

University of North Carolina at Asheville

40 Agencies and One Mule: The Unified Religious Tradition of African  
American Resistance 1920-1939.

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Department of History in  
Candidacy for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in History

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Asheville, North Carolina

20 November 2007

“The Bible don't say nothin' 'bout the colored man and the white man, just says man. With God, man ain't but man<sup>1</sup>.” These words were uttered by Nate Shaw, a black sharecropper who defied cultural, physical, and economic inequity throughout his life. Though Shaw was uneducated, illiterate, and only informally religious, his statement characterized all levels of African American resistance for a generation. Though resistance to white hegemony at the time was largely split along class lines, groups as varied as black churches, religious organizations, labor unions, and even political radicals all shared the sentiment of spiritual equity portrayed in Shaw's words. This idea stemmed from a series of central religious metaphors that both upper and working class African Americans would draw on throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

The belief structures that African American groups relied on in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century stemmed from a shared religious background. The body of Christian belief conceived during slavery served as a source of resistance on both spiritual and physical levels. Asserting inherent equality before God and evoking His support against white hegemony had been key tenets of African American spiritual life since Christianity's introduction<sup>2</sup>. These beliefs centered around a set of religious assumptions traditionally used to support both emancipation and racial equality. Slaves relied on the same

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1 Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 521.

2 James M. Washington, *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986), 27.

biblical support as white slave-owners to bolster their claims. Biblical support like “Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons<sup>3</sup>” was used to show God's disregard for social distinctions. Biblical support also allowed African Americans to claim universal equality: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus<sup>4</sup>.” Slaves and freedmen alike used passages like these to challenge religiously supported oppression<sup>5</sup>.

Slaves also connected their hardships specifically to the Bible's narrative of Israel. Many believed that their situation mirrored Israel's subjugation in Egypt, and that the faithful would eventually be delivered from oppression. These beliefs formed a context where religious figures like Moses and Jesus were considered analogous, and the second coming of Christ was understood as an act of physical emancipation from bondage<sup>6</sup>.

Following emancipation, a rising black middle class joined with established freedmen to advocate a new path to racial equality. Many of these rising elites were successful freedmen or preferred slaves whose efforts had advanced their positions<sup>7</sup>. Instead of divine deliverance, they

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3 Acts 10:34 King James Version

4 Gal. 3:28 KJV

5 Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 405-406.; Washington, 27.

6 Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 48.

7 Thomas J. Durant Jr. and Joyce S. Loudon, “The Black Middle Class in America: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,” *Phylon* 47 (1986): 254.

saw equality as the result of self-advancement through faith, hard-work, and thrift, which were associated with independence from white control<sup>8</sup>.

Adherents to this doctrine hoped that economic status itself would provide a means to combat racism. One example was Josephine Curry, a middle class black woman who argued in 1888 that her ability to pay for reserved seating in a whites-only Chicago opera house ought to supersede her race<sup>9</sup>.

Change was partially the result of disillusionment – slavery had ended, but freedom did not mean equality. Emancipation even occasionally led to harsher conditions, as black workers no longer represented a capital investment for white slave-owners<sup>10</sup>. Faced with a new context for racism, many within established black organizations concluded that deliverance would have to come from prosperity based on financial, cultural, and educational self-advancement<sup>11</sup>.

By the 1880s, self-advancement had become the cornerstone of black middle and upper class racial uplift. The result was a body of religious thought that appealed to Victorian social norms by praising admirable qualities like industriousness and sobriety over expressions of faith<sup>12</sup>.

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8 Evelyn B. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 67.

9 Kevin Gaines, "Re-thinking Race and Class in African American Struggles for Equality, 1885-194," *The American Historical Review* 102 (1997): 381.

10 Such was the case with Black convict laborers.

Ronald L. Lewis, *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict 1780-1980* (University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 16.

11 Also, perhaps more cynically, Hunt argues that adherence to white norms outside of traditional, black Protestantism provided for greater social mobility.

Larry L. Hunt, "A Religious Factor in Secular Achievement among Blacks: The Case of Catholicism," *Social Forces* 53 (1975): 595-605.

12 Higginbotham, 186.

Traditional forms of religious expression including shouts and camp meetings were downplayed in favor of a “politics of respectability” that emphasized socially respectable autonomy:

“Men and women are not made on trains and on streetcars. If in our homes there is implanted in the hearts of our children, of our young men and of our young women the thought that they are what they are, not by environment, but of themselves, this effort to teach a lesson in inferiority will be futile<sup>13</sup>.”

Both traditional means of worship and support networks represented cultural and economic reminders of traditions that upper class blacks saw as outmoded and white sympathizers viewed as uncivilized<sup>14</sup>.

Lower class African Americans did not take to these new beliefs in the same way. Though a section of African American society had become successful, many struggled with circumstances very much like those that persisted before emancipation. Most remained either subsistence farmers or domestic workers, occupations that bore striking resemblances to their pre-war duties as slaves<sup>15</sup>. Low compensation, poor conditions, and systematic economic and social oppression helped ensure that most blacks remained part of a permanent underclass<sup>16</sup>. Literacy, education, and hard

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13 In the words of Nannie Burroughs, a secretary of the Baptist Woman's Convention. Higginbotham, 191.

14 James B. Browning, “The Beginnings of Insurance Enterprise among Negroes,” *The Journal of Negro History* 22 (1937): 422-425; Higginbotham, 188-191.

15 Kelley, 19; Hunter, 22.

16 Hunter, 28-31.

work might allow a sharecropper to keep his own books, but they offered little recourse when he realized he was overcharged and underpaid. Instead of a plan to end racial inequity, many like Abbie Elmore Bugg, an Alabama sharecropper, saw a ruse sponsored by whites and their conspirators: “Now, if you love your neighbor as yourself, why did you not protect those two poor wounded negro farmers? Why did you let them die? A good enemy [sic] of all races I should say you be, in a time of real need<sup>17</sup>.” In 1931, one middle class black reverend was even accused of telling his followers to: “Wait for the pie in sky when you die<sup>18</sup>.” The religious vocabulary used by the black middle class and their white sponsors bore a striking resemblance to the overtures of former slave-owners - work hard, bear your burdens, and receive your reward in heaven<sup>19</sup>. Though middle class beliefs placed an emphasis on inherent equality, workers saw them as downplaying the real, institutional barriers African Americans faced.

The black working class largely rejected middle class beliefs, keeping their own unique spiritual tradition. While the upper class reinterpreted divine deliverance, the working class saw it as deferred: “the North was coming back and they was going to have another war<sup>20</sup>.” Attitudes like this gave credence to continued subversion, frustrating upper class blacks and

17 Her criticism was leveled at the Tuskegee Institute over the deaths of two members of the Sharecropper's Union.

Robin D. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 51.

18 Kelley, 111.

19 Samuel Hill, *Southern Churches in Crisis Revisited* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999), 83.

20 Kelley, 100.

whites alike. Workers understood that deliverance would come from faith and continued resistance of white hegemony, not racial uplift programs<sup>21</sup>.

