, in which he called on Catholic parishioners to support the CFM and join the “social revolution [that] is taking place in America.”

Following these speeches, King led a march of several thousand activists from the rally down State Street to City Hall, filling the broad avenue from curb to curb with a procession that stretched for well over a mile from end-to-end. Upon arrival, in a move that echoed the actions of his namesake, he taped a list of the CFM’s demands to the door of City Hall, which CFM organizers hoped would shape the goals of Northern civil rights activism in the years to come. Among many other items, the document called for school integration, an expansion of public transit in majority-black neighborhoods, a federally-guaranteed minimum income, race-based affirmative action in hiring and promotion decisions, and the barring of public funds to financial institutions that refused to lend to black residents. In the specific area of housing, proposals included not only federal open housing legislation, but also regulations to enhance tenants’ rights, a bill to peg the distribution of city services to neighborhood population density, and the

71 “Chicago Archbishop Supports City Rights Drive: Cody’s Statement is Strongest Yet Issued by the Church,” New York Times, July 11, 1966. The speech was positively received by members of the NCWC and, apparently, members of the national political establishment. In a complimentary letter to Cody, the Director of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, George G. Higgins, not only called the letter and Soldiers’ Field speech “masterful presentations of Catholic social teaching,” but also noted that he “heard many compliments on them by influential people in the Washington area.” Rt. Rev. Msgr. George G. Higgins to Archbishop Cody, July 13, 1966, Folder 1, Box 10, GGH.

72 Once again, the precise numbers of the march are a matter of dispute. For a sense of its scale, consider that one journalist noted that when “the front of the column neared City Hall, the rear was passing Balbo Drive and the Illinois Central railroad tracks” - a distance of 1.3 miles. See: “King Tells Goals; March on City Hall,” Chicago Tribune, July 11, 1966.
construction of ten-thousand low-income housing units per year, distributed evenly throughout the city’s mixed-income neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{73}

In an attempt to build the political leverage necessary to achieve these goals, CFM organizers turned to direct-action protests designed to elicit press-worthy reactions from hostile white residents. They had initially pursued less antagonistic tactics, which were broadly supported by local religious leaders like Archbishop Cody - including housing discrimination tests, similar to those employed by the Anti-Defamation League - but found that they mustered little interest from the press and the public. As SCLC organizer Rev. Andrew Young put it, organizers came to believe that discrimination tests lacked the sort of “confrontation” that had defined Selma and had forced newscasters to “interrupt the network TV programs” to report on civil rights activism.\textsuperscript{74} So in late July, they began to hold “prayer vigils and mass real estate visits” in all-white neighborhoods, bracing themselves, according to Patti Miller, for the slinging of “rocks, bottles, firecrackers and vulgar language and harassment” that they believed would ensue.\textsuperscript{75}

The first wave of these open housing demonstrations began on July 30th, when an estimated 250 activists struck out from New Friendship Baptist Church to march to a prayer vigil outside of a realty office in Gage Park. The following day, an even larger march, which included both white ministers and Catholic nuns, set out from nearby Marquette Park. Both demonstrations attracted an explosion of violence, from angry crowds of white residents that outnumbered the marchers by a ratio over eight to one. Hurling blunt objects at the marchers,

\textsuperscript{73} Demands summarized in Patti Miller, “Chicago Freedom Movement,” Field Staff Report, September 1966, Folder 173, Box 12, UCM.

\textsuperscript{74} Quoted in Ralph, \textit{Northern Protest}, 114-119.

\textsuperscript{75} Patti Miller, “Chicago Freedom Movement,” Field Staff Report, September 1966, Folder 173, Box 12, UCM.
these counter-protestors injured over sixty activists, hitting CCCO leader Al Raby with bricks at least four times. They screamed epithets at white participants, calling them “white niggers,” and taunted black marchers with chants of “white power” and ditties about their desire to be “an Alabama trooper” so that they “could kill a nigger legally.” They targeted the cars that activists had driven south in, smashing the windows and slashing the tires of vehicles with out-of-state license plates and bumper stickers from the Union to End Slums. Several cars were flipped over, two were pushed into a lagoon, and over fifteen were lit on fire, sending columns of smoke pluming into the night sky (see Fig. 4).76

Figure 8: White Counter-Protesters, July 31, 1966

King had been in Atlanta at the time, but immediately flew back to Chicago to double down on the direct-action strategy and lead a march of five hundred activists back into the Southwest Side. Despite the presence of over twice that many police, who were instructed to

protect the marchers, mass violence broke out amongst white residents yet again. The angry onlookers threw eggs and cherry bombs, sported neo-Nazi headgear, tore up effigies of King, and dragged a black Catholic priest out of the march and into the crowd, necessitating his rescue by police. King himself was stoned in the head (see Fig. 5) and narrowly missed being struck by a throwing knife, which sank into the neck of a nearby sixteen-year-old boy instead. In response, the interfaith group of marchers knelt in the street and prayed for several minutes, before being led by King in a round of freedom songs as they marched onwards. White residents continued to riot throughout the city after the marches drew to a close, resulting in the deaths of at least two black Chicagoans, one of whom was an expectant mother.77

![Figure 9: Marquette Park March, August 5, 1966](image)

As CFM organizers had hoped, national press coverage of the open-housing campaign spiked in the wake of the marches, producing front-page headlines that highlighted the violence

---

of white residents’ opposition. In an exclusive interview with Chicago’s American, King painfully meditated on the hatred of the crowd, which he called “worse” than anything he “ever experienced in the deep South, in Mississippi or Alabama.” Rev. George H. Clements, the black Catholic priest who had been dragged out of the march, agreed. In an interview with Chicago’s archdiocesan newspaper, he declared that “the filth and obscenity directed at the marchers” in Chicago “outrivalled anything I’ve heard” elsewhere, despite being a veteran of marches in Selma, Montgomery, and Jackson. He described the mob in Chicago as “the most ferocious” he had ever seen.

The emergence of such intense violence motivated other new-breed clergy to join subsequent marches, swelling the ranks of religious demonstrators. Rabbi Robert Marx, a Selma veteran and then-administrator for the UAHC, had declined to march in the July 30th Gage Park demonstration, instead attending as a neutral observer hoping to help keep the peace. What he saw there, he later wrote, in a letter distributed to local congregations and reported on in Jet, “seared my soul in a way that my participation in no other civil rights event had done.” Watching “Catholic priests reviled and nuns spat on,” he came to see “how the concentration camp could have occurred, and how men’s hatred could lead them to kill.” He concluded that he had been “on the wrong side of the street that day” and unhesitatingly joined the August 5th

---


march that King led out of Marquette Park. “Perhaps it is better that I receive a scar from a rock thrown on a Friday afternoon,” he suggested, “than for a million Negro children to bear the scars for a lifetime.”

As had been in the case in the South, these march participants used new-breed networks to spread the word of their involvement, portray it as a form of religious witness, and suggest that readers had a similar moral obligation to combat racial inequality in the North. In the same letter, Rabbi Marx wrote about the Jewish obligation to fight discrimination and work for “Judaism’s vision of a city that is truly open to all people.” When nonviolent marches elicited backlash among “evil men,” he argued, religious believers were called upon to combat their “fanaticism and viciousness.” After witnessing the “hatred” of Gage Park residents, they had “no choice but to join those who do believe in democracy.” Black Chicagoans were fighting for their own liberation, much as Jews had millennia ago in Egypt, and in their struggle Jews could see that “Passover is not 3,000 years old - that it is today, and that we are part of it.”

Similarly, Christian participants portrayed their activism as an extension of Jesus’s mission in the world. Patti Miller described de facto segregation as a form of “institutional sin,” which Christians were obligated to oppose through nonviolence in order to bring about reconciliation and “the possibility of reunion of men with men.” In doing so, they were imitating Jesus, who also confronted injustice with love - an act that led “to the cross, but only so we may


82 Ibid. Lay Jewish marchers supported the demonstrations for similar reasons. Bernie and Roz Epstein, heads of their local American Jewish Congress chapter and residents of Merionette Manor, a traditionally Jewish neighborhood subject to scare selling as black families moved in during the mid-1960s, participated in the July 10th Marquette Park march. When later interviewed about their civil rights activism, they referred to an Old Testament heritage of prophetic opposition to injustice; the roots of Jewish social responsibility in Passover; and the need to oppose intolerance and discrimination of all stripes in the post-Holocaust age: Jonathan Kaufman, Broken Alliance: The Turbulent Times Between Blacks and Jews in America (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1988), 172-173.
know of the resurrection.” The Chicago archdiocesan newspaper expressed similar sentiments, running an editorial cartoon of Christ carrying a cross above a crowd of CFM marchers, as both were stoned by angry white onlookers (see Fig. 6). One Catholic editorialist wrote that religious participation in open housing marches forced parishioners to reflect on whether they truly “accept and understand the teaching of Christ” - “that He is a brother of every man, that He is here and now identified with all men,” and that true religious belief could “not be confined to church buildings.” Such acts of witness were “real Christianity,” according to Marlene Thompson, a participant in Spectrum ‘66. True religion was found in “the surge of love and power that flows through a crowd when everyone joins hand and sings ‘We Shall Overcome.’”

83 Patti Miller, “Chicago Freedom Movement,” Field Staff Report, September 1966, Folder 173, Box 12, UCM.

84 “What You Have Done to the Least…,” The New World, August 5, 1966.


86 “Marlene Thompson, “Chicago Is a Laboratory,” Viewpoint, Fourth Quarter, 1966, Folder 294, Box 28, BMP.
As had also been the case in Selma, new-breed religious groups coupled direct action protests with a national campaign in support of federal reform legislation - in this case, the 1966 Civil Rights Act, which included a robust open occupancy clause. Sympathetic members of the Catholic hierarchy ginned up support among parishioners, with Baltimore’s Cardinal Sheehan and the Detroit Archbishop’s Committee on Human Relations both calling on their city’s Catholics to lobby their representatives in favor of the bill.\(^{87}\) Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish

leaders jointly testified on behalf of the legislation before Congress, calling it an “act of justice” that they supported because of their shared “religious conviction that we are all children of the same eternal Father.” An alliance of lay women’s organizations issued a strong statement of support, arguing that the passage of “Fair Housing provisions” would cut to the root cause of “segregation in schools, playgrounds, health facilities, and all other aspects of our lives.”

Responding to moderates’ concerns about the “violence” sparked by the Gage and Marquette Park marches, the Chicago CIC lobbied Illinois’ Congressional delegation, arguing that it was “good to restore order,” but “better to build justice” and confront the “grim causes” that lay at the heart of urban unrest.

Locally, the press coverage of the marches forced both Mayor Daley and Chicago realtor organizations to the bargaining table, for a summit meeting convened at the behest of the Chicago Conference on Religion and Race (CCRR). Nearly a third of the meeting’s participants were clergy or lay representatives of a religious organization. The negotiations led to a formal commitment to open housing among all parties, including a promise by Daley to aggressively enforce the city’s Fair Housing Act, a pledge by the Chicago Real Estate Board to follow fair housing regulations, the restriction of new public housing developments to eight stories in

---


89 The women’s organizations in question represented all major non-evangelical national denominations, including the National Board, YWCA of the USA; National Council of Catholic Women; National Council of Jewish Women; National Federation of Temple Sisterhoods; The National Women’s League; United Synagogue of America; United Church Women (Protestant); and the Women’s Branch, Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations in America. See “Churchwomen Joining Fight for Fair Housing Act,” *The Baltimore Afro-American*, July 2, 1966.


91 Eighteen of the fifty-six participants were identifiably religious; see list of participants in Kathleen Connolly, “The Chicago Open Housing Conference,” in Garrow, ed., *Chicago 1966*, 93-94. For more on the complicated origins of the summit meeting, the role of moderate religious groups like the CCRR in its negotiations, and the decision of King and the CFM to accept the summit agreement despite its many shortcomings, see Ralph, *Northern Protest*, 149-171. For a complete and invaluable transcript of the negotiations, see: John McKnight, “The Summit Negotiations: Chicago, August 17, 1966 - August 26, 1966,” in Garrow, ed., *Chicago 1966*.
height, the establishment of a permanent organization (sponsored by the CCRR) to promote open housing, a pledge by the US Attorney’s office to deny federal mortgage backing to lenders with a history of discriminatory service, a guarantee that the city’s Department of Urban Renewal would coordinate with community organizations when contemplating resident relocation, and a promise from the county’s Department of Public Aid to secure housing for welfare recipients without regard to race. Although the “real work has only begun,” Patti Miller concluded in her report on the summit agreement for NSCF, it was seen as an important victory nonetheless. Activists had mobilized “the force of our souls” and shown that “there is nothing more powerful in the world than the surge of unarmed truth.”

For The Flock or The Kingdom?: Interreligious Conflict and Civil Rights

As powerful as that ‘surge of unarmed truth’ may have been, its victory was incomplete. The summit agreement included neither timetables nor enforcement mechanisms and is now widely seen as a sham. The 1966 Civil Rights Act, meanwhile, never made it out of the Senate. Although the legacy of the CFM remains a matter of debate, its summer of activism has been described by leading scholars as a “failure,” a “long fizzle,” a “tragic” loss, and a “chastening” defeat.

---

92 Patti Miller, “Chicago Freedom Movement,” Field Staff Report, September 1966, Folder 173, Box 12, UCM.


94 Notably, a similar version of the open housing legislation passed with bipartisan support in 1968, despite the fractious party politics of that election year. Although the CFM had long since met its demise, the final bill had its origins in the 1966 legislation that was tied to Chicago protests; and while that may seem like small praise, it’s worth keeping in mind that we do not judge Birmingham a failure because it took another year before the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed. See: Graham, The Civil Rights Era, 270-273.

95 Respectively, Manning Marable, Black American Politics: From the Washington Marches to Jesse Jackson (London: Verso, 1985), 205; David Halberstam, “The Second Coming of Martin Luther King,” Harper’s, August 1967, quoted in Ralph, Northern Protest, 221; Anderson and Pickering, Confronting the Color Line, 3; Sugrue, Sweet Land of Liberty, 419-420. For an alternative point of view, see: Ralph, Northern Protest, 220-235.
The divergence in outcomes between Selma and Chicago was tightly linked to the evolving nature of interreligious conflict over civil rights. When evangelical segregationists clashed with new-breed liberal Protestants, Catholics, and Jews in the streets of Selma, their conflict mapped on to long-standing sectional divisions, and legislators from all-white districts in the Midwest thought they knew which side their constituents would be on. When the battle moved north, however, those lines were no longer so clear-cut. Catholic parishioners attacked their own nuns in the streets. Moderates who had praised the courage of those who marched on the Edmund Pettus Bridge sang a different tune when their own religious community became a target. New-breed youth were stunned when their clarion calls to action were rejected and accused their co-religionists of inauthenticity. The political leverage that religious activism had generated in the South was correspondingly hard to come by in the North. In its place was religious fracture, breaking down along a fault line that divided religious universalists, who believed their faith was defined by its call to resist injustice in all forms, from particularists, who prioritized their church’s obligations to its own faith community.

It should be made clear that these fault lines also emerged in reaction to the politics of community. Religious investments in community organizing ran up against opposition from both local powerbrokers and conservative congregants who opposed investing their own denomination’s resources in the communities of others. Consider the example of the Morris County Citizenship Project, a 1965 community organizing initiative of the Methodist Student Movement located in Morristown, NJ. MCCP participants were called to join “God as he incarnates himself in concrete political action,” according to the project’s prospectus, working with disempowered minority communities to confront “subtle racist attitudes and structures” and challenge racial inequality in “education, housing, [and] unemployment.” Seeking to avoid
charges of “paternalism,” their goal was explicitly not to raise “the Negro or the poor ‘up’ to the middle class level,” but to serve as “a support and advisory group” in the process of developing long-term “local leadership.”

The program was an embodiment of the politics of community. Seeking to empower local residents, students prepared reports on local housing conditions, published a neighborhood newsletter, sponsored black history classes, helped community leaders navigate City Hall politics, and served as a liaison with regional civil rights organizations and national religious groups. They sought to establish permanent representation for underserved residents, proposing that mayoral planning committees be at least half made up of “people living in areas under present or proposed urban renewal programs” and fighting for resident representation in Board of Aldermen meetings, which had previously been restricted to recognized civil rights leadership from CORE and the Urban League. And they worked to ensure that press coverage of their organizing emphasized community agency, not the influence of outside organizers.

---

96 All quotes from “Prospectus on the Morris County Citizenship Project,” ca. 1965, Folder 136, Box 10, UCM, with the exception of “a support and advisory group,” from “A Daily Chronicle,” Appendix D, ca. Summer 1965, Folder 136, Box 10, UCM.

97 The report on housing conditions was based on community surveys and aimed to give voice to residents’ concerns about housing quality, poor communication by urban planners, and a lack of community influence over the urban renewal relocations. Representative comments include: “They’re planning for themselves, not for our housing… There are plenty of parking lots in this town but no houses;” “Urban renewal concerns me the most and I only found out about living in an urban renewal area by rumor;” “When it comes time to vote lots of things are promised us, but we don’t get anything out of it. We’re not treated like it matters!” “Report to the People: Urban Renewal and the Problem of Relocation in Morristown,” September 12, 1965, Folder 136, Box 10, UCM. For other activities, see: “A Daily Chronicle,” Appendix D, ca. Summer 1965, pp. 6-9, 31, Folder 136, Box 10, UCM. MCCP maintained organizational relationships with the Morris County Urban League, the local NAACP branch, the Morris County Fair Housing Council, the Group on Active Leadership, the Madison-Florham Park Human Relations Council, the Boonton Human Relations Council, and the Chatham Fair Housing Council: “A Daily Chronicle,” ca. Summer 1965, pp. 2, Folder 136, Box 10, UCM.

98 “A Daily Chronicle,” ca. Summer 1965, Appendix E, Folder 136, Box 10, UCM. The best example of this strategy came in a July 15 mayoral summit of black leaders, but the MCCP also secured resident representation at numerous Board of Alderman meetings, including one that was preemptively canceled to avoid a public airing of their complaints and thus precipitated the public rally that the Urban League opposed. See: “A Daily Chronicle,” ca. Summer 1965, pp. 15-18, 25, Folder 136, Box 10, UCM.
When one reporter wanted a photograph of an MCCP volunteer handing out the neighborhood newsletter to local residents, they refused, insisting that they take a picture of a community member penning material for the publication instead.99

On the one hand, the religious identity and class status of MCCP participants rendered them respectable enough to demand meetings with local powerbrokers, including suburban ministers, city aldermen, local reporters, and the Mayor himself. These meetings helped to secure resident access to the aforementioned political councils, and also drew public attention to local housing conditions, with news articles on the ‘slums’ of Morristown drawing on the research and newsletters facilitated by MCCP.100 Moreover, MCCP participants used their religious identity to coordinate outreach to liberal, white suburban communities, convincing the pastor of a local Presbyterian Church, for example, to deliver a sermon on the MCCP and parishioners’ Christian duty to not just “do things for the economically deprived,” but to enable them to “have a voice” in the name of “human dignity.”101

On the other hand, their focus on community empowerment came at the expense of established civil rights groups and local powerbrokers, generating conflict among potential allies within the movement. The local chapter of the Urban League complained that the MCCP tactics were “too negative” and argued that residents simply needed to vote more regularly. The MCCP, in turn, derided the Urban League’s “paternalistic views” and “so-called ‘Negro leadership.’”102 The local chapter of CORE took umbrage when the MCCP encouraged residents


100 See, for example: “Civil Rights Workers Stimulating Residents,” Morris County Record, July 12, 1965, Folder 136, Box 10, BMP.

101 “A Daily Chronicle,” ca. Summer 1965, pp. 29, Folder 136, Box 10, UCM.

102 “A Daily Chronicle,” ca. Summer 1965, pp. 28, Folder 136, Box 10, UCM.
to show up at Board of Aldermen meetings without their permission, rather than relay their concerns through CORE representatives. The MCCP cuttingly replied that residents should be “receiving information first-hand, not second-hand” - a goal that was “basic to our understanding of why we are here.” 103 And Democratic Mayor E. Marco Stirone used the MCCP to dismiss resident demands as the work of outside agitators, declaring that he had “no need for somebody from Virginia or Kansas to tell me the needs of the people of that section of Morristown.” In fact, he suggested darkly, it might be high time to start interrogating MCCP participants in order to find out “just who they are and what they are teaching” local residents. 104

As new-breed youth and clergy came into conflict with these groups, which they had previously regarded as allies, they became increasingly disillusioned with the possibilities for change within existing political structures and - this being the mid-1960s - gravitated towards emerging Black Power critiques. 105 Perhaps surprisingly, given the reputation of Black Power activism for having fractured interracial civil rights coalitions, leading new-breed activists defended Black Power in universalistic religious terms. Rabbi Eugene Lipman, the former director of Reform Judaism’s Commission on Social Action, wrote a lengthy working paper to this effect. It argued that Black Power, properly understood, was not an embrace of racial barriers or a rejection of white allies, but a realistic assessment of American power relations, which saw “neighborhood political organizations” run by and for black communities as the

103 “A Daily Chronicle,” ca. Summer 1965, Appendix D, Folder 136, Box 10, UCM.

104 “Mayor Stirone Has Sharp Reply for Hollow Criticism,” July 28, 1965, Folder 136, Box 10, BMP. MCCP was not helped by the fact that, despite their best efforts to stress community agency, some press accounts continued to portray them as having “prodded” residents “into militancy”: “Civil Rights Workers Stimulating Residents,” Morris County Record, July 12, 1965, Folder 136, Box 10, BMP.

105 One concerned Spectrum ’66 administrator was moved enough to write a memo warning that participants were becoming “alienated from existing and established structures even when those structures might be dedicated to working for change.” “Memorandum #2,” January 6, 1967, Folder 294, Box 28, BMP.
surest route to empowerment and equality. Surely “Jews, of all people on the earth, should recognize the validity of and the necessity for this… form of Black Power,” Lipman argued. After all, they had pursued the same strategies as immigrants in the early-20th century United States and during the founding of the state of Israel. Universalizing the logic of Zionism, Lipman suggested that Jews had a “religious commitment” to support such forms of empowerment among other social groups that was “as fundamental to Judaism as monotheism itself, as binding as the Covenant itself.”

New-breed activists expressed this support through innovative public religious rituals, such as the Freedom Seder, an interracial Passover ceremony first held in 1969, in a historically-black church, officiated by the Hillel Director of American University, and involving a black Protestant minister, a Catholic priest, and Balfour Brickner (the rabbi who had allied with the East Harlem community organization in 1966). Its Haggadah used the story of Jewish liberation in Hebraic times to call for the liberation of oppressed communities today, arguing that “we speak to our children of the departure from Egypt” not only for the sake of remembrance, but also “because we know that in their generation too it will be necessary to seek liberation.” The unconventional ceremony called on a young girl to ask the four questions, involved a chorus of Bob Dylan’s “The Times They Are A Changin’,” and quoted liberally from such “shoftim” as Thomas Jefferson, John Brown, and Black Panther Party leader Eldridge Cleaver. In addition to

receiving press coverage in *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, the text of the Haggadah was published in the New Left magazine *Ramparts* and distributed as a surprisingly popular book.\(^{107}\)

Such public support for black liberation politics in the name of Judaism quickly came under fire from Jews who had a more particularistic vision of their shared faith tradition. In *Commentary* magazine, Jewish neo-conservatives described the ceremony as a “crude political rape of a religious tradition,” censuring its participants for eroding boundaries between the sacred and the secular and accusing them of anti-Semitism in their supposed denial of the uniqueness of the historical Jewish experience.\(^{108}\) Rabbi Balfour Brickner swiftly fired back, arguing that those who say “that Jews must devote themselves to themselves” fundamentally misunderstand their own prophetic tradition, citing Isaiah’s command to “break every yoke” and “let the oppressed go free.” Indeed, Brickner suggested, it was precisely the Freedom Seder’s attempt “to apply the particular of Judaism to the universal of humanity” that made it part of the true “politics of God.” Anyone who retreated into clannish particularism was the real “traitor to his Jewishness and his Judaism.”\(^{109}\)

Similar conflicts arose when Black Power advocacy came not from within churches, but from activists demanding reparations from outside of them. Most famously, on May 4, 1969, former Executive Director of SNCC James Forman dramatically interrupted Sunday services at New York City’s Riverside Church to issue his ‘Black Manifesto.” This document, which had

---


*See the collection of articles by Walter Laqueur, Robert Alter, and Norman Podhoretz, under “Revolutionism and the Jews,” *Commentary*, February 1971.*

been developed during a conference funded and planned by the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organizing (IFCO) mentioned previously, called for $500 million in reparations from “the white Christian churches and synagogues” for their part in America’s historical “exploitation and rape of black people,” to be used to fund black land banks, publishing houses, television networks, universities, and think tanks.  

