

VOICES OF SOUTHERN RADICALISM: PROPHETIC VOICES, AGRARIAN  
CONSCIOUSNESS, AND THE FIGHT FOR HUMAN WELFARE

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation uses archival research to explore the rhetorical influence of the Southern Social Gospel Prophets. The project focuses on the outgrowth of radicalism that occurred from the Vanderbilt University Campus, specifically the classroom of Professor Alva Taylor. I analyze the radical prophetic rhetoric of Taylor and his students, which was a response to the environment created by the Vanderbilt Agrarians. This discourse of radicalism urged Southerners to be open to social growth and a new version of Americanism grounded in Christian social theory instead of Old South ideals. The importance of this study is twofold: first, it establishes the importance of radical Southern discourse as a precursor to the more widely recognized Civil Rights rhetorics of the 1950s and 1960s; and second, it answers the call of social movement theorists to include the vernacular rhetoric of place in historiographical studies.

## DEDICATION

To my Daddy Mims, the late Billy L. Mims, my conscience, my courage, my protector, and my forever confidant, who let me know the land, and without whom I would not know what it means to truly live. I say:

I make my living with words and rhymes and all this tragedy / Should go into my head and out instead as bits of poetry / But I say, 'Daddy I'm so afraid / How will I go on with you gone this way?' / 'That's my job, that's what I do / Everything I do is because of you / To keep you safe with me, that's my job, you see' / Everything I do is because of you / To keep you safe with me.' (Gary Burr and Conway Twitty, "That's My Job")

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## INTRODUCTION

“The South at last is to be physically reconstructed; but it will be fatal if the South should conceive it as her duty to be regenerated and get her spirit reborn with a totally different orientation toward life.”—John Crowe Ransom  
—*I’ll Take My Stand*, “Reconstructed but Unregenerate” (1930)

“Unless the Negro and white Southerners win this battle together, it will be only a partial victory—only the form and not the substance, and...for a truly new society to emerge white and Negro must build together.”  
—*The Southern Patriot*, “The Voice of the Silent South” (1948)

Vanderbilt University in the 1930’s was the home to the Vanderbilt Agrarians. While John Crowe Ransom was busy defending the principles of the Old South in the Department of English, Alva Wilmot Taylor—a social ethics professor—was reforming young Southerners’ minds, teaching them concepts of Christian brotherhood with the aim of transforming the South into a “beloved community” (*Christianity* 9). Taylor taught students including Howard Kester, Don West, Ward Rogers, and Claude Williams, who were later joined outside the classroom by Myles Horton and James Domwbrowski (Egerton 78). Taylor and his students, whom Anthony Dunbar calls Social Gospel prophets, were concerned with social progress, but Taylor’s method of constant criticism, education, experimentation, and reformation urged Southerners to be open to social growth, not the Agrarians’ Old South revivalism. Both groups demonstrated a certain sense of movement, renaissance, and revivalism what addressed the Southern identity crisis caused by industrialism.



This dissertation explores the legacy of Taylor and his students Howard Kester and James Dombrowski by mapping the ways that they disrupted their contemporary environments with radical convictions. These advocates of the Southern Social Gospel were “social activist[s] who saw the role of the church as a reconciling force serving, among others, those who occupied the bottom rungs of the economic ladder” (Egerton 77). Their non-denominational, politically liberal version of Christianity inflected their approach to solving social ills. I argue that these Southern Social Gospel prophets built a progressive counterpublic in the South. The defining characteristic of this counterpublic was the emphasis on Christian brotherhood, through which the prophets and their disciples could challenge the myths of Southern identity, Christianize social relationships, maximize freedom, and hence awaken public consciousness. In arguing that this prophetic rhetorical form helped create a progressive Southern ideology, I show how this prophetic rhetorical strategies contributed to broader industrial and social reform and the Civil Rights activism of the 1950s and 1960s. The Social Gospel prophets’ publications, speeches, and sermons not only revealed a South that was open to social growth and a new version of Americanism grounded in Christian social theory, but also urged Southerners to fight against the myths publicized in the Vanderbilt Agrarians’ *I’ll Take My Stand*.

### **The Social Gospel, North and South**

Anthony Dunbar defines the Social Gospel quite simply as a “minority viewpoint in American Protestantism ... spawned by the prevalent optimism and faith in science at the turn of the century, which held that people should and could reform society along Christian lines,” while historians such as Carl, Ronald Cedric White, and Charles Howard Hopkins emphasize its complexity (Dunbar 28). They explain that advocates of the Social Gospel promoted social responsibility, a social conscience, and a non-individualistic society (Hopkins; Rodgers; White).

These principles, according to Degler, “spelled the transformation of American Protestantism” (347). John Egerton calls the message of these Social Gospel prophets “a reform-minded union of the denominational groups interested in progressive, socially conscious Christianity.” The Social Gospel was necessarily divorced from the church proper because of its focus on spreading a socially conscious Christianity not bound by denominational differences.<sup>1</sup>

Though the Social Gospel—as a movement—had its origins in the North, it became something different when Taylor and his followers brought it to the South and placed it in opposition to the Agrarians and the urbanization of predominantly rural environments. Egerton, for instance, suggests that there was a difference between Southern and Northern Christianities and thereby implies that there was also a geographically different Social Gospel:

The leaders of the Social Gospel movement felt a greater need to make the world around them a better place for their church members to live in than to help lift souls up to heaven one by one. While Southern churches were holding revivals to rescue sinners from the devil, the mainline Protestant denominations of the urban North were bringing moral pressure to bear on the sins of capitalism. The more conservative of those congregations simply wanted a greater show of charity from the industrial barons, but their more radical counterparts longed to replace capitalism with an altogether different social order in which wealth and power would be more widely distributed. (Egerton 43)

The prophets of the Northern Social Gospel ranged from pastors to educators to editors to directors of reform organizations who aimed to apply the teachings of Jesus to the injustices they saw in Progressive Era America. They were social activists whose mission was to renew the social dimensions of Christianity that they believed had been lost in America. They attempted to

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 1 is devoted to delineating a definition of the Social Gospel, particularly in terms of Alva Taylor’s texts. For additional explanations, see Ronald Cedric White and Charles Howard Hopkins’, *The Social Gospel: Religion and Reform in Changing America*; John Battle’s, “A Brief History of the Social Gospel in WRS Journal”; Ronald Rodgers’ “The Social Gospel and the News”; Carl Degler’s, *Out of Our Past: The Forces That Shaped Modern America*; C. Howard Hopkin’s, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915*; and Shailer Mathews’, “Social Gospel,” *A Dictionary of Religion and Ethics*.

accomplish their mission via “the application of the teaching of Jesus and the total message of the Christian salvation to society, the economic life, and social institutions . . . as well as to individuals” (Mathews 416). In the Social Gospel’s earliest form, Walter Rauschenbusch, Josiah Strong, and Washington Gladden were its more prominent public voices, and they are largely credited for transforming the philosophy into a social movement. Yet, as White and Hopkins note, not until the 1970s did scholars attempt to think outside the geographical boundaries (i.e. the North) that Rauschenbusch, Strong, and Gladden had established simply because of the location of their work. As the South met the challenge of industrialization, it too would benefit from Social Gospel principles and a Social Gospel movement.

White and Hopkins support this argument, claiming that the Social Gospel was a “bridge from an agrarian to an urban religion” (xvi). I suggest that as the part of the country most affected by the re-making of rural, agrarian culture, the South serves as a primary case in point (xvi). Because the Social Gospel emerged as a response to a crisis in a given community—particularly urbanization and industrialization in this instance—the Southern Social Gospel prophets addressed questions specific to their environment. The prophets had to think about spreading their gospel in local terms. Would Southern society be shaped out of nostalgia for the Old South or acceptance of new principles grounded in other versions of Americanism? Those Christians who had been busy rescuing sinners from the devil had to fight instead against other evils, which Egerton notes: peonage, convict leasing, illiteracy, malnutrition, and race-based hate (44). The Social Gospel, above all, was about action, not simply a theological belief.

To delineate the Southern Social Gospel, I focus on the period from 1930-1966. The former corresponds to the publication date of the Vanderbilt Agrarians’ *I’ll Take my Stand*, and the latter, to when James Dombrowski retired as executive director of the Southern Conference

Education Fund. Several texts that consider the work of the Southern Social Gospel prophets are also centered on these dates: Thomas Krueger's *And Promises to Keep: The Southern Conference for Human Welfare 1938-1948*, Irwin Klibaner's *Conscience of a Troubled South: The Southern Conference Education Fund, 1946-1966*, John Egerton's *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (which covers the years of 1930-1954), Morton Sosna's *In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue*, and Linda Reed's *Simple Decency and Common Sense: The Southern Conference Movement, 1938-1963*. None of these studies, however, explicitly explore the Social Gospel prophets in terms of their vernacular rhetorical practices.

These rhetorical practices are addressed by this project, which answers the call of social movement theorists to include the vernacular rhetoric of place in historiographical studies (Hauser and mc clellan). The Social Gospel Prophets and the Southern Agrarians alike were responding to the emerging social structure caused by industrialism, but their solutions to the problem were radically different. Exploring the Social Gospel Prophets as a response to a prevailing Southern discourse shows the voices of the Southern elite as they are in conversation with the underprivileged and “complicate[s] issues of access, cultural capital, power, hegemony, and conflict” (Degenero). The project, therefore, challenges conventional conceptions of a single Southern ideology and advances an argument for a Southern social consciousness grounded in Christian social theory.

### **Public Sphere Theory at the Turn of the Century and Now**

To substantiate my claims I combine the work of scholars in a range of disciplines—including rhetoric and communications, sociology, history, and political science—who are particularly concerned with the public, counterpublics, and the work of social movements.

According to John Dewey's progressive era text *The Public and its Problems*, the *public* arises organically from distinctive intellectual and emotional consequences imposed on a collective group (27). Collective actions result from the common interest of this group, "organized and made effective by means of representatives who as guardians of custom, as legislators, as executives, judges, etc., care for its special interests by methods intended to regulate the conjoint actions of individuals and groups" (35). Political organization naturally arises from this public and it becomes a political state. The public *should*, therefore have its best interest articulated by the state. As Dewey says, "A measure of the goodness of a state is the degree in which it relieves individuals from the waste of negative struggle and needless conflict and confers upon him positive assurance and reinforcement" (72). When the state cannot meet this goal, it is the role of the public to intervene, but the public can become apathetic, fail to question the policies of the state and thereby become accepting of less than adequate social situations. For Dewey, the industrial age caused the public to become so large that it could not identify itself, much less its cause. Essentially, the expansion of communication expanded the concept of community, and with an ever-expanding community came multiple publics (126). "We have," says Dewey "the physical tools of communication as never before. The thought and aspirations congruous with them are not communicated, and hence are not common" (142). The state was incapable of representing each of these publics. It was thus Dewey's goal to revive communication as a means of revitalizing the public and hence allow for a fully functioning democracy. Jurgen Habermas, too, contributed to the notion of the public in his 1962 book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which posits that private people come together as a public to critically discuss the powers that govern them. The public sphere, therefore, is any space where critical discourse can produce political consciousness. Like Dewey, Habermas's theory calls for active citizens

communing for the sake of the public's best interest. Likewise, both theorists recognized an essential problem with this theory: All people are not made equal. While they recognized that class and education were significant barriers to civic discourse and a fully formed public sphere, they did not recognize the complex problem caused by differences in race and gender.

Nancy Fraser, Robert Asen, Daniel Brouwer, Michael Warner and Gerard Hauser, among others, expanded the concept of the public sphere and reconsidered notions that Dewey and Habermas put forth. These theorists considered a multiplicity of publics, negotiated the boundaries of the public sphere, and exhibited the value of public sphere theory to new social movements. Fraser (1992) explores alternatives to the dominant public sphere, which she identifies as *counterpublics*, public collectives—composed of marginalized or subaltern groups—that define themselves as alternative spaces formed as a result of conflict with the norms and context of a cultural environment. These spaces, as Fraser notes, allow the subaltern group to agitate against the wider public to which they are opposed. This expansion of public sphere theory allows for a distinction between public and private spheres that corrects the oversimplified version that conflated the private sphere with the home and the public sphere with everything outside the home. Fraser's feminist critique shows that the boundaries between the public and private life are fluid and that dichotomies exist within both the public and private sphere. Robert Asen and Daniel Brouwer (2001) in "Reconfigurations of the Public Sphere," thus assert that counterpublics offer "a useful way of explicating historical experiences of exclusion and oppression and incorporating recent developments such as new social movements" (8). The emergence of counterpublics within, or as precursors to, social movements, allows scholars of rhetoric, like Michael Warner, Gerard Hauser and erin mc clellan to complete the "metapragmatic" work of exploring often "invisible publics" through "reflective agency"

(Warner 12-14). The Southern Social Gospel at the very least created one counterpublic, explored in the following chapters, that enabled the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s.

Based on Warner's framework, the study of publics and counterpublics is, nonetheless, a study of how a particular group of Southerners were motivated to change the world they lived in; they could not possibly have know that they were part of a counterpublic asserting their power through vernacular rhetorical forms. Counterpublics, as "practical fictions," enable textual exchanges that mediate between those who have authority and those who are in critical relation to power (Warner 8). Like publics, they show that certain stretches of language are understood as "texts" with certain properties (Warner 16). They are essentially "intertextual, frameworks for understanding texts against an organized background of the circulation of other texts, all interwoven...by the incorporation of a reflexive circulatory field in the mode of address and consumption" (Warner 16). This formulation extends Dewey's and Habermas' theories to describe counterpublics in context of larger social movements that take shape from print-mediated critical discussions (Warner 50). It also allows makes visible the multiple styles of discourse that compose critical and rational debate. These styles are neither distinctively public nor private forms in that they often alter private forms to serve publics functions. For instance, the Southern Social Gospel prophets radicalized a private Protestant Christian message that devalued the public, by calling for a Christianized social order (or public) in this world, not in an afterlife. The Christian person, in their view, could not simply dismiss the public to which they belong but instead transform it by forming a counterpublic embodying an alternative to their contemporary cultural environment. The publicity, or publicness, of the Southern Social Gospel prophets served a transformative purpose, validating conflict in a stagnant cultural environment.

## Prophetic Rhetoric in the Public Sphere

In the following chapters, I examine the specific rhetorical strategies that were used to create a progressive counterpublic in the progressive era South. Specifically, I will argue that the Southern Social Gospel prophets organized a counterpublic using prophetic rhetoric. In context of both speech and writing, the object of this rhetoric was to help Southerners formulate a rhetorical consciousness that would allow for a collective identity as a counterpublic. I use the following texts as evidence of how the Southern Social Gospel prophets formed a counterpublic via prophetic literature: Alva Taylor's *The Social Work of Christian Missions and Christianity and Industry in America*; Howard Kester's *The Lynching of Claude Neal and Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*; and James Dombrowski et al.'s *The Southern Patriot*. These texts mediated the relationship between the progressive era public and the South permeated by the spirit of *noblesse oblige*.

Taylor and Kester specifically turned their sermons into publicly circulating texts, at once relying on prophetic ethos and American cultural memory. They used the political sermon, or *American jeremiad*, as outlined by Sacvan Berkovitch (1978), Cornel West (1982), and David Howard-Pitney (2005) as a means to create this ethos. The American jeremiad functions as ritual of lament in times when people lose sight of America's role as the City on a Hill. Berkovitch, thus, traces the jeremiad to its Puritan form and concludes that this form, though evolved, maintained its role as part of American rhetorical history. The jeremiad, as Howard-Pitney claims, has a three-part structure: a reference to the promise (that America would be a City on a Hill), a criticism of the declining society (because it abandoned this promise), and a resolution (prophesying that society can and will redeem this promise) (7). By definition these *jeremiadic* sermons “join social criticism to spiritual renewal, public to private identity” and thus represent a



version of Americanism guided by the sacred principle of Christian progress but governed by the secular principle of democracy. The jeremiad is built on the principle of progress, that the people will collectively listen and act in accordance with the will of God to ensure that society and the individual simultaneously progress while maintaining the position of a City on a Hill.

The *prophet* consequently uses the jeremiad as a rhetorical mode to gain consensus, to unite the religious and the civic, and to define the figure *America*. The Jeremiah uses a time of crisis—a time when the state no longer acts according to the will of the public and when this apathetic public no longer uses civic discourse to critically interrogate state actions—to create a counterpublic. In this sense, the jeremiad is a radical rhetorical form that James Darsey claims “pricks the conscience” of Americans by using the twin themes of freedom and duty (203). It is radical in the sense that it attempts to “re-create the audience in accordance with a strict set of ideals as commanded by God, revealed in natural law, and assented to in principle but unrealized by the audience” (Darsey 202). The Southern Social Gospel prophets, for instance, attempted to remake the world around them as a precursor to individual salvation. As a counterpublic, this small group of prophets judged the South and according to John Lee Eighmy “broke the solidarity of nineteenth century Southern religion” (372). These prophets recognized that the church served both a spiritual and a secular function, and that through regenerating the public, the church could better serve its spiritual function.

The combination of public sphere theory and rhetorical theory then leads to the conclusion that the prophet’s ultimate goal was to reform the public so that it could once again assert its freedom through public discourse and regain its proper relationship with God. It is the duty of the counterpublic, created through the prophets call, to prick the public conscience enough that it will recognize its failed obligation. While this theory may seem to negate the

possibility of critical debate and liberation, it actually creates the possibility for a discourse grounded in equality. As Cornel West maintains, prophetic Christianity is grounded in the struggle for freedom. He says, “Democratic participation of people in the decision-making process of institutions that regulate and govern their lives is a precondition for actualizing the Christian principle of the self-realization of human individuality in community” (West 18-19). In this sense, the Social Gospel is anchored in the prophetic Christian tradition and the continual American quest for a collective identity characterized by its devotion to freedom. It embodies American Pragmatism because it conceives communal inquiry as the basis of Christian practice and American freedom.

### **The Prophet and Social Movement**

The work of the Southern Social Gospel prophets provide scholars in rhetoric a means to examine the strategies used to build a progressive counterpublic in the South in the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s and show the contribution of this counterpublic to the Civil Rights Movement of the later 1950s and 1960s. Social movement theory, accordingly, provides a framework for approaching Social Gospel discourse as a prefigurative textual background for the Civil Rights Movement. Social Gospel prophets began the work of reviving an apathetic public, failing at its goal of critically discussing the political problems plaguing the progressive era South. Unfortunately, the liberatory movements of the 1960s have received more attention because they actually mobilized people, proving that movement participants were rational, goal-oriented, strategic, and ethically consistent (Malesh and Stevens). As a prefigurative movement, the Southern Social Gospel movement has been overlooked, thus distorting our perception of the fight for Civil Rights in the American South.

As a *prefigurative* movement, the Southern Social Gospel movement showed solidarity, innovation, and development, all significant features of participatory democracy according Francesca Polletta (2). Expanding the concept of democratic deliberation, Polletta uses the term *prefigurative* to denote movement groups who maintain “a minimal division of labor, decentralized authority, and an egalitarian ethos” and who make direct and consensus oriented decisions (6). Most important for Polletta, and for my argument, is development via this structure. In other words, what type of discourse can develop as a result of a group ethos constructed on deliberative practice? She acknowledges that developmental practice in participatory democracy is overlooked because of the “tendency to project later aspirations back onto earlier version of participatory democracy (12). The Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s eclipsed the value of the Southern Social Gospel movement in part because of its more immediate results. The direct action promoted by the leaders of this era, however, was born of a public whose conscience had been pricked by the Southern Social Gospel prophets. That is not to say that the Social Gospel was the only influential counterpublic at the time, but it is to say that they are a part of the “geneology of participatory democracy” that should be recuperated as part of the long Civil Rights movement (Polletta 12).

Whether it is a movement in its own right depends on the rhetorical critic. Early rhetorical critics in social movement studies including Robert Cathcart (1987) and Michael Calvin McGee (1980) provided litmus tests for defining social movements. Cathcart focused on conflict and confrontation, while McGee focused on evidence of change in human consciousness (101, 122). In 1986, Robert Benford and David Snow proposed using Erving Goffman’s concept of frames, schemata that “organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective,” to study social movements. As interpretive schemata, these frames allow movement

participants to act by focusing attention on bounded phenomena that organized experiences. In other words, movement frames allow movement leaders to interpret social ills and punctuate them as a way to prompt a counterpublic and a wider social movement. This framing process allows participants to identify social structures that are in line or opposed to their group's ideology. They are important to social movements to the extent that they are shared by enough people to become a *collective action frame* (Gamson 1995). Collective action frames enable movement activity by allowing movement participants to both identify instances of injustice and identify common experiences of injustice that promote collectivity. Frames thus serve as a means to locate meaningful discourse among movement participants.

Collective action frames, then, locate discourses that can be used as grounds for action and thereby support movement activities (Gamson 75). While the discourse of Southern progressivism considered social justice and democracy, for instance, the Social Gospel prophets' connected these issues to local experiences using collective action frames. In Gamson's approximation, these collective action frames necessarily have three components: injustice, agency, and identity. These frames, in other words, locate a concrete target responsible for the injustice, show that there is an opportunity to engage in discourse, and establish the difference between actors and non-actors within the frame. This collective identity then creates a counterpublic, and that counterpublic has the opportunity to strategically act. The Southern Social Gospel in this sense was a counterpublic insofar as it agitated against a wider, stagnant cultural and political environment; it was a prefigurative movement insofar as it revived an apathetic public using the twin themes of freedom and duty; and it was a social movement (The Long Civil Rights Movement) insofar as it contributed one collective action frame for Civil Rights activists.

In “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” Jaquelyn Dowd Hall claims that “by confining the civil rights struggle to the South, to bowdlerized heroes, to a single halcyon decade, and to limited, noneconomic objectives, the master narrative simultaneously elevates and diminishes the movement (1234). Confining the civil rights struggle to the period between 1954 (the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision) and 1965 (The Voting Rights Act) “prevents one of the most remarkable mass movements in American history from speaking effectively to the challenges of our time” (Hall 1234). Hall instead identifies a “long civil rights movement” spanning from the late 1930s to the 1970s. She tells the narrative of African Americans as they negotiated New Deal reform and battled the racialized social system of the 1930s and 1940s. Particularly, she claims that the “basic doctrines—racial and class subordination, limited government regulation, a union-free workplace, and a racially divided working-class—dovetail seamlessly with an ethic of *laissez-faire* capitalism rooted deeply in American soil (Hall 1243). Her point is that the struggle for civil rights was not particularly Southern but rather American in origin and Southerner historians must look for a more all-encompassing narrative to completely understand this racialized social system. Even so, she argues that in the South, the “movement’s ability to rally participants, stymie enemies, and break through the fog of the Cold War came largely from the prophetic tradition within the black church” (Hall 1251). These black prophets used the “themes of justice and deliverance” to give “believers the courage to engage history as an ongoing process of reconstruction” (Hall 1251). The dominant narrative reveals this much, but it often leaves out the voices of Northern compatriots and Southern white allies, working in the prophetic tradition and using similar themes of freedom and duty, who worked to mobilize white and black people on behalf of race and class freedoms. Hall claims that the “civil rights unionism of the 1940s—which combined

the principled and tactical belief in interracial organizing with strong emphasis on black culture and institutions—was lost to memory” by the activist of the 1960s (1253-54). The story of the Southern Social Gospel prophets suggests an overlap. Especially in the earlier phases of the classical civil rights period, the Southern Social Gospel prophets were working alongside activists like Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks (particularly at Highlander Folk School).

