When Black Gods Preached on Earth: The Heavenly Appeals of Prophet Cherry, Daddy Grace, and Father Divine

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This study examines the messages of three charismatic leaders who established followings among the substantial black populations of northern cities. Their ministries suggest little in common: one a racist theological innovator, another a self-aggrandizing charlatan, and the third a social reformer who championed integration. They are bound together by their ethical appeal derived from their self-proclaimed ties to the divinity.

When Wilson Wallis (1943) noted that 144 people had already proclaimed themselves to be Christ, the Son of God, or God Himself, his observation was not intended to mark the beginning or end of this phenomenon. Claims of divinity abounded in many black sects and cults in the first half of the twentieth century, particularly in the economic climate spawned by the Great Depression. These "alternative religions" (Mukenge, 1983, p. 63) reached their peak in the 1930s when over 400,000 black Southerners migrated to northern cities. By 1933, 50 per cent of Harlem's black families had no employment and were forced to apply for governmental relief. The tuberculosis death rate in Harlem was four times higher than for the city as a whole. Only one hospital serviced a black population which exceeded 350,000; other city hospitals had policies of racial segregation (Harris, 1971). So desperate were conditions for blacks that in 1932 the National Urban League reported that "in a single block in Harlem 70% of the tenants were jobless, 18% were ill, 33% were receiving either public or private aid and 56% were behind in their rent" (Hoshor, 1936 p. 89). Traditional religions and churches were incapable of meeting human needs and suffered attrition even while the black population was increasing.

By contrast, the charismatic and non-Christian churches were attracting people who "received only advice from the established churches and those who were seeking a sense of belonging and expressive intimacy among their own kind" (Mukenge, 1983, p. 63). These sects especially flourished when their pastors were seen by parishioners as being identified with deity rather than being merely servants of the Lord. This paper will examine the messages of three such charismatic leaders, Prophet Cherry, Daddy Grace, and Father Divine, who established followings among the substantial black populations of northern cities. Their ministries would suggest little in common: one a racist theological innovator, another a self-aggrandizing charlatan, and the third a social reformer who championed integration when almost all social institutions resisted it. They are bound together by the Aristotelian notion of ethos, established primarily by self-proclaimed ties to divinity. To their disciples they were, respectively, the chosen of God, the co-equal of God, and God incarnate (Fauset, 1944).

F. S. Cherry, a completely self-educated black man conversant with both Yiddish and Hebrew, claimed to be called by the Lord in a vision to be His Prophet (Braden, 1949). After experience as a seaman and railroad worker, Cherry established the Church of the Living God, the Pillar Ground of Truth for All Nations, the first Black Jewish sect, in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1886 (Singer, 1992). Little is known about the movement in the nineteenth century; but Cherry, perhaps despairing of the virulent racism endured by African Americans in the South (Woodward, 1966), relocated his group to Philadelphia
where it was called the Church of God, although disciples became more familiarly known as “Black Jews” or “Black Hebrews” (Moses, 1982).

Cherry drew sharp distinctions between his sect and traditional Jews, whom he considered impostors. Black Jews refused to call their house of worship a synagogue, which they claimed belonged only to whites. They quoted Revelations 3:9 for support: “Behold I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not” (Qtd. in Fauset, 1944, p. 4). Cherry’s theology held that God, Jesus, Jacob, and Esau were black; logically black people should be Jews, the direct descendants of Jacob. White Jews were held in contempt for rejecting Jesus; and consequently only black people could join his church (Washington, 1972).

Prophet Cherry combined both Jewish and Christian beliefs into this hybrid dogma. As in Judaism the Sabbath began at sundown Friday night and lasted until sundown Saturday (Braden, 1949), but services were also conducted on Sunday and Wednesday evenings as well. Baptism and the Ten Commandments were observed, while dancing, drunkenness, and photographs were forbidden. Although Christian hymns were sung in church, neither Easter nor Christmas were celebrated as holidays, but Passover was (Washington, 1972). Prophet Cherry referred to the Talmud and Hebrew Bible for scriptural authority, and many of his followers studied Hebrew in Monday night classes. One observer (Fauset, 1944) of this practice noted that “it is not uncommon to hear members quote directly from the Hebrew [although it is a question whether they know what they are quoting]” (p. 34).

