

The Doubts of Their Fathers: the God debate, and the conflict between African American churches and civil rights organizations between the World Wars

In February 1923, the field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, William Pickens, penned an article “Things Nobody Believes.” The “nobody” was anyone “with intelligence.” The “things” included bible stories, creation, miracles, Christ’s resurrection, Christian creeds, a material heaven, or hell – which “was a helluvanidea.”¹ Most Christian teaching was “superstitious buncombe,” Pickens asserted, and any “man who believes something simply *because* somebody believed it two or three thousand years ago, is an idiot.”² “PICKENS DENIES RESURRECTION” and “DEAN PICKENS SAYS THERE IS NO HELL” were front-page headlines in the African American press.³

The son of a South Carolina hotel worker was one of the most high-profile African American leaders of the era, a renowned educator, journalist, orator and civil rights activist.⁴ Pickens published his second autobiography in 1923, his speeches attracted large audiences, and his postbag was full of fan mail, including one poem that started with the somewhat predictable rhyme, “Pickens, you’re the dickens.”⁵ Outspoken and frequently combative, Pickens was quick to get into fierce arguments with anyone who crossed his path, from Marcus Garvey to his daughter’s dentist.⁶ Or as he put it to his NAACP colleague W.E.B. Du Bois in 1921, “I have heard of men without enemies and I have often wondered what they could be doing.”⁷ Top of Pickens’ hit list, though, was superstition and dogma, including the Christianity that was preached in – as Pickens put it – “the average negro church.”⁸

Pickens had, in fact, been active in African American church circles earlier in his career. Just the previous year, he had been the keynote speaker at the Bishops Council of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church. But from the publication of this article onwards, the NAACP’s main ambassador to local communities spoke out with the zeal of the convert that he was from his self-described traditional Baptist upbringing.⁹ Part of Pickens’ critique was of the institution of the Black church, or rather Black

churches, and their personnel. Pickens frequently lampooned Black clergy for immorality. “We ordinary sinners have not even a chance to hit the spotlight any longer.”¹⁰ (He condemned KKK pulpits regularly, too).¹¹ But Pickens argued that the ultimate problem with Christianity was not misguided behaviour that needed reform but misguided beliefs that needed debunking.

For Pickens, these beliefs were not just out of date and irrational, but they also had practical, detrimental consequences for the struggle for equality and the state of the country. He was frustrated when African Americans appealed to their maker rather than applied themselves to make society better. In scores of articles and speeches, Pickens insisted progress for African Americans could only come through self-reliance and scientific thought.¹² Pickens also noted that white supremacists were quick to invoke the “The God alibi.” When people “drag God into the argument,” he warned, “you can usually look out for some scoundrelism that could not get by on any real logic.”¹³

On the face of it, Pickens’ article was just a liberal theological position expressed with characteristic gusto. But such a position, explained Levi Coppin, an influential AME Bishop, “is out of harmony with the prevailing doctrine of the Christian Church.” “So greatly at variance is his credo from what is commonly taught in our churches,” observed the Baltimore *Afro-American* in an editorial, “that no end of discussion is bound to result.”¹⁴ A front-page editorial in the New York *Amsterdam News* agreed. Pickens’ “article marks a new departure ... on the part of a prominent race leader.” “The attitude of the rank and file, where the faith of their fathers is involved, seems certain.”¹⁵

The *News* was right, at least as far as many clergy were concerned. Baptist ministers quickly appointed a committee to “affirm our trust” in “time-honoured doctrines.”¹⁶ Pittsburgh ministers passed a resolution of censure. In Baltimore – where Pickens had served as Dean of Morgan College before joining the NAACP leadership – the *Afro-American* could not find a single clergyman “willing to support the doctrine of the former local educator.” Instead, twenty-six ministers condemned the article, and added their opinions of Pickens: “a dog barking in the sun,” “extremely silly,” “nothing

in his brain but water,” and a “little blatherskite,” to quote a few of the insults. One exasperated Baltimore minister, Rev J. A. Briscoe, suggested, “Why not say there is no God, and give us a clean sweep.” Another called him an “atheist.”¹⁷ From Philadelphia, Richard R. Wright Jr, editor of the widely-circulated AME newspaper *Christian The Recorder*, also questioned Pickens’ faith. Highly educated, and well versed in liberal theology, Wright was no theological reactionary. He was deeply committed to social justice, too.¹⁸ Nonetheless, Wright wondered whether Pickens was “so mixed up in his theology that he really has no belief?”¹⁹ (Wright couldn’t resist a personal jibe, either. He reassured his readers that, having read the article, it was clear that “Pickens didn’t understand what he was talking about.” Wright feigned disappointment: “we were prepared for war.”)²⁰

An exasperated Nannie Burroughs, an NAACP supporter as well as a prominent African American Baptist women’s organizer wrote in a personal letter, “My dear friend, Pickens: Were you crazy when you wrote that article? ... You know as well as I do the attitude of the Negro ministers toward the NAACP.”²¹ Burroughs warned, “although you have been very popular with the Negro masses ... you will lose their respect if you write another article” like ‘Things Nobody Believes.’ Mary Ovington, chair of the NAACP Board, ordered Pickens to take swift remedial action. Pickens’ action was indeed swift. But he was anything but remedial.²² Pickens put out a statement claiming his argument had been sensationalized, and wrote a follow-up article.²³ Although there was “no prospect that man will ever be without religion,” he reckoned “there was every prospect that he will soon be beyond our present religious conceptions and beliefs.” The “preachers who attacked his article” did not know “their Bible.”²⁴ The reporters who had written the sensational headlines told “lies like snowballs – the further one rolls them, the more they grow.”²⁵ The clergy who banned him, were “unchristian ... to refuse the NAACP anything whatever because some person who is a member ... has expressed an honest opinion.”²⁶ As for Richard Wright, he was a “money-shark religious editor” who “failed to change our opinion of hell, but we did revise our opinion as to who should go there.”²⁷ The clergy responded in kind to Pickens’ follow-up article, calling him, among

other things, a “fool” who was copying the “fool white man,” and accused him of having “brain fever” or “just seeking notoriety.”²⁸

Far from being a mere personality spat, this falling out had consequences for Pickens’ work as an NAACP leader. As Burroughs rightly warned Pickens, “You know as well as I do that Negro ministers are going to shut their doors in the face of a representative of the NAACP who thus expressed himself.”²⁹ Nor was it an isolated incident. During the 1920s and 1930s, there was widespread conflict between male civil rights leaders and clergy over the question of Christian belief – a conflict that had major implications for the relationship between churches and civil rights organizations more generally. In these years, seemingly the majority of prominent civil rights leaders moved away from the faith of their fathers, often very publicly. Some, like Pickens, questioned the fundamental doctrines of the major African American denominations. Others would question the nature, or even existence, of a Christian God altogether.

In the first generation of civil rights scholarship, it was something of a truism that the movement grew out of the church.³⁰ Since then, scholars have rightly begun to decouple the church and early twentieth century protest, drawing attention, among other things, to the discontent of churchwomen with their denominational leaders, the prominence of Communists in Depression-era protest, and the critique of the church by activist intellectuals (though there has been less attention to the response of church leaders).³¹ Even so, in this telling, it was the church as an institution, rather than Christianity as a belief system, that was under question. Churchwomen remained committed to godly race work, the intellectuals’ critique of church leaders was of their failure to be an effective fighting force rather than because of their Christian faith, and Communists took care to emphasize economic rather than spiritual matters during the Popular Front era.³² No doubt much of the conflict between clergy and civil rights leaders over questions of faith was also about personalities, power, and the place of their institutions in African American life.³³ But as the Pickens case also suggests, wrapped up in the various disputes between clergy and civil rights leaders, there was a battle over belief.

This battle was fought in – and was all the more heated because of – a broader context of widespread scepticism of prevailing Christian beliefs by African Americans during the 1920s and 1930s. As one of the Maryland ministers, Rev. John Wesley Hilton, put it, in reaction to Pickens, “This is an age of apostasy, of scepticism and doubt.” Hilton expressed confidence that “Every time a skeptic, infidel, or scoffer attempts to blacken the Eternal “Rock of Ages” he is wounded by the fragments of truth that fly from the rock, but never moves the rock.”³⁴ But many ministers were less secure. Richard Wright’s reaction to Pickens, for example, was underscored by his concerns that Pickens’ “agnosticism represents a growing minority among colored people.”³⁵ The Baptist ministers put out their statement of faith precisely because they feared that “too many hold to Dr. Pickens’ views.”³⁶

This essay will explore, in turn, the context of religious scepticism during this period of rampant racism, the conflict between church and protest leaders, and the consequences of this conflict for the development of African American Christianity and the struggle for equality – with a particular focus on the dispute between leaders of the main church denominations and Pickens’ NAACP, the preeminent civil rights organization of the day. Exploring this conflict over beliefs shows that racism was intimately linked with religious rethinking, helps explain why churches developed social justice traditions apart from civil rights organizations, and suggests that the Christian underpinning of the modern civil rights movement was anything but inevitable.

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Broader studies of the so-called secular age have tended to overlook African Americans, or to place them in counterpoint to secularization narratives.³⁷ In turn, for many years, the dominant narrative in African American religious history has been the growth and power of the Black church, or rather, Black churches, following emancipation.³⁸ More recently, historians of African American religion have recognized a long Black humanist tradition, notably through Antony Pinn’s work.³⁹ One of the

striking features of the period between the World Wars, though, is the extent to which the Black press and religious journals, sermons and surveys, and literature and letters discussed the rise of what was variously (and often interchangeably) called scepticism, agnosticism or atheism.⁴⁰ “The growing indifference of the Negro toward Christianity is becoming very apparent,” reported the NAACP’s *Crisis* magazine in 1919. “Indeed, so strong is this spirit of indifference to Christianity that it is bordering on agnosticism.”⁴¹

This “spirit of indifference to Christianity” among African Americans was part of a much broader period of religious scepticism in America more generally, not to say beyond.⁴² In a 1926 article in the influential *African Methodist Episcopal Review*, evangelist D J Flynn could equally have been talking about white Americans when he blamed “excrement intellectualisms” and “materialistic beliefs” for “generating a spirit of atheism in the hearts of our people.”⁴³ Meanwhile, the challenges to the institutional position of American churches that have been much debated by historians – including World War One, urbanization, increased provision of services by the state and non-religious agencies, and the growth of a secular press – profoundly affected African Americans too. Indeed in many ways, African Americans were disproportionately affected, because of the rapid growth of the Black press, the unexpected inclusion of African Americans in the New Deal state, and above all, the speed and sheer scale of the Great Migration.⁴⁴

It was the pain of Jim Crow, though, that presented the most profound challenge to Black Christianity. As early as 1903, the activist intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois had posed his famous question, “how does it feel to be a problem?” in spiritual terms; “why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?”⁴⁵ Others followed suit. “A growing number of iconoclasts and atheists impertinently demand to know why Negroes should revere a God who permits them to be lynched, Jim-crowed and disfranchised,” wrote the outspoken African American sceptic, George Schuyler, in a characteristically caustic 1932 article entitled “Black America Begins to Doubt,” published in *American Mercury* (a journal edited by the prominent white atheist, H. L.

Mencken).⁴⁶ The first African American Executive Secretary of the NAACP, James Weldon Johnson mused, “Religious life could easily be made more universal ... if an Overruling Providence only saw to it that unfortunate things happened only to bad people.”⁴⁷

In response to racial discrimination and racist violence, observed one Black Methodist theologian in 1919, many were “either charging God with injustice or with the inability to control the world which he has created.”⁴⁸ Or as a correspondent from Shreveport put it in a letter to the Chicago *Defender*, a decade later, “these souvenirs of the dreadful past, these horrors that still exist, these frightful facts deny that any God exists who has the will and power to guard and bless the human race.”⁴⁹ African American theologians seemed ill-equipped to cope.⁵⁰ Black Christian leaders had previously faced the theological problem of slavery, of course. Some argued that God allowed his new chosen people to be forcibly brought to America to hear the Christian message, and then to win freedom in order to return the gospel to Africa. The spectacular church growth of the later nineteenth century had accompanied the emancipation and progress that seemed to confirm God’s favor, a modern day version of the biblical flight of God’s people from slavery.⁵¹ Since the turn of the century, though, lynchings and segregation, racist riots and a resurgent Klan, meant no promised land was in sight.⁵² “Poor God,” wrote one Black Methodist editor in 1929. “We are sorry for him. Let the Ku Klux reign!”⁵³ The Depression then hit African Americans particularly hard. It “has been spiritual more than economic,” warned the Fraternal Council of Negro Churches – a group of prominent clergy committed to fighting poverty. People have “cut loose from the moorings of faith.”⁵⁴

The fact that the United States was a self-professed Christian country compounded this spiritual challenge. “When we see the Christian church refusing to fellowship a Christian brother,” the *AME Review* had warned back in 1891, “we need not be surprised if such contradictions bring doubts to the minds of those who are not fully established in a genuine Christian life.”⁵⁵ In a speech in 1925, James Weldon Johnson regretted that whereas some white Christian allies had condemned slavery, now most

white pastors did not speak out even when lynchings occurred in the shadow of their church.⁵⁶ In an influential survey the following year, Walter White, Johnson's second in command at the NAACP, highlighted the correlation between the number of lynchings and the number of Protestants in any given state. White thought it "exceedingly doubtful if lynching could possibly exist under any other religion than Christianity."⁵⁷ "When we meet a bigot," noted the *Afro-American* in 1926, "we involuntarily ask ourselves this question: "Wonder whose Sunday school he's superintendent of?" "If racial segregation ... is the "Christian standpoint, then where in the devil will the Devil "stand?"⁵⁸ Looking abroad, commentators fumed at the cultural imperialism of white missionaries, and at the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, the symbolic home of black Christianity. "Rampant" Christianity, charged Du Bois, should "hang her head in shame."⁵⁹

Conversely, some of the most prominent white Americans who opposed racism also challenged Christianity. Robert Ingersoll, for example, the celebrated "Great Agnostic" of the late nineteenth century, had famously shared a stage with Frederick Douglass to demand civil rights.⁶⁰ The widely-read journalist and intellectual, Kelly Miller, connected Ingersoll directly to "Things Nobody Believes." Pickens "can hardly claim originality" with his agnosticism, Miller argued. "Col. Ingersoll came fully a generation ahead of him."⁶¹ In a 1934 article, Black congregational minister Roland Heacock acknowledged the power of the "Negro secular leaders'" argument that the "really courageous [white] leaders are too often found ... in the ranks of non-churchgoing people, atheistic Humanists, materialists, Socialists, Communists."⁶² Or as a 1933 Chicago *Defender* editorial put it, pointedly, "Atheists, free thinkers and infidels constitute no mobs."⁶³

Some of the tension over beliefs related to the challenge to traditional creeds from higher criticism and science, rather than a rejection of Christian faith altogether.⁶⁴ Pickens continued to attend church, one that reflected his increasingly universalist approach to religion.⁶⁵ Indeed Pickens' article was prompted by the furore over a sermon given by a liberal white New York clergyman, Percy Stickney Grant, questioning the divinity of Christ. Pickens even criticized Black clergy by saying that many of their more

intelligent white counterparts shared his views.⁶⁶ (In fact, debates surrounding approaches to scripture were prevalent in African American theological schools too, which no doubt unsettled established church leaders).⁶⁷

Talk of spiritual crisis, though, was not simply that of a traditionalist Black church establishment (over)reacting to looming modernist changes. Clergy tended to differentiate between liberal critiques and what they determined to be unbelief. In any case, by the 1920s and 1930s, progressive theological voices were well established within each denomination. Reverdy Ransom, editor of the *AME Review* 1912-24, had found comfort in the realization that “the doctrines I did not and could not accept ... were man-made.”⁶⁸ Russell Barbour, Ransom’s counterpart at the widely-circulated *Baptist Voice*, thought “modernism was far superior to fundamentalism” though he promised to serve all views. Barbour also assured readers that he did not use the term atheist lightly. He noted that he had refused to “join the chorus shouting “Atheism” simply because [of] the critical approach to Biblical study.”⁶⁹ It is striking that progressive clergy and those committed to a social gospel, just like their conservative counterparts and those focussed on otherworldly salvation, warned of growing unbelief.