These beliefs were often tailored to the context in which the working class lived. Figures or groups that defended racial equality could be adopted as religious heroes. Originally such reverence was limited to Lincoln and Northern abolitionists, but came to include radical organizations by the 1920s and 1930s<sup>22</sup>. Kelley states that: "For many black radicals the Russians were the 'new Yankees,' Stalin was the 'new Lincoln,' and the Soviet Union was a 'new Ethiopia' stretching forth her arms in defense of black folk<sup>23</sup>." Communists were championed for their defense of "all class war prisoners" and "the struggles of racial minorities<sup>24</sup>." Groups like the International Labor Defense supported campaigns for direct resistance and immediate racial equality that more accepted organizations like the NAACP made every effort to avoid: "The public is divided . . . into two groups, naturally, with reference to what we accomplished by our intelligent handling of the Peterson case . . . Those who are Communistically inclined are disappointed in that we did not free him<sup>25</sup>." Many black workers found communists' statements analogous to those of

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21 Like Hunter's washerwomen strikes and the networks that supported them. Hunter, 131.

22 Kelley, 100.

23 Kelley, 100

24 Charles H. Martin, "Communists and Blacks: The ILD and The Angelo Herndon Case." *The Journal of Negro History* 64 (1979): 131-141.

25 NAACP secretary Charles McPherson explaining ILD popularity in one of many black rapist cases in 1934  
Kelley, 90.

their traditional deliverance figures. With the acceptance of these radical organizations, churches and Bible study groups became centers for distributing literature, holding meetings, and educating new members<sup>26</sup>. Though this strengthened the party's position significantly, it also fostered religious connections that Northern communists were certain to be uncomfortable with<sup>27</sup>.

The closest documented links between groups as wide ranging as denominational churches, religious aid societies, the rural working class, and black communists come from Lawrence W. Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* and Albert Raboteau's *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African American Religious History*. The works attest to African American Christianity as a unique set of beliefs that supported slaves' active and passive attempts at resistance. Both authors use a combination of second hand accounts and oral histories to document how slaves reinterpreted white evangelical beliefs to support resistance. Instead of the "Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters" that slave-owners preached, African Americans supported spiritual equality and emancipation via the account of the Israelites in Egypt<sup>28</sup>.

The works point to a post-emancipation schism between existing folk

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26 Kelley, 66.

27 Kelley, 149.

28 Levine 48; Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 19; 27.; Acts 6:5 KJV

beliefs and established black churches<sup>29</sup>. Levine's work points to a rich folk heritage, which much of the working class retained. Perhaps the most important of these covered by Levine was the traditional motif of divine deliverance that presented Jesus and Moses as parallel figures and anticipated emancipation via divine intervention<sup>30</sup>. However, both authors show that a rising class of black professionals rethought these traditional religious tenets and channeled their faith into self-determination. The race would have to better itself<sup>31</sup>. Levine places the start of this shift at the Civil War's end, while Raboteau places its inception at 1790 with the founding of the African American Methodist Episcopal Church<sup>32</sup>.

The cultural and economic relationships between racial uplift and direct resistance form the basis for most other scholarly works on African American resistance from the 1880s to the 1930s. Some of the most concise work has been done by Tera Hunter and Robert Kelley. These authors deal directly with the physical and cultural gaps between the rising black middle class and working class African Americans.

Hunter argues in *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* that the black middle class' stance on racial equality was closer to that of white elites than black workers<sup>33</sup>. The middle

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29 Levine, 85, 48.

30 Levine, 34, 48, 84.

31 Levine, 156.

32 Raboteau, 89.

33 Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 139.

class organizations she describes focused more on policing behavior than providing economic relief or advocating social empowerment: “[The Neighborhood Union] censored individuals 'breaking the Sabbath,' gamblers, drinkers, prostitutes, late night dancers, and 'holy rollers' and reported the undesirables to the police<sup>34</sup>.” The Union’s behavior spoke to elites' focus on self-advancement over immediate change. Achieving equality meant developing the qualities that both whites and professional class blacks saw as essential to racial responsibility: “Self pride in white women is a natural instinct, but in the great majority of negro women self pride is much needed<sup>35</sup>.” Equality was to be earned, not fought for.

Hunter shows that this stance alienated African American workers on matters ranging from economic aid to perceptions of female beauty. Middle class blacks were among the most vehement critics of dance halls, blues dives, and alcohol, all of which they perceived as compromising the struggle for racial progress<sup>36</sup>. Though these measures were designed to encourage the hard work and self-improvement so key to the middle class’ understanding of racial uplift, they also aided whites in laying a claim to African Americans’ labor<sup>37</sup>.

Instead of poor education and lack of discipline, African American

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34 Actions more closely aligned to white middle class propriety than black social or economic interests. However, it should also be noted that the NU worked to enhance education, reduce overcrowding, and expose dishonest merchants.

Hunter, 138-139.

35 E. B. Barco, a black journalist writing for the *Atlanta Independent* in 1905.

Hunter, 166.

36 Hunter, 170.

37 Hunter, 166-167.

workers saw institutionalized racism and abject poverty as the largest obstacles to racial advancement<sup>38</sup>. Robert Kelley's work, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*, describes how political, social, and economic marginalization combined with traditional folk beliefs to engender lower class blacks to more radical stances. Kelley argues that the persistence of folk religion predisposed black workers to communist organizations because they took direct action against racial oppression: "Conditions were so bad, that many people believed that the only way they could ever get better was to start a new war. . . . I very naively was under the impression that the Unemployment Council was calling all Negro and white workers to a new war<sup>39</sup>." He also focuses on how working class African Americans essentially Alabama's communist organizers and helped the party to survive as a political entity: "The tradition of autonomous black women's religious and social organizations served as conduits for the broader movement<sup>40</sup>." Given the ferocity of red-baiting, intimidation, and frequent violence, it was traditional African American social networks that kept the Alabama party alive<sup>41</sup>.

The second major set of scholarly work deals with how these differing social groups framed physical and cultural resistance with religious arguments. Works from Evelyn Higginbotham, Theodore Rosengarten, and

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38 Hunter, 131.

39 Spoken by Angelo Herndon, an organizer for the International Labor Defense. Kelley, 100.

40 Kelley, 46.

41 Kelley, 66.

Nell Painter illustrate that religious belief motivated and justified both upper and lower class resistance in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Higginbotham's *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920* describes black female Baptists' attempts to gain sexual and racial equality within their denomination. They hoped that demonstrating black educational and economic success would prove that segregation and paternalism were socially, not spiritually, founded<sup>42</sup>.

Higginbotham shows that though these women did not support the same direct resistance as Kelley's communists, they did make an active effort to challenge white hegemony. Instead, their struggle took place largely within the context of Baptist doctrine. Black proponents claimed that inequality within the church denied African Americans their spiritual heritage as children of God: “their efforts validated, according to black Baptist women, full inclusion and equal justice in American society<sup>43</sup>.”

White detractors responded claiming that equal representation required greater spiritual and educational faculties than the race then possessed – black Baptists needed to prove their congregations' readiness<sup>44</sup>. Black Baptist women were forced to choose between their religious traditions, which denied the real hardships their communities faced, and support for racial equality. According to Higginbotham, these women were never fully

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42 Higginbotham, 74.