Nonetheless, this dissertation is my attempt to interrupt the dominant narrative by telling the story of the Northern compatriots and Southern white allies. This exploration of the rhetoric of the Southern Social Gospel emphasizes historical continuity, or to use Social Gospel terminology, the law of organic development, as defined by Walter Rauschenbusch. The rhetoric of radical reform that defines the Southern Social Gospel exhibits the sense of mission and desire to reform social practices, and it could organically transform to address the Christian duties and American freedoms from the 1930s to the 1960s. That said, it has organically transformed as a response to ideological crises since the time of the Hebrew prophets. The frames of the prophets simply change over time, highlighting the most salient events or beliefs of the audience.

### **Vernacular Rhetorical Forms in Counterpublics and Social Movements**

Vernacular rhetoric—rhetoric of the people that is in dialectic with official discourse—provides a means of exploring early Civil Rights discourse and provide a more nuanced and comprehensive picture of an organically developing South (Hauser and mc clellan 29). Because of leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Fred Shuttlesworth, the Civil Rights Movement in its compact form (in other words, from 1954-1965), gave a public face to resistance of human injustices. They shaped a part of the movement and explained its causes and objectives to a constituency of everyday people, the rank-and file, to use Gerard Hauser and erin mc clellan’s

terminology. Hauser and mc clellan posit that the communication tradition of rhetoric and social movement studies has tended to focus on these public faces and hence “skewed the picture of the public sphere by defining it in terms of privileged voices” (25). The rhetorical exchanges of the everyday people reveal a picture that is much more complex and that shows the relationship between the public faces of the Civil Rights Movement and the people they led. These instances of vernacular exchange show collective reasoning, common understanding, and, in this instance, developing Christian social consciousness.

Using the collective action frames of Christian brotherhood (i.e. freedom and duty), the Southern Social Gospel prophets and their disciples connected the vernacular voices of oppressed Southern people to instances of injustice as a means to create a counterpublic. Vernacular discourse, in this sense, played a significant role in expanding the Southern Social Gospel, because it was symbolic of the egalitarian ethos necessary for participatory democracy and Christian brotherhood. The aforementioned texts composed by Taylor and Kester, and edited or collected by Dombrowski, are a visible means of resistance that show the significance of not only the leaders of the movement but also others who shaped it. While these men were not “everyday people” in the strictest sense, they, like poor sharecroppers, for instance, were outcasts within the public sphere because of their socialist tendencies. They were part of a dominated group of people who saw that myths of Southern exceptionalism, resulting in race and class-based hate, could not stand. The radical rhetorical ethos that they adopted further removed them from the classist and racist South that they agitated against.

Hauser and mc clellan provide three defining characteristics of vernacular rhetoric that frame my reading: 1) “the vernacular is a performance of solidarity that constitutes the movement as a liberatory social organization”; 2) “Vernacular rhetoric also reveals those in

movements sometimes have negative bonding with authority”; 3) “Vernacular rhetoric contains markers of positionality” (36-37). To this end, my analysis focuses on instances in which the Southern Social Gospel prophets Alva Taylor, Howard Kester and James Dombrowski publicized their opposition to the Southern power structure. I look for examples of “intertextual performance” (i.e. textual productions in which leaders and the rank-and-file, together, establish social meaning and circulate that meaning to produce cultural change) (Hauser and mc clellan 34).

In chapter one, this intertextual performance is demonstrated in the rhetoric of radical reform that circulated on Vanderbilt’s campus in context of the public discourse of the Agrarians. I argue that, as a Southern Social Gospel prophet, Taylor created a rhetoric of radical reform that shaped a group of disciples who believed in a socially conscious Christianity. I describe the time of crisis that necessitated a Southern Social Gospel movement, outline Taylor’s ultimate mission as a Southern Social Gospel prophet, identify the sacred principle to which he believed the South should return, and show his vision of a New South rooted in biblical principles. Taylor’s rhetoric of radical reform focused on five basic principles: 1) Teach disciples to spread the Christian principle of brotherhood; 2) Challenge the myths of Southern Agrarianism; 3) Create a beloved community based on interdependence or “the principle of service”; 4) Maximize freedom; 5) Awaken public consciousness.

In chapter two, show Taylor’s principles in action via the work of Howard Kester, and argue that Kester’s report on the lynching of Claude Neal displays dialogic exchange between the Southern Social Gospel Prophet, Howard Kester, powerful Southern white men, and members of the black community in Marianna, Florida. In the wake of a spectacle lynching, Kester’s report is a dissident performance in opposition to the power structure. It is a moment of



“dramaturgical spectacle,” the success of which depended on other performances to reinforce its critique, which drove the movement forward (Hauser and mc clellan). This text serves as framing devices whose impact is revealed via the everyday actions of citizens. They give authority to the rank-and-file who act and consequently provide solidarity to the movement. The social movement in this sense is itself a rhetorical performance, the voice of which is dependent on our understanding of vernacular rhetoric. Kester’s work ultimately resulted in a progressive form of agrarianism grounded in Social Gospel principles. I show how he uses the jeremiad, which I identify as the “gospel of reconciliation,” to create a counterpublic. Especially in his work with the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, Kester is able to help emancipate the Southern sharecropper and promote social change by showing the sharecroppers the power of a collective identity.

In chapter three, I analyze the *The Southern Patriot*, the newspaper of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, because it opened a space for relationships to form between all of the organizations in the South fighting for change. From its front-page articles by Eleanor Roosevelt to its “Trends” section—educating Southerners on government reforms—to its editorial section, in which the editor reveals both voices of support and opposition, it constituted the Southern Social Gospel in its later years. It reveals how the Southern Social Gospel prophets appropriated a discursive space to interrogate those who—with Old South mindsets—thought of themselves as “Southern patriots.” Even in the naming of their journal, they critically associate themselves with the official American discourse of their time. In the wake of World War II, they name themselves patriots while advancing what others perceived as socialist theory. The newspaper promoted the work of three women, Eleanor Roosevelt, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Anne Braden, who were integral to the work of spreading the Southern Social Gospel. While

Kester worked with sharecroppers specifically, Dombrowski and his compatriots attempted to give voice to the entirety of “the silent South.”

My conclusion explains the ways Social Gospel principles contributed to civil discourse in the South and the importance of radical prophetic rhetoric to the historical identity of the South.

## CHAPTER 1: “THE BETTER WAY”: ALVA TAYLOR’S RHETORIC OF RADICAL REFORM”

“The progress of civilization can be told in terms of altruism and the process of socialization. Strong individuals may be developed by the ‘struggle for self,’ but society advances through the ‘struggle for others.’”—Alva Taylor, *The Social Work of Christian Missions* (1911)

Walter Rauschenbusch, probably the best known Northern Social Gospel Prophet, stressed the need for social reconstruction along Christian lines, and students of his Gospel—including Alva Taylor—did as well. But while Taylor and Rauschenbusch were both reacting to the problems of industrialization, industrialization in the South was quite different from that in the North precisely because it changed more than the economy itself: it shifted the very foundations of Southern life, including the long-standing Protestant influence. While it would seem that the spirit of *noblesse oblige* that appeared to permeate Southern culture was a natural fit for Social Gospel principles, many middle or upper class, white citizens rebelled against them because of the race issue. The sociological work in Southern seminaries is evidence of substantial interest in a “practical religion,” but because practical religion was associated with Progressivism, Southerners were reluctant to embrace its principles. At best, the response to the Social Gospel, as it appeared in the North, was “discriminating and selective” (Eighmy 369). As the Social Gospel penetrated the South, the books of Walter Rauschenbusch, Shailer Matthews, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Washington Gladden contributed to a Southern Social Gospel. A particularly Southern response to the Northern Social Gospel was formulated at Vanderbilt University in the

classroom of Alva Taylor.<sup>2</sup> Here, students focused on regional differences that complicated their Christian message. Taylor, a Disciples of Christ minister who worked in the School of Religion at Vanderbilt University, was an advocate of the Social Gospel and provided one of the public responses to the changing South and Agrarianism.

The Agrarians, who were on Vanderbilt at the same time as Taylor, initiated a “willed campaign on the part of the elite to establish and control ‘the South’ in a period of intense cultural maneuvering...they deliberately presented a fabricated South as the one and only real thing” (Kreyling xii). And they did so, no less, on the grounds of the South’s preeminent institution of the era. Born of piety (the Methodist Episcopalian Church) and plutocracy (Cornelius Vanderbilt, the Carnegie corporation, and various Rockefeller charities), the campus was, in Paul Murphy’s terms, a product of the “generally narrow and restrictive cultural climate” of the South (15). The Agrarians, were thus not only a product of their time and place, but also one of the manufacturers of the homogenous public sphere at Vanderbilt.

With the publication of *I’ll Take My Stand* in 1930, the Agrarians, offered a picture of the public sphere (specifically in and around Vanderbilt) that sets the stage for the development of alternative discourses on religion and the social economy in the South. Michael Kreyling claims the Agrarian project was “a willed campaign on the part of one elite to establish and control “the

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that Southern versions of the Social Gospel were not visible elsewhere, but that this is one instance where we can see a distinction between progressivism and the Social Gospel. In other words, Southern Progressives worked through associations that may or may not have espoused a Social Gospel philosophy, but, in the instance of Taylor and his students, Social Gospel principles were always visible in their work. So, the Prison Reform Association or the Alabama Child Labor Committee, to take two instances, were both part of progressive era reforms and could fall under change promoted by Social Gospel tendencies, but they were not directly tied to Social Gospel philosophy. They were not purposeful in directly affiliating themselves with Social Gospel prophets. For a thorough explanation of progressive era reforms not related to Alva Taylor and his students see John Lee Eighmy’s “Religious Liberalism in the South during the Progressive Era.”

South” in a period of intense cultural maneuvering...they deliberately presented a fabricated South as the one and only real thing” (xii). This South, because of the Agrarians’ positions as literati, has become the South taught in Southern literature courses and hence the South that constitutes one, and only one, critically discussed Southern paradigm. To critically examine the Southern Agrarians, however, is to take part in two colliding conversations—a historical one and a literary one. Kreyling identifies this collision as a literary-cultural process of identity, a process in which “it is not so much Southern literature that changes in collision with history but history that is subtly changed in collision with Southern literature” (ix). This point is especially relevant to scholars in rhetorical studies because it allows for the study of the public discourse of literature. The literature of the Agrarians was not simply literature, it was a document that changed cultural politics and therefore a surviving document embedded in a larger debate on Southern identity. The manifesto is a collision of history and literature that proves that “it is not so much Southern literature that changes in collision with history but history that subtly changes in collision with Southern literature” (Kreyling 9). Hence, it is necessary to study the public discourse surrounding the manifesto in order to see how it changed history. It is also particularly important that the manifesto identifies one cultural opponent that the Southern Social Gospel prophets had to contend with that their Northern compatriots did not.

The rhetorical exchanges that were a proximate result of *I’ll Take My Stand* redirected Southern history. The critical discourse in the South at the time according to historians like John Egerton should have focused on labor management relations, race relations, laissez-faire capitalism, and exploitation of natural and human resources, which were the key issues in the South during this period (70). However, as Egerton notes, the Agrarians “virtually ignored” these issues, and their manifesto—although a dissenting expression—was not a response that

actually sought to solve the social issues of the 1930s. It pointed to the problems of industrialism, but failed to defend (or even paint an accurate portrait of) the people it sought to defend—the “yeoman farmers and other salt-of-the-earth white folks.” Indeed, the manifesto instigated what Grace Elizabeth Hale calls the “first heated public debate about the meaning and future of Southern whiteness” (257). It painted a “self-portrait ... of white Southern men besieged by the forces of modernity, whether in the form of a dehumanizing market economy or by the prospect of regional memory and history being hijacked ... by white women and by African Americas empowered by the forces of change” (Donaldson xiv). Their culturally constructed idea of the South was largely a response to the South unquestioningly adopting the industrial conventions of the North, and they used this time of crisis to judge the South for abandoning its long-standing commitment to the agrarian lifestyle. This lifestyle, “in which agriculture is the leading vocation, whether for wealth, for pleasure, or for prestige,” must be defended by younger Southerners who were “being converted frequently to the industrial gospel (li). All of the Agrarians, according to their “Statement of Principles,” differentiated a Southern way of life from an American way of life, which they saw as slowly becoming defined by nothing other than industry.

Industrialization, thus, prompted both an economic and ideological crisis for groups of Southerners living in what John Crowe Ransom refers to as “the village South and the rural South,” who he believes “supply the resistance” to progressive ideals (20). Ransom depicts the product of industrialization as the dehumanized farmer, and calls for Southern leaders to revive an attitude of resistance against industrialism. Ransom’s plan was for leaders to “arouse the sectional feeling of the South” and do so by reviving “the old Southern gentleman and his lady” (23). The resulting culture, built around the relation to God vis-à-vis the land. It would thus be a “very local and peculiar culture that would, nevertheless, be secure and respected” (24). The

South needs, according to Ransom, an established philosophy to live by, and that philosophy would offer cultural stability.

The Agrarians and the Social Gospel prophets were similar in this call for renaissance and in many other instances: they both attacked the social order and economy of the progressive era South; they both believed that restructuring the social economy meant the renewal of Christian faith; and they both recognized the value in rural and agrarian life. While both seeking cultural stability in these terms, they fundamentally disagreed on a solution to problems caused by industrialism in the South. It would be easy to dismiss the Agrarians by saying that they were academic literati who re-defined Southernness to their limited audience. In other words, they never intended to be social activists. In fact, when studied as *simply* literature, they are valued for their representation of a pastoral myth and their utopianism (Murphy 2-3). They represent a version of radical conservatism that would turn into Southern traditionalism after World War II. But, in their contemporary context they were the manifestation of an official discourse that constructed a Southern identity grounded in universal devotions to home, rural life, and historical identity. These devotions, essentially, were a picture of a very restricted white Southern mentality that would allow the white majority to retain power. They attempted to speak for those who could not, and not only attempted to differentiate the Southerner from the American, but also a specific type of Southerner from other Southerners. Above all they wanted individual freedom, and on this point, they differed from the Social Gospel prophets.

The Agrarians wanted moral, social and economic autonomy and thus focused on “the good life” as opposed to the “beloved community” (Ransom 10). The good life is composed of one ultimate freedom—the free life of the mind (through peace with nature). Peace with nature is the result of the pioneering life, the basis of agrarian living:

The pioneering life is not the normal life, whatever some Americans may suppose.... European opinion does not make too much of the intense practical enterprises, but is at pains to define rather narrowly the practical effort which is prerequisite to the reflective and aesthetic life.... It is the European intention to live materially along the inherited line of least resistance, in order to put the surplus of energy into the free life of the mind. (4-5)

In this way, Ransom attempts to dismiss the capitalist, industrial economy. It is the duty of each individual to strive for the free life of the mind, not material wealth, as industrial capitalists would have people believe. The free life of the mind only results from identification with the land:

He identifies himself with a spot of the ground, and this ground carries a good deal of meaning; it defines itself for him as nature. He would till it not too hurriedly and not too mechanically to observe in it the contingency and the infinitude of nature; and so his life acquires its philosophical and even its cosmic consciousness. A man can contemplate and explore, respect, and love, an object as substantial as a farm or a native province. But he cannot contemplate nor explore, respect nor love, a mere turnover, such as an assemblage of "natural resources," a pile of money, a volume of produce, a market, or a credit system. It is into precisely these intangibles that industrialism would translate the farmer's farm. It means dehumanization of his life. (19-20)

Industrialism, they believed, destroyed the individual success that was necessary for the larger success of a new South. Ransom says, "There is evidently a kind of thinking that rejoices in setting up a social objective which has no relation to the individual ... The responsibility of men is for their *own welfare* and that of *their neighbors*; not for the hypothetical welfare of some fabulous creature called society" (1, my emphasis). This social consciousness, consequently, did not include the lower classes of society. These classes, according the Agrarians, were attempting to secure their roles in society as a result of the contemptible gospels of progress and service, neither of which furthered the vision of an agrarian movement (Ransom 7,11).

Progress in terms of race relations, according to the Agrarian Frank Owsley, was impossible. "Two races," he said, "cannot live together in a condition of equality" (77). The



white Southerner determined that black people “must either rule or be ruled (82). Owsley made explicit what Robert Penn Warren could not: that the South was defined by exploitation and race-based slavery. The closest Warren comes to this assertion, in his attempt to minimize conflict between the races, is a claim akin to separate but equal:

The negro radical, or the white radical in considering the race problem, would say that he wants the second thing—he wants to go to the same hotel, or he wants the right to go to the same hotel. The millennium which he contemplates would come to pass when the white man regularly sate down to the same table and when the white woman filed her divorce action through a negro attorney with no thought in the mind of any party to these various transactions that the business was, to say the least, a little eccentric. (254)

As a manifestation of the public discourse in the South, the Agrarians attempted (fairly successfully) to suppress counterpublics that attempted to re-define Southernness in more collective, plural, and less exceptional forms. They were not willing, as Ransom says, “to sacrifice their private dignity and happiness to an abstract social ideal” (xlvi). Ultimately, the manifesto points to the way that the white majority maintained its power: segregation, disenfranchisement, and the use of terror, particularly lynching (Murphy 14). The manifesto was one way that this vision of the public could continue to circulate.

Against this backdrop, Alva Taylor concentrated on reforming society through advancing the rights of women, nonwhite men and those at the bottom of the American class system with hopes of making the world, not just the South, a “beloved community” (*Christianity* 9). While the Agrarians embodied the response of the *noblesse oblige* to industrialization Taylor attempted to create a collective consciousness among the “least of these.” In the prophetic tradition, Taylor’s rhetoric of radical reform prompted a counterpublic with a collective rhetorical consciousness. Taylor’s rhetoric was grounded in Biblical principles, particularly the “law of the leaven” or the struggle for others (*Christianity* 10). As this chapter will delineate, the premise of

his message was: 1) Americans have lost sight of God's divinity; 2) Thus, Americans must create a community based on Christian duty in order to regain our covenant with God; 3) To do so, disciples must awaken public consciousness by challenging race and class myths (which are responsible for the downfall of American society); 4) This struggle will lead to a collective American identity and maximized freedom. Through the explicit address of the race question (i.e. challenging race and class myths in the South) this rhetoric of radical reform would advance the Southern Social Gospel.

Taylor extends the Social Gospel by explicitly addressing the race issue under the collective frame of Christian duty and American freedom. Taylor's philosophy was an expansion of the Social Gospel as outlined by professors who taught him at the University of Chicago Divinity school, including Shailer Matthews, as well as those he worked with in the field, including Reinhold Niebuhr, professor at Union Theological Seminary, and Walter Rauschenbusch, professor at Rochester Theological Seminary.<sup>3</sup> Both Niebuhr, directly, and Rauschenbusch, indirectly, influenced Taylor via their work with the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ (Harbison 185). Niebuhr and Taylor worked together throughout their careers, but Taylor's philosophy remained more in line with Rauschenbusch's. All of these men primarily focused on the transformation of society rather than the conversion of individuals to Christianity and thus mostly worked outside the church proper. While Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr are often grouped under the broad heading of the Social Gospel, their theologies became

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<sup>3</sup> Stanley Harbison in *The Social Gospel Career of Alva Wilmot Taylor* has a nearly two page list of professors who influenced Taylor at Chicago Divinity School and provides one autobiographical sketch from Taylor that says: "in other subjects who have influenced my viewpoint in sociology...President William Rainey Harper and Prof. George Adam Smith in studying the prophets of the old Testament and a course in ethics under Gerald Birney Smith in Chicago University. The influence of these men was largely on viewpoint and a recognition of the place of social ethics in all human interests and relationships" (Harbison 53). Taylor ultimately did not earn his degree from Chicago and left in 1898.

quite different as their careers progressed. In Rauschenbusch's prime, he worked in Hell's Kitchen in New York in the early 1900s, where he would battle industrialization and immigration, and the way these combined forces influenced or were influenced by capitalism. Niebuhr, in his prime, taught at Union Theological Seminary in the 1930s, where he addressed world war and the depression, and transformed earlier conceptions of the Social Gospel to social Christianity or Christian Realism (Evans). In "Ties that Bind," Christopher Evans asserts that "Niebuhr's version of Christian realism eclipsed Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel" (352). Niebuhr's Christian realism focused on economic justice, but it did not accept the Social Gospel viewpoint that heaven could be created here on Earth. Christian realism, especially in the Social Gospel context, espouses a more pessimistic view of the Gospel, that the beloved community would never be created on Earth because sin could not be overcome by Christian morality. Niebuhr says, "Historic Christianity is in the position of having the materials for the foundation and the roof of the structure of an adequate morality. But it is unable to complete the structure" (149). While Rauschenbusch believed that the crisis caused by industrialism would give rise to a strong Social Gospel Movement to create a socially righteous world, Niebuhr pointed to the naiveté of such a viewpoint (Evans 353). Taylor's philosophy aligned more closely with Rauschenbusch's theology, and the remainder of this section will focus on that influence and its prophetic dimension.

Rauschenbusch believed in the "public morality on which national life is founded," and went to great lengths to show why Christians could not simply address the heart of the individual but rather the heart of the nation (6). Particularly, Rauschenbusch argues, "our philosophical and economic individualism has affected our religious thought so deeply that we hardly comprehend the prophetic views of an organic national life and of national sin and salvation" (Rauschenbusch

7). American individualism, in other words, prevents American socioeconomic prosperity because it prevents the belief in divine justice on a national scale. Rauschenbusch believed his job, like that of the Hebrew prophets, was to be the “voice of an untainted popular conscience, made bold by a religious faith” (Rauschenbusch 12). He juxtaposes Amos with Abraham Lincoln, both of whom understood “the law of organic development.” They believed, in other words, that Jesus’ call, that “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye and believe the gospel” would produce “a new people, a novel social unity” just as it had in the days of early Christianity (Rauschenbusch 46, 95). One of the goals of the Christian life, as Rauschenbusch sees it, is to create a context in which community overcomes individuality and greed is supplanted by public welfare.