Ultimately, then, this dispute concerned more than a critique of the clergy, a jeremiad against American Christianity or even a debate about doctrine and its impact on protest – though all of those issues were important and often intertwined. It was also a grappling with the heart of the matter: the nature, actions, or very existence, of God. This grappling occurred across generations, education levels and region. In 1936, Texan Baptist Dean H Smith reported the “bitter words ... of a young Negro.” “God either cannot answer our prayers, or like the great majority of Americans is not greatly concerning himself with the supplications of black folks.” The man was not, warned Smith, “as you might imagine one of the college generation” but an exceptionally fine “semi-skilled workman” who had been unfairly shut “out of trade, odd jobs.” Smith was a progressive theologian. Yet he portrayed this questioner as an unbeliever “who had lost faith not only in his white brother, but in his God.”

Smith sympathized. “Most of us know the bitter Golgotha that every black man in America, whether it be the East or West, North or South, has to face.”⁷⁰ In Washington DC, clubwoman Mary Church Terrell, formerly a college prayer group leader, wrote that the lynching of a friend, “while thousands of Christians sinfully winked ... came near upsetting my faith in the Christian religion.” Shortly after, Terrell suffered a late-term miscarriage. Perhaps this was God’s kindness, she reasoned in a vain attempt to square her theology with her pain, because her anger may have “injuriously affected my unborn child.”⁷¹ In Georgia, labor activist Angelo Herndon gave up on God altogether. As a child he had accepted his mother’s view that the “will of God” meant “white boys called me “nigger.”” As an adult, though, he was attracted to Communism: “rational and scientific in its base, ethical in its motives, it is the only philosophy of living worthy of a thinking civilized man.” Herndon refused to see the chaplain while on death row (for insurrection), telling cellmates he had no time for “pious twaddle.”⁷²

African Americans did not come to a single answer concerning the whereabouts of God in the age of Jim Crow, or the nature of God in an era of religious rethinking. Nor did they settle on a common response: religious nationalism and storefront Christianity, a focus on heaven and emotional escapism, modernism and the social gospel, universalism and spiritualism, and a variety of religious movements were on offer in these years.⁷³ Scholars of religion have shown how religious practice was transformed within Black churches, particularly in northern cities.⁷⁴ In this period of “religious ferment and transformation,” Judith Weisenfeld has demonstrated, too, that “noticeable numbers of people of African descent began to establish and participate in movements outside of Protestantism.” But clearly there were increasing numbers of Black Americans who charged that there was no superintending beneficent God at all.

They were certainly losing their attachment to mainstream church denominations. Though census reports between 1916-36 still showed Black church membership to be increasing overall, clergy were concerned that the rate of growth slowed markedly, and, crucially, lagged behind black population growth.⁷⁵ R.R. Wright warned in 1927, “Negroes are born twice as fast as they are twice born.” A decade later,

now a Bishop, Wright took no pleasure in seeing the fulfilment of his prophesy. In an article, “Challenge to the Negro Church,” Wright noted that a majority of African Americans, some 7 million people, now did not attend. “This is a larger number of Negroes than Abraham Lincoln emancipated.”⁷⁶ In a 1938 address, the widely-travelled Baptist Nannie Burroughs agreed: “The churches, for the most part, except cults and camps, are practically empty.”⁷⁷

Church leaders were exercised about the effects of the Great Migration. In 1929, The President of the National Baptist Convention, Lacy Kirk Williams wrote in the *Chicago Tribune*, “From 1916-20 Chicago increased its Negro population 145.5 per cent, but for the same time there was only a 40 per cent total increase in Negro church membership.” But there was concern about the drift from church in the South too. In 1931 the Houston *Defender* asked, “is there a spiritual death in Houston? One can count on the fingers of one hand (and then have some fingers to spare) the Negro churches here which seem to be holding their own.”⁷⁸ There were also concerns in the countryside. One despondent rural pastor complained to an interviewer, “The people here are backsliders ... The church I pastor don’t have no service because I have got nobody to have service with.”⁷⁹ The AME denomination saw a major drop in attendance, but even the National Baptist Convention, the largest Black denomination, reported a sharp reduction in membership growth during 1916-26 – less than a third of the rate of population growth.⁸⁰ Worse still, mused Russell Barbour at the *Baptist Voice*, “We do not have half of the members enrolled on our church books.” In 1936, Dean of the Baptist Sunday School Congress, M. A. Talley, described this departure from the faith as a “new exodus.” “It was “astonishing to observe,” Talley lamented, “the spiritual decline and the fall off in church attendance.”⁸¹

A fall off in attendance did not, of course, mean spiritual decline.⁸² The “cults and camps,” for example, that Burroughs referenced and many clergy condemned, were often vibrant centres of spiritual sustenance, and new ways of thinking about racial identity.⁸³ Many clergy, though, like Talley, equated declining attendance with rising atheism. “A few years ago it was a rare thing to find an atheist,” observed Barbour, in

1930. “Today our cities and schools are crowded with men and women who have no sympathy for the Negro church.”⁸⁴ Similarly Burroughs feared it was not just churches that were empty, “the minds and hearts of our people are empty too, empty to the things of the spirit.”⁸⁵

From the perspective of the relationship between the clergy and civil rights leadership, this perception of a crisis of faith (and the prospect of falling attendances) was as important as its reality.⁸⁶ In his published “message to the race” in 1929, the influential Washington D.C. Presbyterian pastor, Francis Grimke concluded by asking God to keep the race “from the clutches of infidels, atheists, scoffers ... in however specious, attractive guise they may come.”⁸⁷ Some went on the attack. William Imes, a Presbyterian pastor in New York who Pickens once described as one of the few “progressive preachers,” accused his supposedly “atheist” hecklers during a speech of actually having a religion because they “make a fetish of unbelief.”⁸⁸ Others championed reform: a better educated clergy, an end to denominationalism, a program for youth, and engagement with science and modernist theology in order to stop people falling away altogether.⁸⁹ Apologists argued that American Christianity was a false religion, and that true Christianity remained the most potent weapon for good.⁹⁰ “Just imagine if Mussolini was a Christian,” suggested one minister. He would say, “My dear Brother Selassie ... what could I have been thinking trying to confiscate YOUR land.”⁹¹ Some insisted that suffering could be redemptive. Dean Smith reflected: “Only the heart that has suffered can truly know and see God ... instead of losing Christ, as we carry our cross, we will at the end of the road find Him.”⁹²

In this divide – at least in the minds of many clergy – between believers and sceptics, prominent civil rights leaders of all political persuasions seemed to line up on the sceptical side. The African Black Brotherhood and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the NAACP and the National Urban League, the National Negro Congress and

the Communist ILD were all led by men known for their scepticism.⁹³ Tensions between civil rights and church leaders followed, none more bristling with suspicion and contempt, than between the NAACP and the major church denominations. The NAACP sought to build a mass membership across the country during the 1920s and 30s, while between them the main Black Baptist and Methodist denominations represented more than four million members by 1916.⁹⁴ Histories of Black churches, and of the NAACP, during this period have mostly ignored each other, in contrast to the generations before and afterwards, when the NAACP and churches were in close alliance.⁹⁵ As Gayroud Wilmore rightly observed in 1973, in his influential *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, “It used to be a truism in many communities that “the black church is the NAACP on its knees.”⁹⁶ But by the end of the 1920s, in the eyes of many clergy, the NAACP might as well have stood for the National Association for the Attack on Christian Principles.

It didn't start that way. Church leaders were deeply involved in the NAACP's founding in 1909.⁹⁷ Francis Grimke, who had signed the call for the meeting that led to the NAACP, told his Washington DC congregation ahead of Thanksgiving in 1912 that they should give thanks for the Association. “I believe God has the back of it; that He inspired the thought of it; and that it is due largely to His influence, operating upon the hearts of the men and women in it, that it has been kept alive.”⁹⁸ In 1918, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion's newspaper, the *Star of Zion*, praised the NAACP as “the Race's watchdog ... They need encouragement, co-operation and sympathy.”⁹⁹ The NAACP's campaign against lynching and call for the white church to “live up to the teachings of the Master” dovetailed with Black churches' own protest orientation.¹⁰⁰ The church should still “seek to save men's souls” wrote one AME minister in 1919, but the “New Church in this New Era must be the champion of the people's rights.”¹⁰¹ During the early 1920s, the *National Baptist Voice* served as something of a propaganda sheet in support of the NAACP.¹⁰²

In turn, NAACP leaders did not initially seek a fight with the church. Quite the opposite. The first African American Executive Secretary of the NAACP, James Weldon Johnson, had a deep respect for the place of Christianity in African American life. The son of a Baptist minister, a writer of Christian poetry and a recorder of spirituals, Johnson was best known as the writer of *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, the so-called “Black National Anthem.” The hymn ended with worship of the “God of our weary years, God of our silent tears,” and a call to faith: “Keep us forever in the path, we pray. Lest our feet stray from the places, our God, where we met Thee; Lest our hearts, drunk with the wine of the world, we forget Thee...”¹⁰³

A year into Johnson’s tenure as Executive secretary, the NAACP even contacted ministers to ask them to pray, at noon on April 24th 1921, “That this country may be brought to realization that ... it stands as the arch sinner among the nations, and its protestations of democracy are as sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal.” This call to prayer came as a relief to Grimke, who, in a published sermon, acknowledged, “it has been said at times by some not friendly to the Association that it has been rather inclined to pull away from religion.” In a gentle hint of the stern criticism to come, Grimke suggested “It would be unfortunate for any organization to attempt to do any work in the line of race betterment without associating the thought of God with it, and without looking to God for help.” But this “request for prayer to the churches clearly shows,” Grimke concluded, “that it is not true that it is trying to carry on its work without help from above.” As a result, Grimke called on every member of his and every church to join the NAACP and on God “to give it an ever-abiding place in our hearts.”¹⁰⁴

What Grimke may not have known at the time, though, was that Grimke’s God did not have that place in Johnson’s heart.¹⁰⁵ Indeed, Johnson had no commitment to the God of his lyrics at all. He had resented church attendance as a child, been attracted to the scientific rationality of his first employer as a teenager, and become a self-confessed agnostic by the time he went to Atlanta University – where he refused to attend chapel and thought prayer meetings “put a premium on hypocrisy.”¹⁰⁶ Johnson concluded “that man, instead of being the special care of a Divine Providence, is dependent upon fortuity

and his own wits for survival in the midst of blind and insensate forces.”¹⁰⁷ At the end of his autobiography, published in 1933, Johnson admitted, “through my adult life I have lacked religiosity ... in the commonplace sense of the term.” Not that he considered himself unspiritual. Rather, he cherished a life more “charged with meaning” than if he subscribed to “cosmic design,” “how I deal with myself and how I deal with my fellows ... constitute[s] a basis for adequate religion.”¹⁰⁸

In his personal notes that he made in preparation for the autobiography, Johnson went somewhat further. Johnson praised the controversial British atheist Bertrand Russell, insisting that Russell was “essential” when trying “to penetrate the inscrutable.”¹⁰⁹ Johnson scorned the attempt of people to seek Divine help. “God must have a great sense of humor,” he mused, “to listen to pathetic prayers.”¹¹⁰ Johnson even went so far as to “thank God for my somewhat pagan attitude toward life,” and predicted “The time will come when a man posing as a mediator between God and man ... will be an anachronism in a class with soothsayers, astrologers and medicine men.” In his published autobiography Johnson, a diplomat by disposition, was somewhat more restrained. Johnson concluded that he did “not know if there is a personal God ... I do not see how I can know; and I do not see how my knowing can matter.”¹¹¹ Johnson’s successor as Executive Secretary from 1930, Walter White, who didn’t go to church, said he had no opinion about what happened after death.¹¹²

Johnson and White did not speak out about their agnosticism during their tenures. Indeed, Johnson wrote, “I have little patience with the zealot who is forever trying to prove to others that they do not need religion.”¹¹³ Johnson’s problem, though, was that the Association became intimately associated with precisely the zealots he had little patience for. And Johnson’s beliefs, despite his protestations, did matter. Because he, and White, had given up on the faith of their fathers they were unwilling to placate the churchmen’s ire, or perhaps unable to grasp the extent of it. By the time Johnson became Executive Secretary, in 1920, there were few clergy still serving in national leadership or advisory capacities.¹¹⁴ An exception was Episcopalian Robert Bagnall, director of branches, and a founding member of the Pittsburgh branch.¹¹⁵ By the time

Pickens published “Things Nobody Believes” in 1923, though, there was only one (white) minister on the national board, John Haynes Holmes, pastor of the Community Church in New York.¹¹⁶ In theological terms, Holmes was anything but an ideal ambassador to Black Baptists and Methodists - he had split from the Unitarian Church because he thought it too rigid in its creed.¹¹⁷ Pickens would later get involved with Holmes’ Community Church - for mainline Protestants, that may have been worse than not attending church at all.¹¹⁸