Central to the faith was the belief that the original inhabitants of the earth all were black people. Prophet Cherry rebutted the American Protestant myth identifying the origins of the black race with the curse of Cain by citing (Fauset, 1944), which recounted the punishment promised to the dishonest servant Gezahi which would befall him and his descendants forever: “his skin was as white as snow” (Moses, 1982). This scriptural text provided moral authority for the Prophet’s consistently anti-white beliefs. It followed then that “Negro” was a misnomer because all “true Jews are black (Brotz, 1970, p. 9). Jesus was the savior of men, but only because Jesus was a black man. Moreover, according to Cherry, “the Gentiles [whites] have taken from the black folk their land, their money, their names, and cursed them with the title ‘Negro,’” (Qtd. in Washington, 1972, p. 11). Not until black Hebrews get into high places would the world be right (Fauset, 1944).

The worship service of the Church of God also reflected Prophet Cherry’s singular vision. Swords were hung from the walls, along with various signs with Hebrew letters. The male members of the church wore Black skullcaps. Throughout the sanctuary men dressed in military-like garb monitored the proceedings with swords dangling from their sides. Although the church operated without a choir, an orchestra consisting of tambourines, drums, castanets, rattles, and guitars provided accompaniment for the hymns. When the Prophet arrived on the platform he participated in the musical activity by beating a huge drum. After the opening hymn, the congregation rose, faced east and with right hands raised, recited a prayer in unison. Then Prophet Cherry read, in English, a chapter of the Bible, which he annotated with his personal experiences. Following a musical interlude, the time arrived for the sermon.

According to an eyewitness, Cherry began by castigating preachers, whom he called “dumb dogs” (Fauset, 1944, p. 37). In the Prophet’s mind a policeman was worth twenty-five preachers; because the former would sacrifice his life to save your property, while the latter are primarily interested in your money. He then reviled white Jews for denying Jesus and all people who ate pork. Mocking such epithets as “Negroes, coons, niggers, or shines” (Fauset, 1944, p. 37), Cherry proceeded to trace the genealogy of blacks to Noah, shem,
Japeth, Ham, Lot, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He contemptuously dismissed the Gentiles who “have not left you a spoonful of dirt for yourselves, have taken your name, your religion, and your government” (Fauset, 1944, p. 37).

Even though his sermons contained much vilification of traditional Jews and Gentiles, Cherry preached love of all mankind, saying that a child of God ought to love everybody. But he derided white visages of Jesus, even when black Baptist clergymen visited the church. Near the end of his sermon he reminded the congregation about the absence of any collections: “I’ll kick the tambourine to hell out of here if anyone tries to collect money on it” (Fauset, 1944, p. 38). The service ended when the Prophet called for a song, beat his drum, and then dismissed the congregation.

Cherry injected some non-traditional beliefs into his version of Judaism. He envisioned three levels of heaven; the first where people lived on earth, the second in the sky, and the third where God dwelled. Earth, which he believed to be square, was only six thousand years old, but every two thousand years a watershed event produced profound changes. The first of these was the Flood endured by Noah; the second, the coming of of Jesus; and the third, to come in the year 2000, would be marked by widespread conversion of African Americans to their Hebraic heritage, which was denied them by the institution of slavery (Singer, 1992). When Prophet Cherry died at the age of ninety-five, his son, Prince Benjamin F. Cherry, assumed leadership, although the cult never again had the numbers or stature that the founder created. Some members of the congregation denied that Cherry had really died and maintained that he had gone “where his people could not see him” (Qtd. in Shapiro, 1970, pp. 139-140).