110  Asked why he had targeted religious institutions, Forman replied, “Because the Church is the only institution claiming to be in the business of salvation… General Motors has never made that kind of claim.”

Perhaps because their vision of ‘salvation’ encompassed a commitment to social justice, new-breed youth and clergy mounted a vigorous campaign in support of the Black Manifesto, calling on their institutions to invest lump sums in community organizing initiatives and so-called ‘black development’ funds. Over the month of June, activists staged sit-ins, occupations, and work-stoppages at the offices of the National Council of Churches (NCC), Union Theological Seminary, and the Board of Missions for the Presbyterian Church, USA (PCUSA) and the United Methodist Church (UMC). Episcopalian Bishop Horace Donegan decreed that the Black Manifesto could be read uninterrupted during any New York service.  

112  Even Rev. Ernest Campbell, the Riverside Church minister whose service Forman had originally interrupted, used his radio program to publicly condemn the church for forgetting “the poor and dispirited,” to “acknowledge the truth that underlies [Forman’s] cause,” and to declare it “just


111 Quoted in Lechtreck, “‘We Are Demanding $500 Million for Reparations’,” 65.

112 Lechtreck, “‘We Are Demanding $500 Million for Reparations’,” 47-60; Findlay, Church People in the Struggle, 204-205.
and reasonable that amends be made… perhaps especially [by] the church.”  

Union Theological Seminary was convinced to pledge $1.6 million to the cause, the UMC Board of Mission pledged over $2 million, and although Catholic officials distanced themselves from the Black Manifesto’s “highly controversial concepts,” they nevertheless created a $50 million fund for Alinskyite priests to disburse to community organizations.  

Unsurprisingly, conservative lay members of these religious institutions strongly opposed the Black Manifesto, as well as block grants for black economic development more generally. As scholar James Findlay makes clear, in an analysis of letters written to the National Council of Churches in response to Forman’s speech, their opposition turned not just on the politics of race, but on divergent understandings of religion’s purpose. They reacted so strongly against the Manifesto not only because they saw it as “blackmail” or believed that “WE DON’T OWE THEM ANYTHING,” in the words of two letter-writers, but also because they saw the very idea that religious institutions had a moral obligation to pay reparations to outsiders was “anti-Christian” and “totally foreign to the Christian Church and [its] present mode of functioning.”  

The developing divide between religious universalism and particularism, however, was most visible not in internal debates over funding community organizing initiatives, but in the streets, in reaction to new-breed activists practicing a politics of witness. In Chicago, sharp interreligious conflict over civil rights emerged as early as 1965, when priests who had joined the


115 Findlay, Church People in the Struggle, 205-206.
Willis marches began receiving hate mail from fellow Catholics. Some letters were simply racist screeds, such as one that praised segregation on the grounds that “90% of our relief load, illegitimate children, crime, rape, murder, and lawlessness is negro.” But most took issue not with the marches per se, and many even conceded that educational inequality was a pressing problem. Rather, they objected specifically to the involvement of priests and nuns, whose true religious obligations, they believed, had nothing to do with civil rights activism. Seeing clergy arrested “lowered the highly respected name of ‘PRIEST’ to the level of a beatnik,” one man argued, and was a “disgrace to all Catholics… Keep your nose in the Church, where you rightfully belong.”

“Take off the collar and get into politics,” another demanded, or else “Our Religion is gone.” “Isn’t it some kind of sin to break the law of the land,” asked a third, “or if you think it’s right, does it make it right[?] If this is the rule by which everyone should live, why do we need priests, nuns, and other clergymen?”

Parishioners sent similar correspondence to new-breed Catholic organizations, both local and national. The Chicago Archdiocese received hundreds of letters during one month of the Willis marches alone, demanding to know why the city’s priests and nuns were ‘allowed’ to take part in the demonstrations. Letter-writers described religious participation as a “disgrace,” leaving them “shocked and disgusted” and making “our religion very cheap.” “This is not the

116 Unknown Author to Fr. Daniel Mallette, ca. 1965, Folder: Racial Correspondence, July 1965, Box 3, Daniel J. Mallette Papers, Chicago History Museum (hereafter DJM).
117 Wm. J Kraleski to Rev. D Mallette, July 2, 1965, Folder: Racial Correspondence, July 1965, Box 3, DJM.
118 ‘Irish Catholic’ to Fr. Mallette, ca. 1965, Folder: Racial Correspondence, July 1965, Box 3, DJM.
119 Harry F. Breen to Reverence Daniel Mallette, July 2, 1965, Folder: Racial Correspondence, July 1965, Box 3, DJM.
120 Respectively, Pat [Illegible] to Most Rev. Father, ca. June 1966, Folder 3, Box 1, Human Rights and Ecumenism, CBC Diocesan Taskforce and Committee Files, Executive Records, Archbishop John Cody Papers, The Joseph Cardinal Bernardin Archives and Record Center, Archdiocese of Chicago (hereafter JCP); Mrs. J. Schoondermark to
time to discuss the Negro problem,” one correspondent began, reserving their ire not for civil rights, but for clergy who marched in solidarity: “The only reason I am writing you this letter is to protest the actions of the five sisters in your diocese.”  

The Catholic Interracial Council received mail demanding that it begin helping “real” Catholics (meaning white ones) or disband. Someone sent them a pamphlet entitled, “The New Sin,” which claimed to be inspired by “thousands” of complaints about sermons that focused on “Civil Rights” and “Open Housing.” It set its sights on “the ill-bred New Breed,” which had “commandeered the barque of Peter (they boarded her from portside, of course),” proceeded to “deny or explain away 3/4ths of the doctrine of the faith,” and “invented” in its place “a new and unpardonable sin - Prejudice!” “I’d hate to need a priest in a hurry,” the pamphlet quipped; “he’d probably be out in a demonstration!”

This interreligious conflict boiled over in public exchanges of letters-to-the-editor in *The New World*, Chicago’s archdiocesan newspaper. The editors received such a flood of correspondence related to the Willis marches that they spent two consecutive weekly issues reprinting them. Opponents focused their outrage on activist priests and nuns, rather than the demonstration more generally, suggesting that new-breed marchers were inauthentic, “so-called”

---

Rev. Cletus O’Donnell, ca. June 1965, Folder 3, Box 1, JCP; ‘A True Catholic’ to Reverend Fathers, ca. June 1966, Folder 3, Box 1, JCP.

121 Mrs. Arthur J. Fanale to ‘Your Excellency,’ June 12, 1965, Folder 3, Box 1, JCP.

122 See, for example: Irene Dolan to ‘Sirs,’ July 22, 1967, Folder 16, Box 39, CIC-NY; Mary Doelger to Catholic Interracial Council, August 6, 1970, Folder 16, Box 39, CIC-NY.


Catholics and threatening to reduce their annual donations to the Church.\textsuperscript{125} They were particularly concerned with the fact that religious activists had been arrested: one correspondent wrote that nuns were “degrading their habits and making me sick by disobeying civil laws;” another declared that she had been “brought up to respect the law and my superiors,” and that if nuns and priests could not do the same, “they should remove their garb, and not disgrace law-abiding Catholics.”\textsuperscript{126}

Meanwhile, moderate Catholics in Chicago also came down hard on the Willis protests, fracturing the front that had stood united against Jim Crow. Monsignor Daniel Cantwell, then chaplain of Chicago’s interracial Friendship House organization, publicly described the marches as “a waste of time” and criticized demonstrators for their refusal to “compromise.” He specifically denied that there were any parallels between the Willis protests and Selma, the latter of which he described as “a sacramentalizing of the national conscience” with marches “so clearly religious and moral in character” that they became undeniable “manifestations of the Christian spirit.” By contrast, the Willis marches were “a psychological and community nuisance which closes minds rather than opens them.” Indeed, Cantwell’s primary complaint about the demonstrations seemed to be that they provoked “a tendency toward animosity and disenchantment” in the “white community,” a theme that would echo throughout moderate


critiques of Northern civil rights activism, despite their unwavering support for demonstrations that had provoked similar animosities among the white communities of the South.  

New-breed activists and their allies were quick to respond to such accusations. “The law of God is above the statutes of man,” correspondents wrote, in letters that were also featured in The New World, and “if the City of Chicago flaunts the law of God, we must remind it of its obligations.”128 “Segregation in our schools or anywhere else is grossly immoral and against the teaching of God,” argued another; “I will march for these ideals, I will risk jail for these ideals, and if God wills I will die for these ideals.”129 Father Daniel Mallette called Cantwell’s distinction between Selma and Chicago “almost unimaginable,” decrying the “phony morality” of Catholics who police sexuality in the name of God, yet think that “an archdiocesan selective-buying campaign against discrimination is immoral.”130 “I am a priest first and foremost,” he said, “and what I want above all is to make Christ concrete.” Yet, there was no way “to begin to do that unless I am completely and uncompromisingly identified with their [the oppressed] hunger for justice.”131

When the 1966 Chicago Freedom Movement’s open housing marches began targeting white, working-class communities a year later, this pattern of conflict repeated itself, but on a

---


130 Daniel Mallette, “Why I Did,” Community, November 1965. The ‘phony morality’ quote was delivered to a reporter from The Saturday Evening Post less than a year earlier: “Not Peace, but the Sword,” The Saturday Evening Post, November 28, 1964.

131 “Not Peace, but the Sword,” The Saturday Evening Post, November 28, 1964.
more dramatic scale that encompassed Protestants and Jews, precipitated interreligious violence, and drew the eye of the national media. Press coverage of the marches repeatedly portrayed white Catholic onlookers directing special vitriol at their marching priests and nuns. During the July 31st marches out of Marquette Park, one white resident reportedly screamed, “This is for you, nun!,” before striking her in the back of the head with a rock, sending her to the hospital with blood seeping through the white of her habit.132 At the same march, a Los Angeles Times reporter overheard a middle-aged woman declare that “they should have hit them (the nuns) with rocks - and I call myself a good Catholic,” while a New York Times reporter heard another onlooker yell, “Hey, they ought to hang that priest,” while jabbing a finger at the target of his wrath.133 Rev. George Clements, a black Catholic priest, later claimed that his “collar seemed to engender even more hatred” than his skin.134

Although Catholics were overrepresented among conservative counter-protesters, making up nearly 90% of white residents in the regions that the open housing marches targeted, this pattern also extended to Protestant and Jewish populations. Richard Rheder, a participant in the Student Y’s Spectrum ‘66 program, was assigned to work for a “pre-employment education and reading” program for white, working-class students who were at risk for dropping out. When he joined an open housing march in early August, he encountered a “violent reaction” such as he


133 “New Chicago Riot: 3,000 White Rout Rights Marchers with Rocks, Bottles,” Los Angeles Times, August 1, 1966; “Rock Hits Dr. King as White Attack March in Chicago: Felled Rights Leader Rises and Continues Protest as Crowd of 4,000 Riots,” New York Times, August 6, 1966. Emphasis mine. Angry Catholics also lashed out at sympathetic clergy who were not demonstrating. When parish priest Harold Sieger held a neighborhood meeting to discuss the open housing marches, hundreds of parishioners showed up to disrupt it. Speakers were “booed into silence and jeered” until the meeting “dispersed in chaos.” “Crowd Heckles Pastor, Civil Rights Speaker,” The New World, August 5, 1966; “Priest, Negro Guest Booed into Silence,” Chicago Tribune, July 30, 1966; Mary Lou Finley, “The Open Housing Marches,” 22.

had “never seen,” confronted by “a crowd of 3,000 whites who heckled us with flying glass, insults and firecrackers.” Upon returning to work on Monday, he discovered that his own students were in that crowd - one of them gleefully showed him an issue of *Chicago’s American* that featured a photo of Rheder marching, with her boyfriend in the background waving a White Power handbill at him. “I’ve never seen so much sickness and hatred in my life,” Rheder retorted; unsurprisingly, his relationship with his students “grew increasingly strained” from that point forward.135

Responding to these rifts within their faith communities, liberal religious leaders - many of whom supported the CFM’s goal of open housing in principle - began issuing public criticisms of the marches, blaming demonstrators for ‘provoking’ reactionary violence. Even Archbishop John Cody backpedalled from his initial support, citing the violent “reaction of some” as a reason to “prayerfully reconsider” direct-action tactics and declare a moratorium on the marches.136 “The path to future understanding here in Chicago will be a precarious one,” he wrote in private correspondence, and he was “not at all convinced that public demonstrations which perpetrate [sic] mob violence are the most prudent means to the desired end.”137

New-breed activists bridled at such criticisms from their erstwhile allies and fired back, accusing opponents of the marches of failing to live up to the demands of their shared faith. In response to Cody’s call for a moratorium, Rev. James Bevel declared that if Cody lacked “the

---

135 Richard Rheder, “I Made All the Mistakes One Can Make,” *Viewpoint*, Fourth Quarter, 1966, Folder 294, Box 28, BMP.

136 “Archbishop Cody’s Statement Concerning Marches and Demonstrations,” Documentary Service, Issued by the Press Department, National Catholic Welfare Conference, August 11, 1966, Folder 4, Box 105, GGH.

137 John Cody to Monsignor Higgins, August 29, 1966, Folder 1, Box 10, GGH.
courage to speak up for Christ, let him join the devil.”

Spectrum ‘66 participants like Marlene Thompson, who had written ecstatically of finding “real Christianity in the rallies and marches of the Freedom Movement,” became correspondingly critical of suburban churches filled with “righteous people talking about God’s love and saving grace” while ignoring “the world and the lives around them” that suffered from “social injustice.” The experience made her “physically ill,” she recalled, and so long as “‘Christian’” believers valued “keeping the peace” over social justice - using scare quotes to indicate the inauthenticity of their Christianity - the future of the faith was “seriously threatened.”

Steven Johnson, a Field Staffer who served as NSCF’s liaison with SDS, drew on Biblical language to make a similar point. “If we have not fed and clothed the hungry and naked,” he wrote, “if we have perpetuated a social system of inequality and indignity, if we have not learned how to relate to one another as human beings, we do not belong in our pews on Sunday.”

The pages of The New World, meanwhile, held yet another clash of letters-to-the-editor, this one full of even more vitriol than the Willis affair had produced. An editorialist penned a defense of the marches in which he criticized “‘Catholic’ Know-Nothings” (using scare quotes yet again) and declared that if “Christ our Lord had come down on the earth again and marched in that demonstration He would have been attacked the same way.” In response, conservative readers wrote in to cancel their subscriptions, declaring that they were “dumbfounded” and did


139 Marlene Thompson, “Chicago Is a Laboratory,” Viewpoint, Fourth Quarter 1966, Folder 300, Box 28, BMP. Italics mine.

140 Steven Johnson, in “Youth Say: Let’s Do Something Relevant,” Concern, November 1967, Folder 165, Box 12, UCM.


217
not “want any one of my eight children reading this garbage.”\textsuperscript{142} Another subscriber said that she herself “would be likely to throw a rock” if she saw a nun working “against me and my white people.” “When they [nuns and priests] act like the common trash they should get what the trash gets,” she concluded.\textsuperscript{143} In the letter printed immediately adjacent, a new-breed supporter wrote in to decry the “rebuffs, heckling, and jeering” faced by “valiant” marchers, declaring that conservative opponents failed to grasp the “intertwined love of God and neighbor.” Only in the quest for racial justice, he argued, could Catholics “seek out and find Christ.”\textsuperscript{144}

Such conflict was, in some ways, precisely the goal of the politics of witness. Direct action campaigns, whether in Chicago or Selma, were never intended to cure the hearts of local racists or appeal to the better angels of politicians like Daley and Wallace. They were meant to dramatize injustices for the rest of the nation, using powerful images of nonviolent resistance and religious witness to transform abstract issues of segregation into tangible moral conflicts. In the urban North, however, the epicenter of those battles took place within religious institutions, rather than between them. Press coverage focused not on Northern solidarity with activists, but on internal divisions, on parishioners who believed that “the church that they supported all their lives has joined the ‘enemy.’”\textsuperscript{145} And as liberal religious leaders who had stood in solidarity with earlier civil rights demonstrations began to abandon the cause, failing - in the eyes of new-breed activists, anyways - to practice what they preached, the religious left’s trust in the capacity

\textsuperscript{142} Mrs. John O’Gara, Letter to the Editor in “Editorial on Marches Gets Applause, Dumbfounded Disapproval, \textit{The New World}, August 12, 1966.

\textsuperscript{143} Mrs. Margaret Reynolds, Letter to the Editor in “Editorial on Marches Gets Applause, Dumbfounded Disapproval, \textit{The New World}, August 12, 1966.


of religious institutions to generate significant social change began to decline. Come the late 1960s, their political strategies would begin to shift accordingly.
CHAPTER FIVE
THE RELIGIOUS CRUSADE FOR ABORTION REFORM:
A SHIFTING MODEL OF ACTIVISM AND A RISING POLITICAL TIDE

In February of 1968, the women's magazine Redbook published the story of Mary and Joe Krale. A married couple in their mid-30s, the Krases had three children, a strained relationship, and serious financial problems. Saddled with debt and alimony payments from his previous marriage, Joe worked two full-time jobs, clerking by day and selling appliances over the phone by night. Mary stayed home to care for their youngest, a six-month old boy, and was feeling the strain of life as a housewife. The couple was “swamped, really swamped,” as Joe put it, when they received news that threatened to push them over the edge – Mary was pregnant again.

Abortion was still a crime in their state, five years before the Supreme Court declared such laws unconstitutional, but the Krases saw no way that they could care for another child. Desperate, they attempted to induce a miscarriage at home. Mary ingested castor oil, citrate, and pills recommended by a friend. She lifted heavy objects, overworked herself in the house, battered her midsection with her fists. Nothing worked. She considered contacting an illegal abortionist that a co-worker had used, despite the fact that the woman had been badly injured. But then she was tipped off about another option: a man in New York City named Finley Schaef.

Schaef was a member of an organization that referred women to safe, underground abortions. After discussing the circumstances of the pregnancy and the possibility of alternatives, such as adoption, he sent the Krases to a licensed obstetrician who regularly

---

1 Lawrence Lader, “The Mother Who Chose Abortion,” Redbook, February 1968, 76-77, 147-151. All names of women seeking abortions are pseudonyms, for reasons of privacy.
performed illegal abortions in his office. Before leaving, Mary admitted that she had been
dreading the meeting, fearing, as she put it, that Schaef would “just lecture me like all the others.
The doctors, the clinics,” she told him, “they just tell you that you've made a mistake, so now
you'll have to take the consequences, even if it kills you... It made a difference, coming [to you].”

One of the reasons it made such a difference to Mary was that Finley Schaef was not a
psychologist, health worker, or professional counselor. He was a Methodist minister. Schaef
was a new-breed activist, active in the civil rights and antiwar movement, and had recently
become a member of the newly-founded Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion (CCS), an
organization of religious leaders that referred women to illegal abortions and played a central
role in the late-1960s movement to liberalize criminal abortion laws. From CCS’s inception in
1967 until Roe v. Wade was decided in January 1973, more than two-thousand clergy counted
themselves as members, comprising a network that operated in forty-three states. They
collectively referred approximately half-a-million women to abortions, more than forty-five
times as many as the iconic Jane Collective. In addition, they organized grassroots political
campaigns, raised defense funds for arrested abortionists, provided organizational support to
prominent feminist organizations, ran medical research studies on abortion procedures, and
founded the first freestanding abortion clinic in the United States.

---

2 Ibid., 148.

3 Unprocessed Box A: CCS By State, The Judson Memorial Church Archive, MSS 094, Fales Library and Special

4 Joshua Wolff, “Ministers of a Higher Law: The Story of the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion” (Senior
Illegal Feminist Abortion Collective - How And Why It Worked,” Qualitative Sociology 10, no. 4 (Winter 1987),
339.
The religious crusade for abortion reform was in many ways an adaptation of the activist model that the religious left had used with such success in the civil rights movement. New-breed clergy argued that liberalizing abortion access was a moral imperative, not merely a matter of political interest groups or the purview of state regulatory bodies. Abortion laws systematically denied women access to an increasingly safe medical procedure and so turned desperate citizens into criminals, violating religious principles of charity and denying women the moral autonomy to make decisions about their own bodies. Moreover, criminal abortion laws were unjust in their implementation, disproportionately driving poor and minority women into the ugly, underground world of illegal abortionists. In the name of moral reform, new-breed activists built a national organization committed to securing safe abortion access for women, even if it meant violating civic law in the name of a higher law. As they had in previous social movement, they paired their civil disobedience with a broader political campaign, providing organizational resources to allied secular groups, deploying their religious respectability to imbue their policy positions with moral significance, and lobbying politicians on behalf of legislative reform in the name of conscience.

Yet amidst the interreligious conflicts that emerged in the mid-1960s, not the least of which was the declining support for new-breed activism among liberal denominational leaders in the urban North, these clergy began shifting toward a different model of activism. Organizationally, they designed CCS as a non-institutional network, completely decentralized and independent of denominational apparatuses, social action departments, and official campus student organizations. Strategically, they moved away from a politics of witness, violating unjust laws not in order to ‘arouse the dozing conscience of the nation,’ but to circumvent the laws themselves and provide women with immediate access to safe abortion services.
Politically, although they still pursued a path of persuasion, making public arguments in favor of abortion reform on religious grounds, they were losing faith in their ability to convert others to the cause. Although they still worked to build a moral consensus around reform efforts, they prioritized the need to make abortion access an immediate social reality in communities throughout the nation. In the process, their model of activism shifted away from the tradition of bearing prophetic witness against unjust laws, and towards the tradition of providing religious sanctuary from them.

At precisely the same moment, religious conservatives were counter-organizing to a degree that far surpassed their previous efforts to oppose civil rights reform. Like new-breed activists before them, they used institutional apparatuses to build a dense network of social action organizations committed to bringing civic law into line with their vision of moral law. They forged interfaith alliances that transcended historical religious divisions, uniting Southern evangelicals and conservative Catholics in joint opposition to sexual liberation and a shared commitment to the emerging ‘politics of the family.’ With the resources of their expanding parent institutions, they funded national lobbying campaigns and engaged in direct action protests, propagating a new moral discourse around the concept of ‘pro-life’ politics. The religious left fought back against this rising conservative juggernaut, arguing that it would be a violation of religious liberty for the state to impose the sectarian views of one faith tradition on all of its citizens. But due to a convergence of factors - ranging from the unintended consequences of Roe v. Wade to a broader crisis evolving within liberal religious institutions - they might just as well have been shouting into the wind. The landscape of religion and politics in the United States was undergoing dramatic transformations in the late twentieth century, and
the outcome of the interreligious battle over abortion sheds light on how these sea-changes fueled the eclipse of the religious left.