Tensions flared initially between church leaders and Du Bois, editor of the NAACP’s *Crisis* magazine.¹¹⁹ A free-thinker in every sense, Du Bois was not a zealot against Christianity, or unspiritual – but he was outspoken, and far from orthodox.¹²⁰ Under his editorship, the *Crisis* frequently published work that took shots at Christian doctrine. “Nobody has ever accused him of being religious,” wrote the hitherto NAACP-supporting *Star of Zion* editor in 1922. “When we are satisfied that he has humbled himself sufficiently at the foot of the cross we will thank him for his advice.”¹²¹ Two years later, Du Bois’ *Crisis* printed Countee Cullen’s poem, *Mary, Mother of Christ*, with Mary regretting her cover story for getting pregnant after a one-night stand. “I laughed and sang a silly tune/About a golden quest/That night I kissed his coral lips/How could I know the rest?”¹²²

If only the church “will drop the attempt to *force* men, who are willing to work with them, to believe matters which they ... regard often as absurd,” insisted Du Bois, in 1931, “it may attract the mass of sincere thinking Negroes” and become a greater center for the “uplift of the American Negro.”¹²³ For Russell Barbour of the *Baptist Voice*, who had welcomed Du Bois’ previous critiques of over-emotional or under-educated clergy, this challenge to belief was a step too far – especially when Du Bois complained to God, through the voice of one his characters, “You fill the rich and white with good things and the poor and black you send empty away, or lynchttime.” Reflecting on Du Bois being “disgusted with God,” Barbour told his readers, “The editor of the *Crisis* is too bitter. He has had his day.”¹²⁴ The following year, the *Star of Zion* warned Du Bois that support from the AMEZ’s half a million members, who gave the “NAACP dollars and brains” –

“is getting threadbare almost to the breaking point.”¹²⁵ Even Francis Grimke, who in 1921 had celebrated Du Bois as “a man that is eminently fitted to express clearly and forcibly the aspirations of the race,” changed his mind. “On the intellectual side he may be all right” but Grimke thought Du Bois’ religious views were “perverted” and his lack of “stress upon religion and high moral character” meant that Grimke did not feel “that he represented exactly the type of leadership that the race needed most.”¹²⁶

The appointment of Pickens, who later succeeded Bagnall as director of Branches, hastened the transformation of the NAACP from secular ally to secularist rival in the eyes of church leaders.¹²⁷ Pickens did not let up on his critique of contemporary Christianity during his two-decade stint in leadership, mixing exasperation and ridicule in equal measure.¹²⁸ Responding to preachers who ascribed the Mississippi flood of 1927 to God’s judgement on the Jim Crow South, Pickens noted that many more African Americans had suffered. God “made a wide miss on one of His biggest throws,” scoffed Pickens. God was not “on the Negro’s side.” Judging by the state of Jim Crow America, “He thinks just as well, to say the least, of the white people.”¹²⁹ In turn clergy did not let up in their criticism of Pickens. “They slandered and talked about Christ,” wrote one minister to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, in 1930, “so we are not surprised at this Pharisee, Mr. William Pickens.”¹³⁰

Pickens was soon joined in his challenge to “commonplace” Christianity by Clarence Darrow. The leading (white) lawyer of the era was also his generation’s “foremost Agnostic,” calling heaven “goofville” in high-profile debates.¹³¹ Darrow’s legal mind saw no proof for God – he was an agnostic rather than an atheist, he joked, because “I haven’t yet had time or opportunity to explore the universe, and I don’t know what I might run on to in some nook or corner.”¹³² For Darrow, religion was based “on myth, superstition, imagination, or fear,” and was irrational in a world of suffering: “what a hell of a God.”¹³³

The problem for church leaders was that Darrow had become a hero to many African Americans.¹³⁴ Just months after a starring role at the Scopes trial about the teaching of evolution, in 1925, Darrow led the defense of Ossian Sweet, a doctor accused

of shooting dead a member of the white mob that had besieged his Detroit home.¹³⁵ The *Sweet* case was the most celebrated Black legal victory of the era. Soon after, Darrow spoke at a mass meeting in one of Harlem's largest churches. No doubt the ministers who sat on the platform hoped to bask in Darrow's reflected glory. They soon wished they hadn't. "Negroes are too blooming pious," Darrow declared. If there was a God, He was white; if there was a heaven, it was segregated.

One minister scuttled from the church convinced that the "Christian religion had suffered its severest setback in the past ten years. No matter what Darrow says ... it will be believed."¹³⁶ Darrow's words certainly resonated. "Prayer in our present attitude won't get us in the sunlight of salvation," wrote one supporter from Arkansas, to the *Pittsburgh Courier*.¹³⁷ Ministers called Darrow, variously, an infidel, a publicity seeker, and hell-bound.¹³⁸ In Washington DC, ministers barred him from speaking in church.¹³⁹ Darrow turned up at DC's Howard University instead, promising to "say what I think," which "a man can't do ... if he talks in the average church."¹⁴⁰ What Darrow thought homed in on Black Christianity's Achilles heel. "If God exists," then "he has been present at every lynching ... And he has never helped!"¹⁴¹ According to the *Baptist Voice*, "nobody cheered." But that was little comfort. "The atmosphere was tense," the *Voice* admitted, "tense with the pent-up emotions of the growing, thinking, stirring youth of an oppressed race that agreed, most of them, with Darrow, yet did not dare applaud so revolutionary a sentiment."¹⁴²

Righteous anger at Darrow came from clergy who were progressive in their theology or dedicated to civil rights, as well as from conservatives and those who were not involved in social gospel work. Reverdy Ransom, the most liberal of the AME Methodist Bishops and on good terms with Darrow personally, warned him publicly that he "would not speak as he did if he wore a black skin."¹⁴³ Presbyterian Francis Grimke, a forthright critic of racism, acknowledged that Darrow "is saying some good things in behalf of the rights of the race," but singled him out as a threat nonetheless. "Beware, beware," Grimke warned. "It will be a sad day for the race when it turns away from Jesus Christ ... to the vaporings of Mr. Darrow!" Grimke was disturbed that "Some of our

leaders ... sit and listen, apparently with complacency to his diatribes against God.”¹⁴⁴ AMEZ Bishop William Walls was no fundamentalist, welcomed criticism of corrupt clergy, was a courageous opponent of Jim Crow, an early supporter of the NAACP, and even praised the work of Communists.¹⁴⁵ But fearful that the church was “losing our everyday masses,” Walls drew the line at activists who attacked belief in a superintending deity. In 1925, Walls wrote an article, warning that Darrow had no “effectual substitute for our ‘fool religion’” and was the fool since he “saith in his heart ‘there is no God.’”¹⁴⁶ When Darrow told the race “to quit praying,” Walls countered in a speech, our “fathers and mothers got their freedom on their knees... and we must stay on our knees.”¹⁴⁷ “We must stop making Darrow our ideal,” Walls insisted. One reporter rightly noted that Walls “likes to denounce Clarence Darrow and the latter’s agnostic views.”¹⁴⁸

Why Darrow’s taunts mattered to NAACP-church relations was because they seemed to carry the imprimatur of the Association. The *Sweet* case was an NAACP case. The Harlem meeting was an NAACP-sponsored meeting. NAACP leaders denounced Darrow’s pulpit ban and elected Darrow to the Board.¹⁴⁹ In 1928 Washington DC’s NAACP leaders invited Darrow to address their membership drive – since he was barred from churches, they held the meeting outside and pointedly asked the “Good Lord” for a fine day. (Neither side could claim divine approval: it was sunny, but unseasonably cold.)¹⁵⁰ A couple of years later, Du Bois invited Darrow to make the case against God in the *Crisis*. In 1933, the Chicago branch urged head office not to invite Darrow to address the upcoming annual conference in their city – citing “missgivings” because of “his attitude towards religion.” The NAACP invited Darrow anyway (along with Pickens, and the historian Rayford Logan, who argued that Jim Crow undermined belief in God).¹⁵¹ On Darrow’s 70th birthday, Walter White told the party of 1,200 people that Darrow “has shown that the agnostics are friends of the Negro.”¹⁵² White named his son after him.

Critics of Darrow also bracketed him with Pickens. In a widely-reported speech to an AMEZ conference in the summer of 1931, Walls warned, “William Pickens and other Negro leaders who follow the leadership of Darrow and subscribe to his attack

upon the Negro church are enemies of the race.”¹⁵³ At the end of that year, Walls made the point in person. At a political conference in Washington DC, Mordecai Johnson, the President of Howard University (and a clergyman), had spoken of the power of prayer as a solution to the problems facing African Americans. Clarence Darrow, noted the *Atlanta Daily World* in an ironic turn of phrase, “had taken a slightly diametrical view.” Pickens agreed, insisting “we must not substitute prayer for courage and hard work.” Never one to miss an opportunity, Pickens also suggested that if the “colored preachers” who have said “Darrow is going to hell” were right, then “those of the colored people” who ended up in hell would find a “more sincere and honest white friend in hell” than among “the white Christians who expect to meet them in heaven.” At this point Bishop Walls, from the audience, to quote the *Daily World*, “ruthlessly checked a flight of oratory” from Pickens on a point of order. “Clarence Darrow and his champion were bearded,” and the clergy in the audience “applauded with warmth and glee.”¹⁵⁴

More generally, NAACP leaders came to be seen as part of a wider atheist network.¹⁵⁵ In 1934, Baptist minister and *Pittsburgh Courier* religious editor, George Harvey, warned, “We view the organization through its personnel.”¹⁵⁶ It was common knowledge, agreed labor activist L. F. Coles, that “Most people who quarrel with the NAACP do so because they do not like Du Bois, Pickens [and] White.”¹⁵⁷ “If the NAACP had religion in its early days,” Harvey concluded, “it seems to have lost much of it in these later years, and worships the idol gods of social, legal, cultural and intellectual expediency with whole-hearted zeal; with a possible curt bow to the church and religion as an ally.”¹⁵⁸

As a result, the early alliance between church and NAACP leaders was increasingly torn asunder. During the early 1920s, the *Baptist Voice* had habitually carried more than one hundred favourable articles per year about NAACP activities. By the 1930s, it mentioned the NAACP barely a dozen times a year, and virtually all mentions were hostile. In turn, admitted Bagnall, “At every one of our Conferences there has been very considerable criticism of the ministry as a whole.”¹⁵⁹ Considering the centrality of churches to African American life, and the commitment of many clergy to

social justice, it is noticeable just how few ministers got involved in leadership in the national organization in this period. For example, there were only 16 ministers out of 243 delegates at the NAACP's 1928 national conference, down from 27 ministers out of 140 delegates in 1919. In 1932, only 11 attended. The following year, there were only two. In 1939, not a single minister served as a state conference officer.¹⁶⁰

The conflict between the leadership did not inevitably translate to conflict at the local level. Overall, the record was mixed. There were some active ministers in local NAACP leadership.¹⁶¹ When Baptist Jas Gayle led the New Orleans branch in 1934, for example, he worked with ministerial alliances, and urged clergy to hold anti-lynching Sundays. Under Gayle's leadership, the branch gained over 1000 members, and dozens of clergy became involved. But after Gayle left his position in 1935 to lead the state Baptist Young Person's Union, the membership fell to 175, including only three ministers.¹⁶²

Conversely some local branches recorded a lack of involvement from ministers, or reported on tensions.¹⁶³ From Little Rock, Arkansas in 1924, Carrie Shepperson complained to head office about the absence of clergy support. Bagnall commiserated, "I am sorry to say that your experience is a most common one."¹⁶⁴ Rather than build bridges, Bagnall advised Shepperson to "name and shame" ministers.¹⁶⁵ By 1937, according to NAACP records, fewer than 1 in 10 Southern branch officers were ministers.¹⁶⁶ Jerome Heartland Holland, an NAACP supporter and clergyman who wrote a Master's thesis in 1941 with the intention of demonstrating "the protesting nature" of clergy, was puzzled by the "apparent discrepancy between the aggressive attitude responses" of virtually all the local clergy who replied to his questionnaire (such as a willingness to publicly condemn Jim Crow and call for protest), and their much lower levels of NAACP membership.¹⁶⁷ In practice, of course, numerous church members were no doubt also NAACP members, despite the leadership divide. But as NAACP membership stagnated during the Depression, it can't have helped that the NAACP's field secretary was *persona non grata* in some church circles.¹⁶⁸

Far from being unconcerned with civil rights, some clergy concerns about rising scepticism were about the effect on the struggle for equality. Grimke, for example, a fierce critic of Jim Crow, was convinced that “If things are to go well with us, as a race, we must hold on to God, to Jesus Christ, to the Bible, to prayer, to the Christian religion, as our sheet anchor ... A God-fearing race is a race that no power on earth, political or otherwise, can keep from rising.” He also thought their lack of Christian faith meant that NAACP leaders lacked “a spirit of self-denial for the sake of the cause,” and were unable to reach the masses. Grimke eventually decided against making his criticisms public, out of loyalty to the Association (his brother had been President of the Washington DC branch). Instead, he sent them directly to Walter White. Grimke remained an NAACP member, but his earlier enthusiasm dimmed, from 1922 (to his death in 1937) he gave no more sermons in support of the Association, and his annual donation dropped markedly, in favour of donations to religious and humanitarian relief work.¹⁶⁹

Other tensions were over more practical issues. In 1939 the Port Huron, Michigan, branch president reported on the involvement of churchgoers, but as a result, on moral grounds, they refused to support an NAACP dance. (Pickens, of all people, offered to write to concerned ministers).¹⁷⁰ There was the money question, too. The activist academic, Ralph Bunche, noted that competition between churches and the NAACP for donations, especially during the Depression, was “serious.”¹⁷¹ Though NAACP meetings were invariably held in church buildings (a church was sometimes the only venue available), reports show frustration at how often the Association had to pay hiring fees.¹⁷² NAACP records show fewer churches giving to the organization, too – of 169 contributing organizations listed during 1930, for example, only eleven were churches or Christian-based organizations (and two of those were from Holmes’ Community Church).¹⁷³

Rising tensions between local churches and NAACP branches were by no means inevitable. In Mobile, Alabama, in 1931, NAACP stalwart John LeFlore, a mailman but decidedly not a churchman, had mocked ministers for their belief in the Bible (and for their ostentatious chicken dinners).¹⁷⁴ In 1934, though, LeFlore traveled some distance to

the regional conferences of the major Methodist denominations, where he informed Bishops about his work. Two years later, the AMEZ asked LeFlore to address its Council of Bishops. Strong clergy support for Alabama NAACP branches swiftly followed.¹⁷⁵