While the Church of God confined its proselytizing to Philadelphia, other cults of “Black Jews” were established in Belleville, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. by Prophet William S. Crowdy (Washington, 1972); and Rabbi Wentworth A. Matthew led the Commandment Keepers of the Living God, also known as the Royal Order of Ethiopian Hebrews, in Harlem, although neither of these groups were associated with Prophet Cherry. His legacy appears to have diminished over time. A contemporary critic (Fauset, 1944) praised the prophet for establishing an educational program, encouraging his congregation to open businesses for themselves, and fostering a strong feeling of kinship within the group. But a black scholar (Washington, 1972) a generation later castigated the “Black Jews” for inventing a culture, a history, and a religion to compensate for rejection by whites. In his opinion “they have succeeded in creating cults which are impressive failures, for they further divide black people and therefore forestall the one thing needed: a black communal sense, a community of enriching differences” (p. 134). Contemporary critics are content to mention him in relation to the development of African American Judaism, but do not note any permanent legacy to his movement (Baer & Singer, 1992).

While Prophet Cherry was content to be known as personally called by God (Fauset, 1944), Charles Emanuel Grace had much higher aspirations. Rom Marcelino Manoel du Graca, on a Portuguese territory off the West African coast of African ancestry, he immigrated to America around the turn of the century and worked as a salesman, grocer, and short-order cook on a railroad (Robinson, 1974). After a trip to the Holy Land, he began preaching in 1921 and established his United House of Prayer for All People on the Rock of the Apostolic Faith in Wareham, Massachusetts, a suburb of New Bedford. In the next two years Grace expanded the movement by establishing churches in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Norfolk and Newport News in Virginia. By 1925 Grace had opened a branch in Washington which would become his headquarters. As the cult grew, churches were established in Hartford, Bridgeport, Stamford, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Philadelphia all along the Northeastern corridor, and as far west as Detroit and even Los Angeles (Whiting, 1952).
A tall man with flowing hair, Grace cultivated his towering presence with mandarin-length fingernails which were painted red, white, and blue (Robinson, 1974). A dapper dresser, the Bishop favored cutaway jackets and lots of flashy jewelry, but his followers never objected to his ostentatious appearance. Though he built his church into “one of the largest and wealthiest of all black cult movements” (Weisbrot, 1983, p. 41), he adopted a surprisingly patronizing attitude toward his followers, telling them that “when he took on earthly form he chose to lead the Negroes, lowly in state though they are, rather than the members of some more privileged racial group” (Fauset, 1944, p. 23).

First Grace invested himself “Bishop” (Washington, 1972), but then shifted to “Daddy” in order to deify himself (Moses, 1982). His theology became little more than a play on words. As Daddy Grace described it: Never mind about God. Salvation is by Grace only. . . Grace has given God a vacation, and since God is on His vacation, don’t worry Him. . . . If you sin against God, Grace can save you, but if you sin against Grace, God cannot save you (Qtd. in Washington, 1972, p. 11). Every scriptural reference to grace was then interpreted as if it reflected “Daddy” himself. Cult members were expected to genuflect before Daddy Grace’s portrait (Moses, 1982). Grace even boasted that “he could make the blind see, the lame walk, and cast out evil from the soul” (Harris, 1971, p. 50). What really distinguished the United House of Prayer from all other cults was the entrepreneurship of its leader. Each service offered congregants the opportunity to purchase Daddy Grace tooth paste, tea and coffee, men’s and women’s hair pomade, face powder, soap, talcum powder, shoe polish, and even Daddy Grace cookies (Fauset, 1944). His assembly line Baptisms provided a “charismatic touch to Christian worship” (Weisbrot, 1983, p. 41), allegedly at a dollar a head (Harris, 1971). He also pitted branches of his House of Prayer in frequent competitions to raise money for his private use, with the winning collectors receiving such prizes as seats next to their leader at a banquet (Weisbrot, 1983). During each service there were several collections taken, as dictated by the “General Council Law,” whose Article 48 declared: All houses of prayer must raise money in a united drive to buy a car for our Daddy Grace. Each state must do its part (Fauset, 1944, p. 25). They did; Daddy Grace rode comfortably in a chauffeur driven limousine. Mostly women parishioners attended the typical service in the United House of Prayer, where a picture of Daddy Grace decorated the altar, which was referred to as “the mountain.” The congregants clapped their hands as an observer (Fauset, 1944) noted: There are cries of “Daddy! You feel so good!” “Sweet Daddy!” “Come to Daddy!” “Oh, Daddy!” Then there are brief testimonies, usually including references to cures of headache, asthma, or indigestion. More singing and dancing follows. Women become convulsed, contort themselves, cavort through the house of prayer, finally falling in a heap on the sawdust (p. 28). Ministers would not only extol Daddy Grace soap, which was proclaimed to help people reduce their weight, but also sell the Grace Magazine, which went for ten cents, and if applied to the chest, could cure colds or tuberculosis (Fauset, 1944).