43 Higginbotham, 97.

44 The basis of white “stewardship” within the church  
Higginbotham, 96-97.

able to make that choice, ultimately adapting to white cultural expectations to combat racism<sup>45</sup>.

However, Higginbotham also recounts that Black Baptists defied their white brethren by supporting racial autonomy. She shows that many whites vilified African Americans as culturally corrosive: "I cannot imagine such a creation as a virtuous black woman<sup>46</sup>." Despite a degree of cultural assimilation, black Baptist women consistently supported autonomy based on racial pride: "White faces seem to think it their heaven-born right to practice civil war on negroes, to the extent of blood-shed and death. They look upon the life of their brother in black as a bubble to be blown away at their pleasure<sup>47</sup>." They saw both racial uplift and equal treatment as essential to a just society and a truly Christian faith<sup>48</sup>.

Religious belief was also a motivator for more direct resistance. Theodore Rosengarten and Nell Irving Painter have both published memoirs which illustrate that religious belief was a significant force among radical African Americans during the 1920s and 1930s. Rosengarten's *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* details the experiences of Nate Shaw, an illiterate sharecropper. This man spent his life carefully advancing his economic position despite significant white resistance<sup>49</sup>. It was this

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45 Higginbotham, 186.

46 Along with cultural and religious practices whites deemed uncivilized. Higginbotham, 190.

47 Higginbotham, 192.

48 Higginbotham, 186.

49 Which he was particularly proud of. Rosengarten 257-258

resistance that eventually prodded Shaw into joining the Sharecropper's Union, an organization devoted to improving rural blacks' positions through education and organized resistance. Rosengarten's interviews show that despite his ambivalence toward formal religion, Shaw understood racial equality in religious terms: "The day that God suffered me to walk out and stand up for my rights, I was a sinner man, sinner man, but I was doin at that present time what was pleasin to Him<sup>50</sup>."

Irving Painter's work, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South*, points to a similar trend among more radical resistance. Painter documents the life of a communist organizer named Hosea Hudson who was a long-time agent of the International Labor Defense. Despite his ties to radical politics, Hudson recalls a deeply religious past. He grew up as a southern sharecropper attending church regularly<sup>51</sup>. He met his wife through revival services and spent many years as a member of a gospel singing quartet<sup>52</sup>. Even after he became heavily involved in the ILD, he continued to sing in local churches around Atlanta<sup>53</sup>.

Though not deeply religious, Hudson did have both spiritual and religious frameworks which he strove to reconcile. At the same time that he denounced clergy who refused to involve themselves in resistance

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50 Rosengarten, 553.

51 Nell I. Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 53.

52 Painter, 53, 79.

53 Painter, 129.

movements, he continued to attend churches throughout his life<sup>54</sup>. While his political views did get him thrown out of at least one church, he never denounced either his religious leanings or his radical politics<sup>55</sup>.

This body of research certainly points to a tie between religious belief and both direct and passive resistance. Both Higginbotham's Baptists and the accounts of resistance members like Shaw point to a religious justification for racial equality<sup>56</sup>. However, these two groups were separated by both their social standing and their methods. This separation has been the larger focus of scholarly attempts in the area, as the works by Hunter and Kelley illustrate. What both perspectives have overlooked is that African American workers and middle class resisted white hegemony in different ways that all stemmed from a shared set of beliefs: "The Bible don't say nothin' 'bout the colored man and the white man, just says man. With God, man ain't but man<sup>57</sup>." Nate Shaw's words here are universal, even if his methods are not.

The mutual origins of these varying interpretations are best seen in the body of African American liturgy. Much of what black churches sang in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had developed from slave spirituals, and retained their traditional emphasis on divine deliverance, religiously based equality,

54 A testimony that did not make Painter's book, but is recorded in the Southern Oral History Project

Hosea Hudson, Interviewed by Nell Irving Painter, box B-0083, "Southern Oral History Project," Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

55 Painter, 133.

56 Though, far more directly by Shaw Higginbotham, 67; Rosengarten, 521.

57 Rosengarten, 521.

and racial destiny<sup>58</sup>. One telling example of these ideas' persistence comes from the handbook for Fisk University's Jubilee Singers. The group was one of the first to adapt slave spirituals to popular audiences<sup>59</sup>. Such groups exemplified the efforts of the black middle class to present their heritage as an example of both Christian virtue and African American cultural distinctiveness<sup>60</sup>. This collection of hymns, compiled in 1907, is significant because it contains a unified spiritual tradition that both middle class blacks and more radical workers drew from.

Both middle and lower class blacks called on the understandings of deliverance that this collection portrays. Hymns such as "Soon-a Will Be Done" provided both a sense of temporal deliverance with the lines "Soon a will be done with the troubles of the world, troubles of the world" followed by an allusion to transcendent paradise in "Goin' home to live with God<sup>61</sup>." "Ain't I Glad I Got Out of the Wilderness" reinforces this sense of deliverance with allusions to the Israelites' wanderings in Exodus: "Ain't I glad I've got out of the wilderness, Leanin' on the Lord<sup>62</sup>." Songs like these show that African American spiritual traditions could accommodate both

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58 All ideas originating in slave religion. Levine, 18; 36.

59 Dena J. Epstein, "Black Spirituals: Their Emergence into Public Knowledge," *Black Music Research Journal* 10 (1990): 60.

60 Epstein, 60.

61 "Soon-a Will Be Done," *New Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk University*, box 1, "Adam Kinght Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

62 "Ain't I Glad I Got Out of the Wilderness," *New Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk University*, box 1, "Adam Kinght Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

temporal and transcendent deliverance from oppression.

The hymns also presented allusions to what that “wilderness” was. Songs frequently referenced the hardships that African Americans faced, and how they should be resisted or endured. The Hymn “A Little Talk with Jesus” presents an example where faith could overcome spiritual hardship: “Old Satan fights us hard Our journey to retard; but a little talk with Jesus makes it right<sup>63</sup>.” Imagery of oppression and intervention could be figurative or literal. The hymn “Roll on” characterized struggle as primarily spiritual: “When I was blind and could not see, King Jesus brought the light to me . . . The Heav'nly land so bright and fair, there are very few seem going there<sup>64</sup>.” Lyrics like these reinforced the black middle class' beliefs by presenting the world itself as flawed; deliverance would come with ascendance into the perfection of the “Heav'nly land<sup>65</sup>.” However, the hymn “Holy Bible” shows a much more social understanding of this “wilderness”: “Before I'd be a slave, I'd be buried in my grave, And go home to my Father and be saved<sup>66</sup>.” These words show that African Americans were not opposed to specifically characterizing past forms of coercion as evil, or of

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63 “A Little Talk with Jesus,” *New Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk University*, folder 1, “Adam Kinght Spence and John Wesley Work Collection,” Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

64 “Roll On,” *New Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk University*, folder 1, “Adam Kinght Spence and John Wesley Work Collection,” Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

65 “Roll On,” *New Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk University*, folder 1, “Adam Kinght Spence and John Wesley Work Collection,” Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

66 “Holy Bible,” *New Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk University*, folder 1, “Adam Kinght Spence and John Wesley Work Collection,” Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

insinuating a connection between whites and “Old Satan<sup>67</sup>.”