Of particular importance was the hiring of Daisy Lampkin as NAACP regional field secretary for the mid-West, in 1930. The dynamic clubwoman was a committed Christian who believed in the power of prayer and the promise of interracial fellowship, even under Jim Crow. “Faith is believing in God, in His divine purpose, no matter how dark the day, nor how clouded the way,” she reflected later.¹⁷⁶ In contrast to Pickens, though, who had denounced Baltimore clergy as “unchristian” soon after his appointment as field secretary, Lampkin soon offered “especial praise” to “the colored clergymen” of Baltimore “for the help they have been giving” a membership campaign. More generally, Lampkin sought out ministerial alliances ahead of local membership campaigns, often with striking results.¹⁷⁷

From the church side, there were a handful of peacemakers, too.¹⁷⁸ J. Raymond Henderson, pastor of Atlanta’s largest Baptist church, attended the NAACP’s national convention, in 1933.¹⁷⁹ Henderson was shocked: “the only time I heard anybody use the word “God” was in the opening and closing prayers.” Henderson called for the Association “to be spiritualized.” He reckoned that better terms with the Baptists would double the NAACP’s income. But “many a preacher considers it bad taste to be told in one breath that his money is needed and in the next ... that he is a moron.”¹⁸⁰ Perhaps because the criticism was widely reported, White invited Henderson to be a platform speaker the following year. Frustrated at “twenty-five years of apparent indifference the one to the other,” Henderson believed that if “the idealism of the church” came “into vital contact with the realism of the association, a new era will upon that day begin for both.” After all, “Christians believe in a God of justice. The Association seeks justice. What could be wrong in linking up in our thinking the two?” Henderson urged clergy to attend NAACP meetings, and NAACP officers to attend church – and for both sides to cut the insults.¹⁸¹

They didn't.¹⁸² Some influential churchwomen, such as Burroughs and Lampkin, carved out a niche in the space between the male civil rights and church leadership.¹⁸³ But the NAACP remained distinctly unspiritualized. (The only spiritualizing Johnson briefly considered was an NAACP liturgy including a prayer against lynching, a recital of a poem by Du Bois, and the singing of his own *Lift Every Voice*.)¹⁸⁴ Responding to Henderson's suggestions, the *Baptist Voice's* editor, Barbour, asked "Why should we invite the ungodly secular NAACP leaders into our intimate councils." They do not believe in "the spiritual ideals of our Christian institutions [and] label us jack-asses."¹⁸⁵ Three years later, after Pickens criticized the Baptist leadership yet again, Barbour told Baptists not to "have anything to do with the NAACP." Maybe "we have been Jackasses," he continued, "dumping money into a godless organization."¹⁸⁶ White tried to smooth matters over in a letter, though he also criticized Barbour for overreacting.¹⁸⁷ Ministerial allies, such as Henderson, tried to reassure White, though he added criticism of the "dogmatic" "big mouth" Pickens. If NAACP leaders believe "they can win mass support to their organization by sending Mr Pickens to our communities," Henderson warned, "they are going to be disappointed."¹⁸⁸

The tension between mainline churches and the NAACP over matters of belief could be replayed across most protest organizations in this period. In the years before the Popular front "Third Period" (1928-1935), Communist attacks on black Christianity were sometimes savage. Similarly the socialist journal, *The Messenger*, mixed condemnation of capitalist white supremacy with attacks on Black Christian belief, especially in its early years. In 1919, the journal scoffed that "Prayer has been tried for fifty years" and hadn't done anything for people who were "lynched, disfranchised and jim crowed."¹⁸⁹ Pickens' became a contributing editor in January 1923.¹⁹⁰ "Things Nobody Believes" was published in the *Messenger* a month later, and, following criticism from the clergy, praised by the journal as a "brilliant and scintillating article."¹⁹¹ In the March issue, one of the co-editors, Chandler Owen, asserted "We accept no Bibles or creeds." One syndicated article in the Black press reckoned that Owen's "disbelief is even more sweeping and general than that of Prof. Pickens."¹⁹² At the other end of the political

spectrum, Charles Spurgeon Johnson, the head of the more conservative National Urban League, penned a spiritual autobiography about his retreat from belief in a God who acted for justice.¹⁹³

The various conflicts came to a head at the National Negro Congress of 1936. The brainchild of New Deal lobbyist John Davis, and led by charismatic labor leader and former co-editor of *The Messenger*, A. Philip Randolph, the Congress sought to bring major race organizations together. Though both Davis and Randolph had little time for God-talk, they both recognized the institutional importance of churches. When Bishop Walls wrote offering support, Davis invited him to deliver an invocation at the inaugural conference.¹⁹⁴ Walls and two other Bishops agreed to sponsor the Congress. Some 5,000 representatives from more than 500 organizations, including 70 churches, attended the gathering – a much higher turnout of church representation than the NAACP had ever managed, or sought. Rev. Marshall Shepard, who had served in Harlem with social gospel Baptist minister Adam Clayton Powell, thought the Congress was an epoch-making event. Associate editor of the *Baptist Voice*, Shepard wrote: “Remember preachers, we represent a mass of poor Negroes, and any movement in their behalf should have our support.”¹⁹⁵

But the Bishops soon felt snubbed. They were not involved in any committee nor invited to speak from the platform. The fact that Langston Hughes was invited to recite his controversial poem, “Goodbye Christ” hardly helped. When Hughes concluded, “Now we know that God doesn’t care,” Walls walked out and refused to return to deliver the benediction.¹⁹⁶ On the final day, the Bishops denounced “this shrewd godless posing under the guise of giving us bread” which sought “to eliminate the leadership of the Christian Church.”¹⁹⁷ The Congress’s closing aspiration: “every fifth Sunday shall be set aside in every church in support of the work” was whistling in the wind.¹⁹⁸ The Congress collapsed a couple of years’ later, its critics accusing it of being a Communist front. Headlines in religious journals like “useless National Negro Congress,” and editorials speaking of “irreverence,” didn’t help.¹⁹⁹

The debate about God during the Jim Crow era suggests that racism should be included in any explanations of the rise of the secular age.²⁰⁰ Clergy fears of rising secularism, and the resulting conflict with civil rights organizations, also helps explain the development of social justice movements within the Black church. “We are going to organize our own social movements,” insisted the *Baptist Voice* editor, “and support men who have at least a little sympathy for our religious leaders and the masses they lead.” Or as the progressive Fraternal Council of Negro Churches put it, in 1936, “We should no longer wait for secular leaders to call the American Christian’s attention to his social duty toward our group.”²⁰¹

Conversely, recognizing that the secular age involved African American communities provides important context for interpretations of the civil rights era. For example, as Adele Oltman observed in her history of religion and protest in Savannah, “The unambiguously political civil rights movement ... unfolded the way it did not because churches were so important in black communities; rather, it was because the churches had lost their institutional primacy in those same communities.”²⁰² Ironically, the row over faith also provided church leaders with a weapon to demand that the white church live up to its creed. In 1933 AMEZ Bishop L. W. Kyles told 12,000 delegates at the International Christian Endeavor Convention, “If Christian America fails ... the Christian Church may cease to exist for the Negro.”²⁰³ White Christian publications took note. The Baptist *Watchman-Examiner*, reporting on Darrow’s popularity, warned of “a pity unspeakable if agnosticism begins to make inroads among the colored people of the South.”²⁰⁴ Shaming the white church would remain a protest tactic throughout the civil rights movement. In due course, the stand against segregation taken by white denominational leaders would provide an important challenge to Jim Crow at the local level.²⁰⁵

The secularist orientation of civil rights groups in the 1920s and 1930s also set a pattern that would reach into the modern civil rights era. The Christian Mississippi

activist Fannie Lou Hamer famously scolded visiting student volunteers, “Don’t talk to me about atheism.”²⁰⁶ The Freedom Rides began with silent personal reflection rather than prayer. Nonetheless, the civil rights movement would be conspicuous for its religiosity. This earlier tension between churches and civil rights organizations, however, reminds us that the later alliance was anything but inevitable. Historian Barbara Savage rightly recognized the “disdain” with which “dominant political narratives treated African American religion” as a fighting force for civil rights in the early twentieth century. As a result, Savage concluded that the later rise of a civil rights movement with church culture at its center was a “miracle,” since it marked a “startling departure” from previous critiques of the church as passive and otherworldly.²⁰⁷ As this story shows, though, the rise of a Christian civil rights movement was also a startling departure from the perspective of the churches too, and from a time when the battle over belief fuelled such deep tensions between church and civil rights leaders, even as all fought Jim Crow.

Some of the explanation for this departure from the interwar experience lies in the changed context for protest during mid-century: a Christian Cold War against Communism, the Southern base of civil rights mobilization, white church support for the *Brown* decision, and the televisual power of a preacher-activist. But part of the explanation lies not so much in a ‘miracle’ of changed circumstances, but as a result of hard-headed calculation and hard work.

For its part, the NAACP sought to jettison its secularist reputation. At a clear-the-air discussion at its 1940 national convention, Roy Wilkins, editor of the *Crisis* and White’s deputy (and later, successor), admitted, “the Association has had a reputation for a number of years of being anti-church.” “We have to work out a way of cooperating,” Wilkins continued. “It is a very sore point and a hard point to work out.” It was an essential point, too. In Lampkin’s experience, “without the cooperation of the churches we would not have any NAACP.” But as one of the discussants, Pearl Mitchell from Cleveland, Ohio, reported, “when we go to them, we get nothing. Sometimes they say some member of the national office has said something that hurt their feelings.”²⁰⁸

When asked by a reporter, later, whether he believed in God, Wilkins answered, “I don’t know. I’ve been debating that for years.” But Wilkins had fond memories of church choir and “felt very much at home with church people.” In other words, he was both inclined and well-placed to build bridges.²⁰⁹ The year after the convention meeting, the NAACP formed a Church Committee, with the aim of “crystalizing a combination of recognized powers (the church and the NAACP) each being actually helpful to the other.” In 1942, the NAACP offered legal support to two clergymen who were assaulted en route to the national Baptist convention, and urged President Roosevelt to support the Baptist’s resolution for civil rights on public transport – a resolution brought by Martin Luther King Sr.²¹⁰

Church allies continued to point out the difficulty of defending the Association, as Walls put it, “if it appears to be in any way cold-footed on religious guidance.”²¹¹ But NAACP leaders made a determined effort at reconciliation. In 1943, Ovington, with the help of Lampkin, produced a pamphlet celebrating “The Help the Churches Give Us.”²¹² In 1946, the NAACP sent a flattering telegram to the AMEZ sesquicentennial, “At no time in human history has the world needed as much as it does today, to avert disaster, the guidance of Christian ethics.” White delivered the message in person.²¹³ There was also a change in personnel. Darrow died in 1938. In 1942, the NAACP elected Bishop Walls to its National Board of Directors. That same year, Pickens was dismissed (for criticizing the Association).²¹⁴ In 1946, a dynamic Methodist minister, Gloster B Current, replaced him as Director of Branches. In 1949 Lampkin was elected to the National Board.

The most determined change, though, was through the formation of the Church Committee, upgraded to a Department in 1946, with a full-time Secretary, Baptist Minister Walter Offutt. The NAACP took the opportunity to bring influential, supportive clergy on board, including Imes of the Presbyterian Church, Walls of the AMEZ, Ransom of the AME, and J C Austin of Chicago, pastor of one of the largest Baptist congregations in the country. At the first meeting, the Committee confessed that the NAACP’s past “disinterest ... had been disgraceful at times.” But Offutt was full of

hope. “If the social justice program of the NAACP can be combined with the religious ideals of our churches ... we shall have a power for freedom that cannot be ignored.” In this new phase, “The NAACP would seek to supplement [religious] groups rather than compete with them.” Branch church committees were instructed not to discuss “doctrine, dogma or forms of faith”²¹⁵ – there was no need, because “the word Christian is used here to describe a “way of life” and not a “theological belief”” and so there could be shared pursuit of “social justice” and “Christian society.”²¹⁶

At the local level, there was striking success. The remarkable expansion of NAACP membership that happened on Lampkin’s and Current’s watch benefited from a close alliance with churches.²¹⁷ Lampkin reported that in Chicago, “the churches were most cooperative, more than ever before.”²¹⁸ But in terms of relationships between national leaders, Offutt proved to be over-optimistic. In 1950, after a meeting with 53 ministers, Offutt warned there was still a “definite feeling ... that there is an anti-church attitude shown by some of our executives.”²¹⁹ Wilkins disagreed, but by this time, the two men had stopped agreeing about anything. Wilkins reprimanded Offutt for disloyalty and laziness, while Offutt complained that under Wilkins’ leadership “morale was as low as it can get short of violence.”²²⁰ Offutt resigned in 1954. But his criticism was not simply the frustration of a disgruntled employee. Walls had also told Wilkins in 1950 that, in spiritual matters, he was “puzzled at the apparent aloofness which I seem to have met in high NAACP Councils.”²²¹

In a sign of the importance now attached to clergy attitudes, Wilkins asked Walls to explain further. In turn, perhaps because the secular age had become more firmly established – in the sense put forward by philosopher Charles Taylor, that “faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others” – churchmen seemed to grow more comfortable working alongside people with alternative spiritual viewpoints.²²² Walls accepted that “there may be some who developed religious scepticism who help us.” “We tolerate them, for their critical attitude may also be a contribution” – though he warned they “should never be permitted to be destroyers of the faith ... Toleration deserves toleration.”²²³

Whatever the cause, the hatchet had clearly been buried by the classic years of the civil rights movement. In 1959, the President of the National Baptist Convention told his annual conference, the NAACP “is an association for the advancement of the cause of America in the name of America, by Americans, in harmony with the Constitution of America, for all Americans.”²²⁴ No doubt Pickens and Darrow would have bemoaned the NAACP’s silence on superstition, and warned that making peace with Black Christianity held back the attack on white supremacy. But Wilkins, who succeeded White, certainly enjoyed reaping the financial rewards. During 1958, Henderson, who had moved to Los Angeles, led a Golden Jubilee Drive, raising \$18,000 for the NAACP from Baptist Churches.²²⁵ That same year, Walls presented the Association with a check for \$2,500 from the AMEZ. It was a particular pleasure for Walls, because by this time, he was a vice-president of the NAACP.²²⁶