Unlike Prophet Cherry, whose long sermons were the focal point of Church of God services, Daddy Grace was a reluctant speaker. His Portuguese accent may have contributed to his reticence, although Norman Eddy, a Professor of Human Relations at Boston University who knew Grace, said of him: He wasn’t much of a preacher, seldom said anything. He was sort of a Buddha. Men such as Father Divine and Daddy Grace have a psychic power. The power was in his personality, not in anything he said or did (Qtd. in Casey, 1960, p. El). When Daddy Grace died in 1960 his followers numbered in the hundreds of thousands, and his personal estate consisted of several million dollars. He had established 111 Houses of Prayer in 90 cities and towns spanning 14 states and the District of Columbia. His residences included an 84 room mansion in Los Angeles, and smaller houses in New
Bedford, New Haven, Charlotte, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Washington, as well as a 22 acre estate outside Havana, Cuba (Robinson, 1974). But the ministry of this self-appointed "Bishop" did not serve the real needs of his followers. As Joseph Washington (1972) has argued: these adorations are not turned into the assets for the good of individuals or the good of the black community. It is the good of "Daddy Grace" that is the beginning and end of this cult (p. 127). Another critic (Moses, 1982) concluded that Daddy Grace did not really conform to the ideal figure of messianism because he had no social program. The sole purpose of his cult was to further Grace's financial success. This verdict was even more cynically expressed by Robert Weisbrot (1983), who summarized Daddy Grace's popular mass Baptisms as "systematically freeing all comers from the burdens of their material possessions" (p. 41). The property that the cult amassed spawned a series of contested elections and even court actions to determine a successor to Daddy Grace. Walter McCullough emerged victorious, but lacking the charisma of the founder, he presided over a diminishing number of adherents (Baer & Singer, 1992).

In sharp contrast to the racist views of Prophet Cherry and the self-serving aggrandizement of Daddy Grace is the career of Father Divine, who eventually declared himself God and was accepted as such by his followers. Although he always refused to discuss the early years of his life, Father Divine was born George Baker in Rockville, Maryland, in 1879 (Weisbrot, 1992). Working as a gardener in Baltimore and attending a black Baptist church, Baker listened to an itinerant preacher named Samuel Morris who interpreted a verse in First Corinthians, "Know ye not that ye are the Temple of God, and that the spirit of God dwelleth in you?" (Qtd. in Harris, 1971, p. 6) to mean that he, Morris, was God. Morris assumed the name Father Jehova and Baker adopted his own title, the Messenger (Weisbrot, 1992). In 1912 Morris and Baker split up; the latter travelled from town to town in the South. His greatest success, and largest crowds, occurred in Valdosta, Georgia, in 1914 where the Messenger told throngs "I be God," which led two jealous black pastors to have Baker arrested as a public nuisance under a writ that identified the accused as "John Doe, alias God" (Harris, 1971, p. 9). Although acquitted of blasphemy but found "of unsound mind" (Weisbrot, 1992, p. 27), Baker decided that he had seen enough of Southern justice and arrived in New York with no more than eight disciples.