Songs also functioned to spur struggle against adversity. The hymn “Marching up the Heavenly Road” illustrates a perception that divine strength was necessary to deal with perpetual conflict along the Godly path: “I’m bound to fight until I die; Marching up the heavenly road. My sister have you got your sword and shield<sup>68</sup>?” These lyrics prepared African Americans to understand social and economic barriers as spiritual struggles, and to fight against them. Hymns like these also suggested that whoever followed the path of the Lord would receive support beyond the power of man: “My Lord’s done just what he said, healed the sick and rais’d the dead<sup>69</sup>.” Songs further showed that all those who proclaimed righteousness were not, and that the struggle toward Godliness characterized the faithful: “The Heav’nly land so bright and fair, there are very few seem going there . . . See that sister dressed so fine? She ain’t got Jesus in her mind<sup>70</sup>.” The hymn established material success as a sign of spiritual compromise and resistance as an analogy to righteousness.

While African Americans may have shared a mutual religious tradition,

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67 “A Little Talk with Jesus,” *New Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk University*, folder 1, “Adam Kinght Spence and John Wesley Work Collection,” Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

68 “Marching Up the Heavenly Road,” *New Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk University*, folder 1, “Adam Kinght Spence and John Wesley Work Collection,” Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

69 “Plenty Good Room,” *New Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk University*, folder 1, “Adam Kinght Spence and John Wesley Work Collection,” Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

70 “The Old Ark’s A-Moving,” *New Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk University*, folder 1, “Adam Kinght Spence and John Wesley Work Collection,” Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

their beliefs motivated their actions in vastly different ways. Middle class blacks tended to support forms of passive resistance that focused on proving the moral, social, and economic fitness of their race to the greater body of white society. Religious aid organizations and established denominational churches came alongside Higginbotham's Baptists in supporting racial advancement via self-improvement: "It is only when the ability to think clearly, consecutively and thoroughly is harnessed to the service of industries that these will ever rise to anything more than toil and drudgery<sup>71</sup>." Middle class black resistance focused on replacing the blind faith of former slaves with qualities that would demonstrate their capability<sup>72</sup>.

The American Missionary Association provided one example of black middle class racial uplift. This organization was formed in 1846 from a group of abolitionist mission workers who protested many white churches' apathy toward slavery<sup>73</sup>. The A.M.A. advocated a program that emphasized religious and educational training based on the spiritual equality of the races. The association's patronage even extended as far as funding schools and churches for runaway communities in Canada<sup>74</sup>. Following emancipation,

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71 "Negro Migration and Its Significance," *The American Missionary*, Dec 1923, 481, folder 3, "Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

72 Producing articles in *The American Missionary* such as "'Problems' as Responsibilities" and "Getting Better Every Day."

*The American Missionary*, Dec 1923, folder 3, "Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

73 Augustus Field Beard, *A Crusade of Brotherhood: A History of the American Missionary Association* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1909), 31.

74 Joe M. Richardson, *Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and*

the A.M.A. furthered a program based on racial uplift. Members sought to equalize the races by increasing the capability of former slaves through predominantly religious and educational training<sup>75</sup>. Sponsorship included middle class and white understandings of racial uplift, which focused as much on normalizing freedmen into white society as financial or educational aid<sup>76</sup>. The group consistently clashed with freed blacks who preferred to retain their religious customs and control of their institutions<sup>77</sup>. However, the organization was involved in training the black professional class that emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>78</sup>. These new elites, in turn, contributed to the organization's goals of racial advancement, and contributed to the association's central publication, the *American Missionary*<sup>79</sup>.

These publications show that the organization retained its focus on self-advancement and racial uplift through the 1920s, despite the growing structural barriers African Americans faced. Proponents assumed that if African Americans were accepted as spiritual equals, whites would be forced to make racial equality a moral priority: “And the Negro is a man and brother, embraced in the divine scheme of human redemption.<sup>80</sup>”

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*Southern Blacks, 1861-1890* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), vii.

75 Richardson, 237-239.

76 Richardson, 240-241.

77 Often spurning A.M.A. sponsored white teachers in favor of lower qualified African Americans.

Richardson, 23-24.

78 Richardson, 259.

79 *The American Missionary*, Dec 1907, 312, folder 3, “Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection,” Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

80 Editorial by Bishop Charles B. Galloway

*The American Missionary*, Dec 1907, 325, folder 3, “Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection,” Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

Achieving this meant using religious language to imply that white hegemony represented a spiritual affront to both African Americans and God: "The Gospel is for the redemption of the world, but an insidious skepticism is being taught the people that would exclude the Negro from any part or lot in the great plan of salvation<sup>81</sup>." Members asserted that with Christian faith and cooperation they could "enlighten the intelligence of the Negro and to arouse him from the blighting lethargy of poverty<sup>82</sup>."

The A.M.A. hoped to persuade whites to take a larger role in equalizing the races. The organization was heavily involved with convincing white businesses to employ African Americans and used *The American Missionary* to advertise black worker's qualifications. The A.M.A. went so far as to publish surveys of satisfaction with black workers: "When these employers were asked what difference, if any, there was in the loss of materials due to defective workmanship of white and Negro workmen, twenty-five [of 38] said there was no difference<sup>83</sup>." The organization hoped that this testimony would increase white investment in the African American population both economically and educationally: "There is no substitute in the mere training how to do things for the sharp mental

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81 *The American Missionary*, Dec 1907, 325, folder 3, "Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

82 *The American Missionary* Dec 1923, 481, folder 3, "Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

83 Conducted by George E. Haynes, who served as "Secretary of the Commission on Church and Race Relations of the Federal Council of Churches."

"Negro Migration and Its Significance," *The American Missionary*, Dec 1923, 480, folder 3, "Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

discipline which develops the mind for whatever practical demands<sup>84</sup>."

These statements show a connection between the religious beliefs imbedded in African Americans' lyric traditions and the A.M.A.'s racial advancement programs: "we cannot exclude him [African Americans] from any of the privileges and agencies that may fit him for service in the Kingdom of God<sup>85</sup>."

However, the A.M.A.'s stated goals advocated adaption over direct resistance. The first of these goals was "the uplift of the colored race through Christian education," an aim which called on African Americans to have faith that self-improvement would lead to better social conditions<sup>86</sup>. Here, the A.M.A.'s position corresponded with white arguments that placed the responsibility for racial uplift squarely on blacks themselves<sup>87</sup>. Similarly, the association put a significant focus on vocational training: "The education which secures, uplifts, and permanently establishes the material standards of a race is that in which the disciplined mind dominates<sup>88</sup>." Middle class blacks within the A.M.A. focused on self-determination and protestant cultural values, leading to articles like "Not Willing to Commit

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84 *The American Missionary*, Dec 1923, 481, folder 3, "Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

85 Tying vocational training and education into proper Christian stewardship *The American Missionary*, Dec 1907, 325, folder 3, "Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

86 Editorial by Justice David J. Brewer.

*The American Missionary*, Dec 1907, 314, folder 3, "Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

87 A situation that, consequently, gave whites significant control over the terms of and proofs of readiness.

Higginbotham, 95-96.