- ¹ William Pickens, "Things Nobody Believes," *The Messenger*, Vol. V., No. 2, February 1923, 615. See too "No Heaven, No Hell," *Afro-American*, February 16, 1923, 1. Examples of the strong emphasis on hell in Southern African American religion, include interviews with Martha Holloman, 10, Folder 5, Box 214, and Robbie Langston, Folder 2, Box 215, CS Johnson Papers.
- ² Pickens, "Things Nobody Believes," 614.
- ³ "Dean Pickens Says There Is No Hell," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 14, 1923, 1; "Pickens Denies Resurrection and Tells Why," *Afro-American*, February 16, 1923, 1.
- ⁴ The press release for Pickens' appointment as the NAACP Field Secretary claimed "No orator of the race is so well known to colored Americans as Mr. Pickens." "Dean William Pickens Joins N.A.A.C.P. Staff," *Washington Bee*, February 7, 1920. See too William Pickens, *The Heir of Slaves: An Autobiography* (Boston, 1911); *Bursting Bonds* (Boston, 1923); Sheldon Avery, *Up from Washington: William Pickens and the Negro Struggle for Equality* (Newark, 1989).
- ⁵ Rhymes for other stanzas, such as "your tongue quickens/till my diaphragm expands" and "catch your chickens/when 'laymen return to roost" were rather more convoluted. Elsie Long, "In Appreciation of Mr. Pickens," Pickens Correspondence, Pickens Papers. "Pickens ... one of five greatest negroes," *New Journal and Guide*, December 13, 1924, 1.
- ⁶ See, for example, Pickens to Henry Delaney, August 19, 1932, Pickens Correspondence. On being outspoken see Maxine D. Jones, "Student Unrest at Talladega College, 1887-1914," *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 70, No. 3/4 (Summer - Autumn, 1985), pp. 73- 81, 79.
- ⁷ Du Bois had criticized Pickens for taking sides in local NAACP branch disputes. Pickens insisted he had always chosen the right side. Pickens to Du Bois, March 28, 1921, Pickens Papers.
- ⁸ For "average" church see William Pickens, *Bursting Bonds* (Boston: Jordan & More Press, 1923), 99. For "superstition" see Pickens, "Egypt's Curse Is a Real Bug," *Chicago Defender*, April 28, 1923, 5.
- ⁹ Dr J. Bowen, Gammon Theological Seminary, to Pickens, December 15, 1914 and reply; letter from AME Bishops' Council, 21 July 1922, Pickens Correspondence; Pickens, *Bursting Bonds* (Boston, 1923).
- ¹⁰ Pickens incorporated a doctrinal point about hell into his charge of immorality. "Now we are shocked because too many of them have begun to raise what they have been talking about." William Pickens, "Preachers Raising Hell," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 23, 1930, 2.
- ¹¹ "Ku Klux in Church," editorial, Pickens papers; Pickens, "God and Dr. Murch Differ," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 10, 1937, 15; Pickens, "God and the Preachers," *Afro-American*, May 21, 1927, 4; "Preachers Raising Hell," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 23, 1930, 2.
- ¹² "Vengeance of the Gods," *New Journal and Guide*, March 4, 1922, 4; "Not a Bugaboo, Just a Mind" draft editorial; "Superstition and Science," *Public Journal*, Pickens Papers.
- ¹³ "Birth Control and Albany," draft editorial, nd. Pickens Papers; "Christians Take the Lead in Race Hate" *Afro-American*, January 9, 1926, 17. "God and Dr. Murch Differ," *New York Amsterdam News*, April 10, 1937, 15.
- ¹⁴ "Nobody Believes," *Afro-American*, February 16, 1923, 9.
- ¹⁵ "Dean Pickens Says There Is No Hell," *New York Amsterdam News*, February 14, 1923, 1; John Hilton, "Forum," *Afro-American*, May 18, 1923, 3; "Poor Mr. Pickens," *National Baptist Union Review*, June 12, 1926, 2; "What the People Think!" *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 6, 1930, A3.
- ¹⁶ "Pastors Plan to Answer Pickens ... Modernists are Flayed," *Afro-American*, March 2, 1923, 3.
- ¹⁷ Noting that Pickens had skipped between denominations in recent years to further his career, they asked, "what does the Dean believe?" "Minsters Give Their Views," *Afro American*, February 23rd 1923.
- ¹⁸ Gary Dorrien notes that "by education," Wright "came into liberal theology and the social gospel." Dorrien, *The New Abolition: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Black Social Gospel*, (New Haven, 2015), 486.
- ¹⁹ "Dean Pickens' Agnosticism," *Christian Recorder*, March 1, 1923.
- ²⁰ "Mr. Pickens Disappoints Us," *Christian Recorder*, May 3, 1923, 5.
- ²¹ Nannie Burroughs to William Pickens, March 18, 1923, Correspondence of William Pickens, 1911-1954, Pickens Papers. On Burroughs see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: the Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church* (Cambridge, 1994).
- ²² Pickens to Mary White Ovington, March 8 1923, Pickens Correspondence, Part I, NAACP Papers.
- ²³ William Pickens, "Mr. Pickens Clarifies Hell Idea," *Chicago Defender*, March 24, 1923, 1.
- ²⁴ Pickens, "Intelligent Christianity: Not the Fear of Hell," *The Messenger*, Vol. 5, No. 4, April 1923, 668-9.

²⁵ “Mr. Pickens Clarifies Hell Idea,” 1.

²⁶ Pickens to Ovington, March 8 1923, and to Ovington and Bagnall, March 9, 1923, Pickens Correspondence.

²⁷ “R.R. Wright, Jnr. A Regular Shark,” Pickens Papers. Underlining in original.

²⁸ “Pastors Comment on Pickens Views,” *Afro-American*, April 20, 1923, 3.

²⁹ Burroughs to Pickens, March 18, 1923.

³⁰ See, for example, Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1984).

³¹ See, for example: Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*; Barbara Savage, *Your Spirits Walk Beside Us: the politics of black religion* (Cambridge, 2008); Curtis Evans, *The Burden of Black Religion* (New York, 2008); Glenda Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York, 2008), and Mark Solomon, *The Cry was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917-1936* (Jackson, 1998).

³² Robin Kelley noted that in the rural South some meetings of the radical left were held in church and started with a hymn. *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, 2006). For an example of a critique intended to strengthen the church, see, Orishatukeh Faduma, *The Defects of the Negro Church*, American Negro Academy Occasional papers no. 19. Indeed, some recent scholarship has re-emphasized the spiritual underpinnings of early twentieth century protest, the spiritual grammar of secular writers, and civil rights leaders’ reliance on churches even as they critiqued ‘the church.’ See for example, Edward Blum, *W.E.B. Du Bois: American Prophet* (Philadelphia, 2007); Alison Greene, *No Depression in Heaven: Religion and Economic Crisis in Memphis and the Delta*, (Oxford, 2016); Jarod Heath Roll, *Spirit of Rebellion: Labor and Religion in the New Cotton South* (Urbana, 2010). On reliance on the church, see Savage, *Your Spirits*, 180-1, and Clarence Taylor, *Black Religious Intellectuals: the Struggle for Equality from Jim Crow to the 21st Century*, (New York, 2002), 13. On the “spiritual grammar” of a literary tradition that is often portrayed as secular, see Josef Sorrett, *Spirit In The Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics*, (Oxford, 2016).

³³ Given the fact that the majority of churchgoers were women, what this meant in practice was a battle to control women’s resources. My thanks to Barbara Savage for making this point.

³⁴ John Hilton, “Forum: Blasting at the Eternal “Rock of Ages,” *Afro-American*, May 18, 1923, 3.

³⁵ “Dean Pickens’ Agnosticism.”

³⁶ “Pastors Plan to Answer Pickens ... Modernists are Flayed,” *Afro-American*, March 2, 1923, 3.

³⁷ See, for example, Taylor, *Secular Age*; Steve Bruce ed., *Religion and Modernization: Sociologists and Historians Debate the Secularization Thesis* (Oxford, 1992); Rodney Stark, ‘Secularization, R.I.P.’ *Sociology of Religion*, Vol. 60, No. 3 (Autumn, 1999), 249-273. Most prominent advocates of the freethought movement were white. See, for example, list of Freethinkers of America committee, Joseph Lewis to Clarence Darrow, November 28, 1932, Box 3, Clarence Darrow Papers, Library of Congress. For an exploration of the entwining of race and secularism, which asks “Why has whiteness characterized not only the secular, but also, all too often, critiques of the secular?” see Kahn and Lloyd, eds, *Race and Secularism*, 5.

³⁸ See, for example, Albert Raboteau’s influential, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston, 1995).

³⁹ For example, Antony Pinn, *African American Humanist Principles*, (New York, 2004), 16-40.

⁴⁰ The debate in literature has long been recognized. See *The Negro’s God, As Reflected In His Literature* (New York, 1938). For more recent discussions see Michael Lackey, *African American Atheists and Political Liberation* (Gainesville, 2007), Qiana J. Whitted, “*A God of Justice? The Problem of Evil in Twentieth-Century Black Literature*, (Charlottesville, 2008), and Peter Kerry, *Goodbye Christ? Christianity, Masculinity and the New Negro Renaissance*, (Knoxville, 2017).

⁴¹ “The Negro and Religion,” *The Crisis*, 1919, 17 (5), 236.

⁴² For a helpful analysis of some of the various periodizations of, and explanations for, secularization in America, see David Sehat, “Political Atheism: the Secularization of American Public Life,” *Modern Intellectual History*, (published online, forthcoming in print later in 2018). In his influential *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, 2007), philosopher Charles Taylor notes three definitions – decreasing power of religion in public spaces, the falling off of religious belief and practice, and (his preferred definition), not an inexorable loss of religion, but a time when many began to separate out the supernatural from the natural, and chose to live entirely in natural categories. For a discussion of the meanings of secularism, especially in relation to racialization, see introduction to Jonathon Kahn and Vincent Lloyd, eds, *Race and Secularism in America* (New York, 2016).

⁴³ D. J. Flynn, “A Challenge to the Church,” *AME Review*, XLIII (1), 1926, 41.

- ⁴⁴ On the rapid rise of the secular Black press during the 1920s and 1930s as a forum to discuss (and critique) the church, see, for example, Barbara Savage, "Biblical and Historical Imperatives: Toward a History of Ideas about the Political Role of Black Churches, in Vincent Wimbush, ed., *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures* (New York, 2001), 372. For helpful introductions to the many scholarly debates about secularization, see, for example, William Swatos and Kevin Christiano, "Secularization Theory: The Course of a Concept," *Sociology of Religion*, 60, 3 (Autumn, 1999), 209-228; and JCD Clark, "Secularization and Modernization: The Failure of a 'Grand Narrative,'" *Historical Journal*, 55, 1 (March 2012), 161-194. On the institutional challenge to Black churches in this period, see "American Youth Commission Study," 1939, 39-40, Folder 21, Box 212, C.S. Johnson Papers. On migration as a religious movement, see Milton Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration* (Durham, NC, 1997).
- ⁴⁵ *The Souls of Black Folk*, (Chicago, 1903), 11-12.
- ⁴⁶ *American Mercury*, 25 (100), 1932, 429-30. In his book exploring the "denial of God's existence in the writings of Negroes," the educator Benjamin Mays concluded, "heretical ideas of God develop because in the social situation the 'breaks' seem to be against the Negro, and the authors are unable to harmonize this fact with the God pictured by Christianity." *The Negro's God*, 239, 218-9.
- ⁴⁷ Rough notes, n.d., Box 49, Folder 87, Notebooks, Johnson Papers.
- ⁴⁸ George Henderson, "The Divine Method of Evolution," *AME Review*, 36 (1), 1919, 324-6.
- ⁴⁹ "Who Knows?" October 20, 1928, A2; some wrote to challenge George, more wrote in support. "Is There a God?" *Chicago Defender*, December 1, 1928, A2.
- ⁵⁰ Gayraud Wilmore famously suggested this period marked the "de-radicalization" of Black churches as they shifted to an other-worldly orientation. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, (New York, 1973), 163-195.
- ⁵¹ On, "There was purpose in the horrors of the middle passage," see, St. Clair Drake, "Black Theology," 1, Box 22, Folder 32, and "Providential Design," Box 23, Folder 7, St. Clair Drake Papers, Schomburg Library. Also Reverdy Ransom, "A Quilt of Many Colors," n.d., Manuscripts 1898-1949, 12, Reverdy Ransom Collection, Drew University. On church development, William Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: the African American church in the South, 1865-1900* (Baton Rouge, 1994).
- ⁵² The onset of Jim Crow during the 1890s coincided with interest in emigration (and the search for a promised land in Africa), notably by AME minister Henry Turner.
- ⁵³ "Poor God," *Star of Zion*, October 10 1929, 4. Francis Grimké, a minister in DC, reckoned if lynching continued unchecked, "To the devil the country will go," Carter Woodson, ed., *The Works of Francis Grimké, Volume III*, (Washington DC, 1942), 51. See, too, Kelly Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: the KKK's appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930* (Lawrence, 2011).
- ⁵⁴ "Although our race is supposed to be a religious group, more than 50% of them are unchurched." "An Address to the Country," *NBV*, March 7, 1936, 1.
- ⁵⁵ "The Religious Element in Secular Education," *AME Review*, VIII, 1891, 288.
- ⁵⁶ Johnson, "Address delivered at One Hundredth Anniversary of the Community Church," 7, Box 77, Folder 548, Series II, Johnson Papers.
- ⁵⁷ Walter White, *Rope and Faggot* (New York, 1969), 40.
- ⁵⁸ "Christians Take the Lead in Race Hate" *Afro-American*, January 9, 1926, 17; church racism would "make angels weep." Rev. G. Waller, "The Color Problems of Baltimore," 7, File: Annual Conference Speeches 3rd Session May 1914, NAACP Papers.
- ⁵⁹ "Christianity Rampant," Vol. 3, No. 1, 1919, 25.
- ⁶⁰ "Proceedings of the Mass Meeting Held at Lincoln Hall" (Washington DC, 1883). See too "A Generous Act," *Afro-American*, August 19, 1899, 1.
- ⁶¹ Miller. Also Lincoln in article on Pickens. Pickens also praised the famed liberal preacher, Henry Ward Beecher, for his anti-slavery stance. Taylor, A. *Philip Randolph*, p239, fn 61.
- ⁶² "Jim Crow Christianity," (reprint from *Advance*), July 28, 1934, 2, quote on 6.
- ⁶³ 'On We Lead,' *Chicago Defender*, January 9, 1932, 14.
- ⁶⁴ The Baptist Committee set up in response to Pickens' article was concerned about "modernism" and its challenge to established doctrines. "Pastors Plan to Answer Pickens ... Modernists are Flayed," *Afro-American*, March 2, 1923, 3.
- ⁶⁵ Pickens, "Creed" *Afro-American*, February 22, 1924, A6.
- ⁶⁶ William Pickens, "Mr. Pickens Clarifies Hell Idea," *Chicago Defender*, March 24, 1923, 1.
- ⁶⁷ On doctrinal disputes, see "It seems to be sort of a fad now for everybody to 'lambast' the Bible," Ms. Frazer to Mr. Jackson, March 23, 1921, Correspondence, Luther Porter Jackson Papers, Virginia State University; for Black theological students rejecting "the literal interpretation of the bible" see

Daniel, *The Education*, 94. See, too, Columbus Maxwell "Is Joseph the Father of Jesus?" *New Journal and Guide*, March 8, 1924, 3; "The Rock of Ages or Age of Rocks," *AMEZ Quarterly Review*, Vol. 35, No. 3, (1924), 40-1; Ransom, *Spirit*, 89-91, Imes, *Black Pastures*, 47; Moses Nathaniel Moore, "Orishatukeh Faduma and the New Theology," *Church History*, 63 (1), 1994, 60-80. Nb the debate over modernism had a racial lens. Defenders of a literal reading of Scripture valued the genealogies that showed a common human origin, while supporters of evolution joked that the only flaw in the theory was the insult to monkeys to suggest that some evolved into members of lynch mobs.