Because of his appeals to Amos and the other Hebrew prophets, his rhetoric, is a rhetoric of radical reform, as defined by James Darsey. This tradition “exhibits... a sense of mission, a desire to bring the practice of the people in accord with sacred principle, and an uncompromising, often excoriating stance toward a reluctant audience” (Darsey 16). In a time of crisis, prophets use their prophetic pathos to confront and reform their audiences (Darsey). Particularly, prophets establish discourse communities that mark a change in the culture in which they act. In the case of the Social Gospel Both Rauschenbusch and Taylor encouraged vernacular exchange, collective reasoning, common understanding, and development of a new public opinion through their radical prophetic rhetoric (Hauser 29).

The rhetoric of the Social Gospel prophets was perceived as radical in the North, not because it attempted to create a Christian social order, per se, but because of its critique of capitalism framed by communist theory. In a time of crisis spurred by industrialism, Rauschenbusch turned to the example of early church at Jerusalem in an attempt to show the

value of a communal society, and says “it is amusing to note how our popular expositors treat this Christian communism today” (100). The communism of which he speaks came long before Lenin and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. In fact, he could not have been aware of this revolution or the side effects of communism because Lenin came to power ten years after he wrote. His version of communism comes from Acts 2-4, in which the people of Jerusalem are described by their close fellowship (Rauschenbusch 100). It was, he says, “a religious and instinctive fraternity, but not communism in any strict sense” (Rauschenbusch 102). It was a community that understood equality because they shared property, goods, and knowledge. In other words, the Social Gospel attempted to break the barriers between church and state while implementing communistic tendencies that could undercut capitalism. The Social Gospel would never escape this imprecise connection to Communism as I will show later with the case of James Dombrowski. If the Community of Acts was a model for the kingdom of God on Earth, this label would prevent it from coming to fruition under the guidance of the Social Gospel prophets like Rauschenbusch.

Like the Biblical prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Isaiah, to name a few, Rauschenbusch claimed to speak for God, acting as a messenger of God’s word. He wanted to bring the people back to their forgotten covenant (i.e. the struggle for others), and he had to show them *how* to regain the appropriate relationship with the world. James Darsey in *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* outlines this prophetic messenger formula. As opposed to the ancient rhetorical tradition in which the rhetorician used his ethos to identify with his audience, radical prophetic rhetoric emphasizes the separation of the messenger from the audience he critiques. This prophetic tradition is marked by the prophet’s alienation from his audience, an exclusive message from the prophet that engages central themes of the culture he critiques, and a

message that urges the prophet's audience to reshape their ideologies in accordance with biblical ideals (Darsey). It is important that the prophet share the ideology of the group he critiques so that his critique is not seen as a sort of outside agitation. Therefore, while the prophet is passing judgment, he also includes himself in this judgment by association. While the prophet engages central themes of culture, his optimistic (and sometimes idealistic) views on reform are exhibited in his message. His central message is that people can be made to see biblical truths and once they see these truths, reform necessarily follows.

In terms of social movement theory, Rauschenbusch provides a collective action frame that enabled Christians to “locate, perceive, identify, and label’ occurrences within their life space and the world at large” (Benford and Snow 614; Goffman 21). His Christian theory served the function of interpreting social ills, organizing them, and simplifying them as a way to prompt social movement (Benford and Snow 614). He wedded the “Christian principle of brotherly association” with the working class via the Social Gospel frame (329). It is the Christian duty to use the moral power organically generated by Christianity to address economic crises and readjust the social classes so that through contact all classes could see the injustice of the labor movement. In this instance, he particularly addresses the problems resulting from the wedding of industrialism and capitalism and how this wedding affected the working class:

Men learned to make wealth much faster than they learned to distribute it justly. Their eye for profit was keener than modern humanity. That is the great sin of modern humanity, and unless we repent, we shall perish by that sin. But the first call to repentance comes to those who have had this defective moral insight of humanity under their training, and whose *duty* it was to give voice to the instincts of righteousness and brotherhood. (Rauschenbusch 182, my emphasis)

The “great sin of modern humanity” was the result not simply of industrialism but of the implementation of industrial standards without regard to brotherhood. Specifically, industrial progress promoted individualism, and individualism slowly destroyed the social consciousness

of businessmen. Once individualism was valued over the greater good of the community, the business class essentially took away the freedoms of the working class. “Freedom,” Rauschenbusch says, “is a holy word. The right to labor is one of the fundamental rights of men” (263). Hence, it is the duty of all men to live by the principle of brotherhood so that industrialism and capitalism do not negate man’s basic freedom, to live life more abundantly. It is the duty of the working class, the most powerful class according to Rauschenbusch, to reveal to the business class the social opportunities available when the Christian principle of brotherhood is as valued as the production of wealth. Rauschenbusch’s call, then, is for prophets like himself, to mobilize the working class, “mediate between the two classes, interpreting each to the other... and diminish the sense of class isolation” (329).

As I will later show with Taylor, Kester, and Dombrowski, Rauschenbusch used the themes of duty and freedom to advance his message. They all “bridge” two ideological constructions that have defined American thought—religion and patriotism—as a means of framing the economic problem of the working class.<sup>4</sup> In bridging these ideologies, they create common ground between churchmen, of all classes, and the workingman. Rauschenbusch’s rhetoric, in his chapter “The Present Crisis,” reveals his deep belief in this wedding:

But when we consider what a long and sore struggle it cost to achieve political liberty; what a splendid destiny a true republic planted on this glorious territorial base of ours might have; what a mission of liberty our country might have for all the nations—it may well fill the heart of every patriot with the most poignant grief to think that this liberty may be lost to us by our greed; and that already our country, instead of being the great incentive to political democracy in other nations, is a heavy handicap on the democratic movement, an example to which the opponents of democracy abroad point with pleasure and which the lovers of popular liberty pass with averted face. (214)

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<sup>4</sup> In the strictest sense “frame bridging” is the “linking of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem” (Benford and Snow 624).

The impetus, then, for social movement is the wrangling of these Christian and patriotic impulses in the opportune moment. Christian leaders who “[intensify] the sense of duty and the ideal devotion to the common wealth, and awakens in the strong individuals the large ambition for patriotic service” are the impetus from injustices caused by economic inequality (228).

Through an analysis of Christian communities, as far back as the Community of Acts, Rauschenbusch says that his contemporary Christians should not attempt to return to conditions as they were prior to power machinery (as the Agrarians attempted to do); or model the contemporary world on communities under different social conditions; or make the Church the center of society. Instead, a Christian society should arise organically from the desire for social renewal. People must begin to view existing society as fallen and must revolutionize the world by renewing society’s covenant with God. Hence, in one of his most pragmatic chapters, entitled “What to do,” Rauschenbusch provides a Christian social movement theory situated in social religion. While, on the largest scale, Rauschenbusch aligns religion and patriotism, on a smaller scale he bridges the “professional life” (i.e. industrialism) under religious scrutiny (290). This collective action frame is articulated such that Kingdom of God is amplified by all professional acts. Rauschenbusch relies on religion “setting the Kingdom of God before it” and businessmen connecting their practices with “service to humanity” (290). In other words, he asks the church to conceive of the world as a social actor and the businessman to serve the world with a “moral sensitiveness” (290-291). Rauschenbusch’s purpose is to redirect all people toward their shared values, which is their love for country (i.e. patriotism). The alliance of the working class with businessmen who live by the Christian principle of brotherly love must thus depend on each other in order to conquer the evils of capitalism: “Just as the Protestant principle of religious liberty and the democratic principle of brotherly association must ally itself with the middle class



which was then rising to power, so the new Christian principle of brotherly association must ally itself with the working class if both are to conquer. Each depends on the other” (Rauschenbusch 329). The goal is for brotherly relationships to form organically by the repentance of social sins, the casting off of social wrongs, and the realization of a new type of Christian life. While idealistic, the goal of Rauschenbusch’s book was to convict people of the need to mobilize against destructive versions of industrialism and social relations and thereby create a collective consciousness fighting for Christian brotherhood. In this sense, it was indeed a communistic theory. It established a discourse community attempting to correct social ills in the name of God and brotherly love.

Taylor’s approach to creating a Social Gospel movement, like Rauschenbusch’s before him, was to work outside the church proper in an attempt to consciously put himself in contact with ministers as well as the working class. This contact allowed the Social Gospel Prophets to, as the cliché goes, practice what they preached. Taylor insured that his students put into practice the theory that they learned inside his Vanderbilt University classroom. Because most of Taylor’s records were destroyed in a house fire, the most substantial record of his philosophy is revealed in his two books *The Social Work of Christian Missions* and *Christianity and Industry in America*. We can assume that his philosophy was enacted in his pedagogy, particularly considering the new classes that he implemented in the curriculum and the work his students completed outside his classroom. Nonetheless, when he confronted the problems of industrialization, he necessarily took on the issue of racial discrimination and hence expanded the Social Gospel philosophy. The Social Gospel in its Northern context was a radical affront because of its anti-capitalist viewpoint, but Taylor and his students were doubly offensive with their anti-capitalist and anti-racist message. Furthermore, as John Egerton notes, the Social

Gospel challenged the essence of religious understanding, of the church, for many Southerners: “While Southern churches were holding revivals to rescue sinners from the devil, the mainline Protestant denominations of the urban North were bringing moral pressure to bear on the sins of capitalism” (43). For these Southerners, the Social Gospel was an attack on their Protestant way of life, which for better or worse, was often linked to their views on the race issue, an issue that the Agrarians, for instance, failed to discuss candidly. Egerton puts it this way:

[I]t was rare for the literary, academic, artistic, and journalistic principles in the Southern renaissance of the twenties and thirties to engage in candid discourse on the thorny issue of race. They had little or nothing to say about white supremacy, the once and future problem burrowed like a mole into the subconscious soul of the South ... at best they [the Agrarians] were paternalistic and patronizing; at worst, they were deeply racist believers in the innate superiority of Caucasians. (69)

The crisis that Taylor and his students addressed was not simply the emergence of an industrial era in the South but the absence of underprivileged and black voices in the creation of a New South that must embrace industrialism. Specifically in *Christianity and Industry in America*, Taylor juxtaposes the working conditions, wages, and hours of immigrants, women, children, and black men:

The growth of the *social conscience* is creating new social mores, and both the public and the better employers are increasingly unwilling to tolerate low wage scales and consequent low living standards. If we will but turn to the task of creating a more equitable society, that genius with which we have created our unparalleled material progress will be applied to developing the technique of social progress, and the machine will be made the benefactor instead of the exploiter of the multitudes who tend it. (*Christianity* 99, my emphasis)

The premise of Taylor’s chapter is that if reports are made of the conditions in which underprivileged work, then governmental investigations can occur. It is the Christian duty of all people to promote the “life more abundant” by enabling the growth of social conscience among the poor (88). Taylor, as prophet, judges the American people for not appealing to the poor

because they are the ones historically responsible for the great reform movements (*Christianity* 88). As the United States was moving from its pre-industrial era, the South, specifically, was transformed completely, and “the life more abundant for all” was not the primary focus of businessmen. The conditions that blue collar workers were forced to face left an entire population of the South without an identity and without hope that Taylor knew they could have through the faith in Jesus. While he clearly points to the duty of the businessmen, to raise labor standards so that all people may have a more abundant life, he also believes that it is the duty of the working class to refuse to assimilate into a culture that is not founded on Christian doctrine.

A Christianized, industrial world according to Taylor’s Social Gospel principles, results in the maximum amount of freedom. This idea of freedom, stemming from the American Revolutionary ideas of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, is central to the American identity. Yet, freedom is “not a privilege but an indicator of moral status, and as such, it entails certain obligations” or duties (Darsey 200). The successful prophet is able to strike the balance between the dialectical themes of freedom and duty, if only for a short historical moment. Duty is “a moral compunction,” a pricking of the conscience, a responsibility in Americans that converses with that yearning to attain or maintain freedom (Darsey 200-202). For Taylor, freedom is a result of “the law of the leaven.” He gets this idea from Jesus, who said that the kingdom of God was like leaven working from within until it leavened all. Jesus would teach a few men who would give of themselves through preaching and teaching, but the others would continue their everyday work, “putting the leaven of righteousness into whatsoever they were doing” (*Christianity* 8). Freedom, in other words, is a result of a Christian society, and the duty of a Christian society is to live in a bond of brotherhood. Therefore, the paradox here is that in order to be free one must be devoted to his brothers. From brotherly devotion comes freedom.

Using the collective action frame established by Rauschenbusch (the combined themes of Christianity duty and American freedom), Taylor presents a Southern Social Gospel theology. Taylor, like Rauschenbusch, shows that labor's progress (i.e. industrialism) has outpaced men's abilities to live as both brothers and workers in a capitalist society. Thus men have forgotten their duty, their devotion to the common good of man.<sup>5</sup> He says "the question is not one of comparison of today's wage and working conditions with those of the past so much as it is a question of whether or not the working man is receiving his just share in the vast increase of the nations' wealth" (*Christianity* 26). Taylor calls his reader's attention to the importance of the historical moment in the history of labor in America and calls his reader to action by emphasizing his chance to change the course of this history. In this sense it is a patriotic duty to re-evaluate the capitalist system and reform the heart of the nation: "The method of progress is the method of reformation. When civilization is under the law of the leaven, progress is steady even if slow. The method of social progress is one of constant criticism, education, experimentation, and reformation ... The kingdom of God comes by the law of growth" (*Christianity* 160). In this sense, he sides with Booker T. Washington on the race question. He acknowledges that "many educated Negroes are skeptical of that faith [that 'no race that has anything to contribute to the markets of the world is long in any degree ostracized'] through the experience of seeing color deprive their fellow of equal pay for equal work" (*Christianity* 103). Taylor is at once acknowledging the skepticism of the Social Gospel while attempting to create common ground between the races. In order to awaken the public consciousness, Taylor had to

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<sup>5</sup> That is not to say that Taylor did not include women in his theology. Men, in this instance, is inclusive of both men and women, as evidenced by examples that Taylor uses of women workers. He has an entire chapter in *Christianity and Industry in America* devoted specifically to women in the workforce and their role in unionizing.

create a context in which Southerners could recognize the problems with the American economic system. This context required that the working class black and white man had to work together.

Taylor's earliest work *The Social Work of Christian Missions* lays the groundwork for the plan that he implemented in order to awaken public consciousness and advance a New Southern ideology. The success of new ideals is dependent on the uplifting of all men, not on the "implanting of new ideals of society" (*Social Work* 15). The social principles of Christianity, paired with certain redeeming parts of Southern ideology, advances the welfare of all according to Taylor's theory. "Education and philanthropy," he says, "become the web upon which Christianity, by the hands of the missionary, weaves the woof of a nation's life into a new fabric" (*Social Work* 21). As Taylor sees it, humanity has a covenant with God to make each man and woman "saviors of their own kind" (*Social Work* 12). When groups are pitted against each other, the white man and the black man, the upper class and the lower class, the agrarian and the progressive, without the wellbeing of society at large in mind, they become "dangerous weapons" (*Social Work* 12). He succinctly states this philosophy when outlining his plan for missionaries:

The progress of civilization can be told in terms of altruism and the process of socialization. Strong individuals may be developed by the 'struggle for self,' but society advances through the 'struggle for others.' This 'struggle for others' is the law of Christianity ... Christian personality if not that of the 'superman,' but that of the great-hearted lover of his kinds; it has an 'enthusiasm of humanity,' the power to see the viewpoints of others, to sympathetically enter into their lives and lift them up. (*Social Work* 12)

Although this philosophy was originally part of a book on Christianizing the social order in areas other than America, it applies in this situation as well.<sup>6</sup> When Christians readjust their

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<sup>6</sup> *The Social Work of Christian Missions* was written in 1911 as a handbook for The Foreign Christian Missionary Society. It, therefore, was one of the earliest of Taylor's philosophical statements, and a precursor to the work that he did while at Vanderbilt.

relationship to each other, they will then see how industrialization, for instance, is not the enemy of Southern culture. Instead, the world that critics of industrialism are fostering results in a struggle for a small group of selves rather than the whole of society. Lower-class white men, farmers, black men, women, and children are not lifted up, but are instead told the place that they should hold in a society that is not Christianized, at least according to Taylor's model. They are not given "more abundant life" but are instead imposed upon by Southern ideological structures that have long been dead.

Taylor's goal then, was to reshape the ideologies of those men who would identify with the Southern Agrarian ideology. Through education and philanthropy, he sought to reveal to this group that the mythical past into which they tried to retreat was one that was in direct opposition to biblical ideals. While they tried to blame industrialism for faltering Southern culture, their problem was with their reluctance to be criticized and see that society had fallen out of accord with the sacred principle of creating a beloved community through commitment to others. The reluctance of those who prescribed to the Agrarian ideology was largely a result of the race question, and for this reason Taylor set out through education and philanthropy to show how this ideology stunted progress, not necessarily in the industrial sense but in the moral sense. Taylor refers to the Apostle Paul to teach this lesson:

When the Apostle Paul said there was neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female, in Christ, he propounded the essential democracy of Christianity; in the first, he abolished all racial and nationalistic aversions; in the second he condemned all class distinctions; in the third, he raised woman to a level with man and destroyed the age long, universal, anti-social, discrimination against her. (*Social Work* 28)

Taylor challenged all of the existing race and class issues while maintaining this Christian perspective.

His discontent manifested itself in his books, but the radical expression of his philosophies was in his practice. In his Social Ethics courses at Vanderbilt, Taylor created a context in which he could teach students the power of the community over the individual. When he arrived at Vanderbilt in 1928, the Agrarians were still on campus and about to publish *I'll Take My Stand*. He nonetheless wrote in a letter in Christmas of 1928 that "Vanderbilt's nondenominational character, its liberal spirit and the manner in which the NEW South is rallying to it makes us glad we came here" (Alva W. Taylor Papers)<sup>7</sup>. The very fact that the school of religion had recently acquired a non-denominational status was particularly appealing to Taylor because of his approach to the social problems of the South. He wrote in a letter in 1935 that "the very critical nature of the social problems in the south ... and the great need of constructive Christian social approaches" led him to the school in the first place. Although Taylor didn't create Applied Christianity classes at Vanderbilt (they had been there as early as 1900), he was the "first regular specialist in Christian social ethics" (Harbison 247). Particularly interesting for our purposes was the three-term sequence he taught entitled Rural Sociology, The Church and The Ethics of Human Relations (composed of one term each in Interracial Relations, International Relations, and Industrial Relations), and the Social Function and Work of the Church (which required case studies and fieldwork (Harbison 248). Taylor worked alongside faculty in the Peabody College for Teachers in an effort to educate students on working with rural people. The Rural Church School lecturers, including Taylor, brought ministers from rural towns in both the North and South together in an effort to educate them in matters of pedagogy for rural people. They would, for instance, have short courses on topics ranging from the Bible to

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<sup>7</sup> From this point forward referred to as "AWT Papers." The papers are alphabetized in one box located at the Disciples of Christ Historical Society in Nashville, Tennessee. Most of Taylor's papers were destroyed in a house fire, so the most reliable document we have on his papers is Harbison's dissertation.

farm management to auto mechanics (AWT Papers “Behind the Headlines”). The goal of these courses was to show students how to interpret social ills as a means of prompting social movement. The classroom environment, while not organic in and of itself, was a space where Taylor could emphasize the necessity of improving the welfare of agrarian communities. Taylor’s emphasis on including the social and economic conditions in the classroom led to Rural Studies becoming part of the Practical Theology curriculum. Students were compelled by Taylor’s classes to become involved in their immediate cultural environment and became part of that environment, not simply a theology student at Vanderbilt University (Harbison 252-253).

This evolution from Christian men being placed in the rural community to Christian men wanting to transform that community on their own accord is part of the process that Taylor envisioned and one more way that Taylor followed in Rauschenbusch’s footsteps. As a part of the community, the prophets were interpreters of God’s message, and used their faith as a means to connect with the people. When wedding the religious and the political, the prophet must, according to Rauschenbusch, “connect all that he thinks and says with the mind and will of God, to give the religious interpretation to all human relations and questions, and to infuse the divine sympathy and passion into all moral discussion” (2). Social Gospel Prophets knew that they had to avoid the paternalistic ethos by capitalizing on the divine ethos. Indeed, with the race question, it was inevitable that the Southern white men fighting for reform in the South would still be haunted by the Old South mythology, that the South belongs to the white man. Why would a white man risk his life for a black man? While the pulpit is traditionally the means by which the prophet can accomplish the goal of building this altruistic ethos, the Social Gospel Prophets would use the same tactic in seminaries. As Taylor says, “education and philanthropy become



the web upon which Christianity, by the hands of the missionary, weaves the woof of a nation's life into a new fabric" (*Social Work* 21).

We see at this point the development of a dialectic between the two groups of Southerners—those who were able to forget the Agrarian myth enough to envision a New South and those who could not. The salvation of society was dependent on dispelling the myths that the Southern Agrarians, among others, publicized in *I'll Take My Stand*.<sup>8</sup> The reactionary Agrarians and the radical Social Gospel Prophets' voices collided in an agonistic zone between "official and the mundane communication" and allowed the emergence of a critical Southern rhetorical consciousness (Hauser and mc clellan 29).

Taylor's prophetic Christian ethos, specifically evident in his books *Christianity and Industry in America* and *The Social Work of Christian Mission*, allowed him to set himself apart from reactionaries like the Agrarians and extend Rauschenbusch's call to intensify the Christian sense of duty and devotion to the commonwealth. Taylor's mission was to remind the Southern people that all of their lives should be governed by the "law of the leaven" or the struggle for others (i.e. the commonwealth). They had, according to Taylor, lost sight of God's divinity in their social practices, as evidenced specifically by their ambivalence toward industrialism, which would allow for more freedom for the "least of these." He preached that they must turn their back on individualism and instead uplift every man according to the principle of brotherhood. Like Rauschenbusch before him, Taylor created a collective action frame wedding the concept of Christian duty and American freedom. He did so by means of an educational campaign in the

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<sup>8</sup> The Agrarian version of a Southern identity, an essentialist one to say the least, provides Taylor and his disciples a succinct narrative to react against. I do not want to suggest here that the Southern Agrarians single-handedly formed this ideology or that they were the only ones who insisted that more of the Old South could survive. I am suggesting that the Agrarians created an environment with the potential for radicalism. They invited the dialectic of radicalism at this specific place and this specific time.