“I Do This in Good Conscience”: Abortion Access as a Moral Imperative

In the fall of 1956, the Rev. Howard Moody arrived at Judson Memorial Church, a dually-aligned American Baptist/United Church of Christ institution located in the heart of New York City's Greenwich Village. Acquaintances described him as a new-breed version of President Lyndon Johnson. With a deep, Texan drawl, protruding ears, and close-cropped haircut, Moody coupled a disarming Southern charm with a degree of political acumen that would have rivaled the President himself. “Here was an ex-Marine with the sociology of Engels,” one associate wrote, “a country bumpkin with the finely honed tactical sense of an Alekhine or a Morphy at the chessboard. In short, an immensely capable ally, and a thoroughly dangerous foe.” From the late-1950s through the mid-1960s, Moody was an exemplar of new-breed activism, mobilizing these political skills on behalf of a variety of left-liberal causes. He was elected President of the Village Independent Democrats, an anti-corruption reform group; served on denominational social action committees for the American Baptist Churches and National Council of Churches; invited the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. to preach from his pulpit on religion and race relations in 1958; supported avant-garde art projects and challenged obscenity laws restricting their display; and flew South to participate in black voter registration drives in the mid-1960s.5

Through his capacity as a pastor, he also became involved in the politics of abortion. Soon after arriving at Judson, according to his autobiographical account, he was approached by a

---

church-going, single mother of three, who had just discovered that she was pregnant. Feeling
that she lacked the time, money, and emotional capacity to raise a fourth child, she sought to
terminate the pregnancy. At the time, abortion was a criminal act in every single American state.
It was a felony for doctors to provide abortions, and in most cases, it was a felony for women to
seek them out. But the iconoclastic Moody was sympathetic to her plight and endeavored to
help her obtain an illegal abortion. The process was a trying one, involving a half-dozen failed
leads and frightening interactions with members of the New Jersey mafia. Moody later referred
to it as a “harrowing experience,” a “first glimpse of that dark, ugly labyrinthian underground”
of illegal abortions that desperate women were forced to navigate. They were ultimately
successful at obtaining an abortion, but Moody became curious about how widespread their
experience was. He arranged for Dr. Glenn Patterson, a member of Judson Memorial Church, to
set up meetings with patients who had undergone illegal abortions themselves. He was surprised
to discover, in his words, that “the last person in the world they would have gone to for help was
the clergy,” who they believed would have tried to “talk them into having the baby.” To the
contrary, Moody was coming to believe that he was conscience-bound to help women avoid
unwanted pregnancies.

Like Moody, new-breed clergy were drawn into the orbit of abortion reform politics by
the idea that safe access to the procedure was a moral imperative. For a variety of theological
and political reasons, they came to believe that women should have the moral autonomy to make
medical decisions about their own bodies, that laws which criminalized abortions were by their
very nature unjust and sectarian, and that authentic Christians and Jews were obligated by their

6 Mohr, Abortion in America, 200-225. Luker, Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood, 14-39
7 Arlene Carmen & Howard Moody, 1960s-1970s Abortion Counseling and Social Change: From Illegal Act to
religious commitments to help women in need circumvent them. Exploring the personal and intellectual influences that led new-breed clergy to this position - that eventually convinced them to make abortion referrals “in good conscience,” as one campus minister put it - sheds light on the surprising diversity of the religious abortion debate in the late 1960s and early 1970s. 8

Many new-breed clergy were initially exposed to the world of criminal abortion laws through their pastoral work, a trend that was particularly pronounced among campus ministers, half of whose charges were young women growing up amidst the changing sexual mores of 1960s America. The Rev. Richard Unsworth, for example, was a chaplain at Smith College when he was approached by a freshman student for counseling in the mid-1950s. She was clearly distraught, but not very forthcoming, and Unsworth was unable to get to the root of the issue. Then, one morning, he received a call. “She had hung herself,” he later recalled. “And [I] still had no idea what it was that was so troubling her. Well, they did an autopsy and found she was pregnant. She was a little Catholic girl from Chicago and so conflicted internally that she couldn't even talk in confidence to... me as a minister.” Although he realized that there was little else he could have done, the memory stayed with him. As other pregnant girls approached him for counseling regarding unwanted pregnancies, he felt increasingly conflicted over what advice to give. 9

---

8 Richard Unsworth, in Cline, Creating Choice, 132.

9 Ibid., 126-128. Other examples of this sort of personal exposure include Rev. Samuel M. Johnson (Rev. Samuel M. Johnson, in Cline, 139); Rev. J. Claude Evans (J. Claude Evans, “The Problem of Unwanted Pregnancies,” Sermon Preached in Sunday Chapel at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, TX, n.d., Texas Folder, Unprocessed Box A: CCS by State, JMCA); Rev. Charles H. Bayer (Charles H. Bayer, “Confessions of an Abortion Counselor,” The Christian Century, May 30, 1970); and Rev. Schaefer & Rev. Jesse Lyons (Wolff, 38). Note also Kristin Luker's argument that virtually all of the female abortion-rights activists she interviewed had personal experience with illegal abortions. Luker adds, as does this paper, that mere exposure was not enough – reality had to be interpreted in specific ways to mobilize action. Luker, 100-108.
Such personal exposure to the consequences of criminal abortion laws, to tragic deaths resulting from attempts at self-abortion and experiences navigating what Moody called the “illicit underground” of illegal abortionists, was key to the mid-1960s expansion of religious support for abortion reform. Unlike the issue of civil rights, which tapped into a long-standing rhetorical tradition of religious anti-racism and had obvious civic-religious implications, the discourse surrounding abortion access had fewer intellectual precedents. When criminal abortion laws were enacted in the nineteenth century, their passage had been premised not on moral claims about the personhood of the fetus, but on the danger of the procedure to women undergoing it. Most politicians and religious leaders had been happy to cede this ground to medical experts. As a result, no denomination had an official stance on United States abortion law until 1963, when the Unitarian-Universalist Association came out in favor of liberalizing abortion access. Equally tellingly, the Gallup Organization never once asked a question about abortion in its polls from its founding in 1935 until 1962.

Over the course of the 1960s, however, abortion emerged as a core political issue and became a standard topic in public opinion polls. Advances in medical science were making abortion increasingly safe, at the same time as death and injury rates from illegal abortions were rising, a convergence of trends that ate away at the existing premise of the law and led many

10 Ibid., 14.
11 Luker, Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood, 40-65; Reagan, When Abortion Was a Crime, 8-18, 262f14.
13 GALLUP Brain, Search Results, http://institution.gallup.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/search/results.aspx?SearchTypeAll=Abortion&SearchTypeExa=&SearchTypeAny=&Search ConType=1&SearchDateBeF=True&SearchDateBMo=01&SearchDateBDa=01&SearchDateBYe=1973&SearchDat eAft=False&SearchDateAMo=01&SearchDateADa=01&SearchDateAYe=1935&SearchResuNum=50&SearchResu Ord=dated&Advanced=1&Place=A&p=1 (accessed April 11, 2011).
doctors to agitate for reform. In addition, public debates were developing around related political issues, including global population growth, high-profile cases of fetal deformities, feminist challenges to traditional gender norms, and emerging notions of sexual and legal privacy. Beginning with the unsuccessful introduction of an abortion reform bill in California in 1961, legislative attempts to alter criminal abortion laws were cropping up throughout the United States and many states began carving out legal exceptions for so-called ‘therapeutic’ abortions, permitted in cases when doctors believed an unwanted pregnancy could cause severe physical or emotional trauma to a woman.

Broader religious debates over the ethics of abortion began to develop around much the same time, for much the same reasons. It has since become commonplace for theological conservatives to argue that fetuses are persons from the moment of conception, and that abortion at any stage of pregnancy thus constitutes murder. And as early as 1869, the Catholic Church had promulgated the position of “instant animation,” declaring that the fetus becomes ensouled at the moment of conception, defined with reference to the Biblical term, “quickening.” Yet that position was relatively rare in 1960s religious discourse. The concept of quickening, as many Protestants and Jews understood it, did not refer to a precise biological occurrence, and certainly not to the moment of conception, but to the general enlivening of a child. New-breed clergy


16 Luker, Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood, 67-72.

17 For more on the history of the idea of the fetus in the modern United States, see: Sara Dubow, Ourselves Unborn: A History of the Fetus in Modern America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

debated whether there was in fact a single moment of quickening, generally believed to occur around the fourth month of pregnancy, or whether fetal life existed along an inscrutable continuum. But they agreed that at some point in time, fetuses were not persons in the same sense that an adult human was. As the New York chapter of CCS declared, in its Statement of Purpose, “there is a period during gestation when, although there may be embryo life in the fetus, there is no living child upon whom the crime of murder can be committed.” Or to quote Smith College chaplain Richard Unsworth, speaking far less formally, “I think the Catholic Church is standing on its left ear by trying to say that when that active sperm squirms into the egg that all of a sudden there is a human spirit – that's a lot of baloney. I've always felt that it's got no real Biblical basis.” In other words, the moral consequences of permitting abortion, particularly in early trimesters, had by no means crystallized.

By contrast, new-breed leaders like Moody and Unsworth were arguing that the moral consequences of restricting abortion access were unambiguous. By denying women access to a legitimate medical procedure, the state was precipitating an unnecessary health crisis and driving desperate citizens to into the unregulated, underground world of criminal abortionists. “In the

19 For the former view, see Rev. Unsworth: “I argued ethically that in first trimester abortion, fetal life was not yet 'quickened.'” Rev. Richard Unsworth, in Cline, 132. For the latter, see Rev. Johnson: “To say exactly when human life begins can become absurd. Is it this moment? Or is it exactly that moment? It is a continuum that takes place from the time of conception to the time of birth... I am willing to live with that ambiguity.” Rev. Samuel L. Johnson, in Cline, 138.

20 Carmen & Moody, 30. Italics in original. This position was shared by most mainline Protestant denominations, including the Presbyterian General Assembly and the UCC General Synod: “There is no consensus in the Christian community about when human life begins... The needs of the mother may at times take precedence over the needs of an embryonic and unformed child.” “Minutes of the One-Hundred-Tenth General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States,” June 1970, 124; “While [embryonic] life is human in origin and potentially human in character, the integration of bodily functions and the possibility of social interaction do not appear until later... Sometime after the twelfth week 'quickening' occurs.” “Freedom of Choice Concerning Abortion,” Resolution Adopted by the Eighth General Synod, June 1971, Folder 20: Resolutions, Box 2, CCCSR. See also: Evans, “The Problem of Unwanted Pregnancies”; Landreth, “The Sexual Revolution”; and Parsons, “Abortion.”

United States each year,” proclaimed Presbyterian clergyman Charles N. Landreth, in a sermon that emphasized the moral stakes of restricting abortion access, “350,000 women need hospital care after botched abortion attempts.”22 “Hundreds of desperate women give their lives every year,” Moody wrote, in a campus ministry magazine, “in abortion deaths that are either self-imposed or at the hands of an ignorant, nonmedical 'quack' living off the misery of female victims of man-made laws.”23 “From 1961-1965,” remarked Rev. E. Spencer Parsons, a campus chaplain at the University of Chicago, “more than 20,000 [abortion-related] cases were treated at the Cook County Hospital, the majority of which were complications arising from private attempts to terminate the pregnancy.”24 When faced with this situation, new-breed activists argued, the ethical demands of their faith tradition were clear. As Baptist minister Harris Wilson put it, “I must consider the human trauma of a live, breathing woman and her interests over against the interests, whatever they might be, of a fertilized ovum.”25

A central part of the new-breed emphasis on the ethical consequences of restricting abortion access was outrage at the fact that poor women and women of color were disproportionately the ones who suffered at the hands of the underground abortion market. In a fiery speech on the subject to a group of Southern obstetricians, the Rev. J. Emmett Herndon, a campus minister at Emory University, noted that ninety-three percent of physician-authorized


24 E. Spencer Parsons, “Abortion: A Personal, Pastoral, and Public Concern,” Sermon Preached in Rockefeller Memorial Chapel, University of Chicago, January 10, 1971, Folder 38: Sermons About Abortion, Box 3, CCCSR

therapeutic abortions were performed on white women. By contrast, he thundered, fifty-six percent of fatalities from underground abortions were black women, and twenty-three percent were Puerto Rican. The problem with criminal abortion laws, he continued, is that “the decisions, the power, the legislation and the control in such matters come from the middle and upper-middle class, white male segments of our society.” This “gross inequity” was in just as desperate need of correction here as it had been in the fight for black civil rights. The good Christian was obligated to oppose discriminatory abortion laws and work for “greater equality of justice,” “social well-being,” and “a new sense of dignity in the human dimension.”

Herndon’s argument emphasized not only racial equality, but also gender equality, and amidst the feminist intellectual flowering of the late 1960s, new-breed clergy also criticized criminal abortion laws on the grounds that they restricted the moral autonomy of women. When “we condemn a woman for making an independent judgment… related to her reproductive life,” preached the Episcopal Bishop of the Missouri Diocese, the Rev. George Leslie Cadigan, “we denigrate her personhood” and fail to treat her as a social equal. Protestant minister Will Brewster similar argued that criminal abortion laws “negat[ed] the responsibility of the individual to make moral decisions,” and “heightens human suffering and fosters disrespect for the law” to boot. Moody and Arlene Carmen, a Judson Memorial Church employee and founding partner of CCS, put it in even more radically feminist terms. Criminal abortion laws emblematized “our double standard sexual hypocrisy,” they argued. In Griswold v. Connecticut,

---


28 “Abortion Law Reform – A Response to Human Need,” distributed by Will Brewster, October 27, 1972, Michigan Folder, Unprocessed Box A: CCS by State, JMCA.
the 1965 Supreme Court decision that legalized contraception on right-to-privacy grounds, “guaranteed the sanctities of a man's home and privacies of his life from invasion by government.” Yet the justice system had and utterly failed to afford the same protection to the infinitely more “sacrosanct... body of a woman.” The only solution was “a crusade by the Christian church against the outrageous injustice of the present laws,” in order to make up for its previous “silence and timidity” on the issue of abortion and reproductive rights more generally.29

It was not without cause that Carmen later recalled Moody being “a much earlier feminist than I was.”30

In response to these moral arguments, non-Catholic faith groups across the theological spectrum began issuing statements endorsing abortion reform in the mid-1960s. The most theologically conservative groups, typically evangelical Protestants, affirmed the idea that fetal life was sacred, yet nevertheless called for the legalization of abortion in a narrow set of circumstances. The Southern Baptist Convention, for example, declared its commitment to the “sanctity of human life, including fetal life,” but also called for the decriminalization of abortion in cases of possible “damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother.”31 The National Association of Evangelicals similarly recognized “the necessity for therapeutic abortions to safeguard the health or life of the mother.”32 Theologically liberal groups issued similar calls for legal reform, although they tended to tip the balance more steeply towards women. Citing the fact that criminal abortion laws “penalize the poor” and “take a tragic and

29 Moody, “Man's Vengeance on Woman.”

30 Interview V, Arlene Carmen, January 7, 1976, FPOHP.


needless toll” in women’s lives, the Union for Reform Judaism, called for liberalization not only when pregnancies threatened the “health of the mother” and in cases of “rape and incest,” but also whenever a sweeping range of “social, economic, and psychological factors… might warrant therapeutic termination of the pregnancy.”

While denominational leaders were cautiously endorsing legal reform, however, many new-breed clergy felt a moral obligation to take more immediate and radical action. It was well and good to preach for the cause of liberalization, but until the slow wheels of legal change began to turn, women with unwanted pregnancies would continue to suffer. In Rabbi Yechaiel Lander’s eyes, “the mainstream of rabbinic Judaism permitted me, commanded me, to respond to people in need, whose lives were being radically changed or challenged by their pregnancies.”

He was required to “address my commitment to pikuach hane nephesh,” that is, “to the saving of a human being.” Or as Methodist campus minister J. Claude Evans put it, whereas his Christian mission called him to advance “life in community, life in the Kingdom of God, life lived joyously,” he could see nothing but “fear and dread” in the “faces of the unwed girls who come to me with their pregnancies.” If they made their “own decision to seek an abortion,” he felt that he ought to “do whatever I could to assist them. And I would do it in the name of Jesus Christ.”

In 1967, almost a decade after the “Catholic girl from Chicago” had hung herself rather than face an unwanted pregnancy, campus minister Richard Unsworth received another bit of tragic news. Nancy, a visiting student from Ghana that he had helped recruit some years earlier,

---


34 Rabbi Yechaiel Lander, in Cline, 155-156.

35 Evans, “The Problem of Unwanted Pregancies.”
had also gotten pregnant unexpectedly. As Unsworth later recalled, she sought out an abortion and “got in the hands of someone who was not antiseptic. She was hospitalized and died. I had to conduct her funeral... And you know that just tears you up. Why should that happen?” This time, however, amidst growing religious support for liberalization and in the wake of the rise of new-breed activism in the civil rights movement, he felt determined to do something about it.\(^{36}\) Like so many of his peers, he had come to believe that it was “holier to help a woman get a legal abortion than to pray at her funeral later.”\(^{37}\)

**The Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion: A Shifting Model for New-Breed Activism**

In the early spring of 1967, a group of new-breed clergy began gathering at the Washington Square Methodist Church - the same church at which Donald Baty sought religious sanctuary for draft resistance, before being carried away by federal marshals - for a series of “consciousness-raising” sessions on abortion. Lawrence Lader, an abortion reform advocate and founding member of NARAL Pro-Choice America, had recently reached out to Moody and two other clergy to suggest the value in having religious leaders refer women to safe, underground abortions, as a way of both combatting the stigma of the procedure and encouraging reflection on the morality of criminal abortion laws. Interested in educating themselves, they began meeting regularly for “theological 'bull session[s]'” inviting doctors to demonstrate the procedure with pelvic models and lawyers from the New York Civil Liberties Union to discuss the possible legal risks of an illegal referral service. Although several of the attendees were reluctant to engage in such high-risk civil disobedience, they became convinced of the need for more radical action when a moderate abortion reform bill, intended to liberalize abortion access only in cases of

\(^{36}\) Rev. Richard Unsworth, in Cline, 126-128.

“rape, incest, and deformity of the child,” was killed by conservatives in the New York State legislature before even making it out of committee.38

On May 22, 1967, The New York Times ran an exclusive front-page article announcing the establishment of their new organization, the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion (CCS). It listed the names and addresses of all twenty-one participating ministers and rabbis, as well as the telephone number for the service.39 Their founding statement declared that their actions were demanded of them by their “belief in the sanctity of human life,” which required that they help women who would otherwise be “driven alone and afraid into the underworld of criminality or the dangerous practice of self-induced abortion.” “There are higher laws and moral obligations transcending legal codes,” they declared, echoing the logic of religious civil disobedience that underpinned so many civil rights demonstrations, and it was their “religious duty to give aid and assistance to all women with problem pregnancies.”40

In establishing the CCS model, new-breed clergy reinvented their postwar activist tradition in at least two key respects. First, new-breed clergy had previously broken laws they perceived as unjust as a form of prophetic witness, in public actions meant to appeal to the conscience of the nation. They frequently intended to be arrested, in the hopes that the incarceration of religious leaders would dramatize abstract injustices and highlight the moral dimensions of their protest. By contrast, clergy in CCS violated civic law primarily to circumvent it and secure safe abortion access for women with unwanted pregnancies. As Moody and Carmen put it, their organizational philosophy was organized around the principle that the

---


need to expand abortion access “cried not for sermons and exhortations but for supportive affirmation and concrete assistance.” If clergy counselors were arrested, it would undermine their ability to provide that support.

As a result, CCS was designed from the start to insulate members from the arm of the law. The organization had no formal structure, no official address, and no bank accounts. Its first branch in New York consisted of an automated telephone answering service at Judson Memorial Church. Women would call and listen to a pre-recorded message listing contact information for the clergy who were on call that week, independently contact one to arrange an appointment at their church or synagogue, and then meet for a counseling session similar to Mary Krale’s. Clergy were provided with an updated list of abortionists that they could refer women to, all of whom were licensed physicians, investigated and approved by Arlene Carmen. At that point, CCS expected to bow out of the process, communicating further with referred women only to confirm that the procedure had met basic medical standards. Through it all, counselors relied on their status as religious leaders to ensure that law enforcement would let them be. As Carmen later reflected, “One of the presuppositions upon which the whole Clergy Service was based was that nobody was really going to tangle with the church… [The authorities] sort of knew what we were doing all along, and let us be.”

---

41 Moody/Carmen, 22.

42 For examples of Carmen's arduous physician-approval procedures, see: Series C.10 – Abortion Correspondence – General Folder, Unprocessed Box: Judson Clergy Consultation Service, JMCA.


Second, new-breed clergy designed CCS to be free of institutional ties and to function as a highly decentralized network. It was “more of a movement than… a bureaucracy,” in Unsworth’s words.\textsuperscript{45} This design was partly meant to further insulate clergy from the possibility of arrest, but it was also a philosophical decision, rooted in a growing opposition to the use of hierarchical organizations as vehicles for social change. Moody and Carmen wrote that they were fearful of becoming a “self-perpetuating bureaucracy,” an “empire-building, self-serving organization,” and thus sought to limit their national work to facilitating and empowering local branches. Although there was technically a National CCS that oversaw local branches, its only true function was to help new groups get off the ground and ensure that they followed a few basic rules for referrals. When clergy expressed interest in founding a CCS chapter in their region, Moody flew out to meet with interested clergy, run a multi-day workshop regarding the mechanics of abortion counseling, and provide them with a national safe-list of abortionists. After that, the only role of National CCS was to require that no fees would ever be charged for referrals, that counseling would only be done in person, and that women would never be sent to unapproved abortionists. Although local branches remained in touch in order to share statistics and strategies, participate in the updating of the safe-list, and obtain educational literature and pamphlets, they remained almost entirely autonomous outfits.\textsuperscript{46}

CCS’s expansion similarly took place through non-institutional channels. Initially, the process of recruitment and founding new chapters ran largely through interpersonal religious networks. Moody and Carmen believed that they needed to begin with a “nucleus” of “clergy

\textsuperscript{45} Interview with Unsworth in Cline, \textit{Creating Choice}, 130. Italics mine.

\textsuperscript{46} Carmen and Moody, \textit{1960s-1970s Abortion Counseling and Social Change}, 52-54. Wolff, 100-106. The one exception to this pattern was the Los Angeles CCS, which had been founded by Rev. Hugh Anwyl prior to National CCS, and was thus technically exempt from its formal rules (limited as they were). Los Angeles CCS and National CCS nevertheless coordinated in much the same way as other chapters, and constituted more of a formal, organizational exception than anything else.
whose liberal attitudes and commitments had been clearly established,” and so reached out to new-breed activists who had been active “in the civil rights battle both [in New York] and in the South.” As the New York chapter of CCS got off the ground and Moody turned his attention towards expanding nationally, he began targeting clergy that he knew through activist networks in regions from which his branch was receiving a heavy volume of calls. “All these women were coming up from Philadelphia,” he later recalled, in a 1997 interview, “so I called up [Rev.] Alan Hinand in Wayne, Pennsylvania and said, ‘Look Al, all these women coming up from Philadelphia is really a shame. You ought to do something about that!’” In turn, Hinand reached out to local clergy that he knew through North Philadelphia new-breed organizations and connected with an ecumenical women’s group that he had worked with on a civil rights campaign, and they collectively founded the Pennsylvania chapter of CCS in November of 1968. Similarly, when the Rev. Gene Thompson penned an article for the Louisville Times about his experience counseling a pregnant teen, Moody contacted him privately, mailing him CCS literature and persuading him to open a chapter in Kentucky.