⁶⁸ Ransom, *The Pilgrimage of Harriet Ransom's Son*, (Nashville, 1949), 33.

⁶⁹ One reader remained unconvinced: Barbour was "too wobble-wobble when it comes to ... Christian doctrines." James Anderson, *NBV*, May 27, 1939, 3.

⁷⁰ "We have been praying to Christ for years and on the whole we are in as bad a fix as ever." H.M. Smith, "The Negro Faces Christ," *NBV*, March 21, 1936, 1, 8.

⁷¹ Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World* (Washington DC, 1940), 106, 107-8. See too "Tribute to Mary Church Terrell," December 7, 1945, 4, Biographical and Testimonial Folder, Reel 19, Mary Church Terrell Papers on microfilm. Terrell would return to church – but only after a possible dabbling with spiritualism, and no longer wrote of a personal faith. Terrell, *Colored Woman*, 283-4, 386. On regaining enthusiasm in an interfaith context see Terrell, Remarks of Interchurch Fellowship Group, June 9, 1947, *Speeches and Writings, 1941-1948*, (Alexandria, VA, 2010). For a similar spiritual struggle with a different outcome, see Ida B. Wells' *Crusade for Justice*. Wells, who once asked "God help me to be a Christian," prayed that she would be "glad because my Father saw fit to send these trials & so fit me for his kingdom." Schechter, *Wells*, 17. See, too, Rev. R. Bradley, "my faith has been often shaken," "The Press, the Pulpit, and Public Opinion," 4, File: Annual Conference, Speeches, 1921, Group 1, Series B, NAACP Papers.

⁷² Angelo Herndon, *Let Me Live* (New York, 1969), 11, 88, 257.

⁷³ Johnson hoped Africans would not follow the African American choice of Christianity, "I believe Mohamedism is much better fitted to him, his needs and his future." notes, n.d., Box 49, Folder 87, "Miscellaneous autobiographical notes before 1933," Johnson Papers. On Islam see Richard Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience* (Bloomington, 2003), 159-161. On other choices, see Judith Weisenfeld, *New World A-Coming: Black Religion and Racial Identity during the Great Migration* (New York, 2017).

⁷⁴ See, for example, Wallace Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine*, and Dorrien, *The New Abolition*.

⁷⁵ The 1936 census report reported a 2.3% growth in Black church attendance in the previous decade compared to a 10% population growth rate. Religious Bodies, 1936, Volume 1, (Washington 1941), 84. Attendance statistics are unreliable, as the census takers noted – they presumed the slowdown in church growth reflected underreporting, but many church leaders thought the opposite.

⁷⁶ "Religious Writer Advocates Unity," *Chicago Defender*, August 20, 1927, A1; "The Challenge to the Negro Church," *National Baptist Voice*, April 11, 1936, 3.

⁷⁷ "Annual Address of Miss Nannie H Burroughs," *NBV*, November 5, 1938, 5. On Burroughs, see Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*. An editorial in the *Negro Journal of Religion* asked, "what is wrong with Christian attendance among Negro churches?" "... pews go a-begging for occupants." October 1935, 1 (9), 3. See too, C. Luther Fry, *The U.S. Looks at Its Churches* (New York, 1930), 11; Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson, *The Negro's Church* (Salem, NH, 1933), 97.

⁷⁸ Reprint in *NBV*, November 14, 1931, 4. On anthropological observations about the drift from Southern Black churches, see Hortense Powdermaker, *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South*, (New York, 1939), 269; Interviews Sam Goins, 7, Folder 6, Box 213; J. D. Harris, 13, Folder 2, Box 214; David Hill, 8, Folder 4, Box 214, and Eva Gurley, Folder 7, Box 213, Charles S. Johnson Papers, Fisk University.

⁷⁹ J D Mitchell, Folder 7, Box 215, CS Johnson Papers.

⁸⁰ On the AME's decline, see *Religious Bodies*, Vol. 2, 1176; E P Alldredge, Negro Baptists of America, *NBV*, April 30, 1932, 6.

⁸¹ "Statistical religion," *NBV*, October 20, 1934, 2; M A Talley, "The New Exodus", *NBV*, August 1, 1936, 1, quote on 8.

⁸² For many, these were years of new ways of engaging with religion. Robert Bagnall, after returning to ministry, complained that some were leaving church simply because they thought "religion and Christianity are individual things which may be obtained by radio sermons or communicating with nature." "Priest Tells of a Miracle," *Afro-American*, December 15, 1934, 6. See too Blum, *Du Bois*; Cynthia Taylor, *A. Philip Randolph: The Religious Journey of an African American Labor Leader*, (New York, 2005). Conversely, continuing to attend did not mean retaining religious belief.

Anthropologist Hortense Powdermaker noted that the high attendance in Mississippi churches in the 1930s included “disaffected youth” who thought “religion belongs in the past,” but still attended “because it is something to do” – and because their parents told them to. Powdermaker, *After Freedom*, 270, 269. On clergy fears of losing youth: Edmund Des Brunner, *Church Life in the Rural South*, (New York, 1923), 86; William Imes, *Black Pastures: An American Pilgrimage In Two Centuries* (Nashville, 1957), 81; “American Youth Commission Study,” 1939, 39, Folder 21, Box 212, CS Johnson Papers.

⁸³ See Weisenfeld, *New World*. On the need to decenter the “Black Church” and explore other forms of religious and spiritual practices, see, Charles H. Long, “Perspectives for the Study of African-American Religion in the United States” in Timothy E. Fulop and Albert E. Raboteau, eds., *African American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture*, (New York, 1997), 22-35. For a critique of Long, see Josef Sorett, “Secular Compared to What?” in Lloyd and Kahn, *Race and Secularism*, 43-76. On the entangled relationship between the supposed secular and spiritual in this period, see Sorrett, *Spirit In The Dark*.

⁸⁴ “Enemies of the Church,” February 11, 1930, 2. Progressive Baptist J. Pious Barber thought “Dr. Mays is kind to” the writers who questioned Christianity, in *The Negro’s God*. Mays “takes their writings at face value. I am not so kind – most of them are atheists.” *NBV*, March 18, 1939, 1.

⁸⁵ Burroughs, “Annual Address.”

⁸⁶ For example: L. Berry Sec of Missions, to Bishop J.A. Gregg, July 27th 1936, Box 17, AME Records, Schomburg Library; “A Survey of the Negro Church: Questionnaire for Pastors,” Reel 16, Carter Woodson Papers, Schomburg Library; “Some ... have turned traitor to Christ,” J.H. Jackson, “The Finality of the Gospel,” November 14, 1937, 4, J.H. Jackson Papers, Chicago Historical Society. Weisenfeld notes a similar phenomenon in relation to ‘cults and sects.’ “For some Protestant clergy, the religio-racial movements’ challenge to religious unity was alarming. They undersood this threat to be both theological, in that the groups offered options outside of Christianity, and institutional, in moving beyond the broad umbrella of “the black church.” *New World*, quote on 253-4, more general discussion on 252-272.

⁸⁷ “My Last Quadrennial Message to the Race,” March 3, 1929, 23, 25, Folder 410, Grimke Papers. In fact, Grimke lived another four years and gave another quadrennial message. Grimke was disturbed that “Some of our leaders” (including Church leaders) “sit and listen, apparently with complacency to his diatribes against God.”

⁸⁸ Pickens to Fort-Whiteman, July 19, 1926, General Correspondence, Pickens Papers. Others went on defense. Examples include, Ruby Goodwin, “What Would You Give Us For God?” *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 30, 1930, A9; J.H. Jackson, “The Old Religion in the New Age,” July 19, 1936, 6, Sermons, Jackson Papers.

⁸⁹ See speeches by, among others, Ransom, R.R. Wright, W. J. Walls, L.K. Williams. On denominations, see, for example, “Rev. King Asks Denominations to Lay Aside Sects for Civic Rights Warfare,” *Amsterdam News*, September 16, 1931, 11. On youth, see, for example, Constance Grayson, “Youth and the Church,” *AMEZ Quarterly Review*, XL, (2), 1929, 20-25. On modernism, “Cutting loose from the belief that every letter, word, clause ... came directly from God,” wrote AME minister P. Nichols, in 1919, should prepare “Christian believers to withstand the shock that their simple faith is sure to receive ... by learned critics of today.” P. A. Nichols, “Bible Criticism,” *AME Review*, July 1919, 36 (1), 292-4.

⁹⁰ There were countless articles and sermons that highlighted good works by the church. See, for example, Floyd Calvin, “Youth Has Religion,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 12, 1928, 3; Woodson, ed., *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, 269; coverage of the visit of Toyohiko Kagawa, *Negro Journal of Religion*, 1 (11), December 1935, 3.

⁹¹ “Nahum Brascher, “Random Thoughts” *Chicago Defender*, February 29, 1936, 11.

⁹² See, for example, “Editorial,” *Negro Journal of Religion* 1 (6), July 1935, 3; Woodson, ed., *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, 266; Moxley Willis, “The Bible and Prosperity,” *Chicago Defender*, October 17, 1931, 15; Reverdy Ransom, “My Apocalypse,” 1929, Ephemera, Ransom Collection; J. H. Jackson, “Godly Comfort in Tribulations,” July 26, 1936, Jackson Papers. On the tradition of seeking redemption purposes through suffering, see Pinn, *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*.

⁹³ Their spiritual journeys varied, from attraction to the bi-racial practice of the atheist left through to intellectual engagement transcendentalism. The most outspoken atheist and political organizer, Hubert Harrison, was also much praised by Pickens. See, for example, Jeffrey Perry, *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism* (New York, 2008)

⁹⁴ See Federal Council of the Churches, *Yearbook of the American Churches*. The scale of these organizations and the influence of members on leaders suggest that this public debate also reflects

developments at the grassroots. On the importance of grassroots protest, see, Emilye Crosby, *Civil Rights History from the Ground Up: Local Struggles, A National Movement* (Athens, 2011).

⁹⁵ Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the making of the civil rights movement* (New York, 2009); Gilbert Jonas, *Freedom's Sword: The NAACP and the struggle against racism in America* (New York, 2004); Kenneth Jancken, *Walter White: Mr. NAACP*, (Chapel Hill, 2006). On before, see Carle, *Defining*. On after, see Morris, *Origins*.

⁹⁶ Wilmore, *Black Religion*, 171.

⁹⁷ Carle, *Defining*; Alexander Walters, *My Life and Work*, (London, 1917), 95-140; Shawn Leigh Alexander, *An Army of Lions: The Civil Rights Struggle Before the NAACP* (Philadelphia, 2012).

⁹⁸ "Excerpts from a Thanksgiving Sermon, Nov 26, 1914," Folder 346, Box 7, Francis Grimke papers, Howard University, Washington DC. Nb Sermon actually delivered on November 20, 1912.

⁹⁹ "The NAACP," *Star of Zion*, September 12, 1918, 4; Martin to Nash, December 28, 1916, Philadelphia, Pa, 1914-17, Branch Files, NAACP Papers.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, R. Bagnall, "Color and the Church," File: Speeches, 1914 Annual Conference, NAACP Papers; W. Brown, "The Conquering Christ and Race relations," *Journal of the Forty Fourth Annual Session of the National Baptist Convention* (Nashville, 1924), 58, Southern Baptist Archives, Nashville, and "Lawlessness," *Journal of the Twenty Sixth Annual Session of the Quadrennial Conference of the AME Church*, (Nashville, 1920), 120, AME Archives; front page articles of *NBV*, January 1, 1921; Frederick McGhee to Ransom, June 8, 1906, General Correspondence, Ransom Collection. On social reform, see R.R. Wright, "Social Work and Influence of the Negro Church," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 3. No. 3, (1907), 81-93; Judith Wiesenfeld, *African-American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA, 1905-1945* (Cambridge, 1997); Dorrien, *The New Abolition*. Church protest and social reform stood in a long tradition. For black Baptists, see J. Brown, "The Bible's Attitude Toward Lynching," 6-11, *National Baptist Magazine*, 1894; for Methodists, Stephen Ward Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and African American Religion in the South* (Knoxville, 1991).

¹⁰¹ J. Goddard, "The New Church for the New Era," *AME Review*, October 1919, 340-2. In 1924, the AME invited James Weldon Johnson to address its Annual Conference. *Journal of the Twenty Seventh Session of the Quadrennial Conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, (Nashville, 1924), 142.

¹⁰² See, for example, "NAACP Begins Nationwide Campaign to Arouse Negroes Against Segregation," *NBV*, November 15, 1924, 14.

¹⁰³ On Johnson's respect for believers, see *Along*, 414 and *Grandmother's Bible* (1890).

¹⁰⁴ Grimke, "Address: The NAACP," April 24, 1921, Woodson ed., *Works, Volume 1*, 624,

¹⁰⁵ Johnson was admired in some church circles, see *NBV*, May 16, 1931, 8.

¹⁰⁶ *Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson* (New York, 1933), 105, 81. His employer was also interested in the occult and hypnosis. Cecil Hollis to James Weldon Johnson, August 8th 1936, Box 20, Folder 464, James Weldon Johnson and Grace Naill Johnson Papers, Yale.

¹⁰⁷ Johnson, *Along*, 413.

¹⁰⁸ Johnson, *Along*, 413.