88 *The American Missionary*, Dec 1923, 481, folder 3, Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

Himself<sup>89</sup>." The A.M.A. advocated racial equality, but the organization's focus on cooperation and self-advancement often sparked resistance in lower class communities. Adherents expressed frustration that more African Americans did not subscribe to the organization's platform: "I have often become discouraged because I did not see our people coming more rapidly to the ideals of the Gospel as I understood them<sup>90</sup>."

The A.M.A.'s focus on self-advancement tied directly to its religious priorities. An article published in *The American Missionary* by member Charles B. Galloway held that the status of souls took precedence over physical equality: "More pernicious than racial prejudice is the rank infidelity that would exclude any human being from the possibility of salvation<sup>91</sup>." The A.M.A. considered itself to be primarily a religious organization that prepared African Americans for the hereafter. When Galloway stated "we cannot exclude him [African Americans] from any of the privileges and agencies that may fit him for service in the Kingdom of God," he intended to prepare blacks for service in heaven, not liberation on earth<sup>92</sup>.

Middle class black churches espoused similar beliefs. The White Rock

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89 "Not Willing to Commit Himself," *The American Missionary*, Dec 1923, 474, folder 3, "Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

90 *The American Missionary*, Dec 1907, 312, folder 3, "Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

91 *The American Missionary*, Dec 1907, 325, folder 3, "Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

92 *The American Missionary*, Dec 1907, 325, folder 3, "Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina made prominent reference to a preference for purely spiritual teaching in their weekly bulletins: “We haven't the slightest interest in controversial theology, or in sensational topics. The White Rock pulpit is seeking faithfully, honestly to serve the real needs of life<sup>93</sup>.” These “real needs” illustrated a doctrine similar to the A.M.A.'s. White Rock clergy focused on applying traditional evangelical principles to Durham's community: “The pastor will consider the following questions. 1. 'Did Christ Abrogate the Commandments?' 2. 'Are they now obsolete?' 3. Is Durham obeying them? 4. What of it, anyway<sup>94</sup>?” Another sermon at the church illustrated a middle class sensitivity to basic moral behaviors. This time the focus was on swearing: “Come tonight and hear the sermon 'Thou shalt not take the name of God in vain<sup>95</sup>!’” The sermon was designed to provide a distinct moral outline to judge the behavior: “Is there a living man who doesn't? How guilty is it? What good does swearing do? Is this America's besetting sin<sup>96</sup>?” Sermons like these pointed to a belief in moral uplift as the preeminent means of racial advancement.

White Rock Baptist Church also included support for the institutionalized church in its concept of moral improvement. Church attendance was treated as less of an expression of fellowship than a sacred

93 Weekly Bulletin, Feb 5, 1928, box 4, “Southern Historical Collection, White Rock Baptist Church Records,” Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

94 Weekly Bulletin, Feb 5, 1928, box 4, “Southern Historical Collection, White Rock Baptist Church Records,” Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

95 Weekly Bulletin, Feb 25, 1928, box 4, “Southern Historical Collection, White Rock Baptist Church Records,” Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

96 Weekly Bulletin, Feb 25, 1928, box 4, “Southern Historical Collection, White Rock Baptist Church Records,” Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

duty: "The magnitudes of our new life call for greater spiritual magnitudes.

This necessity calls for prayer organized prayer and organized faith<sup>97</sup>."

Participation could be construed as an act of spiritual fealty: "Let's be loyal to Christ, the church, and ourselves and crowd the building at every service . . .<sup>98</sup>" These measures directly linked church attendance and faith.

Members who did not regularly attend could be chastised in the same vein:

"What will be your answer next Sunday when we celebrate his suffering and death? Will your seat be vacant? Will you turn your back upon the table<sup>99</sup>?"

Desertion of the church was portrayed as desertion of God.

The same logic was applied to tithing. Funding of church programs was connected to religious duty: "Get under the load your church officials have to carry. Pay your church first<sup>100</sup>!" Sponsorship was seen as a major internal problem and connected to lapses in attendance: "If all will lay by a weekly offering and bring it on the Lord's Day, it would solve the problem of church attendance and the financial problem as well<sup>101</sup>." It was also suggested that members who withheld their tithe did so for personal gain:

"He's put a nickel on the plate and then with might and main he'd sing,

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97 Weekly Bulletin, 1923, box 4, "Southern Historical Collection, White Rock Baptist Church Records," Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

98 Weekly Bulletin, Feb 25, 1928, box 4, "Southern Historical Collection, White Rock Baptist Church Records," Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

99 Weekly Bulletin, 1923, box 4, "Southern Historical Collection, White Rock Baptist Church Records," Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

100 Weekly Bulletin, Feb 5, 1928, box 4, "Southern Historical Collection, White Rock Baptist Church Records," Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

101 Weekly Bulletin, Dec 11, 1932, box 4, "Southern Historical Collection, White Rock Baptist Church Records," Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

“When we asunder part it gives us inward pain<sup>102</sup>.”

There was some logic behind White Rock's admonitions; the church doubled as a communal center and mutual aid organization. Financial records from 1938 and 1939 show \$59.00 set aside for members' education and financial assistance<sup>103</sup>. Ties to the local N.C. Mutual Life Insurance Company helped the church get a discount mimeograph for their bulletins, and allowed basic life insurance for their poorer members<sup>104</sup>. White Rock also sponsored basic burial services, paying out \$45 in funeral costs for member Sydney Stamper in 1939<sup>105</sup>. These kinds of communal aid efforts were essential to African American communities, and served to alleviate hardships caused by accidental death or injury<sup>106</sup>. Some members within the church also sought to expand their capacity to render financial assistance, including the business manager C. C. Spaulding, who advocated hiring a church undertaker. According to his petition, the service would have minimized costs to poorer members and allowed White Rock to extend

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102 Weekly Bulletin, Dec 11, 1932, box 4, “Southern Historical Collection, White Rock Baptist Church Records,” Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

103 Including funds spent on providing food, hats, and shoes

White Rock Mission Circle financial report, Dec 21, 1938, box 4, “Southern Historical Collection, White Rock Baptist Church Records,” Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

104 Similar services were offered by most churches and secret societies of the day.

R.M. Parrott to W. J. Kennedy, April 8, 1926, box 3, “Southern Historical Collection, White Rock Baptist Church Records,” Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Theda Skocpol and Jennifer Lynn Oser, “Organization Despite Adversity: The Origins and Development of African American Fraternal Associations,” *Social Science History* 28 (2004): 421.

105 Part of this was to go to his widow as compensation – a primitive, but inexpensive, of life insurance

Insurance Contract, Sept. 12, 1939, box 3, “Southern Historical Collection, White Rock Baptist Church Records,” Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

106 Skocpol, 421.

services to a broader base within the community<sup>107</sup>.

Both the American Missionary Association and the White Rock Baptist Church played an active role in self-advancement and racial uplift. The A.M.A. was involved in educational campaigns, advocated new vocational opportunities, and presented the case for spiritual equality to whites. The organization attempted to serve as a bridge between the body of African Americans and white society, and to advocate continued African American efforts at racial improvement: "Nearly all the speakers emphasized the remarkable progress which the colored race has made in the forty years since it has enjoyed freedom<sup>108</sup>." Similarly, White Rock focused on the moral and spiritual cultivation championed by the black middle class. Many of their efforts revolved around bolstering "His visible Body, this church" and encouraging moral behavior like church attendance and propriety<sup>109</sup>. Like many Black churches of the period, White Rock also served as a basis for mutual aid, using its communal connections to provide basic death benefits and burials to members<sup>110</sup>.