As CCS expanded through such interpersonal contact, word of its activities began to spread and clergy who had been primed to see abortion access as a moral imperative decided to found chapters of their own. Smith College chaplain Richard Unsworth founded the Western Massachusetts chapter of CCS, which drew heavily on campus ministry networks throughout the

---


Berkshires, after hearing about Moody’s New York chapter from Harvey Cox, the Harvard academic and theologian. By the late 1960s, similarly independent branches cropped up in Memphis, Upstate New York, and Arkansas, all organizing locally before directly connecting to National CCS. Several branches even created regional umbrella networks of their own, including the Chicago branch of CCS, which used mass mailings of brochures to recruit clergy and spur the creation of new chapters throughout the Midwest. At one point, it had at least ten local chapters reporting directly to it, rather than to National CCS, and was autonomously exchanging referral information with at least five other nearby state chapters.

The primary mission of every CCS chapter was to provide women with immediate access to safe, underground abortions. On this front, they were more successful than any other similar organization in the nation, as their referral data attests. CCS referred over eight hundred women to abortions in its first six months, and over three thousand in the first year. By one scholar’s estimate, they eventually referred nearly half-a-million women. These numbers were an order of magnitude greater than more well-known underground abortion referral networks. Between


52 Harold J. Quigley to Clergy Friends, October 9, 1972 (Form Letter), Folder 60: Correspondence – Clergy, 1972-1973, Box 4, CCCSR.

53 Direct Affiliation: Folder 22: Champaign-Urbana CCS, Box 2, CCCSR. Folder 26: Springfield, Ill CCS, Box 2, CCCSR. Folder 27: Rockford, Ill CCS, Box 2, CCCSR. Folder 28: Peoria, Ill CCS, Box 2, CCCSR. Folder 29: DeKalb, Ill CCS, Box 2, CCCSR. Folder 45: Charleston, Ill CCS, Box 3, CCCSR. Folder 46: Joliet, Box 3, CCCSR. Folder 48: Carbondale, Ill CCS, Box 4, CCCSR. Folder 55: Bloomingdale and Normal, Ill, Box 5, CCCSR. Indirect Affiliation: Folder 17: Iowa, Box 2, CCCSR. Folder 25: Wisconsin, Box 2, CCCSR. Folder 64: Indiana, Box 4, CCCSR. Folder 26: Quad Cities, Box 4, CCCSR. Folder 27: West Seneca, Box 4, CCCSR.

the mid-1960s and 1970, for example, the feminist Society for Humane Abortions referred an estimated twelve-thousand women.\textsuperscript{55} To quote a former member of the Jane Collective, the abortion referral and education collective based out of Chicago, “[We] were getting ten calls a week, but the clergy was getting ten calls a day.”\textsuperscript{56}

In addition to referrals, however, CCS chapters worked as abortion advocates on a number of other fronts, which reflected their primary moral commitment to making safe access an immediate social reality. These activities including serving as \textit{de facto} regulators of the medical practice of abortion. In a sense, medical oversight was a natural consequence of CCS’s referral practices, which involved blacklisting abortionists who did not meet basic standards of care or who sexually harassed patients.\textsuperscript{57} But in addition, as an extension of their commitment to justice for underserved communities, many clergy used their status as high-volume referrers to arrange no-fee or low-fee abortions for low-income women. When these efforts met with resistance from abortionists – as happened to Rabbi Matthew Derby, of the Tennessee chapter of CCS – they threatened to stop sending women to particular doctors unless an agreement was reached. “I am not interested in their Profit/Loss Statement,” Derby angrily wrote to Carmen, filling her in on a dispute with a New York doctor. “Considering the number of 'paying' patients that have been referred from East Tennessee, I frankly was repulsed by [their] attitude.”\textsuperscript{58} As states began liberalizing abortion access in the late 1960s and early 1970s, CCS clergy became concerned that legal abortions actually might not measure up to the standards they had ensured

\textsuperscript{55} Reagan, \textit{When Abortion Was a Crime}, 340.

\textsuperscript{56} Kaplan, \textit{The Story of Jane}, 64.

\textsuperscript{57} See, for example: “Negative List,” n/d, Michigan Folder, Unprocessed Box A: CCS by State, JMCA.

\textsuperscript{58} Matthew I. Derby to Arlene Carmen, December 12, 1971, Tennessee Folder, Unprocessed Box A: CCS by State, JMCA.
for underground procedures. In response, they founded yet another organization, Clergy and Lay Advocates for Hospital Abortion Performance, with the goal of becoming “‘watchdogs’ of hospital abortions and advocates of women hassled and harassed by an unsympathetic hospital bureaucracy.” The group performed studies of hospital safety records, publicly criticized the high cost of legal abortions, and successfully fought the New York State Board of Health's attempt to limit abortions to admitting hospitals, rather than permit them in outpatient clinics.59

Clergy also engaged in medical research on abortion, using their uniquely extensive referral network to gather statistical data on best practices. In a project funded by the Playboy Foundation, for example, CCS studied abortion “delivery systems” through follow-up surveys. The Rev. Ronald Hammerle, Director of Research for the project, set the goal of turning the Chicago branch of CCS into “the abortion data center of the country,” intending to provide “assistance in planning for the safety, scope and quality of abortion services in the future.”

Using the information he gathered, Hammerle ran “clinical education seminars” for doctors and medical students, providing technical training on abortion procedures at a time when most medical schools refused to. He also networked among local activist groups in an attempt to jointly establish a low-cost abortion clinic, hoping to create a model of affordable, outpatient service that could be duplicated elsewhere.60

Although Chicago activists never managed to establish their model clinic, the New York branch of CCS did. Beginning in 1969, prior to New York State’s repeal of its criminal abortion


60 Ronald L. Hammerle to Mr. Nat Lehrman, July 6, 1970, Folder 19: Director of Medical Research, Box 2, CCCSR. Ronald L. Hammerle, “A Six Month Report on the Research Activities of the Chicago Clergy Consultation Service,” June 30, 1970, Folder 19: Director of Medical Research, Box 2, CCCSR. Folder 67: Statistical Report, Box 4, CCCSR. Other branches were also involved in medical education projects. See, for example: Arlene Carmen to Dr. David Sopher, May 12, 1971, Letters to Physicians Folder, Unprocessed Box B - National CCS, JMCA
statutes, they worked to “open an abortion facility in New York City in violation of the law,” in order to demonstrate the “feasibility and safety” of a low-cost, outpatient abortion clinic. They toyed with several models, including an “abortion ship” operating offshore under a foreign flag, and reached out to medical professionals who they considered likely to commit to providing illegal abortions “above-ground.” In addition, they wanted their clinic to provide a slew of affordable reproductive health programs, including gynecological examinations, contraceptive education, and social support services for low-income women. The barriers to establishing such a clinic lessened when New York legalized abortion in 1970. Dr. Hale Harvey was appointed to operate the facility on a nominally independent basis, and “Women's Services,” the first outpatient abortion clinic of its kind in the United States, was founded. Board members included three doctors, two clergymen, a lawyer from the New York Civil Liberties Union, and Betty Friedan, leading liberal feminist and author of *The Feminine Mystique*. Moody triumphantly referred to it as “the clinic the clergy built.”

As that who’s-who list of board members indicates, new-breed clergy built broad activist alliances in the effort to secure safe abortion access in local communities, working not only with liberal professionals like themselves, but also with radical feminist organizations. Their affiliations were all the more remarkable given the strongly anti-clerical bent of many such groups. The Society for Humane Abortions (SHA), for example, was led by Patricia Maginnis, a radical feminist who harbored particular resentment for the Catholic Church in which she was raised. To raise funds for her organization, Maginnis sold a series of postcards depicting clergy

---

as evil, anti-feminist villains, fighting - in one rendition, literally - to wrest control of the female reproductive system from women themselves.  

Although these postcards largely criticized conservative members of the Catholic hierarchy, which new-breed clergy also saw themselves as being in conflict with, Maginnis spared no sympathy for CCS. She called their in-person counseling requirement “patronizing,” and referred to them derisively as the “Hominy Dominy Counseling Service.” In one particularly damning cartoon, she sketched a round, little minister with his head in his hands, under the title, “Women's Counseling for Problem Clergymen.”  

Yet in an indication of how central clergy were to 1960s political activism, how indispensable members of the activist left believed their moral authority and organizational networks were to the process of social change, SHA cooperated extensively with local CCS chapters and employed clergy as board members, referral counselors, and public advocates for their organization. The Rev. Samuel A. Wright was a member of the SHA Board of Directors when the group was incorporated in 1965; by the fall of 1968, clergy were only one member away from comprising a majority. The following year, SHA cemented a formal alliance with the Los Angeles chapter of CCS, and the two groups agreed to share lists of abortion providers, feedback from referred women, and internal organizational literature. When serious concerns about an abortionist on their shared lists arose, as happened when a woman from Boise, Idaho...
was sexually harassed during her appointment, the two organizations worked in tandem to address the issue – in this case, CCS shot off an angry letter informing the physician that he had been placed on their blacklist, while SHA phoned the woman to ensure that she was alright.66

Other feminist abortion agencies were similarly intertwined with new-breed clergy. Although the Jane Collective never established a formal relationship with the Chicago branch of CCS, the two groups held regular meetings to share information about local abortionists.67 Meanwhile, as Planned Parenthood came under pressure from local affiliates to take a stronger stand on abortion reform, it established a “Religious Affairs Committee” in July 1970. Members, who included a Jesuit priest, were charged with the task of “promoting Planned Parenthood as a social change agent,” engaging in “specialized clergy activities,” and recommending “innovative actions for the Federation” regarding abortion.68 As local Planned Parenthood branches began to provide abortion services themselves, they incorporated clergy into the process. When Dr. Sadja Goldsmith opened a new branch in San Francisco, for example, she personally organized a local CCS chapter, contacting local clergymen and rabbis, training them in counseling techniques, and helping them to establish a tax-free fund for donations, all despite having no religious convictions of her own. Clergy had become so deeply

66 Patricia Maginnis to Elizabeth Canfield & Hugh Anwyl, July 8, 1969, Folder 15: Clergy Consultation, Series IB: Office Files, SHAR. For more examples of this sort of coordination, see: Cynthia to Pat, Zelda, et al., July 25, 1969, Folder 82: ACS Correspondence, Series IIC: Abortion Specialists, SHAR. Cynthia to Zelda, September 29, 1969, Folder 82: ACS Correspondence, Series IIC: Abortion Specialists, SHAR. See also the extensive correspondence over particular abortion providers between Liz Canfield and Patricia Maginnis, Folder 83: Canfield Correspondence, Series IIC: Abortion Specialists, SHAR.

67 Ibid., 64, 204-206.

embedded in the world of local abortion provision that like-minded activists took their involvement as a given.69

Perhaps most tellingly, feminist and women’s health organizations used clergy as public spokespeople, relying on them for outreach to religious communities and the politicians who represented them. As former Jane Collective member Laura Kaplan recalled, in her “collective memoir” of the organization: “It had to be the clergy who took the public role… since, unlike Jane, they were people with stature and no one thought of them as subversive.” Their unique “cloak of moral authority” opened doors that were closed to radicals.70 For this reason, SHA literature regularly featured statements from new-breed clergy who supported abortion reform, quoting Unitarian minister F. Danford Lion as identifying a religious “duty not to bring new infants into the world except under healthy and wholesome and loving conditions,” or Episcopal Bishop James A. Pike saying that “abortion laws must be broadened” so as “to allow freedom of decision.”71 The organization also invited CCS members to speak at their public forums, solicited donations to defense funds for clergy arrested for their abortion referrals, and distributed contact information for counselors in the Los Angeles chapter of CCS.72

Although CCS clergy prioritized the ‘concrete action’ of abortion referrals over ‘sermonizing and exhortations,’ many CCS chapters incorporated the latter activities into political campaigns to liberalize abortion access, typically focusing on reform bills in their state

69 Interview X, Sadja Goldsmith, M.D., November 19, 1975, FPOHP. For another example in Chicago, see: E. Spencer Parsons to Arlene Carmen, June 4, 1971, Illinois Folder, Unprocessed Box A - CCS by State, JMCA

70 Kaplan, The Story of Jane, 63-64.


legislatures. The Chicago branch of CCS, for example, helped to draft a series of abortion reform laws for the Illinois state legislature in the early 1970s. After the failure of their first bill, attributed to a hasty set of last-minute amendments, Rev. E. Spencer Parsons, the chapter's chairman and the University of Chicago’s chaplain, wrote to all affiliated counselors urging active support for HB 853, their next effort.\textsuperscript{73} Clergy responded by flooding their representatives' offices with letters of support and staging a rally in Springfield on the date of the legislature's vote.\textsuperscript{74} When that initiative also failed, new-breed clergy rolled out a more elaborate campaign. They began by collating individual roll call votes by district and generating a list of legislators that had opposed the previous bills. These were then categorized into definitive “no” votes and potential swing votes. Research was then done on politicians in the latter category, whose church affiliation was identified, presumably to influence their votes via ministerial networks. Finally, and most startlingly, this information was distributed to CCS counselors, who provided the appropriate representative's contact information to women during the referral process.\textsuperscript{75}

Like the Chicago chapter, the Michigan chapter of CCS also threw its weight behind liberalization efforts at the state level. Its founding covenant explicitly dedicated members to the mission of “modifying and changing attitudes and laws on contraception information and medical procedures, prenatal care and adoptive services for unwed mothers, and all aspects of

\textsuperscript{73} E. Spencer Parsons to Illinois CCS and Members of the Chicago CCS, March 19, 1971, Folder 31: Memoranda, Box 3, CCCSR.

\textsuperscript{74} Hayes F. Fletcher to CCS Member, April 25, 1971, Folder 31: Memoranda, Box 3, CCCSR.

\textsuperscript{75} Folder 2: Illinois Legislative Material, Box 1, CCCSR. Lindy Saint-Victor to Chicago CCS Counselors, n/d, Folder 31: Memoranda, Box 3, CCCSR.
abortion, including abolition and/or reform of existing laws.” In service of that goal, the chapter waged a get-out-the-vote campaign for a popular ballot initiative that would have repealed the state’s criminal abortion laws. The Rev. Will Brewster, the chapter’s chairman, penned a statement urging support for the referendum on the grounds that “the present law... heightens human suffering and fosters disrespect for law.” Although churches might still “speak out against the danger of abortion becoming too casual,” he argued, they ultimately needed to leave “the moral decision to the woman involved.” This relatively moderate argument was supplemented with excerpts from a speech by Rev. George L. Cadigan, bishop of the Missouri Diocese of the Episcopal Church, who made his point much more sharply. It was immoral to refuse “a woman access to medical help when she has determined that she needs it,” Cadigan declared. “A law that compels a woman to continue an undesired pregnancy is evil – as evil as a law that would compel her to have an abortion.”

Yet because of the decentralized structure of the organization, such a commitment to political advocacy varied greatly by region. The Louisiana chapter of CCS even declared that despite viewing criminal abortion laws as “immoral” and “depersonalizing,” their advocacy role would be limited to that of “pastors and counselors.” They decided to “leave the politics to our fellow professionals.” Moreover, because of the disconnection from denominational bodies with established educational and political arms, no national campaign comparable to that

---

76 Michigan Clergy for Problem Pregnancy Counseling, “Covenant Agreement,” n/d, Michigan Folder, Unprocessed Box A: CCS by State, JMCA.

77 “Abortion Law Reform – A Response to Human Need.” Distributed by Will Brewster, October 27, 1972, Michigan Folder, Unprocessed Box A: CCS by State, JMCA.


79 “A Statement of Intention, n/d, Louisiana Folder, Unprocessed Box A: CCS by State, JMCA.
undertaken on behalf of the civil rights cause was ever established in the realm of abortion politics. The records of CCS turn up only sporadic evidence of efforts to influence national abortion policy. The presidents of local chapters, including both Moody and the Rev. J. Paschall Davis, head of the Tennessee branch of CCS, occasionally fired off letters to federal politicians, excoriating them for violating their own faith tradition’s values by opposing liberalization efforts. But these were isolated incidents, never approaching the scale necessary to wage an effective national campaign. By contrast, the religious right was beginning to organize national opposition to abortion reform on a scale that contemporaries would not have dreamed of just a few years prior.

**Turning Points: The Rise of the Right and the Response of the Left**

As efforts to liberalize abortion access through state-level legislation gained momentum in the mid-1960s, concerned conservatives began to counter-organize on an unprecedented scale, led by the efforts of Catholic opponents of abortion. In efforts that mirrored the work of new-breed members of social action departments just years prior, conservative members of the Catholic hierarchy used the U.S. Catholic Conference’s Family Life Bureau as an advocacy arm to encourage and fund anti-abortion activism throughout the nation. They hired political consultants to train local bishops in lobbying techniques, founded parish-level Right-to-Life Committees, and issued joint pastoral letters to be read aloud in mass. Smelling an opportunity to crack open the Democrats’ New Deal coalition, Republican Party operatives used abortion

---

80 Letters from Howard Moody, November 24, 1970, General Abortion Correspondence Folder, Unprocessed Box B: National CCS, JMCA; Rev. J. Paschall Davis & Evelyn Ames Davis to President Richard Nixon, May 10, 1972, Tennessee Folder, Unprocessed Box A: CCS by State, JMCA; Rev. J. Paschall Davis & Evelyn Ames Davis to Governor Nelson Rockefeller, May 10, 1972, Tennessee Folder, Unprocessed Box A: CCS by State, JMCA

politics to woo conservative Catholic voters, setting into motion a massive partisan realignment that first manifested itself in late-1960s state-level forays and then, more aggressively, in President Richard M. Nixon’s 1972 election bid.82

Also like their new-breed counterparts, conservative Catholics sought to transcend historical religious divisions and suggest that opposition to abortion was not a sectarian position, but part of a broad moral consensus on fetal personhood and sexual ethics. They forged alliances with sympathetic secular professionals who were willing to marshal legal, medical, and scientific arguments against abortion, meant to counter the work of moderate doctors and lawyers involved in the abortion reform movement.83 But more consequentially, at least in the long run, they reached out to Southern evangelicals and built an interreligious coalition committed to pro-life opposition to abortion and an emerging ‘politics of the family.’84 Evangelical theology had never taught that life began at the moment of conception, and as already discussed, many denominational bodies, including both the National Association of Evangelicals and the Southern Baptist Convention, had come out in favor of limited abortion reform in the mid-1960s. Yet grassroots evangelicals were increasingly associating abortion with feminist critiques of heteronormative sexuality and a broader 1960s culture of permissiveness, which they believed eroded ‘traditional’ family values and encouraged libertine promiscuity. These evangelicals began speaking about abortion as an evasion of personal responsibility, rejecting alternative


83 For an array of examples, see the primary source documentation gathered in Greenhouse and Siegel, Before Roe, 81-97.

theological emphases on moral autonomy and the social consequences of criminalizing abortion, putting pressure on denominational leadership to be more critical of ‘abortion on demand’ and forcing even superstar preachers like Billy Graham to backpedal from their previous positions on the issue. The alliance between these two historically antagonistic groups achieved concrete organizational status in 1968, just a year after CCS was founded, when the interfaith National Right-to-Life Committee was established with the mission of making clear - as evangelical activist Harold Brown put it - that the fight against “permissive abortions… was not merely a sectarian or doctrinal issue.”

Christian conservatives used groups like the National Right-to-Life Committee to target new-breed clergy and lay abortion reformers directly, working to undermine their referral networks and delegitimize the moral dimensions of their advocacy. Conservative Christians repeatedly wrote hate mail to local chapters of CCS, attacking their work as not only immoral, but un-Christian. “I'm amazed to find so-called clergy advising & aiding in the killing of babies,” one typical missive from 1972 read. “I'm sure God is displeased, and I will have no part of you.” Motivated by such sentiments, anti-abortion advocates founded “crisis pregnancy centers” across the country, seeking to attract calls from women seeking CCS and other abortion referral organizations. The Birthright Hotline Plan, for example, claimed to provide “referral information” and “counseling” to “women with problem pregnancies,” using phrasing that was identical to that of the nearby Minnesota chapter of CCS. Once contacted, however, Birthright gave women not referrals to underground abortionists, but anti-abortion propaganda and contact

87 Jasper Williams, M.D. to Gentlemen, December 15, 1972, Folder 63: Correspondence, Anti-Abortion, 1972-1973, Box 4, CCCSR.
information for local adoption agencies.  

Alarmed by the rising tide of religious resistance to abortion reform, new-breed clergy began to fight back. In a book penned in late 1972, Moody and Carmen called the anti-abortion work of Christian conservatives in general, and of the National Right-to-Life Committee in particular, “the most serious threat to our religious peace and pluralistic coexistence in the past one hundred years.” Deploying language rife with military metaphors, they portrayed religious anti-abortion advocates as part of a “fanatical” movement whose “weapons are always slogans,” who have “destroyed the spirit of dialogue and debate,” and who “consider compromise and accommodation to be betrayal and their opponent to be not simply wrong but diabolical and evil.” The solution they proposed was “limited warfare,” in which advocacy groups on both sides of the debate acknowledged that there were legitimate and competing understandings of the morality of abortion, which any and all religious groups were entitled to defend in the public square. Yet the state should be left out of the matter, Moody and Carmen argued, and laws should never be used to dictate any citizen’s conscience or behavior on issues with no clear moral consensus. 

This logic undergirded the primary argument that abortion reform advocates mobilized against Christian conservatives: namely, the defense from religious liberty. New-breed activists argued that the vagueness of Scripture on the issue of ensoulment made one's position on fetal personhood - and thus the morality of restricting abortion access - a matter of theological debate, or perhaps of individual conscience. When the state criminalized abortion, new-breed clergy argued, it enshrined a sectarian moral view into law, violating religious liberty, destroying “the

88 Robert McCoy to Howard Moody, June 14, 1971, Minnesota Folder, Unprocessed Box A: CCS by State, JMCA.

freedom of the individual conscience before God,” and using the cudgel of “law as a means of attaining conformity of belief.”

When a Boston-area abortionist on CCS’s referral list was arrested in 1969, he laid out just such a First Amendment defense, arguing that criminal abortion laws codified “the moral position of the Roman Catholic Church to the detriment of the positions of other denominations and also of non-religious persons.” The list of religious leaders who sought to testify in favor of this argument on his behalf included Moody, the Episcopal Bishop of Massachusetts, the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and the Dean of Harvard Divinity School. More systematically, members of CCS teamed up with the New York Civil Liberties Union to found Citizens for Abortion Rights and Religious Liberty in the early 1970s. Their press release pledged to wage war on those “opponents of abortion” who sought “to encodify the religious beliefs of some into law and thereby oblige the state to force those theological and moral tenets on others who do not share them.”

Many new-breed Catholics actually concurred with this argument, even when they believed, or at least said that they believed, that abortion was morally impermissible. Church leaders such as Archbishop Richard Cushing of Boston, for example, noted that “there is nothing in Catholic teaching which suggests that Catholics should write into civil law the proscriptions of Church law,” a quotation that the Society for Humane Abortions prominently circulated in its

---


91 Joseph S. Oteri to Howard Moody, July 8, 1969, CCS – Legal Folder, Unprocessed Box B: National CCS, JMCA; Howard Moody to Joseph S. Oteri, July 21, 1969, CCS – Legal Folder, Unprocessed Box B: National CCS, JMCA. Judge Tomasello had apparently made his mind up on the issue, declining not only to hear from expert religious witness, but also from various psychologists and sociologists. In his statement to the jury, he argued that their testimony was irrelevant and that abortion laws were unequivocally designed “to prevent attempts to destroy human beings in the womb”: *Commonwealth vs. Pierre Victor Brunelle*.