South. Christians in the South, he believed, must dutifully challenge the economic and class system to create a more just Christian social order grounded in more equal distribution.<sup>9</sup>

What made Taylor's practices unique, in terms of both the Social Gospel and Southern education, was his focus on improving race relations through the University at this early stage in the fight for civil rights. As early as 1928 he coordinated visits between students from Vanderbilt and Fisk University. He became known around Vanderbilt for promoting "educational growth through creating 'unusual' situations" (Harbison 253). Two decades before integration, Taylor was in the company of a Mississippian on campus who noted his amazement at the thoughts of the black students:

[He] was so amazed and confused he could scarcely [sic] walk straight. He kept saying things like "I simply can't believe what I've heard. I had no idea there were nigras who felt that way. I was raised with nigras. I played with the little chaps on my father's plantation all the years I was growing up, and I thought there was nothing, NOTHING, about colored people I didn't know. But I never dreamed they felt the way they've said today. I never dreamed there were colored people like these ... I never dreamed they wanted to be called Mister. (Harbison 254)

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<sup>9</sup> Taylor ends *Christianity and Industry in America* with the resolutions of the British Conference on Politics, Economics and Citizenship in an attempt to show how churches in other parts of the world have begun educational campaigns of the sort he calls for. The resolution is as follows: "1. The ultimate aim of Christians with regard to industry and commerce should be the substitution of the motive of service for the motive of gain. 2. Industry should be a cooperative effort adequately to supply the needs of all ... 3. Industry should be so organized that all those engaged in it shall have an increasingly effective voice in determining the conditions of their work and lives. 4. The first change upon industry should be a remuneration sufficient to maintain the worker and his family in health and dignity. 5. The evils of unemployment are intolerable to the moral sense. The causes must be sought and removed. 6. Extremes in Christian wealth and poverty are intolerable to the moral sense. The causes must be sought and removed. 7. The moral justification of the various rights which constitute property depends upon the degree to which they contribute to the development of personality and to the good of the whole community ... 8. The duty of service is equally obligatory upon all. No inherited wealth or position can dispense any member of the Christian society from establishing by service his claim to maintenance (qtd. in *Christianity* 197, from the Copec Commission Report, Vol. IX *Industry and Property*).

This reaction is telling of the times as well as the atmosphere on the Vanderbilt campus, but it is in no way different from other places around the South at the same time. Even these simple encounters, however, were positive moves toward the New South that Taylor envisioned.

Instead of setting the South up against “the victorious principles of the Union,” to use Ransom’s terminology, Taylor took an entirely opposite approach—to wed industrialism and religion. Although religious deterioration was likely on Taylor’s radar, he took an optimistic approach to the industrial problem, as he and his disciples would to all other problems. Their mode of critique was Christian at its core, and mostly non-confrontational, which also accounts for our lack of acknowledgement of their side of the conversation. In the introduction to his book, *Christianity and Industry in America*, Taylor says that “our greatest moral and social problems are industrial,” and he proposes to show how Christian teachings are fundamental to our social relations and that it is essential to develop an “industrial morality” (x). He says, “The greatest responsibility faced by the Christian leadership of our day is that of Christianizing social relationships. Our civilization is Christian only in so far as its social life is Christian. If industrial relationships are not Christianized the machine may prove Frankenstein turning to destroy what it has helped to create” (xi). Particularly he sought to develop a fraternal order, in which managers and workers could earn together. The factory, the farm, the school and the church all had functions within society, and according to Taylor’s philosophy, each of them functioned as “sanctuaries of brotherhood...[in which] the men and women sharing common tasks must become beloved communities before the kingdom of God will have come” (*Christianity* 9). The business in each of these sanctuaries must be conducted, he determined, on “the principle of service,” which would allow for human welfare above all else. Unlike Southern Agrarians, he acknowledged the impracticality of returning to a simple life of handicraft in which it would be

less easy to exploit workers. Instead, he believes that “keep[ing] the spirit in the midst of the wheels” will allow men to govern his own nature and thereby subdue selfish and unjust urges (*Christianity* 11). The beloved community is a result of fraternal living and therefore interdependence among men. The industrial world, more than the simple primitive (agrarian) life, promotes brotherhood, but only when paired with Christian social principles.

Vanderbilt’s chancellor eventually deemed Taylor’s influence across the Vanderbilt campus reactionary and too liberal. After his teaching position was abolished, Taylor wrote in letters (which were apparently announcing his retirement from the position) to several of his friends: “This stream of fine young chaps I have been teaching scatter all over the south with their social vision enlarged. If we can save my work we will save the Dept. of Social Ethics for years after I am done” (AWT Papers). Upon his dismissal, Taylor stressed his student’s appreciation for his classes with empirical data:

My classes were the largest in the school. I taught more hours than any other professor simply because of the demand for social ethics ... forty percent of all School of Religion candidates [for the B.D. degree] over several years had majored with me (not because of any superiority of mine) because of their interest in social questions and their interest as students of religious leadership in discovering a solution on the basis of Christian ethics. (Harbison 269)

An article in the 1958 *Christian Century* on Taylor’s influence at the time of his death states,

“The roll of those in the Deep South who for more than a generation have been fighting for social, economic, and racial justice is almost a catalogue of his students” (AWT Papers “He sacrificed Himself, Not His Principles”). While the reason for Taylor’s dismissal was likely his liberal social stances, it was more likely that his relationship with people at Fisk that ultimately made him intolerable to the powers that were at Vanderbilt. Nonetheless, our focus on

Taylor is on the work that he did while at Vanderbilt, and the apparent necessity of his dismissal is a small proof that he was making an impact of the university in a way that others on the campus viewed negatively.

After leaving Vanderbilt, Taylor lectured at Fisk University, joined the League of Nations Nonpartisan Association, the Save the Children Federation, and the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen, the Council of Southern Mountain Workers, and worked with the U.S. Department of Labor and the Cumberland Homesteads. He also worked with Myles Horton and Don West at Highlander Folk School and had active roles in the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (which I will discuss at length in a later chapter) (Harbison 377). He contributed to *Christian Century*, *Mountain Life and Work*, and *The Southern Patriot*. The scope of his articles emphasized the same themes he addressed at Vanderbilt—labor (and industrialism), race relations, education, and human welfare in the South. His columns were religious in tone but generally catalogued information that he believed should be part of the consciousness of Southern people.

Taylor's sense of Christian duty was the framework for his career and an impetus for social progress in the South. His philosophy, as well as that of his students, was a response to the ideology promoted by the Agrarians, but as a radical rhetoric of reform, it would eventually be called Communism. Whether this label is true or not, the critiques that Taylor and the other Social Gospel Prophets made concerning the emerging South accomplished far more than they are given credit for. They engaged rural white and black people in civil discourse; they experimented with desegregation at the university level long before it was mandated; and they proposed one way for Southerners to embrace industrialism as part of their culture. Above all, they challenged the philosophical mores of the Old South and prompted civil dialogue about the New South. Taylor's philosophy, therefore, was to teach these principles to a group of disciples

so that they could spread the word of a socially conscious Christianity. The ultimate goal of this collective was to create a beloved community through the commitment to others. This community, or counterpublic, was composed of four basic principles that would form their rhetoric of radical reform: 1) Challenge the myths of Southern identity (as related to race and class and as promoted by the Southern Agrarians), 2) Christianize social relationships, making them fraternal and based on the Christian duty of service to the community, 3) Maximize freedom, 4) Awaken public consciousness by showing Southern people that they had lost sight of God's divinity but through struggling for others and determining to uplift every man, Southern culture would prevail. Yet he adds that only with the denial of "rugged individualism," and the "Christianization of the social order" can this plan actually work. The same is true for all 70,000,000 others in poverty in the South (*Christianity* 130). To this end, he calls for a collective Christian struggle to maximize freedom for all and thus extends Rauschenbusch's theory by not only addressing the issues with American individualism and economic disparity but also particularly addressing the race issue.

## CHAPTER 2: “TO THE DISINHERITED BELONGS THE FUTURE”: HOWARD KESTER’S GOSPEL OF RECONCILIATION

“These disinherited men have their ears to the wind, their eyes fixed on the far horizons where freedom and plenty await them. Today they march with firm feet toward it; tomorrow with firm hands they will seize it. *To the disinherited belongs the future.*  
— Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* (1936)

Alva Taylor expanded the Social Gospel to include the race issue, thus forming a Southern Social Gospel framed by the themes of Christian freedom and American duty (a frame established by Walter Rauschenbusch). This frame wedded the Christian principle of brotherly association (i.e. duty to one’s brother) and the working class’s need to reassert their freedom to justly labor in an industrialized world. Howard Kester would extend this frame by bridging the religion of Southern Tenant Farmers (i.e. specifically the religious rhetoric of bondage and freedom) with patriotic sentiment via economic justice and interracial cooperation.<sup>10</sup> His impetus to action as a prophetic leader came from his reports for the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) on continued economic injustice across the South and his coverage of the spectacle lynching of Claude Neal in Marianna, Florida.<sup>11</sup> This lynching in particular drew together, for Kester, the twin problems of the Southern industrial economy and race. While Kester’s work in Nashville in both classrooms and churches influenced his mission as a Southern Social Gospel Prophet, he saw that he had to find ways to represent the voices of “the least of these.” Kester takes it as his mission to

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<sup>10</sup> For Kester’s complete biography, refer to Robert F. Martin’s *Howard Kester and the Struggle for Social Justice in the South, 1904-77*.

<sup>11</sup> Kester covered other lynchings, but the N.A.A.C.P. published the report on this lynching.

articulate the cause of “the least of these,” particularly the sharecroppers in eastern Arkansas in the later 1930s. Like Taylor before him, Kester challenged race and class myths, promoted fraternal living (especially through the Delta Cooperative Farm), maximized the freedom of sharecroppers (by giving them a voice), and awakened their public consciousness (through his jeremiad).<sup>12</sup> Through complicating the Southern discourse on race and class, Kester prompted the voices of a counterpublic, composed of white and black sharecroppers, and hence created a rhetorical consciousness framed by Christian duty and American freedom. Kester amplifies this collective frame by invigorating the principle of brotherly love via the discourse of unionism and in the process creates a socially conscious version of Agrarianism.<sup>13</sup> I call this discourse Kester’s gospel of reconciliation<sup>14</sup>.

Kester began attending the School of Religion at Vanderbilt University in 1926, after he had worked with the YMCA, YWCA, and the Student Volunteer Movement, all of which transformed him into a Christian activist (Martin 30-33). In Nashville, Kester continued his participation in the YMCA as associate secretary and also became involved in the Student Forum (Martin 32). In an interview about the Forum, Kester says the its intent was to “discover the

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<sup>12</sup> The jeremiad, simply defined, is “a mode of public exhortation...designed to join social criticism to spiritual renewal” (Bercovitch xi). The term is discussed at length in a later part of this chapter.

<sup>13</sup> Benford and Snow explain the frame amplification process: “The frame amplification process involves accenting and highlighting some issues, events or beliefs as being more salient than others. These punctuated or accented elements may function in service of the articulation process by providing a conceptual handle or peg for linking together various events and issues” (623). Furthermore, “Given that once of the key factors affecting whether or not a proffered frame resonates with potential constituents has to do with the extent to which the frame taps into existing cultural values, beliefs, narratives, folk wisdom, and the like, it is not surprising to find that most movements seek to amplify extant beliefs and values” (624).

<sup>14</sup> The purpose of this title, “gospel of reconciliation” is two-fold: 1) Kester united the voices of black and white sharecroppers under one collective frame, thus attempting to reconcile racial difference; 2) he reconciled Southern Agrarians’ desire to stay connected to the land and Old South ways with the sharecropper’s version of agrarianism. This version of agrarianism focused on the need for farmers to labor justly in an industrial world.



mind of Christ as it affects human relationships, especially international, industrial, and interracial relationships.”<sup>15</sup> With the Forum, he worked with students from Fisk University to establish biracial gatherings centering around conversation on arts and education at black and white universities (Martin 33-34). This position would lead Kester to other positions that would allow him to sponsor interracial cooperation, including the Fellowship of Youth for Peace and the Fellowship of Reconciliation (Martin 36). It would also allow him the opportunity to work hand in hand with his thesis director, Alva Taylor. Under Taylor’s supervision, Kester completed a study on the practices of black ministers in the Nashville area (Egerton 79). Taylor also encouraged Kester to increase his activism, a move that would allow Kester to develop a close relationship with Reinhold Niebuhr through his work with the Committee for Economic and Racial Justice (Kester interview). Unlike Niebuhr, Kester would continue to focus on the involvement of the Southern church in the struggle for social justice. Kester said that Niebuhr “felt that there just was no hope for getting churches involved,” yet Kester “tried to get the churches to give a real bone fide Christian witness and get themselves involved in all of these troubles, you know” (11). Niebuhr had just as much of an influence on Kester as Taylor did, but Kester recognized the Christian realism that would differentiate Niebuhr’s perspective, noting that Niebuhr wrote to him in “the sunset of life . . . wonder[ing] if it had been worthwhile” (12). Based on Kester’s continued activism, it appears that he struck a balance between Niebuhr’s skepticism and Taylor’s optimism in the prophet’s ability to transform the world into the kingdom of God. Niebuhr also prodded Kester to teach, and while he would eventually retire to Anderson College at Montreat as a teacher, Kester felt it his duty to continue his work in the field because “confrontation [was] absolutely necessary (11). Even at Anderson, he “came to the

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<sup>15</sup> The complete interview with Kester can be found on the website *Documenting the History of the American South: Oral Histories of the American South*.

conclusion that the best thing to do was just to quit fooling with the text, and take it as it came from day to day and week to week through the news media” (15). It was nonetheless through Niebuhr’s encouragement that Kester began what could be considered his most important work with the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, because this phase of his career brought him his widest audience with the publication of *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*.<sup>16</sup> Niebuhr would eventually convince Kester that that this work was the cornerstone of Christianity. Kester, thus, moved away from the more conservative Southern Social Gospel (à la Taylor and Rauschenbusch) and in the direction of Niebuhr’s neo-orthodox Christian radicalism. This philosophical position emphasizes “the reality of evil and skepticism about social perfection” (Martin 44). In other words, Alva Taylor believed that the world could be transformed into the Kingdom of God, but Niebuhr thought that the ultimate goal of the Christian activist was to maintain faith in the class struggle even though he could never achieve complete justice. Kester’s work does not suggest that he would ever completely convert to Niebuhr’s version of Christian realism, but it does suggest that he was more radical than Taylor in terms of action.

One marked instance, according to Anthony Dunbar, that influenced Kester’s prophetic action was in May of 1934. At this point, Kester heard Niebuhr speak on “Religion and the Social Order” at a meeting in Monteagle, Tennessee organized by the Conference of Younger

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<sup>16</sup> While there is not way to quantitatively prove the impact of Kester’s publication, we know that it was published alongside a range of books that were a response to President Roosevelt’s investigation on rural poverty. Donald Grubbs, in *Cry from the Cotton: the Southern Tenent [sic] Farmers’ Union and the New Deal*, for instance, points out “the influence of the STFU was demonstrated most convincingly by its impact on popular opinion and literature. Prior to the formation of the STFU, only the most well informed knew what a sharecropper was. Howard Odum, Rupert Vance, and Arthur Raper had examined tenancy, but mainly other scholars gave them attention. Erskine Caldwell had published *Tobacco Road* in 1932 and *God’s Little Acre* in 1933, but many of the millions who read them probably considered them more pornographic than sociological, more fictional than real... Then in 1934 when the STFU was founded Norman Thomas published *The Plight of the Share-Cropper*, and the flood gates were open... Howard Kester’s impassioned *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* came out a year later” (145).

Churchmen of the South (Dunbar 60). At this meeting Niebuhr condemned Christian people for their failure to contribute to the South's problems in a meaningful way, their inability "to deal with the desperate sickness of a sick society," and their "grievous sin not only against the Lord Jesus Christ but God and the whole of His creation" ("Radical Prophets" 17, qtd. in Dunbar 60). The intention of this meeting was to gather progressive ministers to discuss the social struggle they faced, and it allowed these men to conclude that while Niebuhr was on point with his condemnation of the church, the immediate and local problem they could address was inadequate working conditions for sharecroppers (Dunbar 60). Because the nature of this problem was class-based, it also concerned the race issue, the fact that discrimination by employers was reserved for the poor and those of color. Hence, the assembly called for a "radical political party of all races" that would advance a program allowing the farmer to retain possession of the land he worked (Dunbar 61). The party's goal would be to act as a prophetic voice for Southern clergymen who saw that America needed to return to "the revolutionary tradition of America...and the higher values of patriotism and religion" (Dunbar 61). Particularly, they saw the current capitalist system as the demise of the country, and their work would be to free sharecroppers, who they viewed as the slaves of capitalism. These dispossessed Southerners had been denied an essential value in which America is rooted—freedom.

Affected by Niebuhr's prophetic call and Taylor's philosophical lessons, Kester sought a way to unite the secular and the sacred. Kester, like other Social Gospel prophets, was searching for a moral and social alternative for these people, and in the process condemning the South—and America for that matter—for enslaving them. This quest to maintain freedom (and equality for that matter) is rooted in the jeremiadic discourse, "a mode of public exhortation that originated in the European pulpit [but that in America] was a ritual designed to join social

criticism to spiritual renewal, public to private identity, the shifting of ‘signs of the times’ to certain traditional metaphors, themes and symbols” (Bercovitch xi). Particularly, this rhetorical form, rooted in Puritan sermons, has served the function of linking the sacred and the secular. For the Puritans, theology and politics were not separate entities, and the form of their sermons reflected this wedding. While the immediate goal of these sermons was to show people their role in the continuous creation of the kingdom of God, the sermons also demonstrate an American rhetorical form that would later impact revolutionaries like Kester.

Kester’s effectiveness was rooted in this form, which “obviated the separation of the world and the kingdom, and then invested the symbol of America with the attributes of the sacred” (Bercovitch 179). Bercovitch’s explanation of the jeremiad is quite concise and worth quoting at length here:

The revelation of the sacred serves to diminish, and ultimately to deny, the values of secular society. The revelation of America serves to blight, and ultimately to preclude, the possibility of fundamental social change. To condemn the profane is to commit oneself to a spiritual ideal. To condemn ‘false Americas’ as profane is to express one’s faith in a national ideology. In effect, it is to transform what might have been a search for moral or social alternatives into a call for cultural revitalization. (179)

Kester, in other words, was fighting against a false America that had turned its back on the Christian principles on which it was based. It was no longer a city on a hill and was not a place that could embrace social change. Only by committing to Christian principles could this false America possibly return itself to prominence and restore people’s faith in a true national identity.

Kester’s “Report on The Southern Tenant Farmers Union” in 1938 exemplifies the form:

It cannot be said too frequently nor driven into the minds of Americans too relentlessly that the choice this nation makes with reference to the disinherited and expropriated tenant farmers, sharecroppers and farm day laborers of the South may be the decisive factor in determining the future of the land. The seriousness

of the problem is sufficient to give this nation the jitters and to provide it with the worst national headache it has [had] in many decades. Thus far the nation has been content to lament and talk and now and then to make a feeble gesture of concern toward the people. The nation's condolence is appreciated but it is not enough: action by this nation, and especially by the Christian forces of the nation is desperately needed. To long postpone the necessary action to make the land accessible to the people is to invite disaster. Today America may make up its mind with deliberation and intelligence: tomorrow may be too late. These are the days of reckoning: a reckoning with the sins of our fathers, North as well as South; a reckoning with outraged nature; a reckoning with an outraged humanity. Compound these elements into a single unit and you get the men, women and children of the Cotton Belt: you get in short the rural South, a situation at once heart rending and pathetic but offering to our country its deepest challenge in human skill, patience, and faith in the common man. ("Report" HK Papers)

Kester is at once condemning and asserting his faith in America. He condemned a false version of the South (like the one fabricated by the Southern Agrarians), and attempted to liberate poor Southern people from a version of Americanism that oppressed them. He is responding to the death of Christian principles as a guiding force in solving social problems and through his jeremiad, advancing a gospel of reconciliation. While he calls attention to the Cotton Belt, he argues that the economic problems of the South are not essentially Southern problems but are instead national problems. In this way, he shows how the South affects American identity, which is grounded in certain inherent and inalienable rights, first and foremost freedom for all. These rights are given by God, and Kester is sure to remark that "for a democracy" the Christian response to this problem "is clear and unmistakable" ("Report"). Kester is emphasizing the fragmentation of America—the essential problem that there is a separation of democracy and Christianity—in order to insist on his moral stance that God must be dead in this world if the situation in the South is allowed to continue. In Kester's words, which evoke the themes of the preamble to the American Constitution, "almost everything needful is being done except one ... the participation in the building of a strong union with which our people may secure for themselves and their children—for you and for me, for all—the legitimate rights and privileges

of American citizens and the fulfillment of our dreams of a happy America” (“Report” HAK Papers). A happy America in Kester’s mind is an America that weds the secular ills with spiritual existence so that it might again be a city on a hill, a religious society returned to its sacred covenant. He refers to the journals of early Americans, “who saw the promise of life” and the “limitless possibilities” of a world built on “eternal verities of truth, justice and equality, without which no man or society can be civilized [sic] or human” (Sermons 1923-1972 HAK Papers). It is the Christian duty to begin this transformation to a “purposeful life” by once again “giving meaning to the great words of our democratic faith, [sic] justice, equality, fraternity by concrete acts” (Sermons 1923-1972 HAK papers). He thus notes that “the words of the prophet spoken centuries ago have a poignant meaning for us today, ‘I brought you into a plentiful to eat the fruit thereof.....[sic] but when ye entered ye defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination”” (Sermons 1923-1972 HAK papers).

Kester’s radical rhetorical ethos was thus constructed from his personal history as a Southerner who could not accept the traditions of the Old South, his dependence on traditional American rhetorical forms passed down by the Puritans, and his symbolic acts of brotherly love, which would come from continually putting his life in danger to ensure that other people’s lives would improve poor Southerners’ conditions.<sup>17</sup> These symbolic acts, which I delineate below, particularly arose from Kester’s investigation of lynchings in the South. His challenge was to convince his fellow Southerners that they were sinning against society by not accepting their black brothers, but many of these men would maintain that people like Kester were responsible for their violence against black people. In one of his lynching reports, for instance, Kester quotes

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<sup>17</sup> In one sermon, “I have lived most of my life among the rural folk in the South and during the past twelve years I have lived and worked in each of the thirteen Southern states” (Kester papers folder 216).

an editorial from a 1933 *Tuscaloosa News* that says, “Social equality never has been, is not now and never will be recognized in the south. Those who came to preach a different order always have been, are now, and always will be repulsed. Ignorant, misguided or unscrupulous reformers who thusly come into our midst can bring nothing but misery, disaster and bloodshed” (Folder 216 HAK papers). While Kester saw himself simply spreading the word, “writing about conditions, exposing conditions,” he was almost lynched as a result because men like the one quoted above believed that reformers were the ones responsible for questioning Southern social mores and thus causing mob violence (Interview). The same man cited above says, “this newspaper, in common with all thoughtful people, deplores the spirit of mob violence. We thought it had gone out of our midst forever. May God forgive the carpet baggers of today who returned this foul thing to our midst—human hearts cannot” (Folder 216 HAK papers).