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107 Though he preferred to keep his advocacy anonymous.

C. C. Spaulding to Pastor M. M. Fisher June 1, 1938, box 3, "Southern Historical Collection, White Rock Baptist Church Records," Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

108 Spoken at an organizational conference on racial progress.

"A Great Day at Howard University," *The American Missionary*, Dec 1907, 309, box 3, "Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

109 Conduct that reflected a similar religious agenda as Higginbotham's Baptists. Weekly Bulletin, Feb 5, 1928, box 4, "Southern Historical Collection, White Rock Baptist Church Records," Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Higginbotham, 188-191.

110 Though it should also be noted that White Rock spent far more on a church beautification campaign – roughly \$11,500 during 1938-1939.

White Rock Baptist Church Records financial records, Year of 1939, box 3, "Southern Historical Collection, White Rock Baptist Church Records," Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

However, the focus of these organizations was almost exclusively spiritual. The A.M.A. prioritized Christian education over social concerns, with members like Charles B. Galloway claiming that religious exclusion was a greater threat to the race than social coercion<sup>111</sup>. Their view echoed with the stances of churches like White Rock which advocated “Not by might, not by power, but by my spirit<sup>112</sup>.” The church did provide basic financial assistance through insurance and burial benefits, but these represented traditional efforts to alleviate communal burdens, not address institutional inequity, and were far outweighed by White Rock's church beautification program<sup>113</sup>. The hardships African Americans faced were supposed to enhance their fitness for the next life<sup>114</sup>.

Because they downplayed the temporal struggles of African Americans, middle class black churches and religious organizations like the A.M.A. were not always well received. Many lower class blacks wanted to hear how the cause for real emancipation had been furthered<sup>115</sup>. Here, middle class organizations fell short. Hosea Hudson recalls that pastors of

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111 *The American Missionary*, Dec 1907, 325, box 3, “Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection,” Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

112 Weekly Bulletin, Feb 25, 1928, box 4, “Southern Historical Collection, White Rock Baptist Church Records,” Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

113 \$59.00 in “missions” vs \$11,585.73 for renovations in 1939  
White Rock Baptist Church Records financial records, Year of 1939, box 3, “Southern Historical Collection, White Rock Baptist Church Records,” Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

114 Hence the A.M.A.'s focus on the “progress” of the race.  
“Why Support the American Missionary Association?,” *The American Missionary*, Dec 1923, 474, box 3, “Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection,” Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

115 A sentiment that often spilled over into motifs of deliverance deferred.  
Kelley, 100.

upper class black churches often distanced themselves from demonstrations of any kind: "Reverend Williams and a whole lot of them, they heard that the march was going be, they left the hill that Sunday, just like the cat leaving the firehouse with a fire in it<sup>116</sup>." Instead middle class institutions offered speeches on racial progress toward deserving equality, and gave lectures on the Ten Commandments. Assertions that "the Negro has been free forty years and he has not made good<sup>117</sup>" were not well received; in the eyes of many African Americans it was whites that had reneged on their promises. Both the A.M.A. and White Rock contributed to this alienation by interpreting the failure to connect as either a testament to ignorance or worldly priorities: "There has been little true conception of the relation of religion and conduct<sup>118</sup>."

Lower class African Americans frequently resisted the application of black middle class religious structures advocated by institutions such as the A.M.A. and the White Rock Baptist Church. Their resistance points to a very different understanding of the basic tenets of African American Christianity than those espoused by middle class organizations. Lower classes took the spiritual equality advocated by middle class organizations and claimed a

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116 Hosea Hudson, Interviewed by Nell Irving Painter, box B-0083, "Southern Oral History Project," Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

117 An assertion that the association challenged its readers to answer with continued effort.

"A Great Day at Howard University," *The American Missionary*, Dec 1907, 309, folder 3, "Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

118 *The American Missionary*, Dec 1907, 312, folder 3, "Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

divine plan for its physical application: “the Negro began to look. Somthing's gonna happen now . . . We thought we was looking to have a war in the South<sup>119</sup>.” African American workers continued to believe in direct divine intervention, even if its manifestations seemed small<sup>120</sup>.

One community indicative of this divide was Granville County, North Carolina. Interviews conducted on sharecropping and religious life during the 1920s and 1930s point to a religious understanding that assumed a much more physical connection with the divine. One such resident, Thomas Chavis, expressed this sort of faith when speaking of his limited literacy: “[Interviewer] ‘Well, why, what makes you... you don't touch other things but just the Bible?’ [Chavis] ‘Just the Bible, if you stay with that, God will open it to you. He will open for you<sup>121</sup>.’” Chavis cited faith for his ability to read. As a rural pastor, he also believed that his preaching would be directly augmented: “The Holy Spirit is going to endow me, what to say. I don't have to stumble, I don't have to ramble on. It'll tell me what to say, tear our church all to pieces<sup>122</sup>.” Chavis also recalled that some in the community believed that God took physical form: “man plowing over yonder in the field, and he look up and see a whirlwind or a bush shake over there in the

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119 Kelley, 99.

120 “They thought the North was coming back and they was going to have another war.” was meant more as a religious crusade than a political movement. Kelley, 100.

121 Thomas Chavis, Interviewed by Eddie McCoy, box Q-0014, “Southern Oral History Project,” Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

122 Thomas Chavis, Interviewed by Eddie McCoy, box Q-0014, “Southern Oral History Project,” Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

woods . . . he walk in there just shakin both hands, 'I saw Him! Saw him in a whirlwind!' . . . And that's just their method of worship<sup>123</sup>." While Chavis himself was not this extreme, he did believe God would intervene for the faithful: "Well, only thing of it is, the scripture tells you what will happen. He said a day would come that if you continue in my name, that I will open doors, and pour blessings upon you<sup>124</sup>."

Chavis' beliefs offered a more physical interpretation of the idea central to hymns like "My Good Lord's Done Been Here." The song implied a sense of reward for continued piety: "Oh, My Good Lord's done been here! Blessed my soul and gone away<sup>125</sup>." While upper class institutions like White Rock and the A.M.A. construed these verses to support cultural change and moral piety, Chavis saw them as prophesying the end of white hegemony: "And we as a nation of people, we gonna have to go back, to the good old way<sup>126</sup>."

Chavis' beliefs produced a very different perception of both spiritual

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123 Thomas Chavis, Interviewed by Eddie McCoy, box Q-0014, "Southern Oral History Project," Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

124 Echoed by Allie Sue Haythe Yancy, who believed that divine support was the result of following the commandment to "be kind and peaceable, to all mankind."

Thomas Chavis, Interviewed by Eddie McCoy, box Q-0014, "Southern Oral History Project," Wilson Library

Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Allie Sue Haythe Yancy, Interviewed by Eddie McCoy, box Q-0119, "Southern Oral History Project," Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

125 A sentiment echoed by Black communists.

"My Good Lord's Done Been Here," *New Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk University*, folder 1, "Adam Kinght Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.; Kelley, 100.