Father Robert F. Drinan, an antiwar advocate who was also Dean of the Boston College Law School, and who went on to become the first Catholic priest ever elected to the United States House of Representatives, argued that while Catholic doctrine had a clear position on the ethics of abortion itself, the Church had no similarly clear position on abortion jurisprudence. In light of Vatican II's declaration that “in spreading religious faith... everyone ought at all times to refrain from any manner of coercion,” he argued, good Catholics must actually oppose attempts to legislate their religious beliefs on this issue. Some new-breed Catholic laypeople went even further, founding an organization called Catholics for a Free Choice that argued that even within Catholic teaching there was ambiguity on the morality of abortion itself, and that one could both be a good Catholic and a supporter of abortion rights. The organization ran ads in such press outlets as The New York Times, which argued that, contrary to the claims of the United States bishops, “there is no common and constant teaching on ensoulment in Catholic doctrine, nor has abortion always been treated as murder in canonical history.” In either case, these Catholic activists advocated the repeal of all abortion laws, rather than efforts to liberalize them in select instances, on the grounds that the state should have nothing to do with such matters of conscience.

Conservative members of the Church hierarchy were predictably displeased, and used their institutional authority to crack down on Catholic abortion advocacy directly. The National


95 Quoted in Miller, Good Catholics, 112.
Council of Catholic Bishops issued statements declaring that opposition to abortion was a cornerstone of Catholic orthodoxy, and that any Catholic who participated in an abortion procedure or assisted others in obtaining one was thereby excommunicated from the Church.\(^96\)

They dismissed Catholics for Free Choice as “a small number of people claiming some affiliation” with Catholicism, but who in fact carried “no official status within this church.”\(^97\)

Conservative Catholics lobbied the hierarchy to censure Father Robert Drinan for opposing criminal abortion laws, and their pressure may have played a role in their decision to order him to either withdraw from public office or resign his priesthood in 1979.\(^98\) Other priests and nuns who dissented from the conservative position on abortion were censured by the Vatican itself, which demanded that they publicly retract their statements or resign from their religious orders.\(^99\)

Had such interreligious conflict played out entirely through state-level politics, it is not at all clear who would have won, nor is it clear what the consequences would have been for policy discourse and party polarization. Instead, in January 1973, the Supreme Court issued its decision in *Roe v. Wade*, overturning all state statutes restricting abortion access before roughly the second trimester. Despite its dismal reputation, *Roe* did not by any means precipitate polarization, as the earlier development of interreligious conflict over the issue clearly shows. Yet it did invert the legal landscape that existed just a decade earlier, putting the law overwhelmingly on the side of abortion advocates. In the process, it transformed their agenda,

\(^{96}\) Miller, *Good Catholics*, 65

\(^{97}\) Quoted in Miller, *Good Catholics*, 96.


which shifted overwhelming to fulfilling the promise of Roe with more than ‘all deliberate’ speed.

After all, as momentous as the Supreme Court’s decision was, it did not create a national infrastructure of affordable outpatient abortion clinics, staffed by well-trained, licensed physicians. After all, as momentous as the Supreme Court’s decision was, it did not create a national infrastructure of affordable outpatient abortion clinics, staffed by well-trained, licensed physicians. Nor did it address the many other issues of medical practice, affordability, or broader reproductive health services that CCS had become involved in. As a result, CCS branches began to focus their attention on implementing Roe at the local level. Moody almost immediately sent out a memo entitled, “On the Light at the End of the Tunnel,” which provided members with guidelines for future action. Branches were asked to stay open until “at least one good non-profit medical facility” had opened in their region. Women's Services, the outpatient ‘clinic that the clergy built’ was offered as a model for above-ground abortion provision, and clergy coordinated with local Planned Parenthoods to develop similar facilities in their area of coverage. Until local access had been established and basic standards of medical care and just pricing had been secured, branches continued their referrals to out-of-state facilities, guaranteeing that women would maintain access to quality abortion services in the interim. The result was a national network of high-quality, low-cost reproductive health clinics, which most Americans now take for granted and few realize was built with the help of new-breed clergy.

CCS shuttered its doors over the course of this transition, but new-breed clergy remained extraordinarily active in the cause of abortion advocacy. Members of local chapters remained

---

100 In fact, the dearth of qualified doctors willing to perform abortions in culturally conservative regions after Roe was a particularly serious problem. See: Twig to Rev. Howard Moody, March 20, 1973, Nebraska Folder, Unprocessed Box A - CCS by State, JMCA.

committed to their role as patient advocates, keeping tabs on newly established abortion clinics and helping to ensure their financial viability.\textsuperscript{102} Most notably, Women's Services announced that it was going to shut down in May of 1973; the number of out-of-state women seeking abortions at their facility had plummeted in the wake of \textit{Roe}, and the clinic's patient load had since dropped too low to meet operating expenses. But Carmen and Moody feared the potential impact of their model's failure, worrying that women would be forced to turn to overcrowded hospitals and overpriced, for-profit alternatives. They convinced Judson Memorial Church to take over the clinic, including its debt of over $250,000, and expand its medical reach to include such health services as low-cost breast biopsies. The clinic was staffed with unpaid volunteers, many congregants of the church itself, and by 1974 Carmen was optimistic of Women's Services' future as a church owned-and-operated “facility where other innovative health services can be introduced at low cost with quality care provided in a humane setting.”\textsuperscript{103}

Additionally, in continued response to rising opposition from religious conservatives, new-breed clergy began to organize national political support for abortion access as they never had before. Just a few months after \textit{Roe}, the United Methodist Church issued a statement condemning the “massive, emotional, well-financed, [and] multi-pronged” efforts of the religious right to limit abortion access through “media and mail campaigns, town meetings, right-to-life speakers bureaus, [and] personal meetings with legislators.” In response, it proposed a comprehensive Abortion Rights Program of its own, “devoted to sustaining and implementing the Supreme Court decision on the right to abortion.” The statement called for new-breed clergy to appear on television and radio talk shows, perform outreach to moderate Catholic leaders to

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{102} Wolff, 164.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{103} Wolff, 164-165. Arlene Carmen to Dr. David Sopher, January 30, 1974, Series C.10 – Post-Supreme Court Abortion Correspondence Folder, Unprocessed Box: Judson Clergy Consultation Service, JMCA.
\end{flushright}
maintain goodwill, write letters to magazine and newspaper editors to “inform them of religious support for the Supreme Court decision,” and engage in targeted lobbying efforts within states whose representatives served on the Judiciary or Health subcommittees of Congress.\(^{104}\)

By late 1973, like-minded religious organizations had joined the United Methodist Church in this mission and banded together to found the Religious Coalition of Abortion Rights (RCAR), which counted among its members most mainline Protestant denominations, the Union of American Hebrew Congregations (Reform), the Young Women's Christian Association, the Women's League for Conservative Judaism, the American Ethical Union, the American Humanist Association, and Catholics for Free Choice, among others.\(^{105}\) Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, members of RCAR repeatedly testified against legislation restricting federal funding for abortion. In the 1980s, their focus expanded, and they established an education fund intended to spread awareness about reproductive issues, initiated a “Women of Color” outreach program, sponsored workshops dealing with religious positions on abortion for pro-choice members of Congress, and launched several media blitz campaigns.\(^{106}\)

Yet two convergent factors limited the impact of such organizing on public discourse and contributed to the perception, so prevalent among Americans today, that the abortion debate pits secular feminist supporters of abortion rights against religious ‘pro-life’ opponents. The first was that, in the wake of *Roe*, the conditions that had driven so many religious believers to see abortion access as a moral imperative disappeared. With outpatient clinics legal and well-established, underground abortion referrals were no longer necessary, and neither was the need

\(^{104}\) “Proposed Abortion Rights Program,” June 15, 1973, Series C.10 – Post-Supreme Court Abortion Correspondence Folder, Unprocessed Box: Judson Clergy Consultation Service, JMCA.

\(^{105}\) “Members of the RCAR,” Folder 74: RCAR, Box 5, CCCSR.

for religious resources to protect and facilitate them. With the law of the land supporting abortion access in the specific, and now pervasive, language of privacy rights, the need for respectable liaisons and alternative moral reasoning similarly faded. And as underground resistance gave way to legally-sanctioned medical activity, a top-notch legal team became worth as much or more than a clerical collar. By the mid-1970s, this shift was reflected in the mission statements of religious groups themselves. Gone was the soaring rhetoric of CCS’s call to resist unjust laws. In its place was RCAR’s more mundane, if no less pressing, goal of “sustaining and implementing” a Supreme Court decision.  

By contrast, religious conservatives found themselves in a political situation that mirrored that which new-breed clergy had initially faced. Their public presence ballooned for precisely the same reasons that their rivals had been so effective earlier. They organized political resistance through appeals to moral conscience, challenging existing law in the ripe and righteous tongue of religious ethics. They used clerical networks and denominational resources to build and fund national, single-issue advocacy organizations focused on challenging and changing the status quo. They deployed social capital through state ballot initiatives and mass mailings, threatening to preach politics on Sunday if their representatives refused to take a stand. And they adopted radical, law-breaking measures to bring public attention to their protests, blockading abortion clinics, suffering arrest, and capturing the attention of news reporters by justifying their actions in the name of a higher moral law.  

---

107 Political scientist James Morone goes even further: “Roe v. Wade has extracted a heavy price from American progressives. The left has ceded its moral politics to conservatives - across the full range of American politics… Privacy rights work only for people who wield power in their personal lives. It leaves others to fend for themselves against the odds. What progressives have lost is the moral fervor that fights to rally the country.” Morone, *Hellfire Nation*, 491-492.

In addition to this dramatic shift in the legal and political landscape, which was specific to the issue of abortion, broader transformations were taking place in American religious life. Beginning in the late 1960s, liberal religious institutions, which had commanded so much public influence for so long, were experiencing unprecedented membership loss, budget shortfalls, and defections from clergy and liberal laypeople. New-breed activists were disaffiliating from organized religious life at record rates, moving beyond church walls in the hopes of escaping the limitations of denominational bureaucracies and pursuing more meaningful forms of social change through decentralized, grassroots political organizing. At the same time, religious conservatives were experiencing an institutional renaissance, and their organizational resources and public influence expanded accordingly. This tipping of the political scales took place within the microcosm of religious abortion advocacy, but it was a much broader phenomenon that ultimately reduced the public power of the liberal denominational groups that made up RCAR and fueled the eventual eclipse of the religious left by their rivals on the right. It is to that phenomenon that I now turn.
CHAPTER SIX
BEYOND CHURCH WALLS:
THE FATE OF THE POSTWAR AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LEFT

In June 1966, as part of an unprecedented expansion of their organizational might, new-breed activists founded the University Christian Movement (UCM), uniting a diverse array of student activists under one single, ecumenical banner. Member organizations included nearly every mainline Protestant student group, both national Catholic student organizations, the Orthodox Church’s campus organization, the interdenominational Student Y, and the secular Students for a Democratic Society.¹ Using their aggregated networks of students and resources, UCM supported vigorous involvement in movement politics, bridging historical religious divisions in the name of shared social values. Among other things, it funded alternative higher education programs called Free Universities, provided logistical support for massive anti-war marches, sent students to Latin America to network with third-world solidarity activists, and recruited pro bono legal representation for welfare rights groups.² The founding of UCM seemed to embody the religious left’s vigor in the mid-1960s. It was a rising star, burning brighter than ever before.

Less than three years later, UCM had ceased to exist. In late February 1969, its General Committee convened to present task force reports and finalize its annual budget. Instead of the

¹ For full list of charter members and related member movements, see Paul E. Schrading, Open Letter to Friends of the UCM, March 1969, in the General Committee Report on the Dissolution of UCM, Folder 572, Box 47, University Christian Movement, Record Group No. 235, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library (hereafter UCM).

² “Nitty Gritty on Field Staff,” April 14, 1967, revised April 18 for Field Services Committee Meeting in Chicago, May 6, 1967, Folder 153, Box 10, UCM; Sheila McCurdy, “Role During the Past Few Months and Future Plans,” May 27, 1968, Folder 172, Box 12, UCM. For more, see discussion of UCM Field Staff in Chapter Four.
usual, routine meeting, their discussions devolved into bitter conflict over the organization’s ideological commitments, its political tactics, and a controversial proposal to redirect thirty percent of its budget to its Black Caucus. Believing these debates to be irresolvable, the Committee overwhelmingly voted to disband the organization, declaring that UCM would henceforth “cease to exist as a national movement.”³ In the mournful recollection of one former president, the decision “was a vote in favor of recognizing a dying dream.”⁴ Yet again, UCM would seem to embody the fate of the religious left, this time illustrating its rapid demise in the late 1960s.⁵

Liberal religious organizations did indeed experience a dramatic reversal of fortune in the late 1960s. Just a decade earlier, nearly half of the nation thought that religious leaders did more good than any other social group and 69% of Americans believed that religion’s formidable influence was continuing to rise.⁶ By the early 1970s, those heady times had passed and a

---

³ See Minutes of the UCM General Committee Meeting, Washington DC, February 27 - March 1, 1969, Folder 572, Box 46, UCM. The Black Caucus requested $50,000; the total UCM budget for 1969 was $172,000. See: “Proposed Black Caucus Budget” and “State of UCM Budget (as of Feb,. 28, 1969),” both in the General Committee Report on the Dissolution of UCM, Folder 572, Box 47, UCM.


⁶ According to a 1957 Roper poll, 46% of Americans selected religious leaders as the social group doing the most good for the country, more than selected government leaders, business leaders, Congress, and labor leaders combined. Poll cited in: Will Herberg, Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, c. 1960), 51. According to a Gallup poll in the same year, 69% of Americans believed that religion’s influence on American life was increasing, compared to 14% who believed that it
record-high 71% of Americans said that religion’s influence was on the wane. Mainline Protestant churches were hemorrhaging members, their formidable budgets shriveling as their pews emptied out. The Catholic Church experienced declining seminary enrollment and mass defections from their religious orders, while church attendance rates plummeted. Synagogues struggled to retain their youth, while Jewish political alliances crumbled amidst conflict over black nationalism and radical Zionism. New-breed organizations fractured, as radicals condemned reformist strategies, black communities demanded reparations from majority-white religious institutions, and feminists railed against patriarchal church structures. The age that had produced the politics of conscience was drawing to a close.

Explaining this phenomenon, however, proves more difficult than chronicling it. Contemporary scholars tended to focus on political tensions between the pew and the pulpit, arguing that new-breed activists alienated their moderate brethren, precipitating defections that led to declines in membership, money, and institutional capacity. Yet although there was plenty of intra-religious conflict over new-breed politics, moderates were not by and large the ones who disaffiliated because of it. It was the left that left. In doing so, they neither secularized, in the vulgar sense of abandoning religious belief, nor did they retreat from their spiritual commitment to social reform. And while it is tempting to chalk their outmigration up to a broader fracturing

---

7 According to a 1969 Gallup poll, 71% of Americans believed that religion’s influence on American life was decreasing, compared to 14% who still believed it was increasing.


9 The idea that liberalizing reforms destroyed supposedly essential orthodoxies, driving secularization on the left, is a common one among conservative critics. See, for example: Ross Douthat, Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics (New York: Free Press, 2012); Ross Douthat, “Springtime for Liberal Christianity,” The New York Times, September 26, 2015.
of American liberalism in this period, the fact that they abandoned organized religious life altogether begs for further explanation.\textsuperscript{10} After all, political conflict is nothing new in the history of American religion. Yet in the past, amidst clashes over everything from slavery to scientific modernism, it tended to precipitate denominational splits and conversions to more ideologically compatible religious groups. In this moment, by contrast, it led to categorical disaffiliation.

The roots of disaffiliation, I argue, can be traced to mid-decade transformations in religious thought. During the early Cold War years, liberal religious leaders had taught their flock that authentic religiosity required more than right belief. It required right action, out ‘in the world.’ Beginning in the mid-1960s, influential new-breed thinkers paired these ideas with pointed critiques of organized religious life. Responding to conflict with liberal denominational leaders over everything from black liberationist politics to abortion reform, authors like Harvey Cox and Jacob Neusner suggested that something inherent in modern church structures - whether that be their sluggish bureaucracy or their hierarchical models of authority - inhibited their own religious mission in the world. If true faith lay not in attending worship services, but in prophetic engagement with social life, then when religious institutions no longer enabled such action, believers were obligated to seek alternatives. They were called to pursue their mission beyond church walls.

The late-1960s disaffiliation of the religious left is best understood in this intellectual context, not as a burst of secularization, but as a redefinition of religiosity itself. Narratives of liberal religious declension miss this point. They privilege the histories of institutions and slight

those of the individuals who moved beyond them, many of whom would have used a more positive word than ‘decline’ to describe the demise of organized religious life. Focusing on disaffiliation instead reframes the late-1960s crisis in religious institutions as an ongoing process, rather than a denouement. It interprets the move beyond church walls as an evolution of religious identity and political strategy, one that requires a new narrative that incorporates the post-institutional history of the religious left. It suggests a path beyond the tired framework of a political ‘God Gap’ between liberals and conservatives, premised on social-scientific polls that measure religiosity only in terms of institutional metrics like weekly church attendance.

Beyond its consequences for religious institutions and scholarly narratives, the disaffiliation of the religious left also dramatically reduced its visibility in the public eye, and thus limited their ability to influence national politics. Yet rather than decline, the appropriate metaphor is one of ‘eclipse.’ In the late 1960s, the religious left increasingly conceived of its mission as being ‘in the world.’ The ‘church’ was the people of God, rather than an institution; the sacred was immanent in secular life. By contrast, the religious right conceived of its mission as ‘in the church,’ from whence Christians could do battle with the fallen world. The ‘church’ was a literal association of true believers; the sacred existed over and against secular life, whose shortcomings were measured against its moral prescriptions. This key intellectual difference produced divergent organizational outcomes. Whereas liberal religious institutions experienced a crisis in the late 1960s, as their members moved beyond church walls, conservative groups underwent an institutional renaissance, as the faithful rallied within them. Decades of slow-burning demographic growth, westward migration, and creative recruitment strategies finally began paying dividends, allowing conservative religious groups to surpass their liberal rivals in membership, revenue, and influence for the first time in the twentieth century. In the process,
they eclipsed new-breed activists in the public eye and retook the mantle of moral majority for themselves. The result defined the battlefield on which the coming culture wars would be fought, generating partisan polarization that continues to shape American politics today.

**The End of an Era: The Late-1960s Crisis in Organized Religion**

After over two decades of dramatic and unambiguous expansion, American religious institutions entered a new era in the late 1960s. The postwar religious revival had been fueled by a virtuous cycle of growth: increases in membership led to increases in revenue, which funded an expansion of religious organizations, which, in turn, enabled the recruitment of ever more members. For many religious institutions, especially theologically liberal ones, that cycle broke down towards the end of the decade. The age of expansion came to an end.

Just as skyrocketing membership had been the driving force behind the postwar institutional expansion, so reductions in membership growth, caused by a combination of disaffiliation and declining birth rates, ushered in a new era. On this front, mainline Protestant denominations were hit the hardest. Beginning in the late 1960s, member denominations of the National Council of Churches (NCC) recorded their first aggregate losses in decades, collectively losing nearly three million churchgoers between 1968 and 1976, a decline of 6.5%. \(^{11}\) Some of its most prominent affiliates fared even worse, including the Episcopal Church, which lost nearly a fifth of its peak membership by 1980, and the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, which lost almost one million congregants, more than 30% of its peak, over the same period. \(^{12}\)

---

\(^{11}\) NCC affiliate membership dropped from 42,763,297 in 1968 to 39,980,443 in 1976, a loss of 2.8 million members (or 6.51%). All denominational statistics not otherwise cited rely on aggregate data collected and analyzed by the author from annual volumes of *The Yearbook of American Churches* (New York: Round Table Press, 1952-1982).

\(^{12}\) The Episcopal Church’s membership dropped from 3,429,153 in 1966 to 2,786,004 in 1980, a decline of 18.76%. The United Presbyterian Church in the USA’s membership dropped from 3,429,153 members in 1966 to 2,423,601
Although neither Catholics nor Jews experienced comparable losses during these years, the rates of membership growth that their budget projections relied upon dried up considerably. In the boom years from 1950 to 1965, the Catholic Church added a whopping 17 million parishioners. During the following decade and a half, by contrast, the Church added just 4.2 million members - not an inconsiderable number, but fewer in fifteen years than it had amassed each and every four years prior. Among Jewish congregations, the 1960s was a decade of steady membership growth, in which they gained about half a million members. The 1970s, by contrast, were years of stagnation, in which the loss of a quarter of a million members between 1972 and 1977 was barely balanced out by moderate gains on either end of the decade. As a result of these trends, despite the continued growth of evangelical churches, the aggregate percentage of Americans affiliated with a church or synagogue dropped from a record-high 64% in 1964 to just 59% in 1980. That was the first time this statistic had consistently declined in the entire twentieth century (see Fig. 1).

members in 1980, a decline of 29.32%. The Episcopal Church and the PC-USA collectively lost 1.65 million members over that same period, single-handedly exceeding net NCC losses by 86,755 members.

13 Catholic membership rose from 29,241,580 in 1950 to 46,246,175 in 1965, at an average of 4,251,149 members every four years. In comparison, membership rose to 50,449,842 in 1980, an increase of 4,203,667 members.

14 Jewish membership rose from 5,367,000 in 1960 to 5,780,000 in 1969, an increase of 413,000. It ended at 5,920,900 in 1980, after rising to 6,115,000 in 1972, only to drop down to a trough of 5,775,935 in 1977. Note that Jewish organizations did not report updated membership totals to the *Yearbook of American Churches* during the years 1967-1968, 1971, or 1973-1976.

15 Data based on Gallup polls reported on annually in *The Yearbook of American Churches*. 

266
In addition, other forms of American religious involvement, beyond the formal measure of membership, were also on the wane. Church attendance, for instance, slipped steadily downwards from the mid-1950s, when approximately half of Americans told Gallup pollsters that they attended religious services weekly, to the mid-1970s, when fewer than two-fifths of Americans said the same (see Fig. 2).\textsuperscript{16} Declines in church attendance were particularly marked among Catholics, over three-quarters of whom had attended mass weekly in 1955, but barely half of whom did so by the mid-1970s.\textsuperscript{17} Meanwhile, involvement in religious activities outside of worship services - from Bible study clubs to volunteer organizations - was also declining. Aggregate membership in such groups dropped by half between 1957 and 1976, according to researchers from the University of Michigan, and continued to decline through the 1980s.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{16} Findings are based on responses to Gallup Polls conducted between 1954 and 1976, reported on in The Yearbook of American Churches.

\textsuperscript{17} Findings based on Gallup polls conducted between 1955 and 1980, reported on in The Yearbook of American Churches.

As Americans became less involved in religious life, churches and synagogues experienced corresponding crises in their income and financial resources. The budgets of mainline Protestant denominations, in particular, plummeted as a result of declining membership. Between 1966 and 1980, annual congregational contributions shrank by 16% for the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, by 29% for the Lutheran Church in America, and by an astounding 41% for the Episcopal Church.  

By themselves, these three mainline denominations lost over half of a billion dollars in annual revenue during that decade and a half. The Catholic Church, despite its still-expanding membership, faced a similar financial crisis, running multimillion dollar deficits to maintain social services whose projected budgets had been based on substantially higher rates of growth. As a result, in the words of one contemporary researcher, it remained “only barely strong enough economically to keep its promises and to sustain its

---

19 The PC-USA took in $695,853,041 in congregational contributions in 1966 and $586,087,635 in 1980, a decrease of 15.77%. The Lutheran Church in America took in $524,868,143 in 1966 and $371,981,816 in 1980, a decrease of 29.13%. The Episcopal Church took in $730,911,685 in 1966 and $427,661,417 in 1980, a decrease of 41.49%. All figures are adjusted to 1980 dollars to account for inflation.