Witnessing the aftermath of this Tuscaloosa lynching and of Neal’s lynching, writing an exposé on the spectacles, and reflecting on the work of investigating and writing the reports was a marked instance that spurred Kester to prophetic action. Per Niebuhr’s call to deal with the sickness of society by changing the conditions of the sharecropper, Kester linked his investigations to the sharecropper’s plight. These investigations helped Kester develop his philosophical principles as a radical reformer and were the basis of his gospel of reconciliation. This gospel was the product of Kester’s years of work as an activist, but he saw in Marianna, Florida particularly that while the issue he was addressing in America was largely race-based discrimination, it was the root of discriminatory practices that he needed to understand. Claude Neal’s lynching was a catalyst for Kester to understand that he was fighting a battle against America’s economic system and that unionism was the strategy that would most effectively fight this battle. That is not to suggest that Kester’s understanding of the effects of the economic

system was different from other opinions of the time. As Ashraf Rushdy notes, “those who try to explain the causes of lynching in the age of lynching generally align the ritual to changing material conditions of labor...to political developments...and to new demographic conditions” (80). It is to suggest that the particular frame that he applied to the situation (i.e. unionism based on Christian principles), was a frame used by the Southern Social Gospel prophets. His frame aligns more closely with social psychologists who “have traced lynching to revivalist religious sensibilities, displaced aggression and the emergence of an ‘authoritarian personality’ in the mob leaders” (Rushdy 80). This personality according to Rushdy “constitutes an institution of American civil society” particularly in the age of spectacle lynching (81).<sup>18</sup>

If Rushdy is correct in his assessment that the mob constituted a civil society, composed of its own critical and discursive practices, then Kester’s work with the NAACP to construct an alternative discourse on lynching in an attempt to create a counterpublic. The Southern Social Gospel used the discourse of reconciliation to re-frame the myth of white supremacy, a myth that Rushdy claims is a “coercive public”—this type of public holds their power by coercing the state to support their agenda, often in belligerent ways like lynching. The government would do what was best to mitigate mob activity, which meant that they were often coerced into appeasing rather than reprimanding mob violence. The mob, in this sense, had a collective social consciousness that resisted the change brought about by the industrial economy. The participation of black people in this culture was a challenge to white supremacy, and white

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<sup>18</sup> Walter White, who sent Kester to investigate the lynching, recognized the religious implications of this type of spectacle lynching. He did not believe that “lynching could possibly exist under any other religion than Christianity” (40). Christianity, he claims drew “the colour line and thus set up an elaborate array of invidious distinctions which assure the white Christian of his immense superiority” (43). Particularly, he claims that evangelical Christianity, with its “Bible-beating, acrobatic, fanatical preachers of hell-fire in the South” prompt “dangerous passions...which contribute to emotional instability and play a part in the lynching” (43).



supremacists thus continued to rob them of their freedom and silence them through mob activities like lynching. Mob activity was publicized as the norm of society, and Kester's challenge to this discourse (through writing and publishing *The Lynching of Claude Neal*) was a challenge "against chivalry, against family, against the rights of self defense, against morality, against virtually everything decent" in the minds of white supremacists (Rushdy 95). Kester thus sought to influence the discourse on lynching by not allowing the advocates of lynching, the local newspapers for instance, to represent the only response to the brutal act. Constructive change in the South, Kester decided, was marred by "the superficially good will type," who attended interracial gatherings but who would not further address the race problem, who could not or did not know how to address the race issue (*Lynching* HAK papers). He saw that if he could *show* all of the "disinherited" that they were fighting the same economic problem, that they had a voice in this fight, that they would unionize to fight for a better future (*Revolt* 96). His reports, as I will show in the following section, reveal that the amplification of the principle of brotherly love as a key trope in his gospel of reconciliation that was used as a way to call white supremacists out for their version of civil religion. In prophetic form, Kester's report denounced the mob as a protector of Southern values and demanded that Southerners question the role that lynching could play in a Christian culture.<sup>19</sup>

The Claude Neal lynching was particularly important to Kester's cause because Neal was working on a peanut farm in Greenwood, Florida, a small rural town near Marianna. Kester composed the report, a synthesis of his own observations and articles in local newspapers, for

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<sup>19</sup> Ashraf Rushdy, in *American Lynching*, calls the "discourse on lynching" the "explanatory rationale for lynching provided by the practice's apologists (76). Advocates of lynching "mobilized the discourse of lynching that delimited the possible responses of antilynching activists" (95). The "lynching for rape" discourse is a predominant mode within this discourse. Rushdy traces an evolution of this discourse, but for the argument at hand, I focus particularly on the theme related to Social Gospel principles.

FOR and the NAACP. Kester wrote that Twenty-three year old Claude Neal was arrested on October 19<sup>th</sup>, 1934 under the assumption that he was responsible for the murder of twenty-year-old Lola Cannady. The arresting officers testified that Neal “assumed entire responsibility for the crime,” and they therefore took him to Chipley, Florida “for safekeeping” (*Lynching* 1). Kester said that from the moment Neal was arrested, “a blood-thirsty mob relentlessly pursued him” as well as his mother and aunt who had also been arrested. *The Florida Times* reported that Sherriff John Harrell stood on duty all night “while crowds repeatedly begged him to give up the prisoners, and finally threatened to dynamite the jail if he did not do so” (*Lynching* 1). Another mob threatened to use acetylene torches to get to the three prisoners. In an attempt to protect Neal, the Sherriff moved him from Pensacola, Florida to Brewton, Alabama. Neal was moved more than 300 miles from the origin of the incident and from Marianna, the county seat of Jackson County, Florida, where he would stand trial. Kester notes in his report that “taking Neal from Pensacola to Brewton was equivalent to handing him over to the mob” (2). *The Daily Times-Courier* reported that “An armed mob, estimated at 100 men, stormed the Escambia county jail between 2 and 3 o’clock am today and seized Claude Neal ... Sheriff Gus Byrne said the men came to the jail in 30 cars bearing Florida License places.” The men said they were “going to take him to Marianna and turn him over to the girls’ [sic] father and let him do what he wants with him.” Neal was then lynched near Greenwood, Florida. He was tortured, Kester says, for “ten or twelve hours” then left on the road in front of the Cannady home. A member of the 100-plus member lynching party told Kester the following story:

‘After taking the nigger to the woods about four miles from Greenwood they cut out his penis. He was made to eat it. Then they cut off his testicles and made him eat them and say he liked it.’ I gathered that this barbarous act consumed considerable time and that other means of torture were used from time to time on Neal. ‘Then they sliced his sides and stomach with knives and every now and then somebody would cut off a finger or toe. Red hot irons were used on the nigger to

burn him from top to bottom.’ From time to time during the torture a rope would be tied around Neal’s neck and he was pulled up over a limb and held there until he almost choked to death when he would be let down and the torture begin all over again. After several hours of this unspeakable torture, ‘they decided just to kill him.’

Once Neal’s body was at the Cannady home, 3,000 to 7,000 people came to see Mrs. Cannady drive a butcher knife through his heart. They proceeded to drive their cars over him as they left. Even neighborhood kids drove sticks through the dead body. The mutilated corpse was then hung in the courthouse square in Marianna. The result of this spectacle was a riot, in which all black people were driven out of the town during an entire day of “terror and madness” (*Lynching* 8).

Kester’s objective documentation of the spectacle is followed by a report on Lola Cannady, who had apparently left her house to attend to chores on her father’s farm. According to Kester’s report, her partially mutilated body was discovered on October 19<sup>th</sup> near the Cannady home. In this section Kester describes how Neal admitted to the crime and that he and Lola had been “having intimate relations with each other” for a period of years (*Lynching* 9). Cannady told Neal on the 19<sup>th</sup> that she did not “want him to speak to her again and that if he did so that she would tell the white men in the community” (*Lynching* 10). Neal reportedly told his friend that when she told him “she’d tell the white men on me, I just got mad and killed her” (*Lynching* 9).

Kester follows the Cannady narrative with a section titled “Was Claude Neal Guilty?” He says that the “rumor was that a white man had murdered Lola Cannady, had taken the bloody garments to Neal’s home to have them washed and had later laid the murder on Neal” (*Lynching* 10). Kester acknowledges that white men often framed innocent black men and that he had to consider this rumor. Particularly he says that he spoke with “the Negroes in the Greenwood community” but, “due to the great terror under which Negroes all over this section of Florida are

living under that they were too frightened to say or do anything which might cause them to become the victims of another mob as had so recently descended upon them” (*Lynching* 10).

Kester’s next move in the paper reveals public opinion as it was revealed in the local press. He includes statements that had been released from George Cannady and Lola Cannady, but he also includes a “Letter from Negro Citizen of Marianna” that was published in the same publication, *Daily Times-Courier*, as an apparent response to the initial publications by the Cannady family. While the authenticity and intent of the newspaper to publish this letter is questionable, Kester displays his intent. He juxtaposed the voices of the black and white citizens around Marianna in an attempt to show the necessity of public dialogue on the matter. The letters are addressed to “the White Citizens of Jackson County” and asks of these citizens not to judge “the good colored people that try to behave themselves and work for an honest living” according the example of Claude Neal (*Lynching* 11). They feel that “that nigger [Neal]” should “stay in his place.” Carry, the “faithful servant” who wrote the letter, wants to “let you know that we [“good colored people”] leave it to you all to do what you all see fit to do to him. But still [ask] you all not to be hard on your good servants who have been honest and faithful for the time that we have been working with you for the other fellow ... because we thank you all for making it easy.” Under another headline, “Colored Citizens Disapprove Crime,” eight other black citizens say that they “have the utmost confidence in the white citizens of this county, and trust that [they] have the same in us. We shall ever strive and teach our race never to betray that trust” (*Lynching* 11). Three days later, on October 23, 1934, the headline of the same newspaper read: “Ku Klux May Ride Again: Jackson County Citizens May Rally to Fiery Cross to Protect Southern Womanhood.” The headline was followed by a “prominent Marianna citizen” claiming “The purpose of the Klan is to take over where the law fails, or where the law has no jurisdiction.

It will defend and protect the constitution and the flag of the United States and make this section safe for ‘life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’ (*Lynching* 13). The deputy sheriff said the next day that “the mob will not be bothered, either before or after the lynching” (*Lynching* 13).

The purpose of Kester’s lengthy report (and other lynching reports completed by FOR and the NAACP) was to reveal to white audiences the root of their outrage against black people. The reports attempted to give voice to black citizens, whose public voices, it seems safe to say, were questionably authentic given that they were often published in white newspapers. While the local newspapers published supposed attitudes toward the lynching and the overall situation in Marianna, Kester closes his article by discussing the silence that the mob violence prompted. He says that “there were some people with whom I talked who were horrified over the lynching and who wanted to raise their voices in protest but felt it to be useless” (*Lynching* 7). As though the lynching was not evidence enough, Kester’s report further suggests that black people were denied any space in society—their bodies nor their voices were welcome.<sup>20</sup>

Kester uses the sensationalized lynching reports in the local newspapers to his advantage by connecting them to an objective report on the local history of Jackson County. He calls attention to the principle industry of the county—agriculture—and notes that between forty and forty-five percent of the population is black. The county had the highest illiteracy rate of any in the state, with no public libraries, but a highly religious group of citizens. Because of the lack of

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<sup>20</sup> What is interesting about this particular lynching is that it occurred in 1934, a time when historian Amy Louise Wood claims “most Americans came to witness lynching only through its media representation—photographs and, even more, motion pictures—presentations that came to stand, in all their excess, as the reality of lynching” (263). The photograph of a lynching, she says, “became a singular image that precipitated the surge of civil rights activity in the late 1950s and early 1960s, rallying young blacks in a shared sense of outrage and purpose” (Wood 269). Lynchings thus became “specters,” “icons of oppression,” but have become detached from the history they represent (Wood 269). As early as 1934, then, the Southern Social Gospel prophets unknowingly gave the Civil Rights activists of the 1950s and 1960s a way to challenge race and class myths.

jobs in Marianna, Kester says a “severe competition exists between Negroes and whites” and that “for some time past there has been constant agitation going on among the poor and disinherited whites for the jobs of the equally poor and exploited Negroes” (*Lynching* 7). Thus, “Negroes have been gradually forced deeper and deeper into economic misery and insecurity (*Lynching* 7). Kester also lists the wages of that most workers in the county earn, in order to show the severe status of poverty and need for relief in the county. Relief unfortunately had been cut off two weeks prior to the lynching and rioting, and it was Kester’s belief that both were a “surface eruption” that resulted from the pressing economic situation. The assumption at play is that if black people were forced out of town, as a result of a lynching or otherwise, they would not be able to work and whites would have economic security.<sup>21</sup>

The report thus focused on freedoms that both races had been robbed of due to the Southern economy. Kester articulated the mutual interests of both black and white people under this collective frame and argues that only through the Christian principle of brotherhood could either group successfully uplift themselves. He condemns them, saying, “these very Christians who mouth their praises and bellow their heads off about the love of God failed these despised and rejected ones as they have so many other oppressed groups in America” (*Lynching* 8). He judges them, saying that do not have the “slightest notion of what the love of God really means,” because if they did, “they would rise up to a man and thank Him that there are some people in

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<sup>21</sup> While Kester maintains objectivity in his report, he clearly connects poverty to lynching in his sermons: “Poverty is a word that has little meaning to those who have never suffered from its corroding effects. Poverty can degenerate and dehumanize. It can create loathing and hatred and it can drive men to commit the most heinous and shameful acts. Lynchings and poverty frequently go hand and hand. When there are not enough jobs and not enough bread, when competition is severe and life at best is hard, men often resort to lynching in order to lessen the sphere of competition and secure for themselves what others must have in order to live. The South is poor not altogether without good cause but the poverty which hangs like a pot of fire upon the heads of the people is neither warranted nor necessary under the circumstances” (Howard Kester papers 1923-1972, folder 216).

America who aren't afraid to call men whose skins are different from their own 'Brother' and mean it" (*Lynching* 8). He used their shared fears as a means to unite them. He preached to them about struggle, and hope, and love in order to show them that he, and God, understood their fears, but that division along racial lines was only furthering the success of the white planters.

Kester's prophetic work following the report on the lynching of Claude Neal was largely with the STFU and amplified the importance of spiritual renewal as the basis for socioeconomic change in the South. Kester's prophetic ethos, his work as an example of brotherly love, and his willingness to continually put his own life at stake to save America from the sins of capitalism (and race-based hate), allowed Kester to successfully link for his audience Christian duty and American freedom. Kester prophesied a racial crisis that would result if Southerners were not reached with this gospel of reconciliation:

My personal feeling is that we are at the beginning of a long and terrible interracial conflict which will gradually grow to severity and intensity until a very definite crisis has been reached. A federal law will be helpful but it will not touch the basic facts which are creative of the sort of things which occurred in Marianna, Tuscaloosa and elsewhere. I rather feel that our tactic of working from the top is misplaced emphasis and that increasingly we shall have to direct our attention and efforts to the exploited and disinherited whites and Negroes among whom the conflict now rages, which is due, to a large extent, to a total misunderstanding of the economic, social and political forces at work among them. We must not forsake the upper and middle classes in either group but we must develop among them a larger intelligence, imagination and social conscience than we have succeeded at doing thus far. (Kester to Gardner, 26 Nov 1934)

Kester's allusion to Marianna, of course, is the lynching of Claude Neal. The present possessor of the Earth, those at the top, had to understand the race struggle as their struggle, and the only way that Kester believed they would listen to condemnation of their current misgivings was to unionize the disinherited voices (both black and white) and not present the possessors' sin in terms of race but instead in terms of economics. In this sense, he denies the values of secular

society and reveals to this audience their demise if they do not search for social and moral alternatives to their present system.

His ability to affect his audience while judging them was a result of his ethos of Christian responsibility. He at once expressed his understanding of the plight of poor Southern people but attempted to reveal to them the dynamics of their ideology in Christian and economic terms, the basis of the Southern Social Gospel prophets' philosophy. His intimate knowledge of both the Southern ideology and the gospel allowed him to interpret the lynchings in a way that he felt others could not. In a letter in 1937, he wrote:

The analysis of individual participation in intolerance movements is an exceedingly difficult and complex problem and one that requires an almost intimate knowledge of the whole social fabric on which the action is cast. I frankly consider my investigation of various lynchings, labor troubles etc. superficial. I have been able, particularly in the Claude Neal lynching, the Duck Hill lynchings and the Tuscaloosa lynchings to obtain a fair understanding of the occurrences but I do not consider myself competent to give the microscopic analysis which I believe your study warrants. While nearly all lynchings or intolerance movements may fall into certain categories or behavior patterns they are often placed there by the wish of the investigator rather than by the nature of the actual facts disclosed. I am therefore pretty skeptical of the usual "investigation." I do not pretend any knowledge of why humans act the way they do.

While Kester may not have understood these psychological principles, he understood how to appeal to his audience in a time of crisis. He acknowledges his flaw as a human witness to the spectacle. The facts of the lynchings were there for the taking and investigators *themselves* could not understand this reality. As a prophet, Kester's understanding is reconciled by his Christian ethos. His power to understand humans is limited, but his investigation is not as limited as "the usual" ones. Unlike the people in local papers who spoke for the disinherited and pretended to understand their tragedy, Kester gives voice to these people by denying his ability to fully articulate their position. This denial gives him power as a prophet to express moral duty



to the people who have been denied their freedoms. Only they have the “intimate knowledge” necessary to promote change.

Kester passed judgment on Southerners who had failed to confront the actual problem that industry had caused and instead tried to hold on to the agrarian myths. The publication of his exposé on Neal’s lynching “probably had a greater impact on white opinion than any other exposé in the organization’s campaign” (Martin 79). Many Southerners continued to celebrate the rural life, the purity of white womanhood, the virtue of the land, and the independence of the farmer (Darsey 88-89). Kester’s investigation, however—his willingness to put himself in danger in the name of justice—and his focus on constructing identity and meaning in his exposé was the beginning of the formation of radical rhetorical consciousness in these dispossessed Southerners. Through his gospel of reconciliation, Kester thus created a counterpublic that fought to transform the discourse of the dominant public, the middle and upper class Southerners, who “t[ook] their discourse pragmatics and their lifeworlds for granted, misrecognizing the indefinite scope of their expansive address as universality or normalcy (Warner 122). While Kester judged the members of the dominant public for promoting inequality based on class and color, he at the same time legitimized the voices of the dispossessed by showing them how to scrutinize the people controlling them. He showed them how to “ask, reject, opine, decide, judge” in order to have agency and a social consciousness (Warner 123).

In what follows, I show how Kester, via his gospel of reconciliation, promoted a social consciousness for sharecroppers that enabled them to develop their vernacular voices in the fight for their freedom. The publication of *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*, published in 1936, two years after his “Report on the Lynching of Claude Neal,” expanded his gospel of reconciliation and expanded the counterpublic that labored for equality. Sharecroppers were as much oppressed

by Americanism as they were liberated by it. Hence, Kester and his colleagues created a discourse of the people—that allowed the sharecroppers to criticize the economic system that held them hostage. Kester’s immediate goal was to create an organized labor union that would enable the farmers to emancipate themselves. He says in the introduction to *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* that it was “more than a union” that he was establishing; “it [was] besides this a movement ... The problem of tenants and the land, particularly here in the South, is one which lends itself to the development of a genuine emancipation movement which encompasses the whole of life” (15-16). The instances of everyday discourse as well as the discussion prompted by union meetings provide a means to trace this emancipation via resistant radical rhetoric that was prompted by Kester’s prophetic voice.

Kester used the work of the STFU as a platform to promote social change through his gospel of reconciliation. Harry Leland Mitchell and Henry Clay East, compatriots to the Southern Social Gospel prophets, established the Southern Tenant Farmers Union in Poinsett County, Arkansas in 1934. As a response to the Roosevelt’s Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), the STFU’s principle goal was to “emancipate” the Southern sharecropper. However, as Niebuhr points out in the forward to *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*, it accomplished far more. These voices, while not always in view of the “official” discourse on agricultural adjustment, interrogate and resist this official discourse, performing their power through the appropriation of Kester’s gospel of reconciliation.<sup>22</sup>

Set in a place bound not by the traditional Southern agrarian values of the planter class, but rather, the agrarian values of the sharecroppers, it “first, describe[d] a general condition; secondly, set down the labors of a particular organization working in the midst of these

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<sup>22</sup> This claim is an adaptation of Hauser and mc clellan’s theory of vernacular voices in *Active Voices* (30).

conditions; and thirdly [...] suggest[ed] a way out” (*Revolt v*). More precisely, it first revealed the necessary conditions for a radical agrarian movement that would oppose the traditional Southern agrarian movement; promoted a reform ethos among the workers who were daily laboring in the fields as slaves by giving them a collective voice; and finally, promoted a radical social movement grounded in the Christian principles of the sharecroppers. After all, as Robert Martin notes, “religion was still perhaps the single most pervasive force in the lives of the folk on the delta” (92-93). Kester used this force as a means to promote his version of an agrarian movement grounded in Social Gospel principles.