¹⁰⁹ "First draft." In addition to Russell, Johnson's favoured authors in his library included freethinker H. G. Wells and playwright George Bernard Shaw – who insisted in his will that no memorial to him should "take the form of a cross or any other instrument of torture." Johnson's Library, Box 91, Folder 745, Series V, Johnson Papers.

¹¹⁰ Notes in notebooks, Box 49, Folder 87, Johnson Papers.

¹¹¹ Johnson, *Along*, 413; Rough notes, Box 49, Folder 87, "Notebooks: Miscellaneous autobiographical notes"; "First draft, *Along This Way*," Box 46, Folder 91, Series II, Writings, Johnson Papers.

¹¹² See Poppy Cannon White, *A Gentle Knight: My Husband, Walter White* (New York, 1956).

¹¹³ On White's "excruciating" Christian upbringing, see Jancken, *White*.

¹¹⁴ White's only close friend who was a clergyman, John Hurst, an influential early figure in the NAACP, died before White became Executive Secretary. "Thousands Attend Funeral Services of Bishop Hurst," *Chicago Defender*, May 17, 1930, 2. Hurst was one of barely a handful of clergy speakers at annual conferences during Johnson's tenure – white sceptics and free thinkers such as John Dewey were far more prominent. General Office File, Annual Conference -- Speeches, 1910, Group 2, Series L, Box 2, NAACP Papers.

¹¹⁵ Thus Bagnall was not connected to Baptists or Methodists through his denomination. A modernist in theological terms, his wider reputation appears mixed. One *Pittsburgh Courier* contributor attacked Bagnall for treating scripture as "trash" and "exploded theory."

- ¹¹⁶ Minutes of Meeting of Board of Directors, December 12, 1923, Part I, NAACP Papers. Other ministers who were occasionally on the board (which had over thirty members) during the interwar period included G. Waller, (Springfield, Mass.), William Imes and Hutchens Bishop (both New York).
- ¹¹⁷ One New England Baptist minister mocked, Holmes' "gospel asks for neither creedal sanction nor is it circumscribed by inadequate Biblical interpretation." R. A. Moody, *NBV*, January 21, 1933, 3. Pickens joined the Community Church after he moved to New York.
- ¹¹⁸ See Church Programs, Holmes Papers; Pickens to Holmes, February 4, 1938, Pickens Papers.
- ¹¹⁹ See, for example, "Afternoon Session," *Journal of the Nineteenth Session of the Ohio Conference, AME Church*, (1920), 10, Andover Library Archives.
- ¹²⁰ Blum, *Du Bois*; Brian Johnson, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Toward Agnosticism* (New York, 2008).
- ¹²¹ "Mr. DuBois Dabbles in Methodism," *Star of Zion*, June 1 1922, 4.
- ¹²² Countee Cullen, "Mary, Mother of Christ," March 1924, *Crisis*, 222. On the wider literary challenge to Christian doctrine in the so-called "Harlem Renaissance," (which went beyond Harlem and this period), see Lackey, *African American Atheists*. NAACP leaders were very much involved in this circle, for example, Johnson to Langston Hughes, January 24 1932, Box 10, Folder 219, Johnson papers. Walter White's, *Fire in the Flint*, (London, 1925), joined the critique, especially 88-90.
- ¹²³ "Postscript," *Crisis*, June 1931, 190-2.
- ¹²⁴ "Disgusted with God," *NBV*, January 16, 1932, 3.
- ¹²⁵ "Du Bois and the Church," *Star of Zion*, February 2, 1933, 5.
- ¹²⁶ "Perverted" in Woodson, *The Works*, Vol. III, 465; rest of the quotations from "Stray Thoughts and Meditations," Vol. XXXIV, 1934, p. 20, Folder 1757, Grimke Papers.
- ¹²⁷ Along the NAACP battlefield, *Crisis* July 1942, 230; "The Missionary John Work," and "Calls Pickens' Letter Gross Insult," *California News*, 1930, Pickens papers, "Preachers on Strike," *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 28, 1926, 14; "Getting Right With God," *New York Amsterdam News*, January 30, 1929, 13.
- ¹²⁸ Along the NAACP battlefield, *Crisis* July 1942, 230; "The Missionary John Work," and "Calls Pickens' Letter Gross Insult," *California News*, 1930, Pickens papers, "Preachers on Strike," *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 28, 1926, 14; "Getting Right With God," *New York Amsterdam News*, January 30, 1929, 13. He would have further run-ins with Wright, even after he left the NAACP to work for the government. At a large church conference, Wright and others accused Pickens of being a paid government propagandist. Pickens replied that he would never "sink so low" as to suggest the Bishop's couldn't be trusted to talk about God just because they were paid by the church. "Dean Pickens Tells AME's Earful on U.S." *Chicago Defender*, September 27, 1941, 8.
- ¹²⁹ William Pickens, "God and the Preachers," *New York Amsterdam News*, May 18, 1927, 24.
- ¹³⁰ L Jerome Jones, "What the People Think!" Letter from Rev. Council M Harris, *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 6, 1930, 3.
- ¹³¹ "Darrow Has Not Joined," *The Truth Seeker*, Vol. 59, No. 11 (1932), 335. "Where is this Heaven?" *Afro-American*, February 14, 1931, 18.
- ¹³² S.T. Joshi, *The Unbelievers: The Evolution of Modern Atheism* (New York, 2011), 109; Clarence Darrow, "The Great Delusion," Box 6, Darrow Papers.
- ¹³³ Darrow to Mary Field, May 15, 1913, General Correspondence A-D, Box 1, and "John Brown", 20, Box 6, Darrow papers. Edward Cotton, "Clarence Darrow," *Christian Register*, May 19, 1927, 401. He also deplored attempts to regulate morality. "Bagnall," *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 24, 1938, 4; Review of *Rope and Faggot*, Box 7, Darrow Papers.
- ¹³⁴ Gordon B Hancock, "Between the Lines," *New Journal and Guide*, August 29, 1931, A6.
- ¹³⁵ Kevin Boyle, *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights and Murder in the Jazz Age* (New York, 2005).
- ¹³⁶ "Darrow's Speech Divides Harlem," *Afro-American*, December 26, 1925, 3; "Mr. Darrow says we are too pious," *New Journal and Guide*, December 26, 1925, 8.
- ¹³⁷ "In praise of Darrow," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 29, 1931, A2. See, too, "Race Is Urged To Try Darrow Philosophy," *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 29, 1931, A2.
- ¹³⁸ "M. E. Preachers Rap Clarence Darrow," *Afro-American*, October 25, 1930, 11; "Darrow's Atheism Doubted by Pastors," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 3, 1931, A10; Edw. Hughes, "Thinks Darrow is Spiritually Blind," *Afro-American*, February 28, 1931, 6; C. Elliott Freeman Jr., "Darrow Is A Fool" *Chicago Defender*, August 22, 1931, 4. The most high profile Black minister to attend a Darrow debate was John Hurst, widely known for his work for the NAACP. "Bishop Hears Darrow," *Afro-American*, April 28, 1928, 6. Bagnall praised Darrow as a man whose life would earn him a place in heaven, "Bagnall," *Philadelphia Tribune*, March 24, 1938, 4.
- ¹³⁹ "Pastors Bar Pulpits to Unbelievers," *Chicago Defender*, April 7, 1928, 3.

¹⁴⁰ “Don’t Have to Be Logical,” *Afro-American*, July 12, 1930, A18. Darrow gave a series of lectures at Howard in 1931, *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 10, 1931, A3. The college chaplain, Albert Cook, had recently been removed for his lack of orthodoxy. “Nobody Believes,” *Afro-American*, February 16, 1923, 9.

¹⁴¹ “Don’t Have to Be Logical.” See too John Brown speech, 20, Box 6, Darrow Papers.

¹⁴² “Dr Moses and Darrow Debate on Negro Religion,” *NBV*, Jan 24, 1931, 9.

¹⁴³ “Bishop Ransom Answers Darrow,” *Louisville News*, January 9, 1926, 1.

¹⁴⁴ “My Last Quadrennial Message to the Race,” March 3, 1929, 23, 25, Folder 410, Grimke Papers. In fact, Grimke lived another four years and gave another quadrennial message. Unlike Ransom, Grimke was conservative in theology, a Calvinist by training at Princeton.

¹⁴⁵ Walls did not believe in a material hell. “Whatever Happened to Hell,” *Ebony*, January 1961, 50. “Golden Anniversary Celebration,” 3-7, Folder 89: AMEZ Church, Charles Blockson Collection, Temple University. “Ministers Have Not Kept Pace,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, August 25, 1927, 14; letter to AMEZ ministers from William Pickens, November 9, 1933, Pickens Papers. Walls had staged a sit-in at a Washington restaurant and had to be smuggled out of Alabama after one fiery speech. “Bishop Denied Service,” *Chicago Defender*, September 29, 1934, 3; “Bishop Walls Escapes,” *Afro-American*, December 2, 1933, 16; “Bishop Walls Praises Abyssinia’s Courageous Stand,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 9, 1935, 2.

¹⁴⁶ “Fool Religion,” *Star of Zion*, July 30, 1925, 4. Grimké agreed. Woodson, ed., *The Works*, Vol. III, 496.

¹⁴⁷ “Bishop Walls,” *Star of Zion*, October 15, 1931, 2.

¹⁴⁸ “William Pickens is Silenced by Bishop Walls,” *Atlanta Daily World*, December 18, 1931, 6.

¹⁴⁹ B. Jones, “Clarence Darrow Warns Race,” *Chicago Defender*, July 11, 1931, 1; Darrow, “Address to 17th conference of NAACP, Chicago, Illinois, June 27, 1926,” Box 10, Darrow Papers.

¹⁵⁰ Bagnall to Pinknett, April 14 1928, NAACP Papers, and reply. On weather, see *New York Times* report.

¹⁵¹ Another speaker was Max Yergan, who had experienced a crisis of faith. David Anthony, “Max Yergan in South Africa: From Evangelical Pan-Africanist to Revolutionary Socialist,” *African Studies Review*, 34, (2), 1991, 27-55.

¹⁵² “Dinner to Darrow,” *New York Amsterdam News*, May 4, 1927, 5; James Weldon Johnson, “Clarence Darrow as I Knew Him,” *Unity*, Vol. CXXI, No. 6, May 16th 1938, 88-89.

¹⁵³ Cleveland Allen, “Bishop Walls Scores Darrow,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 4, 1931, A10.

¹⁵⁴ “William Pickens is Silenced by Bishop Walls,” *Atlanta Daily World*, December 18, 1931, 6.

¹⁵⁵ For an example, see *NBV* editorial, November 28, 1931, 5 imagining a church led by scholar (and sceptic) Carter Woodson. “I suppose the membership would be composed of such strange men as ... George Schuyler, William Pickens, maybe DuBois, ... a half dozen irreligious editors, a few intelligent but misled women, and Darrow. Mencken might be invited to join.”

¹⁵⁶ George Harvey, “The Church and NAACP,” *Star of Zion*, July 26 1934, 1, 7.

¹⁵⁷ L. F. Coles “Philadelphia Man Claims NAACP Deserves Help,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 12, 1932, A10.

¹⁵⁸ The historian and North Carolina Baptist pastor, Miles Mark Fisher, agreed, the NAACP “needs to be spiritualized.” J Raymond Henderson, “A Preacher Looks at the NAACP,” *NBV*, August 12, 1933, 8. The curt bow to churches may refer to the NAACP’s call to local churches to hold meetings ahead of NAACP conferences. “Send Programs in Advance,” Annual Conference Correspondence, Nov-Dec 1932, NAACP papers; 21st NAACP Conference program, Pickens Papers. See, too, Shelby J. Davidson, “Cooperation of the Ministry,” Group 1/Series B/Box 5, NAACP Papers. NAACP officials sporadically brainstormed ways to tap church resources (such as asking ministers to place canisters at the back of sanctuaries).

¹⁵⁹ Bagnall to Carrie Shepperson, June 21, 1924, Little Rock, Arkansas, 1918-24, Branch Files, NAACP Papers.

¹⁶⁰ Lists of delegates can be found in: Group 1/Series B/Box 6, File: Annual Conference Correspondence, June-July 1928; Box 5 File: Annual Conference, Undated, 1922; Box 8, File: Annual Conference, Schedule, 1932; Box 2, File: Annual Conference, Addresses, 1919; Officers of Branches 1939, NAACP Department of Branches, Officers of Branches – Lists, 1939-1940, NAACP Papers.

¹⁶¹ In the early 1920s especially, some churches had NAACP Sundays.

¹⁶² Under Gayle, three churches contributed to the NAACP’s anti-lynching campaign. Letter to ministers, Rev. Jas Gayle, February 1934; membership reports, January 10, April 25 1934; Meeting of Colored Citizens of New Orleans, January 30, 1934; “Gayle elected to lead young Negro Baptists,” Louisiana State BYPE Convention report, July 20-22, 1935; membership reports, 1935; all in New

Orleans Files, 1934-5, NAACP Branch Files. August 22, 1938 membership report; AW Brazier to Daisy Lampkin, March 3, 1938, New Orleans Files, 1938, NAACP Branch Files. For another example of clergy involvement: 1926 newspaper cutting, "Lexington Citizens Demand Death For Rapist of Girls," in Louisville Kentucky, Jan-June, 1936, NAACP Branch Files. See too Thomas J. Edge, "An Arm of God": The Early History of the NAACP in Charleston, West Virginia, 1917-1925, *West Virginia History*, 7 (2), Fall 2013, 1-32.

¹⁶³ In Atlanta in 1917, there were only two ministers on the membership roll. Membership lists, Atlanta: 1919-1939, NAACP Branch Files. The branch's main African American opponent was a minister. John Hope to James Weldon Johnson, July 1918, and Branch Bulletin, Vol. 1, No. 5, 1917, Atlanta, 1913-8, NAACP Papers.

¹⁶⁴ Shepperson to Bagnall, June 15, and reply, June 21, 1924; Little Rock, Arkansas, 1918-24, NAACP Branch Files. Although there were some "devoted and faithful ministers," wrote Bagnall, "the majority" were uncooperative. See too Mrs C J Jones, to James Weldon Johnson, June 22, 1925, Buffalo, New York, 1923-5; E. Thomas to Robert Bagnall, January 23, 1924, Milwaukee, 1924-5; Robert Evans to E. Frederic Morrow, July 18, 1939, Port Huron, 1938-39; Press release, August 14, 1931, Mobile, Alabama, 1931, all NAACP Branch Files.

¹⁶⁵ Bagnall to Shepperson, June 21, 1924.