20 Although the Catholic Church did not formally publicize its finances like its Protestant counterparts, these budgets shortfalls were well-publicized in the contemporary press. See, for example: Weldon Wallace, “Catholic Bishops Conference Grapples With Fund Deficit,” The Baltimore Sun, November 17, 1970.
spiritual mission.” Unfortunately, Jewish denominations did not collect or make public data on their aggregate revenue during this period.

With religious institutions tightening their fiscal belts, they became correspondingly unable to invest in their networks of churches and clergy. For that matter, declines in membership limited the need to build churches and hire clergy in the first place. As a result, the value of new church construction in the United States plummeted in the late-1960s, dropping from a high of almost $3 billion in 1966 to just over $669 million ten years later (see Fig. 3). Existing buildings shuttered their doors as well: over 9,500 NCC-affiliated churches were abandoned in the same period, while the number of American synagogues declined by a quarter and 40% of Catholic high schools closed up shop. In the process, the ranks of clergy thinned out. The Catholic Church lost nearly 2,500 parish priests between 1965 and 1973 alone. NCC-affiliated denominations lost almost ten-thousand ministers during the same period, and by the end of the 1970s, the number of Jewish rabbis had shrunk by 17% from its peak earlier in the decade. With fewer buildings and staff to conduct outreach, these institutions became

---


23 Figures adjusted to 1980 dollars to account for inflation.

24 NCC-affiliated denominations had 144,486 churches in 1966 and 134,975 churches in 1978, a decrease of 6.58%. Jewish groups did not report their number of synagogues to the Yearbook of American Churches annually, but dropped from a reported high of 5,000 synagogues in 1970 to 3,500 synagogues in 1978, a decrease of 25.53%. Regarding the decline in Catholic schools between 1964 and 1984, see: Bryan T. Froehle and Mary L. Gautier, Catholicism USA: A Portrait of the Catholic Church in the United States (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 69.

25 The Catholic Church had 59,491 priests in 1966 and 57,070 priests in 1973, a loss of 2,421 priests and a decline of 4.07%. NCC-affiliated denominations had 115,641 clergy in 1965 and 105,763 in 1973, a loss of 9,878 ministers and a decline of 8.54%. Jewish groups had 6,400 rabbis in 1970 and 5,300 rabbis in 1978, a loss of 1,100 rabbis and a decline of 17.19%.
correspondingly peripheral to American social life, and so the virtuous cycle of growth stalled out.

**Figure 13: Annual Value of New Religious Construction, 1964-1980**

In order to explain this phenomenon, it is important to first note that membership was not declining because Americans were becoming categorically less religious. Indeed, ‘unchurched’ Americans - as contemporaries called those who were unaffiliated with a religious institution or had not attended services in the past six months - exhibited surprisingly high levels of religious belief and practice. According to data from one 1978 study, only 7% of unchurched Americans who had previously been church members left their institution because they “no longer believed in a supernatural being or force.” By contrast, over two and a half times as many left to find **deeper** spiritual meaning. 26 The same study found that 70% of unchurched Americans believed that the Bible was either the literal or inspired word of God, rather than an ancient book written by men; 64% believed that Jesus was the Son of God, rather than just another religious leader;

---

26 7.24% of respondents mentioned that they “no longer believed in a supernatural being or force,” while 18.78% mentioned wanting “deeper spiritual meaning than I found in the church or synagogue.” Discussion of ‘unchurched’ Americans not otherwise cited is based on raw data published in Princeton Religion Research Center and The Gallup Organization, *The Unchurched American: Study Conducted for the Religious Coalition to Study Backgrounds, Values, and Interests of Unchurched Americans* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Religion Research Center, 1978).
68% believed in the resurrection of Christ; and 57% believed in life after death. Over three-quarters still prayed to God, nearly half of whom said they did so at least daily.\(^{27}\)

Nor was conservative backlash to new-breed activism or religious liberalization responsible for a mass exodus from the pews. According to the same 1978 study, among unchurched Americans who became unobservant because of “specific problems with, or objections to, the church, its teachings, or its members,” only a tiny percentage left because their church had become too liberal or socially active.\(^{28}\) Less than 12% complained that their church or synagogue was too involved in social or political issues, only 9% mentioned discomfort with changes from traditional forms of worship, a mere 6.5% thought that teachings about religious beliefs had become too broad and inclusive, and barely over 3% believed that moral teachings were “too loose.”\(^{29}\)

There is also no evidence that conservative backlash was responsible for a wave of conversions to more theologically or politically conservative faith groups. Among Protestants, sociologists have found no discernable increase in the rate of conversions from mainline churches to more conservative denominations during or after the turmoil of the 1960s. Indeed,

\(^{27}\) In the years since the results of the 1978 survey was published, numerous studies have have replicated its findings for both this time period and subsequent eras. See, for example: Princeton Religion Research Center, *The Unchurched American - Ten Years Later* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Religion Research Center, 1988), especially the discussion on pp. 2-4; Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual, but Not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Rodney Stark, *What Americans Really Believe: New Findings from the Baylor Surveys of Religion* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008). Evidence that this trend is reversing in recent years - that is, that Americans are becoming not only less observant, but also less religious by other metrics - can be found in the variety of surveys and studies on the ‘rise of the nones’ published online by the Pew Research Center over the last five years.

\(^{28}\) Exactly 30% of respondents left because of such conflict. That group was second only to the 33% of respondents who said that they “found other interests and activities which led me to spend less and less time on church-related activities.”

\(^{29}\) The survey question was asked of respondents who had been active in the past, but were now ‘unchurched’ and attributed their disaffiliation with problems with or objections to the church, its teaching, or its members. Of the respondents, 11.76% mentioned “a dislike for church or synagogue involvement in social or political issues,” 9.05% mentioned “a dislike for changes from the traditional form of worship,” 6.56% mentioned that “teachings about beliefs were too broad and inclusive,” and 3.39% mentioned that “moral teachings were too loose.”
the rate of conversion from liberal to conservative Protestant churches has not budged an inch over the entire twentieth century. ³⁰ Among Jews, meanwhile, post-1960 conversion patterns overwhelmingly ran in the opposite direction. Orthodox Judaism, the most theologically conservative denomination, was the only tradition that members were more likely to leave than stay within, and a full 68% of its members converted to more liberal Jewish denominations. By contrast, despite 12% of its members leaving organizational religious life entirely, Reform Judaism has nevertheless enjoyed substantial membership gains, more than doubling the size of its ranks between 1973 and 1995. ³¹

There is, by contrast, substantial evidence of liberal backlash - that is, of Americans leaving their churches or synagogues because they had not gone far enough in their reforms or were insufficiently involved in social change. The same 1978 study of unchurched Americans found that respondents were two and a half times more likely to have left because they disliked traditional forms of worship, rather than innovations in the liturgy; five and half times more likely because they thought teachings about religious beliefs were too narrow, rather than too broad and inclusive; and almost eleven times more likely because they thought moral teachings were too narrow, rather than too loose. A full third more respondents complained that their

³⁰ There was, by contrast, a modest decline in the rate of conversion from evangelical to mainline denominations, although the authors of the following study conclude that transformation can be explained almost entirely by a reduction in the rate of interfaith marriages among upwardly-mobile evangelicals: Michael Hout, Andrew Greeley, and Melissa J. Wilde, “The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change in the United States,” American Journal of Sociology 107, no. 2 (September 2001), 485-497.

³¹ On the rates of denominational switching, see Bernard Lazerwitz, “Denominational Retention and Switching among American Jews,” Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 34, no. 4 (December 1995): 499-506. Note that the study’s author suggests this phenomenon may have been influenced by perceptions of the compatibility of religious identity and ritual with American culture - that is, Orthodox communities may have been perceived as incompatible with American culture in a way that, say, conservative Protestant congregations (with their use of mass media, modern architecture, etc.) were not. As Jewish communities became increasingly assimilated in the postwar years, this could have driven conversion patterns in ways unrelated to the theological and political transformations that are the focus of this chapter. On the growth of Reform Judaism, see: Dana Evan Kaplan, American Reform Judaism: An Introduction (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 22-23.
church or synagogue was not willing to work seriously enough to change society than disliked religious involvement in social issues (see Fig. 4). When asked what circumstances could bring them back to their religious institution, the second most popular answer, behind only a major change in their family situation, was finding a church or synagogue that was more seriously concerned with working for a better society. Among American Catholics in particular, the liberalizing reforms of Vatican II had little negative impact on church attendance. Over 3.5 times as many parishioners approved of Vatican II than disapproved, and of those who wanted further changes to the Church, only 11% called for a return to older traditions - fewer than the 16% who wanted priests to be allowed to marry. By contrast, the liberal Catholic reaction to *Humanae vitae*, the 1968 conservative encyclical on sexual morality, has strong statistical links to the sharp decline in Catholic church attendance.

---

32. 22.62% of respondents mentioned “a dislike for the traditional form of worship;” 37.1% mentioned that “teachings about beliefs were too narrow;” 8.28% mentioned that “moral teachings were too narrow;” and 15.61% mentioned “a feeling that the church or synagogue wasn’t willing to work seriously to change the society.”

33. Among respondents who said that there was a situation in which they could see themselves becoming a fairly active member of a religious institution again, when asked what that situation would be, 23.73% of responses mentioned “find[ing] a church or synagogue that is seriously concerned to work for a better society,” a percentage exceeded only by the 25.59% of responses that mentioned “a change in my family situation, for example, marriage or separation, or the birth of a child, or being widowed.”


The problem of liberal backlash was compounded by the fact that religious liberals had far lower birth rates than their conservative counterparts, meaning that relative membership growth was destined to decline even if liberal churches had managed to hold on to all of their existing members. Mainline Protestants not only averaged just three-quarters as many children per household as conservative Protestants did, but also had far fewer women of childbearing age in the first place. Their lower fertility rates alone, according to recent sociological studies, accounted for over three-quarters of the relative decline in mainline Protestant membership. American Jews, meanwhile, had even fewer children on average than liberal Protestants did, with the youngest and least religiously orthodox having the fewest of all. And although there are no

---


37 Hout, Greeley, and Wilde, “The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change in the United States,” 483-484.

38 Jewish families averaged only 1.69 children per household, the lowest of any religious group studied and higher only than those with no religious preference, who averaged 1.39 children. Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*, 161. Regarding the relationship between youth, low levels of orthodoxy, and low birth rates, contemporary studies all found similar results, but disagreed over the causal mechanism. Researchers at Princeton argued that more orthodox communities felt greater responsibility for the future of the Jewish people, and so reproduced at higher rates: Charles F. Westoff, Robert G. Potter, Jr., Philip C. Sage, and Elliott Mishler, *Family Growth in Metropolitan America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961). By contrast, later researchers
studies examining differences in birth rates between liberal and conservative Catholics, it seems almost gratuitous to note that, given the Church’s official teaching on birth control, members who were less orthodox - on this issue, at least - would have fewer children on average.\(^{39}\)

As might be expected by these patterns, a more nuanced look at the statistics of decline reveals that the late-1960s institutional crisis was most pronounced among the demographic groups and organizations that had formed the cornerstone of new-breed activism in the 1960s. Young Americans, for example, were disproportionately responsible for the massive dropoffs in church attendance in this era. In 1958, Gallup pollsters found, slightly less than 50% of Americans attended church weekly, with no significant variation by age group. Just over a decade later, although church attendance rates had dipped only marginally for older generations, a mere 28% of Americans in their twenties were still attending church regularly, with a full three-fifths of that total decline happened in just the four years between 1967 and 1971 (see Fig. 5).\(^{40}\) This trend was even more pronounced among young, highly-educated Catholics.

---

\(^{39}\) By contrast, there are several studies comparing Catholics as a bloc to the general population. These have found that although Catholics had higher-than-average birth rates before World War II, they exhibited little difference from the general population in the postwar years, even when controlling for levels of religious observance (as distinct from political or religious beliefs). See: Basil G. Zimmer and Calvin Goldscheider, “A Further Look at Catholic Fertility,” \textit{Demography} 3, no. 2 (1966): 462-469; Charles F. Westoff and Elise F. Jones, “The End of ‘Catholic’ Fertility,” \textit{Demography} 16, no. 2 (May 1979): 209-217. Compared to other religious groups, Catholics averaged 2.2 children per household - nearly identical to moderate Protestants. Roof and McKinney, \textit{American Mainline Religion}, 161.

\(^{40}\) For Americans over the age of 50, weekly church attendance changed from 48% in 1958 to 46% in 1973. For Americans between 30 and 49 years of age, weekly church attendance changed from 51% in 1958 to 41% in 1973. For Americans between 21 and 29 years of age, weekly church attendance changed from 48% in 1958 to 28% in 1973. Sixty percent of that decrease occurred between 1967, when youth attendance stood at 40%, and 1971, when youth attendance first hit 28%. For a sociological analysis that confirms these findings using a range of other measures, see Putnam, \textit{American Grace}, 72-80.
Parishioners had left the Church at steady but marginal rates across all age groups between 1955 and 1967, but during the following half-decade, twice as many youth under the age of thirty left annually, causing the Church to lose an extraordinary 30% of its college-educated population under the age of thirty in just six years.\footnote{Greeley, et al., Catholic Schools in a Declining Church, 145-146. The authors compare this loss to Protestant groups, who lost 21% of their comparable demographic. They also note that while this trend was most pronounced among youth, there were notable increases in apostasy rates among virtually all Catholic age groups.}

![Figure 15: Church Attendance by Age Group, 1958-1971](image)

As religious youth became increasingly unobservant, campus ministries and religious student organizations stopped being a default part of their associational life at college and suffered a corresponding crisis of their own. Like UCM, the two national organizations for Catholic college students, the National Newman Apostolate and the National Federation of Catholic College Students, both dissolved themselves in 1967.\footnote{John Whitney Evans, The Newman Movement: Roman Catholics in American Higher Education, 1883-1971 (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 164-165.} The Methodist Student Movement, which had been perhaps the most politically active mainline Protestant student organization during the 1960s, phased itself out completely by 1969.\footnote{Robert C. Monk, “United Methodist Campus Ministry and the Methodist Student Movement,” in Russell E. Richey, Dennis M. Campbell, and William B. Lawrence, eds., Connectionalism: Ecclesiology, Mission, and Identity (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1997), 191.} The Student Department
of the YMCA was eliminated in 1970, and although some local campus associations persisted, their numbers had dropped from three-hundred to thirty by 1980.\textsuperscript{44} The Danforth Foundation, a philanthropic group that, according to historian Douglas Sloan, “had been one of the most creative sources of support and development of the Protestant campus ministry,” stopped issuing grants for research on student religious life in the early 1970s, abandoning what it saw as a lost cause.\textsuperscript{45}

Meanwhile, Catholic religious orders, the professional autonomy of which had supported a great deal of new-breed activism, suffered enormous losses across all age groups. Over 4,300 women religious abandoned their orders in the year of 1970 alone, more than eleven times as many as had left in 1950.\textsuperscript{46} Such attrition was compounded by steep drop-offs in the number of young women signing up to replace them, with just under eight percent as many novitiates entering the sisterhood in the early 1970s as had in the late 1950s.\textsuperscript{47} As a result, massive net losses ensued. Between 1965 and 1975 alone, American sisterhoods lost nearly 45,000 members, shrinking by almost a quarter in size.\textsuperscript{48} The outlook was no better for orders of religious priests. The Society of Jesus, better known as the Jesuits, perhaps the most politically active of such American orders, lost approximately 1,900 members between 1965 and 1975, also

\textsuperscript{44} Jean Burkhardt, “Drawing Strength from the Past: The Student Movement of the YMCA’s of the USA, 1970-95,” \textit{Journal of Ecumenical Studies} 32, no. 4 (Fall 1955), 507.

\textsuperscript{45} Sloan, \textit{Faith and Knowledge}, 172.

\textsuperscript{46} Only 381 sisters left in 1950, compared to 4,337 in 1970. The latter year appears to have been a peak for departures, with the number of departures dropping to 1,191 in 1976, the next year for which data is available. See table on leaving trends from 1950 to 1980 in Marie Augusta Neal, \textit{Catholic Sisters in Transition: From the 1960s to the 1980s} (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1984), 21.


contracting by nearly a quarter. By the mid-1980s, more priests had left the order than remained members.\footnote{Peak membership was 8,393 in 1965; that sank to approximately 6,500 members in 1975, a loss of 22.56%. For more, see the graph comparing membership to departures in the appendix of Peter McDonough and Eugene C. Bianchi, \textit{Passionate Uncertainty: Inside the American Jesuits} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), 308.}

Leading liberal religious publications, which new-breed activists used to exert intellectual influence well beyond their numbers, suffered similar hardships. The circulation of \textit{The Christian Century}, the flagship journal of liberal Protestantism, shrank by about a quarter between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s.\footnote{See Figure 8.2 in Elesha J. Coffman, \textit{The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 222.} \textit{Christianity and Crisis} suffered an even larger drop-off in subscriptions, which were slashed by more than half between 1967 and 1973, and was nearly forced to shut down in the wake of subsequent budget crises. As further evidence of the impact of liberal backlash, note that when the magazine responded by tacking further to the left, its subscriptions rebounded to almost double their previous peak.\footnote{\textit{C&C}'s circulation hit a then-high of 18,700 in 1967, before it began dropping for the first time since 1954. It experienced a net loss of 3,000 subscribers in 1969 alone, and settled around 8,500 total subscribers by 1973. Circulation began growing again in the mid-1970s and remained between 17,000 and 20,000 between 1977 and 1980. For more on circulation numbers, \textit{C&C}'s attempt to recapture radicals who were disillusioned with the Protestant establishment, and other indications that subscription defections came more from the left than the right, see: Mark Hulsether, \textit{Building a Protestant Left: Christianity and Crisis Magazine, 1941-1993} (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 242-249.} The circulation of liberal Catholic periodicals like \textit{Commonweal} and \textit{America} shrank by 40\% and X\%, respectively, while more explicitly political Catholic publications like \textit{Interracial Review} folded entirely.\footnote{\textit{Commonweal}'s circulation sat at an all-time high of 50,000 in 1968, but had dropped to around 30,000 by the mid-1970s. See: Rodger Van Allen, \textit{The Commonweal and American Catholicism: The Magazine, The Movement, The Meaning} (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 178. \textit{Interracial Review} ceased publication in 1966.}
an avant-garde Methodist student periodical that *Newsweek* praised as “the most creative and unfettered magazine sponsored by any denomination,” stopped its presses in 1969.53

In short, religious institutions did not simply suffer a generalized crisis of growth in the late 1960s and early 1970s, nor did conservative backlash or a decline in religiosity bring an end to the age of expansion singlehandedly. Rather, the religious transformations that shaped the end of this iconic decade were most acute among religious liberals, new-breed activists, and their organizations. The question that remains is: where did they go? And more importantly, why?

**“Holy Worldliness”: The Roots of Disaffiliation among the Religious Left**

As waves of religious liberals and new-breed activists left their religious institutions in the late 1960s, they did so categorically, abandoning all forms of organizational religious life and seeking authentic faith and social change outside of church walls. In this regard, they were unusual. Every other demographic group that left their inherited faith tradition in this era, according to sociologist Robert Putnam, tended to convert to more compatible religious alternatives. Only political liberals born into liberal religious traditions instead tended to switch their affiliation to ‘none’.54 Those who did so, moreover, were not simply participating in the contemporary anti-establishment zeitgeist. According to a 1978 survey, unchurched and churched Americans exhibited nearly identical levels of trust in almost every national institution, including the military, the Supreme Court, television, and Congress. The sole exception was

---

53 For more, see the discussion of motive. later in this chapter.

organized religion, which the unchurched were less than half as likely to exhibit ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of trust in, and eight times as likely to exhibit ‘very little’ or ‘none’ in (see Fig. 6). In other words, those who disaffiliated were not motivated by an unusual aversion to ‘the establishment;’ they were specifically disenamoured with religious institutions.

Figure 16: Confidence in Select American Institutions, 1978

Although such departures may seem like mass secularization or a burst of irreligion to present-day scholars, for contemporaries, they were a profoundly religious act. In the early postwar years, religious thinkers had developed a socially-engaged vision of faith, which emphasized the centrality of worldly action to religious authenticity. During the mid-1960s, a new generation paired this vision with a critique of modern institutional life, arguing that denominational bureaucracies and centralized hierarchies were inherently inimical to their mission in the world. Informed by these ideas, when religious liberals and new-breederists came into conflict with their institutions, their solution was to move beyond them. They began to practice religion out-of-doors, beyond church walls and free from the constraints of organizational life. In this respect, they were participating in a broader turn away from centralized institutions that took place within the late-1960s New Left, stemming from impulses
that had roots in Christian existentialism, among other intellectual traditions. Yet the religious left was unusual in the degree to which it had previously depended on those very institutions for political leverage, as well as the extent to which disaffiliation stemmed from a reinvention of their identity and moral purpose. The result was the deinstitutionalization of religious liberalism, and of the entities that had been so essential to the previous successes of new-breed activism.

For mainline Protestants, the most influential thinker in this vein was indisputably Harvey Cox, whose 1965 magnum opus, *The Secular City*, sold nearly a million copies in its first few years of publication. Originally written as a study guide for the National Student Christian Foundation, the book was a sweeping treatise on the place of Christianity in a secularizing, urbanizing world, which argued that God was immanent in secular life and called upon readers to meet Him there through service among the poor and dispossessed. A highly readable and provocative text, it was avidly consumed not only by the Protestant youth for which it was written, but also by religious scholars, church administrators, and, in Cox’s own estimation, “an unexpectedly large Catholic audience,” which included Pope Paul VI himself.

Central to Cox’s project was a critique of what he saw as outdated institutional forms, which he believed prevented authentic Christianity from flourishing in the modern world. The church, he argued, was “not in the first instance an institution,” but rather “a people” - in Biblical terms, *laos theou*, or the People of God. By contrast, denominational organizations were a relic of an earlier era of human history, when clannish loyalties led men to erect artificial walls between themselves. Churches had become too bureaucratic, hierarchical, expensive, and thus

---


inherently conservative to fully participate in the contemporary Christian mission of social change and reconciliation. In order to instantiate the true church, Cox argued, Christians were called to do two things. First, they needed to pursue institutional innovation, reorganizing in decentralized networks or autonomous congregations that specialized in particular social issues, as the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion had. Second, they needed to pursue “creative disaffiliation,” a process by which individuals would reject “debilitating institution-centered thinking,” abandon churches that were beholden to organizational logics, and embrace a “holy worldliness.” Only by doing so could they leave “their palaces behind” and step “into God’s permanent revolution.”

In response to calls such as these, Protestant thinkers published a flurry of books recommending specific institutional reforms, typically framed as a return to primitivist Christian models that were democratic, participatory, and capable of prophetic engagement with social problems. Dozens of books, articles, and essay collections flooded the market with such titles as *Christian Witness in the Secular City, Spirituality in the Secular City,* and “Judaism and the Secular City.” The National Lutheran Campus Ministry and the Methodist Church’s Board of Education commissioned studies on campus ministry reform, which concurred with Cox, concluding that they ought to maximize organizational “flexibility and adaptability,” devolve

---


power onto local chapters, and turn the “church-as-institution” into the “church-as-mission.”

Methodist minister Charles E. Mowry, who spent months performing research among lapsed religious youth, exhorted Protestants to abandon the idea that ministry “occurs only in and through local churches,” arguing that the only way to retain “the new generation” was to heed Cox’s call and meet them with “experimental” forms of ministry out “in the world.”