The AAA’s major problem was its disregard for the morals of the sharecroppers—the individual morals of the sharecroppers were not in line with government ideals, nor the ideals of the planter class. Kester’s first goal in *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* is to describe the general conditions of the people and reveal the crisis state. The disinherited sharecropper was the product of a government program that would not only exploit workers in the cotton fields, but also divide the white and black sharecroppers of the region. Although this was not the goal of the AAA, it was the condition in which they placed the Southern sharecropper. The crisis for the Southern sharecropper, as articulated by Kester, was not simply industrialism; the problem was much more local, and much more rooted in the rhetoric of the Southern Agrarians—it was the bitterness toward free black men. Kester articulates the problem in terms that reveal the local nature of the crisis:

The well-to-do planters and ruling class generally kept the poor whites too busy fighting the Negro to ask the one basic question, which sooner or later had to be asked. That question was: “Who put the Negroes on our necks?” The obvious answer was, “The planters, the landlords, merchant princes, business men and all the others who derived a benefit from the struggle the black and white workers were carrying on between themselves.” (*Revolt* 20)

This volatile public sphere was a product of what Kester calls the “divide and rule” public policy (*Revolt* 20). He notes that this method was precisely the reason the Poinsett County, Arkansas sharecroppers had been exploited. There was no site for an open dialogue. The sharecroppers could neither clearly recognize nor articulate their concerns with their position in society because of interference of the ruling class rhetoric. Kester’s book, in this sense, is the embodiment of “the public principle.” He gave the plight of the Southern sharecropper “a public face in order to provide direction and inspire the solidarity among the masses and to explain the conditions or oppression to an external world of readers and listeners so that they might better understand the underlying causes of resistance and lend their support” (Hauser and mc clellan 25). Kester points out that the sharecroppers have been excluded from the dialogue that has defined them as a community. He utilizes the vernacular rhetoric of the people by positioning himself as an opponent of the Southern agrarian discourse that puts white and black sharecroppers in opposition. In Hauser’s terms, Kester “presuppose[d] some form of literacy” that was meaningful to the sharecroppers. In doing so, Kester also had to resist the charges made by opponents of the movement, that the sharecroppers were only a product of socialist and communist activity in the South. Kester does not deny that his work is socialist in nature, but instead proves that socialist activists (of the STFU) “were the only ones who were not on their [the sharecroppers’] backs, and who had the intelligence, love of human justice and courage to help them” (*Revolt* 55). Because Kester grounded himself in religious principles, however, his “help” was not considered threatening to the community. The workers who joined the unions were “convinced that these wrongs are not ordained by God and are neither inevitable nor necessary to human existence” (*Revolt* 54).

For the black sharecroppers particularly, the presupposed literacy was their experience with organized communities—churches, fraternal orders, and community self-help traditions—largely a product of their heritage (Lichtenstein 37). Because the planter class had disguised the economic conditions of the South as a racial one, the white sharecroppers, at the very least, were associated mainly with other white sharecroppers or members of the planter class, but they were—according to Lichtenstein—far more individualistic and unchurched because of economic conditions (38). “Although the South is frequently referred to as ‘The Bible Belt’,” says Kester, the Arkansas delta “is a land where the great masses of cotton workers are unchurched. In many areas churches have disappeared” (47). The STFU provided a sanctuary for both black and white displaced sharecropping Christians, who were “not unmindful of the role many preachers play in giving lip service to the Master while helping ‘their masters’ continue their exploitation and oppression” (Kester 47). He cites, for instance, Rev. Abner Sage who calls the sharecroppers “a lazy and shiftless lot of poor white and negroes” (Kester 50). The publication of these opinions are what called government investigators into the sharecropping areas, and when they investigated they soon found that such rhetoric was promoted by the planter class as a means of securing their dominant role in the Southern economy. The planter class was using the church as a means to their end, and the sharecroppers, unable to use the church as their mouthpiece, instead turned to the STFU to give them voice.

Importantly, the STFU was grounded in familiar religious principles that promoted communal change, or “collective will” in Kester’s terms. They adapted the only organizational schemes they recognized—those of the church, the Ku Klux Klan, and the school. Kester details at length the conversation that took place between members from each of these groups, showing that their members recognized the reasons they needed each other: even though the churches

were divided by race, they needed each other because they were “all brothers and ain’t God the Father of us all” and the church was ultimately responsible for causing some of the suffering (*Revolt 56*); the Ku Klux Klansmen suggested operating in secret to punish landlords during the night; members of the Farmer’s Educational and Co-operative Union suggested ways to make the union a “legal organization and for it to operate in the open” (*Revolt 57*). Once these men began to speak up, Kester and his cohorts, H.L. Mitchell and Clay East, simply served as mediators. Ultimately, they were able to hold elections in which a white sharecropper was elected chairman, a black minister as vice-chairman, an Englishman the public relations representative, and a holiness preacher as chaplain (*Revolt 56*). Kester, along with Mitchell and East, gained the trust of the sharecroppers with what they began to call the “New Gospel of Unionism,” and one of Alva Taylor’s other students, Ward Rodgers, began preaching to the sharecroppers and planters (*Revolt 58*). The picture Kester paints is inspiring:

Each night would witness Mitchell’s and East’s battered old automobiles loaded down with the sharecroppers going to some outlying church or schoolhouse to organize a local. Enthusiasm among the sharecroppers ran high and they talked “union” with the abandon of a backwoods’ revivalist. New locals sprang up everywhere the organizers went. The people were hungry for the “New Gospel of Unionism.” (*Revolt 58*)

Kester reveals that the planters tried to dismiss the work of the union, saying that the organizers, especially Mitchell and East, had political ambitions; their work with the sharecroppers were only a means to being elected. The responses of the planter class signal the effectiveness of the sharecroppers’ union. Although their rhetoric was under the surface, to use Hauser’s terms, the planter class soon recognized that the union had found a way to resist the system of semi-slavery. The sharecroppers were no longer a disinherited people—they had found their voices.

Kester's first goal—to describe the general conditions of the people—was a necessary precondition for the emergence of a collective consciousness. The sharecroppers' cries were no longer “cries in a wilderness” (*Revolt* 18). Instead, by identifying the crisis, Kester helped the sharecroppers create a rhetorical consciousness. Kester opens his chapter “The Heritage of the Sharecropper” by making this point. Because this guiding principle most clearly states both the crisis that Kester believed the sharecroppers had to recognize, as well as the emergence of their collective consciousness, it is worth citing at length:

Today the sharecropper is conscious of his condition and is attempting to make himself heard and felt through the united efforts of those in like circumstances. Thus through the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union the disinherited sharecroppers, tenant farmers, and day laborers of both races are becoming increasingly articulate and gradually thrusting themselves into a nation's consciousness. Through this inherited struggle they will either climb out of the hell of misery in which they have been floundering or they will be more completely submerged as America battles and blunders for a way out of the present chaos. (*Revolt* 18)

In rhetorical terms, Kester identifies what Gerard Hauser refers to as a civil society—“a network of associates independent of the state whose members, through social interactions that balance conflict and consensus, seek to regulate themselves in ways consistent with valuation of difference” (“Civil Society and the Principle of the Public Sphere” 26). The traditionally segregated black and white voices, in this case, were according to Kester “joined together in a common cause against a common oppressor [...] of their own free will” (*Revolt* 21). Based on Kester's claims, the sharecroppers had to overcome internal conflict before they could be concerned with their relationship to the larger agrarian discourse. After the formation of the STFU, and the defeat of the idea of a race-based union, the sharecroppers were able to gradually understand the larger battle they were fighting. The STFU's ultimate goal was to empower the sharecroppers through unionization. Hence, the majority of Kester's book calls attention to the collective consciousness of the sharecroppers.

Yet, this collective consciousness was only the beginning of the battle for Kester and the sharecroppers. Because the sharecroppers were challenging the official discourse of the planters, their voices were no longer mundane or unnoticed. They were, instead, confrontational. Perhaps the most powerful narrative in Kester's book belongs to Preacher C.H. Smith, a local organizer spreading the gospel of social justice. After being attacked and permanently injured by riding bosses, Smith was thrown in jail in Marion. Kester says, "when 'the law' saw the union attorney and this demonstration of comradeship by [forty or fifty] sharecroppers they released Preacher Smith without trial" (*Revolt* 61). Upon his release, Preacher Smith was asked to attend a rally in his honor at Sunnyside Church, where he proclaimed "the union" his "cross ... he was glad to bear for the union" (*Revolt* 61). He said, "the union is the only thing that will help my people—and all of you people, whether white or black are my people" (*Revolt* 61). Stories like this one fill the majority of the pages in Kester's book. Time after time, the sharecroppers are forced out of their gathering places, beaten, arrested, evicted, and threatened, yet preachers like Rev. Sage reminded that them that Jesus "stirreth up the people" (*Revolt* 65). Slowly these gathering places, the churches and schools, "were padlocked, windows boarded over and floors removed, and schoolhouses were packed with hay" (*Revolt* 61). These places, once gathering places for the planter class, became "markers of positionality" (Hauser 37). They show poor Southerner's alternative relationships to religion. More precisely, the vernacular voices of the sharecroppers appropriated a place that was at one point the domain of the discursive forces that held them back. The planter class took away the place in order to take away the power of the STFU, yet these abandoned places became markers of vernacular performance, symbols of resistance.

The sharecroppers' meetings consequently became performances of their power—"dramaturgical spectacle" (Hauser 34). Amidst their worst conditions yet, the sharecroppers



elected the Sharecroppers Ambassadors to send to Washington, which provided a setting that would allow them to perform. Upon returning from Washington the delegation organized a meeting at Marked Tree, Arkansas to share their progress; this meeting was a climax for the STFU that made visible on the national front the nature of this liberatory social organization. Ward Rodgers exceeded the event and Kester claims, “Rodgers was not speaking before the great multitude of disinherited that January afternoon: it was the tens of thousands of disinherited, oppressed but nevertheless defiant sharecroppers who after seventy years of tyranny, terror and suffering were hurling their deepest feelings at the world which had oppressed them—and their voice was that of a young Methodist preacher” (*Revolt* 69). Although Rodgers was arrested that afternoon, his acts revealed “negative bonding with authority” (Hauser 37). Ward was charged with “anarchy, attempting to overthrow and usurp the Government of Arkansas,” and in the process asserting the identity of the sharecroppers that acknowledged their consciousness as well as their displacement (*Revolt* 69). Although the STFU promoted non-violent protest, their meetings promoted engagement with the powers that oppressed them. The more times the STFU members were arrested, the more rhetorical power they gained. Especially as their meetings began to embody the type of society they envisioned, one based on the principle of brotherly love, their voices became more threatening and hence stronger. One of the primary reasons Rodgers was arrested, for instance, was his introduction for Rev. Mr. E.B. McKinney, a black preacher from the Washington delegation. Kester notes that “On the outskirts of the crowd were the prosecuting attorney, Fred Stafford, the high sheriff of the county and all the ‘Better Americans’ [murmuring] ‘He call that nigger a mister’” (*Revolt* 69).

The planter class, the embodiment of Southern Agrarian theory, could not accept these vernacular voices. Reporters like Norman Thomas visited Arkansas and broadcast pleas on NBC,

asking the Federal Government to intervene in the “reign of terror in the cotton county of eastern Arkansas” (*Revolt* 70). These instances of publicity only alarmed the planters more, forcing them to cry “outside agitator” at the organizers. Kester continued to use his background as a poor white Southerner to advance the cause. The planter class continued to issue statements claiming, “the landlord and tenant system of the South seeks to avoid investigation and study,” yet as more and more investigators came to Arkansas, this response became the modus operandi of the planter class (*Revolt* 75). They wanted to conceal the reticulate public discourse the STFU had established and hence conceal the power the sharecroppers had gained. In Hauser’s terms, “the spectacle of dissident performance met with the official acts of retaliation to curtail freedoms of assembly and speech [and] became a dramaturgical unmasking” (35). The sharecroppers, however, continued their struggle, standing by the “Ceremonial of the Land,” in which each of the tenant farmers brought soil from each of their states and placed it in a common pile. Then, from that common pile, each one took with them a “token of that for which [they] were united in struggle” (“Ceremonial of the Land” HAK Papers). To conclude this religious ceremony, they then read their creed:

Audience: For seventy years we have been the victims of the semi-slavery system known as sharecropping which at times is more brutal and humiliating than chattel slavery itself. For years our oppressors kept us divided and made us struggle against our own brothers. By so doing they made slaves of us all. Today a new light has come to our eyes, a new understanding to our minds and we no longer struggle against one another, but we struggle together against our oppressors, knowing that out of the dark and gloomy past that as we struggle together, we shall gain the things for which our hearts long. By means of this ceremony we have dedicated our lives to the task of securing the land, freedom and bread. Divided we fall but united in the Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union we shall inherit that for which we have worked, labored and died. To the disinherited belongs the future. Land to the Landless.

Reader: The land is the common heritage of the people.

Audience: TO THE DISINHERITED BELONGS THE FUTURE. (“Ceremony of the Land” HAK Papers)

Kester's work in Arkansas was only the beginning of a larger radical agrarian movement grounded in the Social Gospel. Eventually he would help found the Delta Cooperative Farm, a "social laboratory, an educational effort, and for some at least, an experiment in applied Christianity" (Martin 100). This effort in Arkansas was not only a ministry to "the least of these" but also, for Kester, the first step toward the Great Society. The Social Gospel Prophets were actively involved in the lives of the everyday people. By embracing the vernacular, they were able to promote an alternative to the version of Southern Agrarianism promoted by John Crowe Ransom and his compatriots. After their voices were acknowledged, thanks to the work of Kester, East and Mitchell, the sharecroppers slowly grew in power. Kester poignantly concludes that "men received new light. They were no longer powerless; they could raise their wages and better their own working conditions [...] They know that poverty and misery and ignorance and all the hellish evils of King Cotton's Kingdom are not ordained by God" (*Revolt* 96).

The Christian duty of these sharecroppers, this collective consciousness, was to continue Kester's work by advancing the gospel of reconciliation. In this way, the bond of Christian brotherhood would grow and the "least of these" would continue to have a voice in the growth of a New South. Their socially conscious version of agrarianism—one that took race and class into account—could attempt to create the Kingdom of God on Earth through the promotion of justice and fraternal living. Their work demonstrated the importance of interracial cooperation and non-violent protest to change society. The new type of rural culture that Kester envisioned would embrace the cooperative farm as part of the industrial world, and the cooperation of cooperative farmers would serve as models for unionization. Kester's would continue to preach his gospel of reconciliation, but he would do so with the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen (Lichenstein 57). Kester and his work with the STFU, according to Lichenstein, "pioneered a form of what the

New Left of the 1960s came to call ‘participatory democracy,’ the ethic that ‘the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life’” (55). The gospel of reconciliation thus laid the groundwork for the expansion of the Southern Social Gospel.

CHAPTER 3: “YOU ARE NOT ALONE”: JAMES DOMBROWSKI AND THE SOUTHERN CONFERENCE’S FIGHT FOR HUMAN WELFARE

“If we were to choose a motto, it would be: ‘You Are Not Alone!’ Indeed, the stirring events of recent years have shown we are not alone in our belief”  
—*The Southern Patriot*, “Not Alone” (1952)

My analysis of the rhetoric of the Southern Social Gospel movement thus far has shown that the crisis of industrialism prompted a rhetoric of radical reform, which I argue moved into the deep South via the work of Alva Taylor and his students. His response to the ideological view represented by the Vanderbilt Agrarians resulted in a progressive, socially conscious Christian rhetoric of reform and hence a counterpublic that defined a new version of Southernism and Americanism. The defining characteristic of this counterpublic was their emphasis on Christian brotherhood, through which they could challenge the myths of Southern identity, Christianize social relationships, maximize freedom, and hence awaken public consciousness. Taylor’s student, Howard Kester, used his jeremiad, or gospel of reconciliation, to rouse the Southern tenant farmers to action by showing them that their collective voices could form a “new gospel of unionism” representative of a progressive form of agrarianism. In both of these instances, the goal of the Southern Social Gospel prophets was to give voice to Southerners who had been silenced by social ills. Taylor’s Social Gospel philosophy focused on education and interaction among the races, but Kester saw that this philosophy must be expanded. In order to emancipate the “the least of these,” Kester expanded Taylor’s philosophy to include a philosophy of unionism aligned with the Christian principle of brotherhood. That said, a rhetorical shift did not occur from the early 1930s, when Taylor was at Vanderbilt, to 1936, when Kester published

*Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*. More than anything, Kester put Taylor's philosophy to work and proved with the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union that the Southern Social Gospel could function as an organizational mechanism for unions.

To advance my argument concerning how the Southern Social Gospel movement moved, I now turn to James Dombrowski's work with the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW) and the Southern Conference Education Fund (SCEF).<sup>23</sup> James Dombrowski was an organizer, a New Dealer; he was not "of the people" in the same way as Kester. As a manager of operations at Highlander (where he learned from Alva Taylor and Myles Horton), an activist in the 1929 Elizabethton, Tennessee textile strike, and student at Emory, Union Theological Seminary, and Columbia, he influenced many prominent New Dealers (Egerton 160). While Dombrowski worked with the Southern Conference for Human Welfare from its inception in 1938, he became the executive secretary in 1942 and later the executive director of the Southern Conference Education Fund (an offshoot of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare). According to Anne Braden, who took over for Dombrowski after his retirement in 1966, the Southern Conference was "the handiwork of one man more than any other—Jim Dombrowski, another white Southerner who ... decided that none of the other problems the South faced,

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<sup>23</sup> Dombrowski was educated at both Emory and Columbia and encountered Taylor, Kester, and Myles Horton at Highlander Folk School. He worked at Highlander with both Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr.. He continued to have contact with them while serving as executive director of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, which became the Southern Conference Education Fund. The SCHW became the SCEF largely as a result of financial woes; as an "educational" fund, the Conference could claim tax-exempt status. Linda Reed notes that 1946-1948, the transitional years for the Conference, was also the time when James Dombrowski and Clark Foreman disagreed on the role that the Conference should play in the Henry Wallace presidential campaign. Foreman believed that the Wallace candidacy gave "the South the greatest change it has ever had to escape the feudalism that has been such a curse to its people and to the rest of the county" (Reed 128). Foreman's resignation gave Dombrowski the change to take the lead of SCEF. For the duration of this chapter, I use Southern Conference to designate both the Southern Conference for Human Welfare and the Southern Conference Education Fund.

including its dire economic ones, would ever be solved until legal segregation and the oppression of African Americans ended. He decided there was a need for an interracial organization committed to that goal” (322). He used his organizational abilities and utilized rhetorical resources to motivate unified action and assist in preserving the work on the Southern Conference. Along with Clark Foreman, he maintained the forum where Eleanor Roosevelt, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Anne Braden, among others shared the Southern Social Gospel. The act of Southern white people speaking *with* Southern black people to define a new South was one symbolic rhetorical act that projected a vision of the possibility of historical change. The work of the Southern Conference was publicized in *The Southern Patriot*, a newspaper that provided a space for voices of “the silent South” to be heard (“The Voice of the Silent South”).

The Southern Conference’s publication, *The Southern Patriot*, as a representation of Social Gospel philosophy, was different from Taylor and Kester’s publications in the 1930s and early 1940s. First published in 1942, it recognized the link between the individual and the collective, and attempted to unite Southerners in brotherhood. It also revealed a shift away from the Social Gospel as Taylor envisioned it. Particularly, it moved away from a connection to the Gospel in any direct way; by this point, the purpose was to organize groups who already understood Social Gospel theory. *The Southern Patriot* was a sort of “tabloid paper,” as Braden calls it, a “movement newspaper of that era and major organizing tool” (323). By linking individual duty, collective freedom, and the politics of action, the Southern Social Gospel prophets, via *The Southern Patriot* make it the duty of white people to join their black brothers in the fight for freedom. It revealed to readers how struggle was enacted across multiple venues, thus making it a radical force to collectively frame the Southern Social Gospel as it responded to the crisis caused by World War II and McCarthyism, an issue I will address later in this chapter.

The work of these Social Gospel Prophets challenged racist roots of the Southern community, being told not to criticize political action, in order to define a New South. Essentially, the Southern Conference was one organization that sought to prove that the “function of the white American is not so much to prepare the Negro for entrance into the larger society—but the prepare society for the changes it must make to include Negroes” (Braden 342). Because the paper took this one-point stance, to de-segregate the South, and because desegregationist tendencies were labeled communist, the Southern Conference would eventually become known as a communist front. Hence, the Southern Social Gospel, which continued to link themes of Christian duty and American freedom in its attempt to reform Southern society, would paradoxically be labeled anti-American. Neither Taylor’s divine ethos nor Kester’s gospel of reconciliation could challenge this label.<sup>24</sup>

Many historians, including Linda Reed and John Egerton, view the Southern Conference as a failure. Indeed, most historians who concentrate on the time period between 1938 and 1963 will discuss the Conference’s failures more than its successes. They will note the promise of what they consider a failed movement on the part of Southern whites and agree that the direct-action tactics of the 1960s illustrate the failures of the previous generation of activists (Reed “Introduction”; Egerton). Reed, like Egerton, recognizes the prophets who “foresaw and acknowledged resolutions to grave societal problems,” but who nonetheless “had neither the numbers nor the courage to undertake” what “basic reform requires” (Reed xxv). “People in the Southern conference movement held up the right examples, the right ideals,” Reed says, “but their opposition proved too formidable.” Reed’s picture of the SCHW is, no doubt, historically

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<sup>24</sup> At its high point, in the early 1940s, *The Southern Patriot* maintained around 29,000 subscriptions. These numbers declined to 2,200 in 1957. One problem with accounting for success via subscription, however, is that special issues were more widely distributed and universities subscribed (Reed 241).



accurate and answers the basic question one would pose about the movement, specifically: “What allowed a group of white Southerners to go against the status quo of Southern society?” She attempts to answer this question with biographical material, their backgrounds, their roles, and their motives.

In this chapter, I re-conceptualize the function of the SCHW by viewing it through a rhetorical lens. I complicate historical arguments that, while acknowledging the promising work of the SCHW, do not identify the rhetorical force of the Southern prophets who constructed one collective action frame that would later take root in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. They used the radical rhetorical tradition in American culture to engage the South in a national discourse in a significant way, thereby establishing a frame for the movement that was to come. Dombrowski along with other members of the Southern Conference perform the act of “critical interruption” that was necessary to set the stage for mass movement (Farrell 258). In other words, they “juxtapose the assumptions, norms, and practices of a people so as to prompt a reappraisal of where they are culturally, what they are doing and where they are going” (Farrell 258). While the rhetoric alone does not have immediate consequences as far as an actual social movement is concerned, it does show a shift in the public consciousness of Southern people. I contend that as radical prophetic work, it was successful: the prophets judged the people of the South for their sins against humanity, particularly their support of a segregated world, and in doing so contributed to a new version of the Social Gospel embodied and expanded by Martin Luther King, Jr. Certainly, the members of the Southern Conference failed as early Civil Rights *activists* if the Civil Rights movement is limited to action, like the Montgomery Bus Boycott or the Selma to Montgomery march. However, this view of the Civil Rights movement is based on the assumption that results—and not processes—are important to understanding movement

activity. To this end, this chapter considers how movements move, in other words, how the impetus for action defines movement.