¹⁶⁶ In the states of Al, Fla, Ga, La and Ms only 5 of 56 officers of Southern branches in 1937 were ministers (most officers listed were men). Southern Regional Conference, Feb 1937, report, NAACP Papers. See too NAACP Department of Branches, Officers of Branches – Lists, 1939-1940, NAACP Papers.

¹⁶⁷ Jerome Heartwell Holland, "The Role of the Negro Church As An Organ Of Protest," MSc thesis, Cornell University, September 1941, 93-4. Virtually all the 97 Methodist ministers who responded to Holland's questionnaire were willing to organize mass protest meetings, but fewer than half were NAACP members. Though seeking a technical explanation, Holland recognized that clergy "may actually not wish to join."

¹⁶⁸ Some churches continued to welcome Pickens to speak. For example, see Julian St. George White to Bagnall, Apr 27, 1923, Philadelphia, Pa, 1923, Jan-May, Branch Files. Pickens' twenty eight-stop tour of West Virginia and Pennsylvania in 1937 did not include a single church. Branch Officer Files, Pickens Papers.

¹⁶⁹ Grimke, "My last address," and "NAACP," Folder 412, Grimke Papers. On finances see Grimke, Financial Papers, Folder 10, Grimke Papers. Grimke – who had no dependents – did give to the NAACP in his will, though. Grimke was one of numerous clergy who charged that the NAACP wasn't radical enough, which fits with Raboteau's contention that the Black church has not "been as quiescent about protest, as has sometimes been claimed," *A Fire*, 66. In *Your Spirits*, Savage explores the reverse criticism, by activist-intellectuals (including those in NAACP circles) that the churches were an ineffective fighting force.

¹⁷⁰ Robert M Evans to E. Frederic Morrow, January 30, and July 18, and to William Pickens, August 29th 1939; Pickens to Evans, July 28, 1939; Port Huron, 1939; Port Huron, 1939, NAACP Branch Files.

¹⁷¹ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York, 1944) 825.

¹⁷² See, for example, 21st Annual Conference report, Pickens Papers, and "Send Programs in Advance to All Ministers Named."

¹⁷³ NAACP Department of Branches, Field Work – Reports – Contributions, 1925-1932, Pickens Papers. Foundations, such as the Garland Fund, headed by white men who shared Johnson's and White's spiritual outlook provided funds. "Segregation From the Christian Standpoint," *Public Journal*, Pickens Papers.

¹⁷⁴ LeFlore to William Andrews, December 15, 1931, and Press Release, August 14, 1931, Mobile 1919-39, NAACP Branch Files.

¹⁷⁵ LeFlore to White, July 4, 1934; LeFlore to Pickens, October 2, 1934; Leflore to White, January 6, 1936, Mobile Branch Files.

¹⁷⁶ "By Daisy Lampkin," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 10, 1951, 8.

¹⁷⁷ "No less than 27 churches had an NAACP Sunday." "Mrs. Lampkins Commends Churches, Editors," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 28, 1930, 6; 'Lampkin stirs city for NAACP', *Metropolitan Post*, 1938.

¹⁷⁸ These included Nannie Burroughs and John Hurst. Report for Board Re Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Fund Campaign, December 13, 1933, Pickens Papers. Perhaps thanks to Bagnall, Johnson was invited to address the Protestant Episcopal Church convention in 1930. "Board Report," July 1930, 6, Part I, NAACP Papers.

¹⁷⁹ On support for NAACP, Julian St. George White to Ovington, Feb 21, 1928, Philadelphia, 1928; AT Walden to Walter White, January 13, 1934, Atlanta, 1934, NAACP Branch Files. Henderson also invited Pickens to speak at his church, Wheat Street Baptist, on May 17, 1932. "Pickens to Talk Here Tonight," *Atlanta Daily World*, May 17, 1932, 1. On social gospel outlook, "Sunday Sermon," *Atlanta Daily World*, March 11, 1934, 4. Later, the young Martin Luther King would listen to sermons by Henderson's successor. Stephen Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta* (Athens, 2003), 61.

¹⁸⁰ "Rev. Henderson Appraises the NAACP," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 29, 1933, 10. Between the wars, the Association was perennially on the edge of going bankrupt. Sullivan, *Lift*, 151. On budgets, "Report of the Budget Committee," December 1931, Board of Directors Correspondence 1931, NAACP Papers; Annual reports, Home and Foreign Missionary Department of AME, Box 17, Folder 49, AME Papers.

¹⁸¹ J. R. Henderson, "Interpreting the NAACP as a Religious Ideal," File: Annual Conference, Oklahoma City, Speeches 1934, Group 1/Series B/Box 10, NAACP Papers. See, too, Bradley, "The Press." Henderson presented a resolution supporting the NAACP at that year's National Baptist Convention. Henderson to Walter White, September 18, 1934, Atlanta, Ga, Aug-Dec 1934, NAACP Branch Files. One example Henderson gave for his confidence in church involvement was that 3,000 ministers supported the 1932 campaign against the negative stereotypes of the Amos 'n' Andy show, which meant that at least 500,000 "Negroes heard the gospel of self-respect." Henderson, "The Church Still Leads," *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 2, 1932, 4.

¹⁸² The NAACP refused to support the suit brought by the pastor of New Orleans' 1st African Baptist Church for the right to use the City Auditorium. "The leaders of the militant NAACP", wrote the *Baptist Voice's* editor, with sarcasm, "look with disdain upon Negro ministers." "Rev R W Coleman and the NAACP," *NBV*, July 15, 1939, 2.

¹⁸³ On Burroughs, see "America – A Democracy with a Millstone about its Neck," Annual Conference, Speeches, 1929, NAACP Papers; Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*. On churchwomen's activism, see Bettye Collier-Thomas, *Jesus Jobs and Justice: African American Women and Religion* (New York, 2010).

¹⁸⁴ "Tentative Draft of Proposed Activities," February 5 1923, Part I, NAACP Papers.

¹⁸⁵ "A Reply to Raymond Henderson's Observations," *NBV*, November 9, 1935, 1, quote on 8.

¹⁸⁶ This controversy was over Pickens' criticism of the NBC's highhanded treatment of Burroughs (though Barbour had written in support of Burroughs, previously). M. Moore to editor *Crisis*, November 29, 1938, enclosing Russell Barbour, "NAACP Leader Insults Baptist Leaders," *NBV*, November 12, 1938.

¹⁸⁷ White to Barbour, December 2, 1938, Box C 352 Administrative File: *National Baptist Voice*, NAACP Papers. For the back and forth between Barbour, White and others, see White to Barbour, December 23, Barbour to White, December 14, "Most of our Baptist ministers will no longer cooperate with Mr Pickens;" J. C. Austin to White, December 9, 1938, Administrative File: *National Baptist Voice*. White to L.H. King, Folder: Interdenominational Preacher's meeting, Board of Directors, Correspondence, 1938, NAACP Papers.

¹⁸⁸ Henderson to White, Dec 2, 1938, File: *National Baptist Voice*. *NBV* December 17, 1938, 2.

¹⁸⁹ "Failure of the Negro Church," *The Messenger*, October 1919, 6.

¹⁹⁰ "Pickens and Colson," *The Messenger*, Vol. V, January 31, No. 1, 565.

¹⁹¹ "Intelligent Christianity."

¹⁹² "Owen Denies Bible and Backs Pickens," *Afro-American*, April 6, 1923, 3.

¹⁹³ See, for example, Mark Solomon, *Red and Black: Communism and Afro-Americans* (New York, 1988), 259-261, and Painter, *Narrative*, 133-5, 169. Johnson, "A Spiritual Autobiography."

¹⁹⁴ U. Simpson Tate to Walls, January 27, 1936, Part I; Records and Correspondence, 1933-42, National Negro Congress Papers, Schomburg Library; Davis to Walls, January 30, 1936, NNC Papers.

¹⁹⁵ Marshall Shephard, "The National Negro Congress," March 7, 1936, 1.

¹⁹⁶ "Bishop W. J. Walls Resents Langston Hughes' Atheism," *Star of Zion*, March 12 1936, 1. Rev. R. Bowling noted "The Negro political and social radicals of today are doing their utmost to bring to their cause the Negro ministry" were "as usual" "those who would free us from the shackles of religious faith." *NBV* April 18, 1936, 1. On the rather more religious thought of Langston Hughes than the clergy realised, see Wallace Best, *Langston's Salvation: American Religion and the Bard of Harlem*, (New York, 2017).

¹⁹⁷ "Eminent Bishops Oppose National Negro Congress," *Atlanta Daily World*, February 19, 1936, 1.

¹⁹⁸ "It's not 'Church,'" *Chicago Defender*, February 22, 1936, 10.

¹⁹⁹ "The National Negro Congress," *Star of Zion*, March 12 1936, 4.

- ²⁰⁰ In "Secular Compared to What?" Sorrett argues that blackness is central to the making of secularism.
- ²⁰¹ "NAACP Leader Insults Baptist Leaders"; "The Fraternal Council of Negro Churches," *NBV*, February 15, 1936, 2. On the Black church social gospel tradition, see Dorrien, *The New Abolition*.
- ²⁰² Adele Oltman, *Sacred Mission, Worldly Ambition: Black Christian Nationalism in the Age of Jim Crow*, (Athens, Ga, 2008), 196.
- ²⁰³ "The Church and the American Negro," *Star of Zion*, July 20 1933, 2.
- ²⁰⁴ *Watchman-Examiner*, September 1926, and comment in "Darrow vs. Christianity," *Philadelphia Tribune*, October 2, 1926, 16. The *Baptist Voice* fuelled the fears by suggesting Darrow's popularity soared in proportion to his critique of white American Christianity. *National Baptist Voice*, December 18, 1926. See too Isaac Lemuel Thomas, *Methodism and the Negro*, p. 102. The (white) *Baptist Magazine* reported on Hughes' poem; "Goodbye Christ," *Baptist Magazine*, n.d., clippings file, Box 1, Folder 2, Una Lawrence Collection, Southern Baptist Archives. See too Henry Porter, *Christianity and Race* (Atlanta, n.d.), 29, Box 1, Folder 9, Una Lawrence Collection.
- ²⁰⁵ David Chappell, *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (Chapel Hill, 2004). See too Jane Dailey, "Sex, Segregation, and the Sacred After Brown," *Journal of American History*, 91(1) (2004), 119-44.
- ²⁰⁶ James Cone, *The Cross*, 148.
- ²⁰⁷ Savage, *Your Spirits*, 2. On rethinking the 'long civil rights movement' to take account of its origins in issues of economic justice, see Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past," *Journal of American History*, 91 (4), 2005, 1233-1263.
- ²⁰⁸ "Discussion and Questions," Business Session, Wednesday June 19, 1940, Annual Conference 1940, NAACP Papers.
- ²⁰⁹ "A Frank Interview with Roy Wilkins," *Ebony*, April 1974, 40.
- ²¹⁰ Randall Tyus, "Observations and Suggestions," Churches Committee, (1941 - 1942), Board of Directors, Correspondence and Committee Materials, NAACP Papers; W P Bayless, "Protest Beating of Ministers," *Pittsburgh Courier*, September 19, 1942, 1.
- ²¹¹ Walls to White, October 29, 1945, General Office File: Board of Directors, W. J. Walls, NAACP Papers.
- ²¹² Ovington to Thurgood Marshall, received April 22, 1940; Lampkin to Ovington, May 3, 1940, Board of Directors, Correspondence and Committee Materials: Mary Ovington, 1940-44, General Office Files, NAACP Papers.
- ²¹³ Telegram, NAACP to Bishop J Walls, Sept 11, 1946, General Office File: Board of Directors, W. J. Walls, 1942-53.
- ²¹⁴ On Pickens' dismissal see Avery, *Up From Washington*, 173-180.
- ²¹⁵ "Minutes: First Meeting of the Church Committee," April 9, 1947, General Office File: Board of Directors, National Church Committee, 1947-49; "NAACP Manual for Church Work Committee," 3, General Office File: Staff, Walter Offutt, 1946-49, NAACP Papers.
- ²¹⁶ "The Church Work Program of the NAACP," nd., 2, General Office File, Staff: Walter Offutt, 1946-49, NAACP Papers. Such comment fits with Raboteau's observation that "it was republican or civil, rather than biblical religion, on which" secular protest groups like the NAACP based their religious appeal. *A Fire*, 64.
- ²¹⁷ For the growth of the NAACP, including church support, see Sullivan, *Lift*; Morris, *Origins*; Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana* (Athens, 1995); Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*.
- ²¹⁸ Lampkin to Ovington, May 3, 1940. See too state theme song of Oklahoma NAACP, "Mine eyes have seen the coming of the NAACP," Program of the First Annual Session of the Northeastern regional meeting of Oklahoma State NAACP, March 7-9, 1940; the First Regional Conference Southwestern Area Oklahoma Conference of Branches, NAACP, March 1-3, 1940, included a session devoted to the church. Branches and Youth Councils, Oklahoma State Conference, 1940-42, NAACP Papers.
- ²¹⁹ Offutt to White, July 26, 1950, 2, General Office File: Staff, Walter Offutt, 1950-54. Offutt also reported on the Baptist Convention's denunciation of White, following White's support for a chemical to whiten skin.
- ²²⁰ "Remarks by Walter Offutt at Board Meeting," October 10, 1949, Staff, Walter Offutt 1946-49.
- ²²¹ Walls was concerned about those who "dream of a world without clergymen who they deceitfully use to gain their following." Walls to Wilkins, April 19, 1950; Walls file, NAACP Papers.
- ²²² Taylor, *Secular Age*, 3.
- ²²³ Wilkins to Walls, July 11, 1950; Walls to White, October 29, 1945.

²²⁴ “Annual Address of President J. H. Jackson,” September 10 1959, 12, J.H. Jackson Papers, Chicago Historical Society. Tensions between Jackson and the Progressive National Baptist Convention (including King), which split from the NBC in 1962, provide some context for Jackson’s praise of the NAACP. Kevin Smith, “Race, Class and Gender in early Progressive National Baptist Convention rhetoric,” *Journal of African American Southern Baptist History*, Vol. 2, (June 2004), 53-71.

²²⁵ Report on Pledges Received from Los Angeles, California,” June 2, 1958, General Office File: Rev. J. Raymond Henderson correspondence, 1960, NAACP Papers.

²²⁶ “AMEZ Cash to NAACP,” *Chicago Defender*, May 13, 1958, A6; Walls to Wilkins, January 5 1962, NAACP File, Walls Papers, Syracuse University. Walls also urged the AMEZ to support King. Walls to F. L. Shuttlesworth, February 18 1960, and King to Walls, December 31, 1958 and January 10, 1959, General Folder, Walls Papers.