Within the Catholic Church, similar reformist impulses were advanced by the Second Vatican Council, which was charged with the task of aggiornamento; that is, adapting the Church so that it could pursue its mission in the modern world. Although the reforms of Vatican II, as the Council was better known, ranged widely, perhaps its deepest impact lay in its reconceptualization of Catholic institutional life. In 1964, the Council issued a dogmatic constitution, Lumen gentium, which (like Cox) defined the Church not as its visible manifestation in basilicas and parishes, but as a transcendent community of “the people of God.” Although clashes over the implications of this document were fierce, new-breed reformers interpreted its spirit as a democratizing one, which located authentic religiosity in communities

---


61 Despite Vatican II’s undisputed importance to modern Catholicism, there are few scholarly histories of the Council’s impact on American religious life; most accounts are written by Catholic partisans, whose analyses are tinted by their views of the its ‘true’ meaning. For the most illuminating study of Vatican II’s impact on American Catholicism to date, see: Colleen McDannell, *The Spirit of Vatican II: A History of Catholic Reform in America* (New York: Basic Books, 2011). For discussions of Vatican II in seminal histories of American Catholicism more broadly, see: Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1985), 421-454; John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2003), 236-238.
of believers, rather than the organizational apparatuses of the hierarchy.\textsuperscript{62} Just a year later, the Council seemed to take this logic one step further with \textit{Gaudium et spes}, another dogmatic constitution, which called on both laity and clergy to understand their religious mission as having a worldly dimension beyond churchly conversion. By sanctifying the application of Catholic principles to social life as a fundamentally religious pursuit, this document encouraged parishioners, as historian John McGreevy put it, “to resist treating Catholic institutions as fortresses” and to find religion in pursuits beyond parish walls.\textsuperscript{63}

Seeking to fulfill the mandates of the Council, post-conciliar liberal Catholics sought to reinvent religious life in ways that were less institutional and more committed to the concept of mission ‘in the world.’ They empowered groups who had languished at the bottom of the hierarchy’s organizational schema, forming independent associations to represent priests and sisters, for example, and permitting laity to serve on parish councils and participate in the liturgy.\textsuperscript{64} Orders of women religious embarked on a series of particularly dramatic reforms, ranging from the elimination of cloisters to the employment of sisters in full-time secular occupations.\textsuperscript{65} New-breed bishops like Joseph Durick called on the Church to pursue a more “secular ecumenism,” going beyond interfaith outreach “toward a more effective service of God


\textsuperscript{64} Avery Dulles, \textit{The Reshaping of Catholicism} (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); Dolan, \textit{The American Catholic Experience}, 440.

\textsuperscript{65} Patricia Byrne, “In the Parish but Not of It,” 180-194.
in the world, and for the world.” Celebrity priests like Daniel Berrigan held forth on the authenticity of those who found God outside of established Church institutions, singling out for praise “small communities of Jesuits who have totally disestablished themselves and are living in the middle of the real world.” “To be in the Church is to be in the world,” he once wrote to nun-artist Corita Kent, elaborating on this theme; conversely, “to be out of the world is to be out of the Church too.”

Among Jews, parallel calls for the reinvention of organized religious life emerged out of critiques of the modern suburban synagogue, which was often described as alienating and spiritually shallow: mere “shuls with pools and schools,” in the words of historian Michael Staub. The problem, wrote the prolific Jewish scholar Jacob Neusner at the time, lay in the “hyper-structuralism” of Jewish organizations, which entrusted only the rabbi with the power to decide “what it means to be Jewish,” reducing congregants to “well-greased cog[s]” in a machine. The “institutional activity labelled Jewish,” he argued, drawing a distinction between organizational life and ‘true’ religion, “is mostly irrelevant to Judaism.” Rabbi Gerald Goldman, then the national director of Hillel House, the Jewish campus organization, concurred. Although authentic Judaism lay in “community, and not a series of member organizations,” he


68 Daniel Berrigan, “To a College Senior,” n/d, Folder 5, Box 4, MC583, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

69 Quotation from Staub, Torn at the Roots, 153.


wrote, many synagogues and national denominations were instead perversely “organized according to a structure paralleling a corporation.” No wonder Jewish youth felt alienated from them.\(^\text{72}\)

Inspired by these critiques, many Jews, especially those hailing from the Conservative tradition, began to organize *havurot*, communal fellowships designed as decentralized alternatives to Jewish organizational life. Part countercultural commune, part imitation of the romanticized Eastern European shtetl, *havurot* were intended to supplant the hierarchical models of traditional synagogues and place authority over liturgy and religious practice in the hands of members.\(^\text{73}\) Participants frequently used the delightful and enormously popular *Jewish Catalog*, a how-to guide modeled after *The Whole Earth Catalog*, which was inspired by the philosophy that “hardly anyone should have to resort to organizations, professional ‘experts,’ or service agencies in the normal course of creating and enjoying a fulfilling Jewish life.”\(^\text{74}\) Activist rabbi Everett Gendler suggested that suburban Jews who were put off by the *Jewish Catalog*’s countercultural flourishes could nevertheless partake in such alternatives as the “unstructured


\(^{74}\) Richard Siegel, Michael Strassfeld, and Sharon Strassfeld, eds., *The Jewish Catalog: A Do-It-Yourself Kit* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), 262. The *Catalog* was a remarkable best-seller, moving over 200,000 copies in just a decade, second among its publisher’s books only to the Bible: Prell, *Prayer and Community*, 16.
synagogue,” composed of a “buildingless network” of Jewish families meeting in neighborhood homes for the purposes of worship, religious education, and social action.\(^{75}\)

Upon closer examination, many new-breel organizations that appeared to be collapsing or declining in the late 1960s were actually attempting to heed such calls for religious renewal through organizational reform. Consider the example of UCM. When student leaders founded UCM in 1966, they envisioned an organizational structure that fulfilled this reformist spirit. Its very ecumenicity, which brought together mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians, was an attempt to break down churchly divisions and unite students around a shared sense of Christian mission. Its organizational structure, according to Methodist minister Paul Schrading, was designed to be “as minimal and flexible as possible,” so that it could “be free to serve as an enabling instrument of a creative and responsible ‘movement,’” rather than an institutional end-in-itself.\(^{76}\) When explaining the desire of both national Catholic student organizations to become charter members, the North American director for the Pax Romana argued that membership would fulfill the mandates of “the Second Vatican Council, in its spirit and its decrees.” The reason? UCM sought to replace a “federation” with a “movement,” to pursue a “less structured” institutional model. It was “not an organization to be served, but a tool with which one can serve,” and was thus in keeping with Vatican II’s reformist vision.\(^{77}\)


\(^{76}\) Paul E. Schrading, Open Letter to Friends of the UCM, March 1969, in the General Committee Report on the Dissolution of UCM, Folder 572, Box 47, UCM.

\(^{77}\) “University Student Organizations and the Ecumenical Movement,” Report Written at the XXVI World Congress of Pax Romana, in Lyon, France, July 1966, Folder 451, Box 35, UCM. In addition to Thomas O’Herron, Director of the North American Commission of the Pax Romana, the document was also signed by Michael Lenaghan, Director-designate of the North American Commission; Carlos Rodriguez, President of NFCCS; Anne Schneller, Vice President of NFCCS; Michele Fearing, Administrative Director of the National Newman Student Federation; and Michael Barry, Southwest Area Advisor of the National Newman Student Federation.
UCM leaders similarly worked to reform their student programming, so as to decentralize organizational authority and empower their organization’s grassroots. Their efforts are perhaps best illustrated by their reinvention of the Athens conference, the quadrennial gathering that had politicized so many religious students in the 1950s, to meet the demands of the “post-Bonhoeffer and Cox era.” For the 1968 gathering, UCM did away with the old model of panels and lectures, in which students passively listened to the speeches of religious experts and movement leaders like the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. In its place was a new model of self-educational, “non-authoritarian” workshops, known as Depth Education Groups (DEGs). Participants signed up for one of the sixty DEGs on offer, choosing from such topics as Technology and Political Power, The Legal and Moral Rights of the Poor, Abortion, and The Growing Threat of US Militarism, and spent months prior to the conference reading literature on the topic. Upon arrival, the estimated 2,600 participants split up into small discussion groups, overseen by expert moderators, such as Daniel Berrigan, and produced joint reports to share with other attendees. In between their DEG sessions, they were free to take part in countercultural art workshops,

---


79 Quotation from Barbara Hall, a Union Theological Seminary graduate student, in a paper prepared for UCM on the educational convictions of Process ’67. See excerpts from the original paper in Schrading, “DEGs, Process ‘67, and the Future of the UCM,” Folder 368, Box 28, UCM.

80 “Action People: Just Thinking Doesn’t Count,” Brochure, ca. 1967, Folder 363, Box 27, UCM.

81 Attendance estimates from Carol Ann Jones, “Who Attended the Cleveland Week?,” in “Everything that Could Happen Happened and This Is the Report,” Folder 368, Box 28, UCM. The actual number of registrants stood at 2,290, of whom 27.6% were Methodist, 11.3% were Catholic, and 10% were Presbyterian; all other denominations had participation rates in the single digits, including Jews (0.7%). 24.5% of participants listed no denominational affiliation. For a statistical analysis of participants based on questionnaires filled out by 53% of attendees, see: David S. Wiley and Jackson W. Carroll, “Process ‘67 and the University Christian Movement: A Report and Interpretation of a Survey of Conference Participants,” Folder 31, Box 3, Ruth M. Harris Papers, Record Group no. 171, Special Collections, Yale Divinity School Library (hereafter RMH).
attend an avant-garde film festival, and participate in an interfaith worship service that incorporated a draft card burning into the liturgy.82

Although the proximate cause of UCM’s demise was the conflict at the 1969 General Committee meeting, the underlying logic of dissolving the organization, rather than reforming it or building an alternative model in its stead, hinged on the belief that these arguments were merely symptoms of institutionalized religious life. Calling “UCM structures… inadequate,” one Committee member explained his vote to disband as a protest against an organization that “operated only to maintain itself, and to function to manage a movement.” This organizational mentality made it no more than “the youth arm of the NCC, regardless of how much freedom we have had.”83 Another declared that the “vision of a grass roots oriented [sic] movement was still-born [sic],” and that the UCM had become no more than “an elitist milieu” that deluded itself into thinking it could “turn on and educate the local movements.”84 A third proclaimed himself “serious about the need for our own death,” for only out of the ashes of UCM could “a vital prophetic locally based [sic] Christian Movement emerge,” while a fourth suggested that because

82 “The Cleveland Week of Process ’67,” Brochure, Folder 389, Box 30, UCM; Wiley and Carroll, “Process ’67 and the University Christian Movement,” 1. A follow-up program, called “University Inside Out,” sought to introduce the DEG model to higher education more broadly, so as create a more “authentic expression of the Christian community” and free men from the “restricting and dehumanizing structures” of campus ministry and the modern multiversity. See: “University Inside Out: A Call for Total University Involvement in Community Reeducation,” ca. October 1968, Folder 753, Box 47, UCM.

83 Nell Sale, Speech Delivered to Advisory Council, March 1969, in the General Committee Report on the Dissolution of UCM, Folder 572, Box 47, UCM.

UCM “did not reflect or creatively respond to the ‘grass-roots’” anyways, he doubted that its dissolution would “seriously affect any functioning local or regional grouping.”85

Nearly identical logic led to the dismantling of the other national religious student organizations featured throughout this dissertation. The Newman Apostolate, for example, which represented Catholic students on non-Catholic campuses, created a commission in the mid-1960s to “reevaluate the structures and organization” of its national body “in the light of Vatican II.”86 It concluded that the organization’s structure led it to value recruitment over its apostolic mission, and condemned it for using recreational halls and summer retreats as bait to keep youth in the Church’s fold. The solution, they recommended, was to eliminate Newman’s national structure entirely and instead let local bodies naturally evolve into “a searching, believing, loving, worshipping” movement committed “to the service of human needs.” Newman’s national congress overwhelmingly adopted these recommendations and, in the fall of 1967, voted itself out of existence.87 The Methodist Student Movement, meanwhile, dissolved itself only a few months earlier on nearly identical grounds. According to its official phase-out proposal, its leadership believed that the “old forms and structures” of the organization had


86 Quotation is from Catholic Student News Service mimeographs, quoted in Evans, The Newman Movement, 164.

87 Account and quotations are drawn from the commission’s meeting minutes and coverage of the organization’s dissolution in its Newman Apostolate Newsletter, described in Evans, The Newman Movement, 160-165. Unlike UCM, the Newman Movement lived on as a series of grassroots chapters linked by a loosely federated national network: Ibid. , 166-172.
become too “ineffectual and cumbersome” to support students’ true “missional tasks of service to the world.”

Local campus ministries were also moving away from their historical focus on membership drives and adopting decentralized models of worship and outreach. The most popular were so-called ‘coffee house ministries,’ which were literal coffee houses run by campus ministers as an alternative to traditional, churchly venues for student religious life. One popular advice manual quirkily interspersed advice on how to use an electric percolator with a call for ministers to follow “the incarnate Lord” out of the church and “into the world.”

Thanks to books like these, the coffee house phenomenon spread like wildfire, growing from a meager one-hundred coffee houses in the summer of 1965 to over a thousand less than a year later. Self-described “beatnik priest” Malcolm Boyd praised this model for breaking down artificial boundaries between “worldly” and “holy,” providing spaces for authentic worship outside of “stodgy Establishment halls.”

Outside of campus settings, liberal clergy and their congregants were similarly moving beyond traditional churchly forms, holding non-institutional services that did not count towards church attendance statistics, but were perceived as a more vibrant form of worship. Jewish

---

88 From the “Proposal for the Phasing Out of the National Structures of the Methodist Student Movement,” quoted in Monk, “United Methodist Campus Ministry and the Methodist Student Movement,” 191. Monk goes on to note, in the following footnote, that students were influenced in this decision by the work of Tillich, Bonhoeffer, and Cox.


90 Ibid., 19. Note that not while campus coffee houses were by far the most common, similar ministries were set up in a variety of settings, ranging from Yosemite National Park (under the aegis of the NCC’s Christian Ministry in National Parks program) to Atlantic City (jointly sponsored by the YWCA and the Atlantic City Council of Churches, with the goal of fostering interracial discussions): Ibid., 103-106.

91 Malcolm Boyd, Foreword to Ibid., 13-16. Similarly, Jewish federations began funding campus havurot everywhere from Santa Cruz to Albuquerque to Northfield, Minnesota, attempting to supplant the hierarchical model of Hillel House by creating autonomous religious communities run by and for Jewish students. See: Staub, Torn at the Roots, 198; Oppenheimer, Knocking on Heaven’s Door, 126.
*havurot* held Shabbat morning services outside of synagogues, adopting an attitude of “open-ended experimentalism,” according to Rabbi Arthur Green, founder of one of the first *havurot*. Their liturgies included poetry from T.S. Eliot and E.E. Cummings; readings of the flood story paired with performances of Stravinsky; and the use of psychedelic folk music for the *Yotser*, or opening blessing. Similarly, post-conciliar Catholics transformed the most traditional of American religious services, the Sunday mass, into one of the most radical. Beyond well-known changes to the liturgy, such as the introduction of the vernacular, Catholics introduced folk singing and acoustic guitars, held services outdoors, and even abandoned their official parishes to meet in *havurot*-like communities called “underground churches” or “floating parishes,” which were “covenanting ecclesial units, neither territorially nor hierarchically located,” according to one Jesuit sociologist.

In addition to such relatively amicable outmigration undertaken in the name of reform, liberal disaffiliation was also driven by clashes between new-breed and activists and liberal denominational leaders over politics, especially over the issue of racial justice. In the context of civil rights activism in the urban North, new-breed activists felt alienated from their parent institutions when local hierarchies condemned open housing marches in Chicago for ‘breaching the peace,’ or disavowed a moral obligation to invest in black economic development in the wake of James Forman’s “Black Manifesto.” Influenced by the convergence of this intra-


93 Over time, Green notes, *Havurot Shalom* slowly eliminated some of the more experimental liturgical elements, both because it “became extremely difficult to produce anything creative on a week-to-week basis” and because the variety of “modes of expression” occasionally created “a staccato hodgepodge.” Arthur Green, “Some Liturgical Notes from Havurot Shalom,” in Neusner, ed., *Contemporary Judaic Fellowship In Theory and In Practice*.

94 Quotation from Fr. Rocco Caporale, in John C. Haughey, “The Underground Church,” *America*, May 18, 1968. For an overview of folk masses, floating parishes, and other such innovations, see: Oppenheimer, *Knocking on Heaven’s Door*, 62-94;
religious conflict and intellectual critiques of institutional life, they increasingly sought out organizational alternatives. Activist rabbis began to stage interracial Freedom Seders in historically black churches, rather than their own synagogues, where neo-conservatives were rallying their forces and accusing their co-religionists on the left of engaging in a “crude political rape of a religious tradition.” Clergy began to build political networks like the Clergy Consultation Service on Abortion, avoiding associations with centralized religious bodies and moving from a politics of witness to a politics of sanctuary.\textsuperscript{95}

As fractious as conflict over racial equality was, however, battles over gender and sexuality were even more prominent in the move towards disaffiliation, not least because women made up a numerical majority in every mainstream liberal religious institution.\textsuperscript{96} Most new-breel women believed in a faith that was gender-blind, that called men and women equally to serve the mission of the church in the world. Yet their faith’s institutions often seemed to treat them as second-class citizens, most obviously by denying them ordination, and thus both the legitimacy to perform the liturgy and the authority that came with official standing within church hierarchies. At a moment when the critiques of Harvey Cox and Jacob Neusner were ascendant, religious feminists often concluded that something inherent in the nature of religious institutions made them incapable of practicing what they preached. To quote Cox on the subject, if the only “problem with denominational organizations” was that their “splendid institutional apparatus” was “being used in the wrong way,” then “a minor palace insurrection in denominational

\textsuperscript{95} See discussions in Chapters Four and Five.

\textsuperscript{96} For more on historical trends in American women’s religiosity, including their relationship to religious dissent and innovation, see: Ann Braude, “Women’s History Is American Religious History,” in Thomas A. Tweed, ed., \textit{Retelling U.S. Religious History} (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).
headquarters might win the day.” But in reality, “the problem [lay] much deeper… within the structure of the churches itself.”

This logic led many women who became involved in turn-of-the-decade feminist organizing to abandon religious organizational life entirely. Consider Charlotte Bunch, the poster-child for the religious left whose intellectual biography framed this dissertation’s first chapter. In the mid-1960s, she had been extraordinarily active in new-breed organizations, through which she provided support for the Selma marches, labored at a radical work-camp in Japan, marched on Washington, and founded development programs in low-income, urban neighborhoods. In 1966, she was elected the first president of UCM, at a time when women were being systematically denied leadership roles in secular New Left organizations. During the late 1960s, however, she became increasingly involved in women’s liberation activism - joining the protest outside of the 1968 Miss America pageant, for example, from whence the myth of ‘bra burning’ arose - and eventually came out as a political lesbian and left her church. Her reason for doing so, she later recalled, was that she had become unwilling to “be affiliated with an institution that labeled me a sinner [for her sexuality] or denied me the right to enter its highest callings.” Although she still felt like “part of the wider Christian community,” it had become necessary to terminate her “institutional relationship with the Methodist Church.”

97 Cox, The Secular City, 202.
99 Ibid., 132. For more on the relationship between women, politics, and leadership positions within New Left organizations, see: Sara Evans, Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) - an especially interesting source, given Evans’ own background as an active member of religious student organizations that encouraged women’s leadership.
100 Charlotte Bunch, in Evans, ed., Journeys that Opened Up the World, 139. Italics mine. Importantly, many of Bunch’s fellow feminists were exceptions to this rule and chose instead to stay within the Methodist Church (albeit often on the organizational margins) and continue to fight for gender equality in the name of shared religious
Similar concerns led the leadership of many new-breed groups to terminate their organizational relationships with denominational structures, often leading to their eventual dissolution. Such was the case with *motive.*, a Methodist periodical that had been by far the most important student publication of the religious left. The initial catalyst leading to *motive.*’s disaffiliation from the United Methodist Church was the controversy surrounding a double-issue that it devoted to “the liberation of women” in the spring of 1969. Upon the magazine’s release, angry letters to the editor flooded in, criticizing its open discussion of lesbianism, critiques of normative gender roles, and extensive use of profanity. One “Tax Payer and Loyal American” wrote to demand that the editors “stop sending this garbage to the students in our Colleges,” although he wryly suggested that the magazine was still “good for outhouses.”

*motive.* shut down shortly after. Yet it was not because the Methodist Church bowed to such pressure and pulled its support, as some accounts imply. Rather, the religious students believed that the solution to such conflict lay in creative disaffiliation and institutional principles. See, for example, the retrospectives of Jan Griesenger, Sheila McCurdy, and Eleanor Scott Meyers, in Evans, ed., *Journeys that Opened Up the World.*

101 According to a 1968 readership study, *motive.* had 36,984 subscribers, 48% of whom were 18-24 years old and 57% of whom were students. 35% of respondents indicated that they were active in politics and 29% had participated in a political demonstration in the past year. Members of the latter category averaged 2.65 demonstrations. “A Readership Study of *motive.***,” ca. 1968, Folder 576, Box 47, UCM.

102 *motive.* XXIX, nos. 6 & 7 (March/April 1969).


104 Members of the Women’s Society of Christian Service of the St. Mark’s United Methodist Church, Crewe, VA, Letter to the Editor, *motive.*, XXX, no. 1 (October 1969). Letters of support were sent in as well, of course, including one from a student at Brandeis who argued that “the fact that people oppose you means only that they cannot ignore what you are saying.” See: Jackie Hyman, Letter to the Editor, *motive.*, XXX, no. 1 (October 1969).
independence. The General Secretary of the Church’s Division of Higher Education did indeed cancel the issue immediately following the women’s liberation issue, but by the next academic year, the presses were running as usual. According to the student editorial board, he had specifically refused to censor future issues, “despite heavy pressure to do so,” and gave the board the “authority” to continue to “strike out in new directions.” Even with these assurances, however, students became increasingly convinced that they “could no longer function under the church” and decided to negotiate the magazine’s independence “through mutual agreement.” They quickly discovered that their subscription revenue was too meager to “survive without church money,” much to their dismay, and used what resources remained to put out two final issues. One was on lesbian feminism, the other on gay men’s liberation, and both celebrated the liberatory nature of their short bout of independent publishing. Disaffiliation had enabled them to write, in the words of the feminist issue, “our own magazine,” free from the constraints of institutions that were part of a “male supremacist system.”

Catholic feminists and their organizations, by and large, resolved conflicts over gender equality not through such formal disaffiliation, but by appropriating and reinventing sacred forms on the margins of Church life, holding unsanctioned feminist masses and building decentralized religious networks outside of the hierarchy. Many of these women began illicitly participating in Catholic liturgies in ‘underground’ church services during the late-1960s. By the

---

105 See, for example: Sloan, *Faith and Knowledge*, 166.


1970s, they were reworking the liturgy itself for explicitly feminist purposes - replacing masculine pronouns with feminine ones, including readings from activists like Mary Daly, and most controversially, having women consecrate the Eucharist.\(^{109}\) Following the Vatican’s unequivocal rejection of women’s ordination in the late 1970s, Catholic feminist organizations banded together to form Women-Church, a loose affiliation of Catholic feminist groups - members “did not want to create another centralized institution” - that served as a church beyond the Church.\(^{110}\) One activist approvingly described the organization’s vision of Catholic community as “a communitarian grass-roots egalitarian utopian redemptive non-sexist approximation of our particular vision of the Gospel.”\(^{111}\) Feminist liturgies were similarly popular in both Protestant and Jewish circles, although they took a less anti-institutional bent as major denominations began ordaining women in the 1970s.