126 Referring to blacks receiving blessings to combat oppression

Thomas Chavis, Interviewed by Eddie McCoy, box Q-0014, "Southern Oral History Project," Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

tenets and social equality than the A.M.A. or churches like White Rock espoused. Instead of focusing on moral characteristics and deliverance through transcendence, many lower class blacks retained a belief that true emancipation had been deferred<sup>127</sup>. Chavis continued to regard whites as agents of repression and looked to the examples of their slave forefathers for support: “[Interviewer] 'You couldn't have church. White people, the whites wouldn't let the slaves have...' [Chavis] 'I know it. That's right, but He come to the rescue<sup>128</sup>.'” Along with slave examples, Chavis also retained traditional connections to the Israelites: “our race has come to be just like Israel<sup>129</sup>.”

These beliefs spurred some working class African Americans to resist oppression much more directly than formal institutions would have sanctioned. Interpretations like Chavis' lent themselves to more radical opposition of white hegemony, and decentralized churches often served as intermediaries<sup>130</sup>. Hosea Hudson, a black organizer for the International Labor Defense, had a strong religious background: “but I thought... I just wanted to try to be a preacher. I had a voice. I still have a preacher's voice<sup>131</sup>.” Though he admitted to never having a religious experience,

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127 A belief that communists incidentally activated Kelley, 100.

128 Thomas Chavis, Interviewed by Eddie McCoy, box Q-0014, “Southern Oral History Project,” Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

129 Thomas Chavis, Interviewed by Eddie McCoy, box Q-0014, “Southern Oral History Project,” Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

130 Kelley, 66.

131 Hosea Hudson, Interviewed by Nell Irving Painter, box B-0083, “Southern Oral History Project,” Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Hudson's account illustrates that religious belief and organized resistance could be complimentary for African Americans during the 1920s and 1930s. His wife was an avid Christian, and claimed that God influenced her to marry Hudson: "She told me that the Spirit spoke to her, and told her, asked why she did treat me like that. And, 'don't you know Hosie going be your husband someday<sup>132</sup>?'” Hudson's acceptance of this reasoning attests to the same levels of divine intervention voiced by Chavis.

Hudson's religious background did not translate into the same piety voiced by either Chavis or Hudson's wife. He attested to never understanding spiritual belief or having a religious experience: "I tried to, I tried to feel like, get the feeling like other people, but I never could get that feeling<sup>133</sup>." He also continually wondered why "God always talked with the preacher, didn't talk to other people," a statement as telling of his leftist leanings as his religious background<sup>134</sup>. Hudson expressed some suspicion of organized religion and its goals, which he stated "will *always* find somewhere to have you working," efforts he felt could conflict with the social equality the ILD and other radical organizations fought for<sup>135</sup>.

Hudson's suspicion may also have stemmed from negative experiences with

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132 Hosea Hudson, Interviewed by Nell Irving Painter, box B-0083, "Southern Oral History Project," Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

133 Hosea Hudson, Interviewed by Nell Irving Painter, box B-0083, "Southern Oral History Project," Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

134 Hosea Hudson, Interviewed by Nell Irving Painter, box B-0083, "Southern Oral History Project," Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

135 Spoken in reference to a fellow party member who left for the church.

Hosea Hudson, Interviewed by Nell Irving Painter, box B-0083, "Southern Oral History Project," Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

churches that did not share his dedication to direct resistance. He recalls that middle class clergy were especially leery of radical organizations: “They talked about ‘that mess you messing around with.’ You better get out that mess. It ain’t going do nothing but get you in trouble<sup>136</sup>.” Hudson was even expelled from a church for his political agitation on at least one occasion: “So I said to myself, well, I wouldn’t go no more. And I don’t remember going no more until along about ‘37-’38. I went to going back out there again, but I had several years when they called me an infidel<sup>137</sup>.”

Despite his reservations, local churches played a significant role in Hudson's social and economic campaigns as an ILD organizer. He continued to pursue churches as vehicles of social organization throughout his tenure with the ILD: “We’d say, ‘Let’s work in the church,’ and ‘let’s get speakers in the church<sup>138</sup>.” Hudson also recalls how churches in Atlanta served as meeting place for an industrial union he had organized: “I had the meeting in the church for the local to decide what to do about fighting my grievance<sup>139</sup>.” Similarly, he attests that both he and the party preferred to have pastors head local initiatives in Birmingham: “Reverend Joseph [was] the President, we elected Reverend Murphy as the Vice President<sup>140</sup>.”

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136 Hosea Hudson, Interviewed by Nell Irving Painter, box B-0083, “Southern Oral History Project,” Wilson

Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

137 Painter, 133.

138 Painter, 129.

139 The meeting was for an industrial union Hudson had organized at his workplace. Hosea Hudson, Interviewed by Nell Irving Painter, box B-0083, “Southern Oral History Project,” Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

140 Hosea Hudson, Interviewed by Nell Irving Painter, box B-0083, “Southern Oral History Project,” Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

Clergy provided a religious background and good social standing that could ward off red-baiting<sup>141</sup>. However, Hudson did not have to coerce pastors into participating; many were ready to take direct action: “‘Yeah, Bro’ Hudson. I think that would be a good idea.’ . . . I just went to him and talked to him about it. He was ready to do something<sup>142</sup>.” The desire for religiously supported resistance motivated both the formally and informally religious.

Chavis' and Hudson's accounts attest to an understanding of black religious traditions that supported direct resistance to social inequality. As a pastor and ardent believer, Chavis used biblical support to draw connections between the trials of Israel and the hardships of African Americans that slaves had drawn two generations earlier. Like his slave ancestors, Chavis believed that continued faith would lead to a full emancipation: “Now, Jesus made it so plain, he said call upon me, he said the day will come, you call upon me, said you ask anything in my name, that I will do . . . Well, people act like they done forgot that<sup>143</sup>.” Hudson's activities attest to a similar context, but he relied as much on communist ideology as traditional African American belief. Despite this, he saw the two as complimentary throughout his life: “so I never quit going to church, and

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141 Though this organization, which sought to register black voters in Birmingham, was eventually accused of communist sympathies, leading to its demise in 1939.

Hosea Hudson, Interviewed by Nell Irving Painter, box B-0083, “Southern Oral History Project,” Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

142 Hosea Hudson, Interviewed by Nell Irving Painter, box B-0083, “Southern Oral History Project,” Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

143 SOHP interview Q0014

I always keep my songbook<sup>144</sup>.

Working class beliefs relied on the same basic religious tenets that motivated upper class churches and the A.M.A. African Americans like Chavis and religious organizations like the A.M.A. believed in hardship as a catalyst for righteousness, and clung to a system of deliverance based on continued faith and effort<sup>145</sup>. Each held racial progress, toward equality or Heaven, as their goal. Finally, both took part in programs that aimed to either relieve the temporal hardships or religious confusion that African Americans faced, be it through White Rock's mutual aid efforts or Hosea Hudson's voting drives<sup>146</sup>.