While Southern white men may have considered themselves Christians, they did not in all instances believe that Christianity should apply to race issues. When their duty as Christian men was to help free black people from this segregated worlds, their faith in Christian principles seemed to falter. In this sense, when the Southern Social Gospel prophets judged them for their sins against the black race, white Southerners did not answer the call to redeem themselves. As prophets, the Southern Social Gospellers attempted to stimulate action on the part of these white men, but because these Christian principles provoked political action that was opposed to the Old South ideology, the prophets were labeled subversive and communist.<sup>25</sup> Their conservative Christian beliefs paired with liberal political action (in context of the race issue) resulted in the Social Gospel prophets necessarily taking a more militant stance. While their Christian principles were implicit in their message, those Christian principles were overshadowed by militancy and hence perceived as too radical for the culture to which they belonged. In this sense, the Social Gospel prophets' radicalism paved the way for Southerners to engage in a legitimate way about the race issue (Darsey 203). Their premise was the same as it always had been—that through Christian brotherhood they could create a heaven on earth—but the crisis was made more urgent, specifically by the responses to Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal.

Roosevelt's attention to the South was a result of the "Report on Economic Conditions of the South" composed by, among others, Clark Foreman, who later helped form the Southern Conference (Reed 5). The report concluded that "the South presents right now the Nation's No. 1

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<sup>25</sup> The first instance that the program was accused of subversiveness and communism was in 1948. These same labels haunted the program throughout its tenure, and the tension came to a head in 1954 when Eastland committee started its official investigation of the conference.

economic problem—the Nation’s problem, not merely the South’s” (Reed 6). This report argued that the South had the resources to be richer than most any part of the country, but it was unable to recognize this potential because of its major institutions. Southerners, of course, were offended by this rhetoric that ultimately brought the race issue to the forefront, asking “Why does not the South do something about raising the standards for the Negroes?” (Reed 7; Krueger 14).

The Southern Conference took this issue head on, when it formed in 1938. The Conference constituted an alliance between Southern liberal organizations (including the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, the United Mine Workers, Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and the N.A.A.C.P., to name a few). It set out to solve many of the South’s problems by beginning a crusade against the poll tax, which disenfranchised numerous Southerners—both black and white—who supported more liberal candidates, including Roosevelt, who attempted to create policies to solve the South’s economic woes. The team of Joseph Gelders and the reformed Vanderbilt Agrarian H.C. Nixon, among others, formed the Alabama Policy Committee in 1936, which would expand to become the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in 1938. The first meeting of the conference convened in Birmingham, Alabama, Gelders decided, because “Birmingham is potentially the most progressive and the most reactionary city in the South. This is the point in the South at which, above all others, the struggle between absentee ownership and Southern labor heads up” (SCHW Papers Box 3). Not all of the members of the SCHW were Social Gospel Prophets in the strictest sense, but they all had similar progressive tendencies. The conference members outlined these tendencies in their statement of purpose written after their first Birmingham Convention: They wanted to “promote the general welfare, improve the economic, social, and cultural standards of the Southern people,

and ‘advance Southern functional growth in accordance with American democratic institutions and ideals.’” They created a rhetorical forum, a “symbolic environment ... within which issues, interests, positions, constituencies, and messages are advanced, shaped and provisionally judged” (Farrell 282). The SCHW’s overall impact was to break down the barriers between all the groups fighting for change in the South in order to promote a healthy civil discourse. In other words, there was a conscious awareness among Southern liberals of their place within this symbolic environment, and, for that reason, they founded a historical movement that created a space where critical dialogue could occur and action eventually take place.

In the first official statement of the organization’s general purpose, which was sent out alongside an invitation to the conference, Gelders and company proclaimed that “pertinent facts and studies must be put into the language of the people,” whose “experience and aspirations ... must be discovered and made available for students and leaders. The needs of our region must bind us, the Southern people, together for collective effort. Only in this way can genuine democracy prevail” (“The Southern Conference for Human Welfare”). Even in this early statement, the promotion of a collective consciousness binds the region, and—while not every member of the conference could be called a Social Gospel prophet—Southern Conference members were a representation of Social Gospel principles. The rhetoric of their official proceedings statement displays an image of Birmingham as the baptismal pool, where the sins of a corrupted version of capitalism would be washed away and forgiven by these liberal saviors: “[Delegates] poured into Birmingham like a cleansing flood, animated one and all with one selfless purpose—to help the South through the democratic process of free speech and frank discussion” (“Birmingham Proceedings of the Southern Conference”). And while these Southern liberals were a far cry from the Vanderbilt Agrarians, they too were steeped in Southern ways

based on their statement of the proceedings: “[We are not] Southern in the sense of magnolia blossoms and sweet dim memories of a by-gone age, but a solid, sensible South, aware that War between the States is over and that the South is the garden spot of the country, but that we must till the soil, or the fairest garden soon over-runs with weeds.” Not only does the statement have Edenic allusions, but also a nod to the agrarian tradition. In the years to come, the conference would attempt to plow, sew, and re-seed their garden in an attempt to create a socially conscious people. They re-convened their revival in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 1940. Social Gospel prophets like Frank Graham and Mordecai Johnson, both of whom outline the religious basis of democracy, attended the meeting. Johnson particularly shows the relationship between the fertility of the soil and the freedom of its people:

The work which we undertake to do here in the South by increasing the fertility of the soil, by the diversification of crops, by bringing of ... [farm] machinery into the South, by bringing scientific intelligence in the South is not merely economics, it is religion, setting the individual souls free from slavery. (Krueger 55)

In this prophetic moment Johnson identifies the changing relationship of man to his environment, and shows that the goal of the Southern conference in the tradition of the Social Gospel is to free men from the drudgery of the rural, agrarian life. This assertion parallels Taylor’s claim, written nearly a decade before in *Christianity and Industry in America*. The “life more abundant” is the result of matching social progress with material progress (88-99). Once people grasp the concept of an industrial world governed by the Christian principle of brotherly love, they will have the maximum amount of freedom.

The answer for the Southern Social Gospel prophets as they moved toward the 1950s and 1960s was to use the crisis of World War II and its aftermath as an impetus for action. McCarthyism, or the Red Scare, beginning in the later 1940s, not only precipitated the boom of

the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), but also gave a “mortal blow” to the Southern Conference (Dunbar 226). While the SCHW allied people who had been accused of communist tendencies before (including Taylor, Kester, and Myles Horton), only the anxiety provided by the Axis defeat precipitated mass suspicion of all groups that appeared “subversive” (Dunbar 226). This moment of crisis could be compared to the crisis of Industrialism: both of which threatened the American identity, and provided Americans the opportunity to define themselves. Who is American? What are our principles? Which people do we trust in light of these principles? These events, which led to questions of identity, “provide the appropriate conditions for discourse”: They are events that 1) are historical rather than rhetorical, 2) are nontactical (either extraneous to the movement in origin, spontaneous in origin, or both), 3) achieve tremendous significance for the movement, and 4) precede rhetorical responses that constitute demonstrably discrete, internally homogenous rhetorical eras (Darsey 489). The rhetoric of the Social Gospel was a response to industrialization, which threatened an America defined by agrarianism. The Southern Social Gospel was a response to industrialism invading the most agrarian region in the country, which also happened to be the one most plagued by the race issue. The Southern Social Gospel prophets in Dombrowski’s era had to respond to a world affected by The New Deal and World War II and its aftermath.

This rhetorical era for the Southern Social Gospel was grounded in the frame provided by earlier Gospel prophets (i.e. Christian duty and American freedom) and amplified by capitalizing on the President Franklin Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms—freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. In fact, both Franklin Roosevelt and Eleanor Roosevelt espoused the principles of the Social Gospel in their work and their rhetoric. The January 6, 1941 State of the Union address is just one touchstone for this historical

moment. In his address—better known as The Four Freedoms—Roosevelt balances the contradictory elements of freedom and duty. In this moment of crisis, a moment that he claims is “unprecedented” in American history, he urges American people to look to the past in order to thoroughly understand the meaning of democracy. In preparing America for war, he engages the common past of Americans, invoking past attempts to destroy American unity and the democratic way of life. The democratic way of life—the ideal way of life, the “secure” way of life—is founded on four essential human freedoms:

The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world. The third is freedom from want, which translated into world terms means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world. The fourth is freedom from fear, which translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world. (*American Rhetoric*)

This “vision” is of “the moral order,” which “under the guidance of God” will prevail against all tyrannical leaders who seek to destroy democracy. Optimistic about the future of American democracy, Roosevelt reaffirmed the American people’s belief in the idea of freedom. With these freedoms, came the duty to maintain them—in this instance, through World War.

Roosevelt’s affirmation of these American freedoms comes at a time when American identity is in flux. Like Taylor before, in response to industrialism affecting Southern identity, The Southern Conference took this opportunity to define a new Southern identity, not only framed by Social Gospel concepts of Christian duty and American freedom, but also wedded to Roosevelt’s four freedoms. The attempt of the Southern Conference to tie their principles more tightly to American political rhetoric, especially in the title of their newspaper (i.e. *The Southern Patriot*) signals their awareness of necessity to re-create their ethos in terms of contemporary

American politics. Dombrowski and the other editors of *The Southern Patriot* used it to cultivate an active citizenry to fight for these freedoms, and they primed Southern citizens for the battle against segregation. In 1948, for instance, *The Southern Patriot* headlined a pilgrimage to Thomas Jefferson's home at Monticello, where they adopted a "new pledge on an old deal" (December 1948 *Patriot*). The declaration that they signed said, "We have taken a fresh look at our American heritage of freedom and equality for all... We still believe all men are created equal, and are endowed with certain rights which each must respect and guard to the other." They reiterated the Social Gospel collective frame by wedding the freedom of all Americans and the duty of each to the other to maintain this freedom. Their rhetoric was supported by place (i.e. the allusion to Jeffersonian democracy), grounded in the political moment (i.e. "new pledge" on Roosevelt's "old deal"), and prophesied a future march on Washington. The December 1948 *Patriot* notes that the march was a "rallying point" for people who believed in the "ethical demands to abolish segregation and discrimination against racial, religious and national groups." In an attempt to craft a new Southern identity that aligned with the new American identity that Roosevelt wanted to be the result of World War II, the editors stressed the need to defend democracy against the evils of bigotry.

Much like Roosevelt primed the nation for war using with his epideictic call to the American people to assist him in his challenge, Dombrowski and his compatriots used the collective memory of their people to assist in their comprehension of the problem at hand. Beginning in 1942, *The Southern Patriot* gave voice to the South that "was not represented in the halls of Congress, and often not in the press of the nation, the South that was decent and which believed in democracy" ("The Voice of the Silent South"). Specifically, they created a collective cultural memory, "a field of contested meanings in which Americans interact with cultural



elements to produce concepts of the nation, particularly in events of trauma, where both the structures and the fractures of a culture are exposed” (Sturken 2-3). The foundation for *The Southern Patriot’s* arguments, then, was both the immediate and the distant past. Immediately, they could recall the hardships of the Great Depression, early instances of union fights (like that of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union), the brutal spectacle lynchings (like Claude Neal’s), and instances of racial injustice that took center stage at the national level (like the Scottsboro Boys case). More distantly, they connected to the founding fathers in their search to define democracy. The twentieth anniversary edition of the paper reflected on the 1940s, saying “the South was a different place in the 1940s—liberalism was not popular, reaction was in the air, and instead of any mass interracial movement to rally behind the decision, there were only voices in the wilderness.” This issue acknowledges that only after the Montgomery bus boycott of 1956 could a new era in the South begin, but the members of the Southern Conference do not want “only a partial victory,” in which white people do not truly support the battle in “substance” (January 1962 *Patriot*). “For a truly new society to emerge,” they say, “white and Negro must built it together” and it is the role of the paper “to speak for the white Southerners who want to help and stimulate more of them [white Southerners] into action.” In their reflection they call attention to all of the fights that they had supported since 1942. The editors show that *The Southern Patriot* recorded the words and the actions of these silent people as they began to speak, and it furthermore was “their stimulator” (January 1962 *Patriot*).

Because *The Southern Patriot* was produced by the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, “a New Deal organization which had been formed by the citizens of the South,” its goal was to show faith in the New Deal programs (“The Voice of the Silent South”). Particularly, it emphasized the battle to eliminate the poll tax because it was the belief that if the electorate was

broadened, then the South could solve many of the issues that made it the nation's number one economic problem. The rocky beginning of the Southern Conference, in which the first meeting of the interracial institution was attacked by the likes of Eugene "Bull" Connor, necessitated that they battle for racial justice across the board. Hence, after 1947, when the Southern Conference Education Fund took over The Southern Conference For Human Welfare, it "adopted a one-point program—the bringing of integration to the South" (2).

In the 1940s, the goal of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare was to, among other things, abolish the poll tax. Nineteen forty four happened to be the 100th anniversary of the birth of the Southern writer George Washington Cable, whose prose *The Southern Patriot* published as a means of constructing a collective cultural past for its readers. Indeed it seems that the very identification of "the silent south" comes from Cable. He wrote, some time between 1884 and 1890, that "you [the Negro people] are before the judgment seat of the world's intelligence ... and it is always a losing business to be in the wrong." In a very Tayloresque moment, he uses principles of the Social Gospel, the judgment of a people to help turn the world into the kingdom of God, paired with democratic principles of the Declaration of Independence, to expose the fractures in his present-day American culture and persuade his audience that this version of Americanism was worth fighting against:

Must such men, such acts, such sentiments, stand alone before an enlightened world? No. I say, as a citizen of an extreme Southern state, a native of Louisiana, an ex-Confederate soldier, and a lover of my home, my city and my state, as well as of my country, that this is not the best sentiment in the South, nor the sentiment of her best intelligence; and that it would not ride up and down that beautiful land dominating and domineering were it not for its tremendous power as the traditional sentiment of a conservative people. But is not endurance criminal?

The editors note that when Cable was nine years old he memorialized the Declaration of Independence and in his essay "The Silent South" wrote:

To some it may seem unimportant that there is scarcely one public relation of life in the South where he (the Negro) is not arbitrarily and unlawfully compelled to hold toward the white man the attitude of an alien, a menial and a probable reprobate, by reason of his race and color. One of the marvels of future history will be that it was counted a small matter, by a majority of our nation, for 6,000,000 of people within it, made by its own decree a component part of it, to be subjected to a system of oppression so rank that nothing could make it seem small except the fact that they had already been ground under it for a century and a half.

Cable in these instances “sounds as if he were speaking in the present,” and the editors note that not much change has taken place due to the lack of a collective voice in the South. Because the South has not been united, and because those like Cable had little means of support, the change they prophesied for the future would be the work of the groups composing the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. *The Southern Patriot* thus uses Cable’s prophecy as an example of the small amount of change that had taken place within the last forty years. The fractures that Cable recalled were only growing wider, and *The Southern Patriot* was constructing the collective memory of the Southern People to prove the necessity of immediate action against the bigots of the South who were destroying American culture, as defined by documents like The Declaration of Independence. They were thereby proving the necessity of immediate actions linking the more recent past—Cable—and the more distant—the Declaration.

Through the use of collective memory, *The Southern Patriot* attempts to reshape the way that movement participants identify themselves within the movement and their larger cultural surroundings. It accomplishes these goals by simultaneously narrating the events that affect Southern liberals but also pushing them to social action by revealing the audience’s potential as moral agents. Throughout the duration of its publication, the paper maintained its loyalty to the Southern people by publishing their voices in “Letters to *The Southern Patriot*,” responding to the requests in subsequent volumes, and organizing entire volumes or minimally front-page

stories to the concerns that readers voiced.<sup>26</sup> The paper gives its audience the opportunity to gain their voice in the same way that the writers of the paper are inscribing their voices in Southern history. This multilayered document mixed voices to create a variety of dialectical moments that expressed resistance via the disclosure of a shared sense of reality (Hauser and mc clellan 30-31). In their own words, the editors of *The Southern Patriot* “relay[ed] the words of good cheer from one fighting man of good will in one section of the South to his embattled brother in another sector” (Vol. 10 No. 1). They facilitated a group identity by demonstrating that they were in battle against a common enemy and that they were indeed the men “of good will.” They reconstituted the historical situation of their readers by shaping the reality of the movement and creating a need for more work in the fight to make “the solid South the fluid South. ” Their simple use of the pronoun “we” strengthens their connection to the reader, noting their shared values for change and setting up the battle that they will continue to face together. The newspaper itself is a space in which radical identities could collectively form. It created a “true and dignified image of those angry, courageous people who believe that the Solid South has become the Fluid South ... [by expressing] their hopes, their fears, their triumphs and disappointments” (1). *The Southern Patriot* challenged the status quo by giving voice to “the silent South;” emphasizing collective identity through their motto “You Are Not Alone,” and defining the Southern Social Gospel Movement by constructing this collective identity. Their hope was that through the collective activity of acquiring their voices, the “silent South” would propel the Southern Social Gospel Movement. Southern liberals become historical actors through their identification with *The Southern Patriot*, and then take action from what they have learned.

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<sup>26</sup> For examples, see *The Southern Patriot* “Youth Conference Report” (Vol. 11 No. 2); “A Brief History, A Proud Record” (Vol. 14, No. 1); “Of One Blood” (Vol. 10, No. 2); “Not By Law Alone” Vol. 15, No.10).

Eleanor Roosevelt, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Anne Braden were three of the voices that composed *The Southern Patriot* and helped the silent South gain their voice.

Eleanor Roosevelt, or, as she titled herself, Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt, is a particular case that shows *The Southern Patriot*'s engagement in defining both a local and a national identity grounded in the Christian duty and American freedom.<sup>27</sup> In an article in 1944 entitled "The South in Postwar America," she sums up the major questions that *The Southern Patriot* would address in all of its forthcoming issues: What will be the position of the South in the period after the war? World War II, as a crisis, would propel the Social Gospel prophets forward in their mission to create a Christian brotherhood. Roosevelt's article attempts to persuade readers that they can achieve a national identity if they overcome one sin: the belief in Southern exceptionalism. Because Southerners viewed their prosperity as independent of national prosperity, they tended to isolate themselves from the Christian brotherhood that believers in the Social Gospel thought would once again make America the beloved community. It is the Christian duty, as Alva Taylor consistently preached, to live by a "principle of service" to all men. As the South presently existed, this Christian duty was largely not accomplishable because Southerners generally did not see their duty to the country but rather to their region. Roosevelt thus points out that the Civil War created Southern exceptionalism, but World War II should create American brotherhood. She wants Southerners to use this time of crisis to redefine their identities. She says:

I think that we must forget the War Between the States. The present war, a war in which men from the north and the south have fought side by side, of greater magnitude than any war which this country has ever before been through, should

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<sup>27</sup> Frank Porter Graham tells the story of Eleanor Roosevelt's support of a desegregated conference in Birmingham. He explains that she sat with the black people until the police asked that she moved, and at this point, she simply placed her chair in the middle of the aisle to resist Jim Crow (Reed 16). Roosevelt supported the Southern Conference from this point on.

serve to bring to a great many young men a better understanding of each other and their families should follow suit. (“The South in Postwar America”)

In the time period between the Civil War and World War II, a period of at least seventy years, Americans had failed to understand the power of this principle of brotherhood, and the nation suffered because this failed understanding limited basic freedoms. As Roosevelt notes in her article, the South “has tended in the past to lean toward isolationism, a position which has been forced upon it to some degree by the rest of the country” (“The South in Postwar America”). She thus attempts to explain how Southerners’ freedom would be maximized if they would buy into the notion of American brotherhood, but her judgment also includes Americans who have placed judgment on Southerners but not allowed them the opportunity to redeem themselves. Particularly, Southerners must at this point recognize that thousands of Southerners fought on the battlefield as equals and were now returning home to a South where this fraternity is not possible. It is the duty of the Southern people to make it possible.

Mary McLeod Bethune’s publications in *The Southern Patriot* and her work with the Southern Conference are symbolic of the brotherhood that Roosevelt seeks, and her work reveals the importance of the black woman’s voice to the Southern Social Gospel. She used her Christian ideals and her prophetic ethos to attempt to convert and transform the souls of women and young people. Her work for the Southern Conference is indicative of the grassroots activism that members of the Southern Conference knew was necessary but that did not flourish until the mid-1950s. By the time she had joined the conference, she was President and founder of the National Council of Negro Women (1935), head of the office of Negro Affairs of the National Youth Administration (1935-1943), member of the Federal Council of Negro Affairs (1936), and founder of Bethune-Cookman college. In the preface to their edition of Bethune’s collected essays, Audrey Thomas McClusky and Elaine Smith explain that “her visibility, and her

confident and dignified demeanor, contradicted notions of black inferiority [...] Bethune was one of few members of her race and sex among the higher echelons of power and influence” (xi). Columnist Louis E. Martin wrote in her eulogy that “it is difficult to understand how much Negroes needed inspiration in the early years of this century and how much of a contribution a person who knew how to inspire others like Mrs. Bethune really made to the general welfare. She gave out faith and hope as if they were pills and she some sort of doctor” (xii). David Howard-Pitney claims that Mary McLeod Bethune’s “main tone was far from jeremiadic; her customary manner was that of a genteel Southern woman ... Nevertheless, her public message consistently contained some characteristic elements of the jeremiad: faith in the national promise, expression of dismay at national declension, urgent moral appeals to reform, and a prophecy of the promise’s imminent fulfillment and start of a new age” (116). While she may not have been a black Jeremiah, she was a Southern Social Gospel prophet speaking in the radical rhetorical tradition. She linked the themes of freedom, duty, and action time and time again in numerous speaking tours or invited lectures. She illustrates her dismay at the current status of America in her “President’s Address to the 15<sup>th</sup> Biennial Convention of the National Association of Colored Women” in 1926: “America is disregarding its plain duty...its moral and spiritual obligations to more than 12,000,000 souls of its population” (Pitney 119). It was a moral necessity, in her eyes, for white Americans to honor the heritage of America, to do their duty as American citizens, and work for the complete freedom of their black brothers. She declared that it was the duty of whites to envision the past as a source of strength in the fight for national unity (“What is Past is Prologue”). For her, it was the responsibility of young people to identify the sins of society, any belief or action that went against mutual respect and appreciation. With a

sense of urgency, she tells students that they must learn to live together, they must *show* non-believers that “tomorrow may be too late,” that “real brotherhood” is possible.

Bethune worked with the Southern Conference to coordinate a Youth Conference, where she prophesied, among other things, the demise of the segregated educational system<sup>28</sup>. The Conference, highly publicized by *The Southern Patriot*, at Allen University in December of 1952 brought together more than 500 people, in a non-segregated environment to show how the youth of the South would be affected by continued segregation. The purpose of the conference, as the statement of objectives read, was to face the problem of a segregated education system and come to a “constructive solution.” The conference had a decidedly Christian tone based on both this statement and the keynote address given by Dr. William Marshall. The Statement of Objectives read:

We are here in this conference because as Americans and heirs of the Judaeo-Christian tradition we believe in the dignity of man under the providence of God, because we believe in democracy and propose its extension and practical application, and because we are confident that men can learn to live together in fraternity and mutual respect.