After first living in Manhattan, the Messenger moved to Brooklyn where he lived with his followers who were segregated by sex (McKelway & Liebling, 1951). This communal arrangement had people turning their wages over to Baker in exchange for room and board. The minister forbade alcohol, drugs, and gambling under his roof and discouraged marriage although he and a woman disciple named Pinnakah were recognized as husband and wife (Weisbrot, 1983). The movement grew slowly, but in 1919 the Messenger was able to purchase a twelve-room house in the all-white suburb of Sayville, Long Island, when its owner, in an his neighbor, inserted the word "colored" in the advertisement (McKelway & Liebling, 1951). He also changed his name to Major J. Devine which would alternate with Reverend Devine and ultimately metamorphosed into Father Divine, with a minor change in spelling (Parker, 1937).

In the next decade the cult's membership doubled from twenty to forty as Father Divine started to publicize himself in Harlem, Brooklyn, and the Bronx. On Sundays the pastor provided elaborate free banquets to anyone who showed up (Harris, 1971). When questioned about his bounty, Divine's stock response was that "God will provide" (Weisbrot, 1992, p. 32). A turning point in the movement came in 1930 when an entire busload of white followers from New Jersey became believers. Father Divine subscribed to the view that there was but one race, the human race, and objected strenuously to the term Negro (Weisbrot, 1983). "It
is a curse, and a cursed, vulgar name that was given to low-rate you, in short to DISGRACE you,” he preached (Spoken Word, 1935). Other white converts included a few wealthy women and a Boston University alumnus, J. Maynard Matthews, who abandoned his automobile agency, donated a Cadillac to Father Divine, and became his executive secretary under the new name of Brother John Lamb (Harris, 1971). From that time on all of Father Divine’s housing, meals, and subsequent businesses would be racially integrated, although blacks overwhelmingly provided the majority of his parishioners.

Anyone among the flock who might have doubted the would be convinced by a 1932 incident. When Sayville residents became incensed by the ever-increasing multitudes descending on the Divine residence, and no doubt racially motivated by the integrated audiences of their neighbor, they had the preacher arrested as a public nuisance. After a verdict of guilty, Judge Lewis J. Smith imposed the maximum sentence possible, one year imprisonment and a $500 fine. When their leader was being led away a follower comforted a sobbing woman by saying: Don’t pity Father Divine but pity the judge who sentenced him. The judge can’t live long now, he’s offended Almighty God (Qtd. in Hoshor, 1936, p. 84). Four days later, suddenly and unexpectedly, the otherwise healthy fifty-five-year-old jurist died of a heart attack, prompting Father Divine to comment from his cell “I hated to do it” (Qtd. 1971, p. 41). Shortly afterwards the preacher was released on bail and received his vindication the following year when the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court reversed the decision.

The Sayville incident convinced Father Divine to move to Harlem and greatly expand his movement, now known collectively as the “Peace Mission,” a possible allusion to the founder’s teachings on inner contentment and interracial harmony (Weisbrot, 1983). The headquarters, a five-story building on West 115th Street, became known as “Heaven,” a fitting repository for a diety. As the cult spread rapidly in the b-leak economic conditions of the Depression, the number of branch “Kingdoms, Extensions, and Connections under Father’s Personal Jurisdiction” (Braden, 1949,) grew to a peak of 178 by 1941 with centers operating in Canada, Europe, and even Australia (p. 12). By 1937 Time magazine estimated Father Divine to have 50,000 followers, although that figure was thought to be grossly underestimated by the Peace Mission itself (Weisbrot, 1992).