However, lower ad middle class blacks' doctrines varied significantly. Formal organizations like the A.M.A. focused on teaching African Americans how to earn equality, which they saw as preparing the race for "The Kingdom of God<sup>147</sup>." White Rock Baptist Church drew from a similar pool of beliefs, as it emphasized the moral and spiritual readiness of its congregation while also providing them with basic insurance services out of

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144 Such as his continued church attendance  
Hosea Hudson, Interviewed by Nell Irving Painter, box B-0083, "Southern Oral History Project," Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

145 Based in a mutual religious tradition: "Soon a will be done with the troubles of the world, troubles of the world."

"Soon-a Will Be Done," *New Jubilee Songs: As Sung by the Fisk Jubilee Singers of Fisk University*, folder 1, "Adam Kinght Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

146 White Rock Baptist Church Records; Hosea Hudson, Interviewed by Nell Irving Painter, box B-0083, "Southern Oral History Project," Wilson Library Special Collections, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

147 *The American Missionary*, Dec 1907, 325, folder 3, "Adam Knight Spence and John Wesley Work Collection," Auburn Avenue Research Library, Atlanta.

Christian compassion. Neither of these bodies anticipated campaigning for immediate racial equality, and steered away from “controversial doctrines<sup>148</sup>.” Lower class blacks took a drastically different stance. Instead of deliverance in the next life, they clung to older slave beliefs emphasizing God's direct interjection on earth. Many identified themselves with the people of Israel and expected a similar form of eventual justice. Their beliefs bolstered faith and bled over into resistance organizations like the ILLD, which focused on social equality now instead of in the next life<sup>149</sup>.

Middle and working class blacks' beliefs point to a shared religious background that motivated resistance efforts throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Middle class organizations combined traditional African American beliefs with white expectations to support inherent racial equality while advocating self-improvement as the avenue for racial advancement. Their stance forced middle class blacks to walk a tenuous line between resistance and collaboration. However, these attempts often did not resonate with lower class blacks who were more interested in the immediate realities of inequality and economic coercion than their spiritual or developmental status in the eyes of whites. The lower class largely rejected self-help and racial uplift, and instead relied on a religious context much closer to that of slaves to maintain cultural continuity and resistance. Their belief structures

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148 Weekly Bulletin, Feb 5, 1928, box 4, “Southern Historical Collection, White Rock Baptist Church Records,” Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

149 And was also the organization which agreed to defend the Scottsboro case after the NAACP refused.  
Martin, 131-133.

focused on the physical hardships and inequities that African Americans faced, and were used to justify demands for immediate social change.

Despite their differences, all of these groups called on variations of the same religious context to justify their actions.

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Article that provides background on the Fisk Jubilee Singers. Recounts their beginnings working with classic hymns and their gradual development of a program for presenting African American spirituals to white audiences in a culturally acceptable way.
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Offers a different perspective on the black middle class than traditional scholarship. Asserts that middle class blacks identified more with their economic distinctions than their racial distinctions, and that they used financial means as an argument for social status. Supports his arguments with analyses of court cases.
- Higginbotham, Evelyn B. *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920*. Cambridge: Harvard University

Press, 1993.

Higginbotham provides a discussion of Black Baptists within the interracial denomination. Focuses on the struggle of Black Baptist women for both racial and sexual equality within the Baptist Church. Used here for its information on the religious outlook of Black Baptists and the precarious position they occupied within the church, balancing between white expectations and their desire for racial and sexual advancement.

Hill, Samuel S. *Southern Churches in Crisis Revisited*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1999.

Dr. Hill provides useful information on the formation and background of Southern evangelical Christianity. Since this was the brand of Christianity slaves were most commonly exposed to, it is relevant to understanding how their religious culture developed. He discusses doctrinal issues such as the shift toward emotional religious practice to service a largely illiterate population, and the weaknesses of a spirituality that largely ignores social context. For Hill, this helps explain white converts' lack of engagement with the issues of slavery.

Hunt, Larry L. "A Religious Factor in Secular Achievement among Blacks: The Case of Catholicism." *Social Forces* 53 (1975) 595-605.

Hunt suggests that distance from the mainstream of African American protestantism actually provided an opportunity for advancement. He specifically deals with how this benefited black Catholics during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Further, he suggests that converts to Catholicism may have been more economically than religiously motivated.

Hunter, Tera W. *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Hunter deals with the challenges faced by Atlanta's black washerwomen throughout the 1880s. Here the work is used for its discussion of class and cultural tensions between working class African American women and their middle class counterparts.

Kelley, Robin D. *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990.

Kelley argues that Alabama's communist organizers ended up depending on their constituency during the great depression rather than leading them. He suggests that communism fit well

into the cultural, religious, and social context of poor southern blacks in ways that organizers could not have anticipated, and that these connections played a major role in sustaining the party throughout the 1930s.

Levine, Lawrence W. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Levine's work deals with the development of African American folk religion and culture throughout and immediately after the end of slavery. He uses a combination of second hand accounts, mostly from white observers, and oral histories to track a clandestine slave religion that served as a source of strength and means of ideological resistance for its adherents.

Lewis, Ronald L. *Black Coal Miners in America: Race, Class, and Community Conflict 1780-1980*. University Press of Kentucky, 1987.

Lewis traces the social and economic conditions surrounding Black Coal Miners. The relevant information in this work comes from his discussion of the exploitation of convict labor after the Civil War.

Martin, Charles H. "Communists and Blacks: The ILD and The Angelo Herndon Case." *The Journal of Negro History* 64 (1979) 131-141.

Martin's article discusses the brief rivalry between the ILD and the NAACP over Angelo Herndon, a case similar to the Scottsboro trial that the NAACP refused to try. Gives some background on the Scottsboro case.

Noll, Mark. *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Deals with the development of American religion in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Has two chapters that deal with religious justifications of slavery and how Northern denominations broke with the literal interpretation of the Bible to combat Southern slave owners.

Painter, Nell I. *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979.

Narrative of the life of Hosea Hudson, a black organizer for the ILD and a member of the Communist Party. Discusses his life organizing resistance to white oppression and his personal beliefs and background.

Raboteau, Albert J. *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1995.

Has a similar focus to Levine, but deals with African American religious contexts outside of slavery. Gives biographical information on the A.M.E. Church and its founding, and discusses the origins of religiously based racial equality.

Richardson, Joe M. *Christian Reconstruction: The American Missionary Association and Southern Blacks, 1861-1890*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986.

Details the American Missionary Association's relationship with the freedmen they served. Deals with issues of paternalism, black resistance to cultural assimilation, the rise of a black middle class, and integration of the organization.

Rosengarten, Theodore. *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.

Memoir that recounts the life of Nate Shaw, an illiterate sharecropper living in the Black Belt. Deals with both the economic and social barriers he faced and his development of a religious understanding of resistance.

Skocpol, Theda and Jennifer Lynn Oser. "Organization Despite Adversity: The Origins and Development of African American Fraternal Associations." *Social Science History* 28 (2004): 367-437.

Study of African American fraternal orders that traces their demographics and their relationship to mutual aid. Points to a direct connection between religious institutions, fraternal orders, and mutual aid organizations. Also suggests that the divisions between these categories are tenuous at best.

Washington, James M. *Frustrated Fellowship: The Black Baptist Quest for Social Power*. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1986.

Also discusses slave religion and its aftermath, with a focus on which beliefs particularly appealed to first slaves and then freedmen.