The speech emphasizes the duality of the American identity. America has both a sacred and a secular history, both of which must be understood and acted upon in order to move forward in this time of crisis. The assertion of God’s presence in history carries with it the assurance that there can be a heaven established on earth once God’s will is realized. Part of God’s will is the formation of a mutual respect between all men so that they might live in brotherhood. Dr. Marshall, in the keynote address, “The Dilemma of Southern Youth,” reiterated this tone:

Many believe that the time has arrived for you young Southern adult Christians to determine on a positive course of action, and to launch out courageously, not necessarily loudly, with the battering ram of your collective influence, to batter down the shameful, anti-Christian wall of segregation. For then, and only then,

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<sup>28</sup> All of the following quoted information comes from *The Southern Patriot* 11.2.



will we restore the lost prestige of our churches and our democracy in the eyes of the cynical world.

Implicitly, Marshall points out the failures of previous generations to provide a clear direction for the future, and calls the youth to action. It is their collective duty as Christians to Christianize social relationships in their fallen, segregated world. Marshall judges those who have come before for their inability to create a new community through Christian brotherhood, and he challenges these students to use the present crisis as their source of strength.<sup>29</sup> As a part of the early Civil Rights movement, these students are asked to view their work as religious and part of sacred history. As part of the youth conference, the attendees drafted a resolution sent to the president, the attorney general, and the governors of states where racial segregation was enforced by law that petitioned them to eliminate segregation in education. For the duration of the conference these delegates, both black and white, were housed in the same area, dined at the same tables, and participated in forums of democratic discussion. The conference was a symbol of brotherhood, of “fellowship, good will, and frankness,” claimed one attendee. As a symbol of the New South and of Americanism, the conference served as a microcosm for the future of work of the Southern Conference. Through the principle of brotherhood, the South could once again be a beloved community.

For this conference, Bethune wrote the speech “We Must Meet the Challenge of a Great Past,” which wedded the past and the present in order to prophesy the future of the South. Her speech, which was read by Rudolph Moses at the Conference on Racial Unity at Allen University, began, “Truly, my friends, ‘What is past is prologue!’” This line from Shakespeare, she says, urges her audience to “look to it [the past] for light and for strength. We may not scorn

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<sup>29</sup> Both Sacvan Berkovitch and James Darsey attest to the power of crisis in providing strength to a movement. Darsey, for instance, writes, “They took courage from backsliding, converted threat into vindication, made affliction their seal of progress” (69).

it nor cast it aside. Fortified by the opening of doors of full opportunity for all—in every phase of living, we must shape the errors into torches to guide our feet, and build its achievements into the foundations of a national unity that knows no race.” The duration of her speech outlines the work of those “of negro descent,” like Richard T. Greener who were offered educational opportunity and hence able to take action as American citizens by teaching, practicing law, and representing the United States abroad in the Foreign Service. She juxtaposes these lives with her own, calling attention to her inability to access equal educational opportunities. Instead, she had to struggle against her race and her “poor schooling” and “dig [her] way uphill, cutting into the slopes of adversity as [she] climbed.” Her point is that she lost years of her life to climbing rather than receiving a normal educational opportunity like Greener. By calling attention to this collective past, this crisis in education that gives some people the opportunity to “act and feel like Americans,” and others, like herself, much less, she challenges the race and class myths. In order to create the beloved community, she sees that it is her role to awaken the public to the law of the leaven.

To awaken the public to the principles of the Southern Conference, as well as the Social Gospel more generally, Bethune worked with James Dombrowski on a speaking tour in January of 1946. Her goal was to challenge both black and white people alike to recognize their duties as Southern Christian citizens. She challenged Southern people to speak out for their freedom and used their past as leavening force to transform the future. She appeared in Tennessee, Alabama, Florida, Georgia, and North Carolina between January 16 and 27 (Reed 100). Her speech entitled “We, The People of the South,” challenges Southern people to meet the “final challenge to civilization to unite itself if it would avert destruction” (Bethune 1). In jeremiadic fashion, she opens her speech with the promise of the “new age” in that the “atomic bomb has turned men’s

minds inward upon their awful capacity for self-destruction—spiritual and physical” (1). The present declension of the Southern people, she claims, is evident in its waste of human and natural resources and its insistence of racial, class, and religious distinctions. While America is supposed to be the leader of the world, the South is in her eyes responsible for creating unnecessary internal conflict disabling it from this position. She says, “Today, the future of the people of the South is mortgaged to an old and insecure past. What must we, the people of the South, black and white, do to redeem this future?” (Bethune 2) Her answer to this question is that the South “must build unity within its borders” (Bethune 2). She prophesies that the South will “do away with tradition” in an effort to redeem its promise “to complete democracy” (Bethune 4). While she outlines the multiple part of the South that must change—abolition of the poll tax, necessity of full and fair employment, benefits of low-income families, and rights for farming people—she argues persuasively that any program attempting to make the South completely free must be rooted in a philosophy of brotherhood.

Bethune also set the stage for the Conference’s transition to its one point stance instituted in 1947. As an interracial conference, the SCEF needed Bethune and other blacks during the red-baiting incidents, which changed the rhetorical stance of the Conference (Reed 64). Her speaking tour in 1946 embodied the threat that white Southerners had feared all along—“a greater number of blacks than they realized no longer accepted a master-servant relationship between the races” (Reed 169). Reed explains:

Segregation intensified the association of integration with communism during the 1950s... Since blacks, according to Southern white conservatives, had previously accepted the relationship, the change [in their attitudes] occurred only because of the influence of outsiders, especially northerners and Communists, who led them to protest in the 1950s ... Blacks who opposed segregation were Communists, and so were their white allies in the struggle. Segregationists, however, generally attacked the liberal white integrationists on Communist charges. (169)

Anne Braden, who became a local field organizer for the Southern Conference and editor of *The Southern Patriot* in 1957, was one of these liberal white integrationists who explains this phenomenon: “This, of course, was in line with the theory that Negroes on their own do not oppose segregation, that it is always the white radicals who pull the strings, and that if the white people so inclined could be silenced the whole disturbing problem would be eliminated” (Braden 213-214). Communism, in this instance, served as a frame that compelled black and white liberals alike to form a stronger collective voice. As one of the few white women civil rights leaders, Braden made it her mission to support black women in the movement, including Ruby Shuttlesworth (the wife of Fred Shuttlesworth) and Coretta Scott King (Braden 197). Braden said she “[had] a mission in life to get women out of the kitchen and involved in things” because “a lot of our problems would be solved if we could just get rid of the men and leave this matter to the young people and the women. I’m considering devoting myself full-time to setting up an organization known as the National Association to encourage intelligent women to divorce their stupid husbands” (qtd. in Fosl 39). Apparently, this lighthearted goal was a result of women resigning from the SCEF board because of their husbands. Nonetheless, Anne fought alongside men, women and children of all races to ensure that the New South would be a desegregated South.

The work of the Southern Conference (i.e. the publication of *The Southern Patriot*, the speaking tours completed by Bethune, and the attempts of Braden to get people involved) shows then that World War II and McCarthyism created the same kind of crisis that industrialism had created for Taylor, and Braden serves as a lynchpin between the Southern Social Gospel

prophets who prophesied change and those who took action.<sup>30</sup> Braden's most well known stand for desegregation was in 1954, when she and her husband, Carl, purchased a house in a white neighborhood for a black family, the Wades; this act enabled her to publicize the Social Gospel on a national front. She chronicles this activity and its backlash (part of which includes the arresting of Carl, whose bail was set at \$40,000) in her book *The Wall Between*, which she published in 1958. The book was a nonfiction finalist for the National Book Award, and its publication resulted in a subpoena to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (Fosl 39). One of the SCEF's major emphases of the 1950s was supporting the Bradens as they proselytized for human welfare in the South and the Bradens ostensibly repaid this support with their campaign via *Patriot* coverage to publicize the first student sit-ins. Her work with students shows her Social Gospel philosophy in practice—she worked with white students to encourage brotherhood among the races. Braden's concept of the “fightback” is one that she contributed to the fight for human welfare. Braden explains in an interview with Fosl that the concept was simple: use the platform that you are given. For instance, the Bradens use the press coverage of the Wade affair as a platform to promote their views on interracialism and capitalism in the South. They circulated literature that discussed the injustices of the case (some of which was in *The Southern Patriot*) and attempted to show in their tour through the South over an eight-month period that they would not be silenced by the label “subversive” or “communist.” This coupling of the literature and the tour educated Southerners on the linkage between Southern efforts against civil rights and the charges of Communist subversion.

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<sup>30</sup> While Taylor, Kester, and Dombrowski acted in the sense that they formed committees, educated the Southern citizenry, and created a Southern rhetorical consciousness, they were not actors in the strictest sense. They did not perform in the same way as Rosa Parks, who, like Braden, physically challenged the status quo.

In Braden's rhetoric in *The Wall Between*, as well as her editorial work for the Southern Patriot, Braden deconstructs Southern whiteness in terms of the Southern Social Gospel. She uses "the wall" as a metaphor to explain Southern ideology and the inability of black and white people to live as Christian brothers and sisters. On one side of this wall are the words of the past that shape either people like Braden, those who fight for the rights of all people, or white supremacists (Braden 275). The wall between people, their skin color, Braden explains, is always there. In a discussion with Andrew Wade, she explains:

I wonder if we will ever achieve it, Andrew, ever in our generation. We think we're tearing down the wall, but then, in a moment of crisis the shadow of the wall rises up to separate us. I've often wondered how I would feel if I were a Negro—I've wondered if I could ever trust anyone with white skin. It would seem that if there would be any trust across the color line anywhere it would be between you and Charlotte and Carl and me. We went through so much together—it would seem there couldn't be any wall left between us. And yet in your moment of crisis, the wall was there. (267)

While Braden could envision a world with a common faith, she believed that like herself, the only way that people could tear down this wall was through defining God as a "spiritual force, the central wellspring of good and love in the universe—a force which served the double function of uniting all mankind in a common bond of brotherhood and of providing a perpetual source of energy that flowed through the life of every individual" (Braden 230). God provided the "creative power" that allowed Braden to battle with her past, a past that had infected her with the principles of *noblesse oblige*. She explains that the white Southern ideologies of the time were a combination of these principles as well as the principle that no man can live for himself alone and that each had the responsibility to live for his fellow man (275). In moments of crisis, she claims, choosing the latter of these two principles is an obligation to the world and to God.

Many of the passages in *The Wall Between* could easily have been written by Alva Taylor. Braden's rhetoric of reform focused on the struggle for others, and in her attempt to

challenge the existing conditions of Southern society, she is optimistic that a new Southern culture will prevail. Unlike Taylor, Braden took action by buying the house for the Wades. She describes the act as a cleansing moment when she challenged a community, a “society too satisfied with its sins”:

How can I ever say for sure that the purchase of the house did not fulfill a need in me: a need to fling a dramatic challenge to a community I thought was moving too slowly, to a society too satisfied with its sins—to fling it like an answer back through the years of my own life, to the man who talked of lynching, to the man with the skull, to the throbbing of my own conscience as I felt the decadent white world closing around me—to fling it like a prophecy, impractical perhaps but hopeful, of a new world that could come, a world that I had seen through a glass darkly, a world without walls.

In her own moment of spiritual awakening, Braden prophesies a world without walls, one that through the spiritual force of God could prevail. In her work with the Southern Conference, she invoked a better future for the South and challenged people to act to realize her dream. While Taylor challenged the Southern myth that the South could not exist with industrialism, Braden challenged the myths of McCarthyism, that people could not question their rights without being accused of subversion. The beloved community was dependent on people recognizing their right to this freedom and their Christian duty to one another so that the wall between them could be torn down and freedom maximized.

While her publicized rhetoric in *The Southern Patriot* and in *The Wall Between* is important for understanding Braden as a Southern Social Gospel prophet, the very act of purchasing the house for the Wades is the most important aspect to understanding her importance to the movement. This display of opposition provided the Southern Social Gospel movement a moment of dramaturgical spectacle that could frame the direct action of early civil rights protesters. Newspapers across the country covered the events surrounding the purchase of the house, and provided free publicity to the movement’s cause. Like the events in Selma in 1965,

the violence on the part of those witnessing the protests unmasked powerful white people's hostile feelings. While the purchasing of the house was not intended as a mode of raising public consciousness, it became a means of circulating information and expressing the solidarity between the Bradens and the Wades. Braden explains this symbolism in *The Wall Between*:

Either [Andrew Wade] could decide that the house could probably never become the quiet home he had started out to seek for himself and his family, and he could therefore give it up and move back to the ghetto; or he could decide that the house had now become a symbol, the embodiment of a principle, and that for him to retreat now would make it more difficult and perhaps impossible for other Louisville Negroes to break out of their walled-in world. (154)

Rhetorically speaking, the Bradens' rhetoric of opposition never had the intent to persuade any audience, but in the end, this symbolic rhetorical act challenged authorities while trying to persuade onlookers that segregated housing was wrong. Because this rhetorical act overtly resisted the norms of society, powerful whites took action against both the Bradens and the Wades by labeling the act "subversive." The act was indeed subversive in the sense that the house was a visible representation of a changing world. The house was a space that represented redemption from a past where black people had no space. The house's visibility served as a constant reminder that the Bradens (and their compatriots) judged white society for their robbing black people of their attempts to pursue life and liberty. As a representation of the Christian principle of brotherly love, the house made people reappraise their culture and their vision for the future of that culture. The entire spectacle shows a shift in the Southern Social Gospel, a move toward political action and the type of work that would be done by other Civil Rights activists.

Braden, Bethune, and Roosevelt's were all able to share the Social Gospel because of James Dombrowski's ("more than any other" as Braden says) decision to create an interracial organization committed to the goal of de-segregating society. Like Kester and Taylor before him, Dombrowski saw that the economic ills in the South could be linked to legal segregation and the



oppression of African Americans, and he used the *The Southern Patriot* as a means to make visible the integrated voices of progressive white and black Southerners. While *The Southern Patriot* was a small newspaper, it minimally provided a space that was symbolic of change. At this point the rhetoric of the Southern Social Gospel was so thoroughly linked to the rhetorical practices of the broader American political sphere that it was no longer a particularly Southern discourse or a particularly Christian discourse (in the strictest sense). The Southern Conference ultimately united the sacred and the secular to such a degree that its conservative Christian principles were not enough to influence non-progressive Americans of its agenda. In other words, the success of Taylor and Kester to spread their gospel had depended on the particular crisis that they responded to and the particular time period in which they worked (i.e. before progressivism was linked to Communism and the Red Scare). The work of the Southern Conference, however, was productive in the sense that it provided a collective frame, using collective memory, that allowed the Southern Social Gospel movement, defined largely by the grassroots efforts I have outlined, to morph into the large Civil Rights movement. The concepts of Christian duty and American freedom continued to be a part of the Civil Rights discourse. In 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his speech “I have a Dream” echoing these sentiments:

Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. And they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone.

It took action on the part of the black community to ultimately create meaningful change, but as King acknowledges, the destiny of white and black men is intertwined, and Southern progressives like Dombrowski knew as much.

## CONCLUSION

Sharon Crowley writes in *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism* “change can begin, then, with admission of a new or countering claim to a belief system” (192). The Southern Social Gospel prophets show how counterclaims can be heard and how those claims create a framework for social movement. In other words, they were at the right place and the right time to identify the need for a new belief system. The difficulty for the later Social Gospel prophets was that they were participating in a broader Southern rhetorical tradition wherein socialist tendencies were not commensurate with religious ideals. Southerners could not see how someone like Anne Braden, for instance, could be a Southern patriot when she was dissenting against, rather than supporting, the status quo. They had forgotten, or never recognized, the radical tradition in American culture in which she and her compatriots were taking part. Socialists could not be patriots. Capitalists are patriots. In this sense, the genius of the Social Gospel Prophets was this double-consciousness; they saw that they could be religiously conservative socialist Americans. In Crowley’s terms, they could not be subjects of “single-mindedness,” the privilege that has “historically been reserved for white males of the propertied class” (192). The social movements of the 1960s would challenge this privilege with more success than the Social Gospel prophets, but the courage of these white people to be both within and without their privilege no doubt served as a powerful context.

Above all, they understood that the Southern ideology could no longer be isolationist if the beloved community was to prevail. To preserve the Agrarian myth—the devotion to a

distinctive Southern identity grounded in its relationship to the soil and the pre-Civil War class structure—the Agrarians would necessarily have to isolate themselves from new versions of Americanism and preserve their single-mindedness. Much like the Christian apocalypticists that Crowley describes, the Agrarians attempted to “make themselves impervious to alternative articulations,” and wanted to create a world where non-Southerners, industrialists, and socialists would not have a voice in the construction of the New South (192). Their manifesto, however, opened a space where alternate versions of Southernism could be voiced by these doubly-conscious Southern Social Gospel prophets. The prophets, unlike the Agrarians, were not only rooted in the beliefs and practices of the Southern people but were also open to civil discourse and the adaptation of belief.

They were able to accomplish their goal of awakening a public consciousness in Southerners by telling these Southerners’ stories to a wider audience. They gave poor Southerners a voice by using their narratives as illustrative points to manifest change. This rhetorical tactic, noted by rhetors from Aristototle to Wayne Booth, is by no means progressive, but was nonetheless used, particularly by Kester and Dombrowski, to convince non-believers in a socially conscious Christianity of its worth. Particularly, they used stories that undercut the message in *I’ll Take My Stand*, that the South could not divorce itself from its historic identity. In many instances, they directly responded to the questions posed by Ransom in *I’ll Take My Stand*:

Will the Southern establishment, the most substantial exhibit on this continent of a society of the European and historic order, be completely crumbled by the powerful acid of the Great Progressive Principle? Will there be no more looking backward but only looking forward? Is our New World to be dedicated forever to this doctrine of newness? (20)

Ransom’s answers, to summarize, are that America, and especially the South, cannot be infinitely progressive if it is to maintain its commitment to intelligence and the arts. The South

needs to use this intelligence to create a new Southern philosophy in the industrial era, but this philosophy must not be engulfed by industrialism to the point that South will lose its “historic identity,” rooted in agrarian culture (Ransom 22). The Southern Social Gospel prophets agreed on this point, that the agrarian culture must be defended, but they painted a new picture of this “historic identity.” This historic identity had robbed poor white and black people, the least of these, of their voices, but *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* and *The Southern Patriot* (along with other Southern Conference publications) gave these voices a place in the historic identity of the South.

The Southern Social Gospel prophets’ rhetoric of radical reform consequently highlighted the themes of Christian duty and American freedom. The Christian’s duty is to promote the life more abundant through acts of brotherly love. Ultimate freedom is the result of Christian brotherhood. This socially conscious Christianity would then spread through the law of the leaven, because it is the duty of Christian brothers to uplift one another. This beloved community was composed of four basic principles which would guide their rhetoric of radical reform: 1) Challenge the myths of Southern identity (as related to race and class and as promoted by the Southern Agrarians), 2) Christianize social relationships, making them fraternal, 3) Maximize freedom, 4) Awaken public consciousness by showing Southern people that they had lost sight of God’s divinity but through struggling for others and determining to uplift every man, Southern culture would prevail.

The collective Christian struggle to maximize freedom for all was extended by Howard Kester with his work for the STFU. Kester bridged the religion of the Southern tenant farmers (specifically the religious rhetoric of bondage and freedom) with patriotic sentiment via economic and class criticism. He awakened the public consciousness of Southern tenant farmers

through gospel of reconciliation, which amplified the collective frame provided by Taylor (the principle of brotherly love) through the discourse of unionism. This grassroots effort reconciled white and black sharecroppers and emphasized non-violent protest to change society.

The final expansion of the Southern Social Gospel resulted from the crises of World War II and McCarthyism. James Dombrowski and members of the Southern Conference used the Southern Social Gospel as the frame to mobilize the silent South. *The Southern Patriot*, as a manifestation of the discourse of the Conference, revealed to readers how struggle was enacted across multiple venues, thus making it a radical force for collectivity. Anne Braden, out of all Conference members, shifted the Southern Social Gospel toward political action by participating in the sub-culture that was produced by and that carried the Social Gospel Movement into the South.

The Southern Social Gospel movement, thus, produced new cultural forms (recognizable vernacular voices and a socially conscious Christian brotherhood) as it attempted to change the lives of underprivileged Southerners. It exposed the spiritual force that “the wall between” inspired, and the unmasking of this force showed that it was possible to unite through Christian brotherhood. The rhetoric of the Southern Social Gospel prophets accomplished this unmasking by challenging cultural sins, via the awakening of a public consciousness among the least of these. These vernacular voices showed that American culture could either be defined by robbing people of their right to live in a just world or it could be defined by its struggle to redeem itself by welcoming these voices in the re-formation of the beloved community. The intensification of duty to other people and the devotion to the figure America created a collective social consciousness in the progressive era South.

As the Social Gospel moved across space, it changed social arrangements, and it produced a collective social memory for those better-known people who struggled for civil rights in the 1960s. This collective social memory, accompanied by the slow tearing down of the wall between, was the Southern Social Gospel prophets' way of showing that inactivity and silence were immoral. The voices of these prophets and their disciples were necessary, and as Faulkner concluded their voices were needed immediately. In his address to the Southern Historical Association on December 1, 1955 he proclaimed:

We accept contumely and the risk of violence because we will not sit quietly by and see our native land, the South, not just Mississippi but all of the South, wreck and ruin itself twice in less than a hundred years, over the Negro question. We speak now against the day when [the] Southern people who will resist to the last these inevitable changes in social relations, will, when they have been forced to accept what they at one time might have accepted with dignity and goodwill, will say, "Why didn't someone tell us this before? Tell us this in time?"

Assuming that Faulkner had his hand on the pulse of the South at the time, this proclamation could be interpreted in one of two ways—either the voices of the Southern Social Gospel prophets, who had been speaking against their day for over a decade, were indeed voices crying in the wilderness (as John Egerton claims), or Faulkner so thoroughly understood the denial of Southern white people who had been hearing these voices that he knew *he*, a native son if there ever was one, also had to raise his prophetic voice. It is this radical tradition in Southern culture, the tradition that calls for civil discourse, people speaking now against their day, that calls us not to alienate ourselves from our history but instead embrace the native radicalism that paved the way for constructive change in the South.

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