Since Father Divine was accepted as God, no other sacred book was required other than his words, which were faithfully transcribed by groups of secretaries who always accompanied the minister in his travels. His statements in over 10,000 sermons, letters, and interviews were reported in the Spoken Word, published weekly from 1934-37, and the New Day, started in 1936 and still in circulation long after Divine’s death. While scholars have generally accepted the accuracy of the transcriptions of Father Divine’s actual words, biographer Robert Weisbrot (1983) cautioned about certain editorial “peculiarities.” All words relating directly to race, for example, “White” and “Negro,” are replaced by such euphemisms as “light-complexioned” and “so and so” race. Certain “negative” words with religious connotations are often bowdlerized and, in some cases, replaced by their antithesis: thus the “devil” becomes the “other fellow,” and “Amsterdam” Avenue becomes “Amsterbless” Avenue (p. 224). His speeches were peppered with frequent repetitions which stretched normal syntax to its limits. Of his own divinity he once said: Because God made Himself flesh, it was observable, it was concentratable; in other words, it could be concentrated upon by individuals concentrating on something that was observable, that which was visible being concentratable, individuals concentrating on something, the reaction of such concentrating thoughts caused the reproduction of that which was invisibly incarnated in that on which that individual concentrated, to be transmitted to to those who have concentrated on such, you see (Qtd. in Alexander, 1939, p. 9). Father Divine seemed
to realize that his sermons were not as important as the theology of his movement. As he once noted: I am not preaching emotion; I am not preaching vibrations; I am not preaching inspiration; I am preaching the Inspirator. I am not preaching blessings; I am preaching the Blesser (New Day, 1951).

A typical worship service of the Peace Mission was unlike that of any other religion. The men and women in the audience were segregated, although couples were permitted to sit together. Some of the congregation who sat on an elevated platform in front would rise to either sing hymns or to testify how their lives had been changed by Father Divine’s intervention. The lectern was engraved with the letters A D F D, meaning “Anno Domini Father Divine” (Fauset, 1944, p. 64). The chairperson of the occasion, known in the movement as “Angels,” with unusual monikers as Job Patience, Faithful Mary, Miss Love Dove, Miss Beautiful Peace, or Mr. Humility (Harris, 1971), would speak on various planks of Father Divine’s “Righteous Government Platform,” which the cult had adopted in 1936. Among its beliefs were the abolition of capital punishment, welfare, and all tariffs, and the adoption of a minimum wage and English as the universal world language (Burnham, 1978). After more testimony spontaneous applause welcomed the entrance of Father Divine, bald, barely five feet-two, and dressed conservatively in a three-piece suit. After a few brief remarks the congregation would be invited to partake of the communal meal in the adjacent banquet room where feasts of Broddingnagian proportions were served into the early hours of the following morning. A religion professor at Northwestern University (Braden, 1949) described the proceedings:

They began first with the serving of vegetables. Each heaping bowlful of well cooked vegetables was brought to Father Divine so that he might bless it before it was passed. This he did by putting in a serving spoon or fork and passing it to his right or left to start it on the long round of all the tables. Each guest served himself as much of each dish as he desired and then passed it on to his neighbor.

Eleven different cooked vegetables passed in quick succession . . . I, not knowing what to expect, had begun by taking a little bit of everything but soon saw that this was not wise and became more selective. . . . The average number of different dishes served at these banquets is around fifty-five (pp. 3-4). Members were permitted to approach their pastor with any question or request. Personal interviews with Father Divine lasted long into the morning hours after services were ended. The reverence afforded this black deity was noted by one writer (Fauset, 1944) who personally had witnessed Nazi Germany at the beginning of Adolph Hitler’s rule, but saw “nothing in the enthusiasm and fanatical worship of Hitler’s followers to surpass the intensity and enthusiasm of the followers of Father Divine” (p. 67). Surprisingly, this cult succeeded despite many departures from much of the African American religious experience. Here was a minister who, though twice married himself, discouraged marriage and procreation and enforced the separation of the sexes on his movement’s properties. While religion provided a haven from the institutional segregation and second-class status that American society offered blacks, Father Divine welcomed whites into his church, made one his executive secretary, and placed others in high level positions. For many parishioners, these actions ran counter to their own perceptions and experiences. Even Marcus Garvey, who was willing to accept contributions from whites for his African repatriation scheme, questioned the sincerity of Father Divine’s white supporters and Divine’s integrity for accepting their aid (Moses, 1982).