Informed by mid-1960s critiques of religious institutions and committed to a faith that was engaged with the world, religious liberals and new-breed activists in this era pursued a vision of religiosity that led them away from organized religious life. Whether the immediate catalyst for change was general dissatisfaction with traditional churchly forms, sharp conflict over gender equality, or the perception of national policy victories, the sum consequence was the disaffiliation of religious liberals and the de-institutionalization of organizations that had been

---


\(^{110}\) Almost all member organizations performed unsanctioned feminist liturgies, and most supported feminist protests, educational programs, and publications, and a broader social justice agenda as well. The exception was Catholics for a Free Choice, discussed in Chapter Six, which was strictly a political advocacy group. See Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Women-Church: An American Catholic Feminist Movement,” in Mary Jo Weaver, ed., \textit{What’s Left?: Liberal American Catholics} (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 46-62.

\(^{111}\) Quotation from Rosemary Radford Ruether, a prominent Catholic feminist, speaking about the possible visions presented at a 1978 Women’s Ordination Conference held in Baltimore. Ruether is quoted in Henold, \textit{Catholic and Feminist}, 213. On the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s “Declaration on the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood” and the reactions of Catholic feminists, see: \textit{Ibid.}, 189-195.
central to new-breed activism in the 1960s. As the example of CCS disbanding on the eve of the culture wars may suggest, this trend would have unintended consequences for the religious left in the coming years.

**Consequences: The Eclipse of the Religious Left**

When evaluating the consequences of de-institutionalization, it is important to distinguish between *organizational* decline and the decline of a ‘religious left’ more broadly. New-breed activists who left their inherited denominations or disbanded their parachurch organizations typically remained active, both politically and religiously, in non-institutional settings. Phil Berrigan was defrocked by the Josephites, yet remained in active in Jonah House, a radical Catholic community for which he performed pacifist liturgies, and in anti-nuclear, direct-action protests through the Plowshares movement.112 Charlotte Bunch left the Methodist Church, but remained a prominent feminist and human rights activist, and recently reflected that her work since leaving “is still part of the struggle I began in the ‘60s to find a values-based politics.”113 Individual chapters of the Student Y and the Newman Club persisted, even after the demise of their national parent organizations, remaining active with the support of their universities.114

In the process of disaffiliating, however, new-breed activists both limited their ability to recruit for the future and diminished their political leverage in the present. When campus ministries and religious student groups were default parts of associational life on campus, their commitment to social action through study groups, international exchanges, urban volunteer

---


113 Charlotte Bunch in Evans, ed., *Journeys that Opened Up the World*, 139.

programs had far-reaching political effects.\textsuperscript{115} As these organizations shrank, eliminated programming due to lack of funding, or disbanded entirely, their ability to awaken future generations diminished correspondingly. Meanwhile, as national denominations implemented personnel cutbacks in the wake of budget crises, the number of professionally autonomous positions available for new-breed clergy declined as well. Fewer activists could find professional employment within the church, more activists were leaving it in the first place, and the reservoir of moral authority that came with preaching politics from the pulpit declined in step. Those who remained within their churches found that their political leverage was shrinking anyways, as public perceptions of the evolving crisis within liberal religious groups led moderate politicians to doubt whether new-breed clergy had as much influence over their flock as they often claimed.\textsuperscript{116}

At precisely the same historical moment, meanwhile, religious conservatives were beginning to flex their organizational muscle. As a spate of recent studies have shown, the origins of conservative institutional growth lie much deeper in the past than the late 1960s. During the Great Depression, Southern evangelicals began migrating westward in droves, transplanting their churches across the Sunbelt South and expanding formerly regional organizations into national networks that stretched from coast to coast.\textsuperscript{117} In the early 1940s, evangelical leaders founded the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), which served as an institutional rival to the liberal Federal Council of Churches (FCC) and a clearinghouse for

\textsuperscript{115} For more, see the lengthy discussion in Chapter Two.

\textsuperscript{116} For an illustration of this latter phenomenon, see the discussion of politicians’ reactions to religious involvement in Northern civil rights activism in Chapter Four.

\textsuperscript{117} Dochuk, \textit{From Bible Belt to Sunbelt}, esp. 3-76. See also: Joel A. Carpenter, \textit{Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
religious opposition to New Deal liberalism.  Politically, conservative Protestants had been flirting with the Republican Party at least since Democrats nominated Catholic progressive Al Smith in the late 1920s, and in the 1940s and 1950s, the GOP began a campaign of coordinated evangelical outreach, hoping to win the loyalty of traditionally Democratic voters.

Yet it was not until this later moment that these organizational developments began to pay significant dividends, producing a divergence in growth patterns that allowed conservative Protestant groups to rapidly surpass their liberal competitors in terms of membership and revenue. At the dawn of the 1960s, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) was a sizeable denomination, but it remained slightly smaller than the United Methodist Church (UMC), for example. Over the next two decades, however, while UMC membership flatlined, the SBC added another 3.9 million members, growing by an astounding 40%. This astronomical growth rate vastly exceeded every other leading liberal Protestant church (see Fig. 7), allowing the SBC to balloon to nearly 1.5 times the size of the UMC by 1980, making it the single largest Protestant denomination in the United States. Moreover, as had been the case for nearly every religious denomination a decade earlier, more members produced more money. Between 1966 and 1980, the SBC’s average congregational contributions increased steadily, growing by almost half. By contrast, despite roughly comparable growth rates during the years prior, the Lutheran Church in America, the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, and the Episcopal Church all

---

118 Dochuk, From Bible Belt to Sunbelt, 118-119.


120 In 1960, the UMC had 9,893,094 members, while the SBC had 9,731,591 members. In 1980, the UMC had shrunk to 9,584,711 members, while the SBC grew to 13,600,126 members. Figure 7 visualizes membership growth as a percentage of 1960 baseline statistics in order to normalize growth rates across varying absolute values.
experienced either complete stagnation or net losses in their income (see Fig. 8). By 1980, Southern Baptists took in $2.1 billion annually, one-and-a-half times as much as those three liberal Protestant denominations combined. 

![Figure 17: Protestant Membership Trends, 1960-1980](image1)

![Figure 18: Protestant Revenue Trends, 1960-1980](image2)

This dramatically divergent pattern of growth even swept up college-age youth, leading to a revival of evangelical campus organizations at a time when their liberal counterparts were closing up shop. Between 1970 and 1980, the membership of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship

121 The SBC reported $1,409,893,956 in total congregational contributions in 1966, compared to $2,080,375,258 in 1980, an increase of 47.56%. All figures adjusted to 1980 dollars to account for inflation.

122 The 1980 sum total of congregational contributions for the Lutheran Church in America, the United Presbyterian Church in the USA, and the Episcopal Church was $1,385,698,256, which the SBC exceeded by a factor of 1.50.
(IVCF), an evangelical student organization, came close to tripling. Its national field staff more than tripled, its budget nearly tripled, and its national conferences consistently attracted between ten and twenty-thousand students, a massive increase over the roughly six-thousand that had been attending in the mid-1960s.\(^\text{123}\) Campus Crusade for Christ, another major evangelical student group, experienced similarly explosive growth. Historian John G. Turner has described the late 1960s as “the organization’s golden age,” with its staff expanding from a not-inconsiderable three-hundred in 1963 to approximately three-thousand just a decade later, enabling it to staff evangelical ministries on hundreds of campuses in the United States and abroad.\(^\text{124}\)

Although the reforms of the 1960s are sometimes blamed for the demise of liberal religion, on the grounds that they replaced religious orthodoxies with mere politics and pop culture, such evangelical campus groups grew precisely because of such innovations. Whereas their liberal rivals emphasized the importance of action in the world, evangelicals used countercultural forms to stress the importance of life within the church, making conversion central to their vision of salvation. Campus Crusade kept a Christian folk band on its payroll, staged flashy, direct-action counter-protests at New Left events, and even paid staff members to grow beards and long hair to perform outreach to campus hippies.\(^\text{125}\) At its 1972 national

\(^{123}\) IVCF counted 10,713 students as members in the 1970-71 academic year, compared to 28,559 in the 1980-81 academic year, increasing by a factor of 2.67. Its number of field staff grew 95 from to 340, increasing by a factor of 3.57. Its budget grew from $5,411,216 to $15,316,000 (adjusted to 1980 dollars), increasing by a factor of 2.83. Urbana ‘64 had 6,264 participants, compared to Urbana ’70 (12,304), Urbana ’73 (14,158), Urbana ‘76 (17,112), and Urbana ’79 (16,625). See data tables in: Keith Hunt and Gladys Hunt, For Christ and the University: The Story of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship of the USA, 1940-1990 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 385-414.


\(^{125}\) Ibid., 121-133. IVCF also experimented with such forms, including folk guitars in religious services, for example, and staging ‘street evangelism’ that used pop-up skits to win souls for Christ: Hunt and Hunt, For Christ and the University, 262-264, 288.
gathering, dubbed “Godstock” by the editors of Christianity Today, eighty-five thousand attendees not only thrilled to the sermons of Billy Graham, but also danced to Johnny Cash, slept in tent cities, and frolicked in muddy fields. There was a strong current of social awareness in the programming, as there had been at the Athens conferences. But rather than exhorting these students to go forth and implement their vision in the world, delegates were trained in techniques for “winning souls” for evangelicalism, conference organizers collected pledges of conversion to Christ, and Billy Graham thunderously declared that “hearts must be changed before problems can be solved.”

Although evangelicals remained politically diverse in the late 1960s, this moment was one in which moral conservatives began to institutionalize, building parachurch organizations that (like new-breed organizations before them) bridged historical religious divisions in the name of shared political goals. Nowhere was this development more pronounced than on the issue of abortion. Conservative Catholics, who believed that life began at the moment of conception and considered abortion tantamount to infanticide, began organizing lobbying groups with the aid of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (NCCB) as early as 1967, in opposition to abortion reform legislation in California and New York. Although conservative evangelicals were wary of Catholic politics and less likely to believe that ensoulment occurred so early, they

---

126 Turner, Bill Bright & Campus Crusade for Christ, 138-144. Italics mine.


increasingly associated abortion with a liberal culture of permissiveness, which they believed 
eroded traditional family values.\textsuperscript{129} As the issue of abortion gained traction in national politics, 
activists from both traditions worked together to overcome historical animosity and formalize an 
interfaith alliance. Around the turn of the decade, the National Right to Life Committee, a pro-
life organization originally sponsored by the NCCB, spun itself off from the Catholic hierarchy, 
captured a growing wave of politicized evangelicals, and became a massive interfaith lobbying 
group that still exercises inordinate influence over abortion politics today.\textsuperscript{130}

Thanks to the growing organizational might of such advocacy groups, which could 
reliably deliver voters to the polls, a symbiotic relationship developed between the Christian 
right and a Republican Party in need of votes from the traditionally Democratic base. GOP 
candidates began using abortion as a wedge issue to peel conservative Catholics away from the 
New Deal coalition in late-1960s gubernatorial campaigns, a tactic that they adopted more 
aggressively during President Nixon’s run for reelection.\textsuperscript{131} White evangelical voters held the 
key to breaking the Democratic Party’s ‘Solid South,’ particularly amidst the disappointment that 
followed President Jimmy Carter’s first term.\textsuperscript{132} Canny conservative leaders like Jerry Falwell 
and Pat Robertson capitalized on this moment, using charismatic televangelism to garner media 
attention and building national organizations like the Moral Majority and Christian Voice to

\textsuperscript{129} For more, see discussion of evangelical theology and abortion politics in Chapter Six.

\textsuperscript{130} Scott Flipse, “Below-the-Belt Politics: Protestant Evangelicals, Abortion, and the Foundation of the New 
Religious Right, 1960-1975,” in David Farber and Jeff Roche, eds., The Conservative Sixties (New York: P. Lang, 
2003); Michael W. Cuneo, “Life Battles: The Rise of Catholic Militancy Within the American Pro-Life Movement,” 
in Mary Jo Weaver and Scott Appleby, eds., Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America (Bloomington, IN: 
Indiana University Press, 1995).

\textsuperscript{131} Greenhouse and Siegel, “Before (and After) Roe v. Wade,” 2052-2059; Lawrence T. King, “Abortion Makes 

\textsuperscript{132} Dochuk, From Bible Belt to Sunbelt, 326-396.
exert direct influence over Republican policy planks.\textsuperscript{133} The power of the Christian right lay in the threat of these organized masses. “We have together, with the Protestants and Catholics, enough votes to run this country,” Robertson declared in 1979, somewhat overstating his case. “And when the people say, ‘We’ve had enough,’ we are going to take over.”\textsuperscript{134}

The irony of these divergent outcomes is too rich to not comment upon. Conservative religious groups, which preached an individualistic ethic centered around conversion, personal morality, and apocalyptic jeremiads about mainstream American social life, built up a massive array of national institutions that turned them into a cornerstone of the conservative political establishment. Liberal religious groups, which preached a fundamentally social ethic, centered around community life, social justice for the dispossessed, and the immanence of God in the secular world, retreated from their institutions and consequently reduced their organizational leverage over national social policy.

That said, it is worth tempering this portrait of unalloyed divergence. Whatever rhetorical flourishes folks like Falwell may have favored, the Christian right was never as powerful as its organizational presence made it seem. Even within evangelical circles, negative or indifferent attitudes towards the Moral Majority outnumbered positive attitudes by a ratio of 3:2.\textsuperscript{135} Conservative Catholics, meanwhile, may have been stalwart allies on issues of sexual morality, but the Church’s social teachings did not map neatly onto American partisan politics. Lurking conflict over issues like immigration reform pointed to the underlying fragility of the Catholic-evangelical alliance. More broadly, although evangelical groups grew at a rate that was

\textsuperscript{133} Williams, \textit{God’s Own Party}, 159-186.

\textsuperscript{134} Quoted in \textit{Ibid.}, 159.

remarkable relative to liberal religious groups, their expansion was less impressive in absolute terms. In 1973, conservative evangelical churches accounted for 23% of Americans; at their peak twenty years later, their share of the population had grown to only 28%, and it has declined substantially since then.\textsuperscript{136} In other words, like the religious left before it, the Christian right used its organizational resources to exert influence far beyond its actual numbers. In doing so, they eclipsed their rivals, seizing the mantle of moral majority for themselves. Although their rise would remain a defining feature of American political life for decades to come, it was never as complete a victory as they claimed.

\textsuperscript{136}Putnam, \textit{American Grace}, 104-107.
**EPILOGUE**

When he was running for reelection in 1980, President Jimmy Carter found himself rapidly losing support among Southern evangelicals, the very voters that had propelled him into office four years earlier. Concerned with everything from Carter’s support for the Equal Rights Amendment to his opposition to prayer in schools, this key demographic was publicly calling into question not only his politics, but also the authenticity of his faith. Carter “professed to be a Christian,” evangelical minister Tim LaHaye declared, yet “his administration” was decidedly “un-Christian.”

Officials from the Southern Baptist Convention accused him of secretly worshipping “secular humanism.”

“Any staunch Christian would not support gays, would not support the ERA which contradicts God’s plan for women and would support voluntary prayer in school,” one evangelical wrote, in an irate letter to the White House. “You don’t even deserve to be called Baptists.”

“Until this year,” Carter told a crowd sorrowfully, while campaigning in Memphis, “I have never had anybody question the sincerity of my belief in God and my commitment of my life as a Christian.”

Once out of office, he was a bit more frank. After Moral Majority leader Jerry Falwell reportedly declared that anyone who supported arms control treaties was “not a Christian,” Carter replied, “Falwell can, in a very Christian way as far as I’m concerned, go to Hell.”

---


These exchanges are suggestive. First, as indicated by the Democratic Party’s successful nomination of Jimmy Carter, a born-again Christian committed to social justice, the postwar religious left did not evaporate in the wake of the institutional crises of the early 1970s. Their political work continued, as did their battle with rivals on the right over the proper relationship between faith and politics. Yet very few accounts of the postwar religious left go beyond the 1960s, and those that have are overwhelmingly critical. Sociologist Stephen A. Kent, for example, argued that this era saw a shift from “radical politics to mystical religion,” fracturing the activist landscape into “ideologically constricted doctrinal camps” that “relinquished opportunities of actively engaging… the wider social and political world.”6 Historian Eugene McCarraher claimed that liberal religion devolved into “privatized, purely therapeutic collages of belief and practice,” manifestations of the “centrifugal forces of late capitalist culture” that lacked the “evangelical energy necessary for any social gospel.”7 Religious scholar Charles A. Meconis framed the post-1960s history of the religious left in terms of “dissolution,” as leading activists “dropped out of the movement in a more complete sense and embraced in varying degrees the ideologies of Marxism, libertarian socialism, and/or feminism.”8

To the contrary, I have argued that new-breed disaffiliation was not a shallow embrace of spiritual seeking or therapeutic culture, but a principled attempt to resurrect the politics of conscience beyond church walls. If I am correct, the question that remains is: what came after disaffiliation? What was the fate of the religious left’s post-institutional project, and how did it


continue to shape the history of liberal religion and American political life? The evidence suggests that many activists who left their churches and synagogues turned to local politics, organizing disempowered communities and attempting to make the promise of federal policy victories a social reality on the ground. By moving beyond a relentless focus on national party alignments and political discourse, historians may uncover a rich tradition of post-1960s religious engagement in the arena of “front porch politics,” as scholar Michael Stewart Foley has dubbed it.9

Yet religious liberals did not confine themselves solely to the front porch, and a national history of their post-1960s political activities may also bear fruit. At the Presidential level, liberals in the Democratic Party have nominated a surprising number of explicitly religious candidates since 1970s, including not only born-again Christian Jimmy Carter, but also Catholic liberals George McGovern and John Kerry, the Scripture-quoting Southern Baptist Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama, a non-denominational Christian who attended a United Church of Christ congregation committed to black liberation theology when he declared his candidacy. Moreover, although liberal religious institutions suffered enormous losses amidst new-breed disaffiliation, a crisis is not the same as a collapse. They remained both solvent and politically active. Losing nearly a third of a denomination’s membership, as the Presbyterian Church in the USA had by 1980, is devastating. But it still leaves over two-thirds to spare, which in the case of the PC-

9 Michael Stewart Foley, Front Porch Politics: The Forgotten Heyday of American Activism in the 1970s and 1980s (New York: Hill & Wang, 2013). Although Foley pays little attention to religious activists, other scholars have also identified the ‘turn to the local’ as a key characteristic of the politics of the post-1960s religious left. In his study of ‘Christian antiliberals,’ religious studies scholar Jason Bivins suggests using the model of ‘koinonia’ for this period, describing the politics of the Berrigans and liberal evangelicals in the Sojourners community as an attempt “to empower citizens in their everyday lives and to provide a sense of meaning through direct political action rooted in the life of a community.” Similarly, Dan McKanan portrays the post-1960s path of the religious left in terms of a turn to the local, arguing that they no longer hoped “to transform national politics in the short term,” but instead “sought explicitly identity-based forms of religious community.” See: Jason C. Bivins, The Fracture of Good Order: Christian Antiliberalism and the Challenge to American Politics (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 160; Daniel McKanan, Prophetic Encounters: Religion and the American Radical Tradition (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 226-227.
USA amounted to just a shade under two-and-a-half million souls and an annual revenue stream of more than half a billion dollars. The mainline may have been shunted to the sideline, as journalist K.L. Billingsley has put it, with its relative influence drowned out by better-organized rivals on the right. But it still commanded an extraordinary amount of resources and political capital, which surely continued to influence its congregants, Democratic Party politicians, and liberal policy makers. More in-depth treatments of their post-1960s trajectory await.

Beyond the need to expand the history of the religious left on its own terms, the conflict between Carter and conservative evangelicals illustrates the need to reconceptualize scholarly narratives of the religious right, so as to reflect the degree to which it evolved in conversation with liberal religious counterparts. For studies of pre-World War II moments, such an approach has been standard. Conservative religious politics are consistently contextualized within broader struggles with their spiritual rivals over the relationship between religion and public life. Both sides are present in historical overviews of the antebellum denominational conflict over slavery, the fundamentalist-modernist debates, and early twentieth century clashes between Social Gospelers and evangelicals on political economy. Yet when it comes to histories of the postwar United States, this interreligious framework has fallen decidedly out of fashion. This state of affairs is partly the result of a lack of synthetic literature on the postwar religious left, and partly of the desire to understand modern religious conservatism on its own terms, as more than mere ‘backlash.’ Yet it obscures the degree to which Christian conservatives were responding to religious counterparts on the left, particularly during the tumultuous 1960s.

---


By chronicling the history of new-breed activism, I hope to suggest the value of restoring a framework of interreligious conflict to postwar United States political history. Even when the religious right was not explicitly criticizing the National Council of Churches or the liberal wing of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, its public claims were implicit rejections of liberal alternatives. The core of its political project was premised on its self-representation as the last bastion of true Christianity, holding the line against an encroaching liberal state and the cultural creep of secular humanism. That position relied on the mythical construction of a secular enemy, and so religious conservatives self-consciously worked to deny that the religious left was authentically religious. The Moral Majority framed its fight as being with a godless left, not a religious one; Falwell did not accuse Carter of holding different religious values, but of holding none at all. By exploring the extent to which the religious right was in fact forging its political agenda through contentious interreligious dialogue, historians can begin to deconstruct these myths. In the process, they may deepen our understanding of how and why the religious right became so politically engaged at this particular moment, even though its intellectual roots ran deeper and it had been organizing for decades previously.

In the process, scholars can restore balance to a historiography that has swung between extremes, leading to a more synthetic understanding of the complex and contradictory ways that religion has shaped political life in the postwar United States. The result will not only shed new light on the religious politics of our past, but will also illuminate how that legacy continues to influence our present, perhaps providing critical insight into how to best shape our shared future.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Manuscript Collections


Association of Hillel and Jewish Campus Professionals. Records. MS-104. American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.

Brickner, Balfour. Papers. MS-776. American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.


Flory, Margaret. Papers. Record Group no. 86. Special Collections. Yale Divinity School Library, New Haven, CT.

Harris, Ruth M. Papers. Record Group no. 171. Special Collections. Yale Divinity School Library, New Haven, CT.

Higgins, George Gilmary. Papers. Collection no. ACUA 129. The American Catholic Research Center and University Archives. The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC.

Lipman, Eugene J. Papers. MS-862. American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.

Maguire, Bruce and Student YMCA. Papers. Record Group no. 78. Special Collections. Yale Divinity School Library, New Haven, CT.

Mallette, Daniel J. Papers. Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL.


National Federation of Temple Youth. Records. MS-266. American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.


Nussbaum, Perry E. Papers. MS-430. American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.

Religious Action Center. Records. MS-873. American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.

Social Ethics Pamphlet Collection. Record Group no. 73. Special Collections. Yale Divinity School Library, New Haven, CT.


Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions. Archives. Record Group no. 42. Special Collections. Yale Divinity School Library, New Haven, CT.

Union for Reform Judaism. Records. MS-72. American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, OH.


United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Youth Department. Records. Collection no. 10. The American Catholic Research Center and University Archives. The Catholic University of America, Washington DC.
Periodicals

America
The Christian Century
Christianity and Crisis
Commonweal
Community
Communique
Cross and Color
Interracial Review
motive.
The New World
Newman Newsnotes
Reconstructionist
Social Action Notes for Priests
Social Action Summary
Wind & Chaff
The Youth Leader: A Magazine for Jewish Youth Groups

Books


Bennett, Michael J. *When Dreams Came True: The GI Bill and the Making of Modern America*. Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 1996.


Woo, Franklin Jung. “From USCC to UCM: An Historical Inquiry with Emphasis on the Last Ten Years of the Student Christian Movements in the USA and their Struggle for Self-