Notwithstanding the generosity of its leader, no collections of any kind were taken at Peace Mission services. The movement was financed entirely by the generosity of some wealthy benefactors, such as the donation in 1953 by a disciple of a thirty-two room mansion,
for Father Divine’s personal use, on seventy-three meticulously manicured acres in Philadelphia’s tony suburbs (Weisbrot, 1983) and the financial acumen of its pastor. The Peace Mission operated businesses in all areas of the country where it had a following. By the mid-thirties Father Divine’s holdings in Harlem alone consisted of 3 apartment houses, 9 private residences, 25 restaurants, 6 groceries, 10 barbershops, 10 cleaning stores, 2 dozen huckster wagons selling fresh vegetables grown on the movement’s own farms, and a tailor shop (Weisbrot, 1992). The success of Father Divine’s businesses can be attributed to the fact that since his costs were lower, his prices beat the competition. His meals were free to those unable to pay (Erickson, 1977) and only 15 cents to those who could (McKelway & Liebling, 1951). Lodging was similarly budget-priced. One visitor (Fauset, 1944) paid two dollars a week, while a visiting journalist (Harris, 1971), staying in the Divine Lorraine, a first-class hotel in Philadelphia, was shown to a suite containing a huge living room, bedroom, and bath, for which she paid “the same price as out-of-town followers would have been charged—fifty cents a night” (p. xxi).

Father Divine’s success in his ministry can be attributed to his munificence, social programs, and acceptance as “God,” but not to his skills as a speaker. With no formal training in oratory he disdained preparation in favor of impromptu delivery (Braden, 1949). Speaking in a high-pitched voice (Boulware, 1969), he fractured English with multi-syllabic neologisms, among them “visibilating,” “reincarnatable,” “metaphiscalzationally,” “begation,” “lubrimentalitie,” and “anti-supernegation” (Crumb, 1940, p. 327). And Father Divine offered no apologies for his language: I AM what I AM; and you see ME as I AM, as I have heard some say, ‘I see YOU and YOU is.’ It matters not what they say, I understand them. They may make grammatical errors, for I make them for a purpose, that they might understand ME; that I might be with them in their grammatical errors and erroneousness; that I might lift them and they might lift ME. Aren’t you glad (New Day, 1938)?

In 1937 two events occurred that would eventually produce dramatic changes in the Father Divine movement. A former follower, Verinda Brown, sued for money that she alleged was given in trust (Weisbrot, 1983). This was denied by Father Divine, who swore in a lengthy affidavit that no follower in his entire career had ever given him money. But another disgruntled “Angel” testifying for the plaintiff claimed that the weekly take from all the Peace Mission businesses was between fifteen and twenty thousand dollars and that Divine personally “handles all that money and he keeps it for his own purposes” (Qtd. in Harris, 1971, p. 94). The court entered a judgment in the amount of $4476 plus costs, which was immediately appealed. Recognizing the danger posed by having other greedy or disgruntled disciples filing similar suits as well as the embarrassing slight to his “Godly” reputation, Father Divine decided never to acquiesce to the court’s decision. Although the verdict was twice upheld on appeal, he refused paying an “unjust” judgment and under threat of imprisonment for contempt of court, Father Divine moved permanently to Philadelphia in 1942 to escape the jurisdiction of New York authorities (Weisbrot, 1983). But the majority of his businesses and followers were now permanently deprived of the physical presence of their charismatic leader; and as the economy of the nation improved with the war effort of the forties, the Peace Mission never attracted the same number of adherents in the city of Brotherly Love as it had in Harlem (Burnham, 1978). The other turning point in 1937 was the death of Penninah, now known in the movement as Mother Divine, which was kept secret from all but Father’s inner circle for many years. This contradicted the teaching that “a person of perfect faith would always have perfect health” (Weisbrot, 1992, p. 108) as well as the ethos of an omnipotent deity. But the cult suffered an even greater shock when, in 1946, the then sixty-seven-year-old leader married a twenty-one-year-old blonde white woman, Edna Rose Ritchings of Vancouver, Canada, who now
assumed the name of “Sweet Angel” (Harris, 1971, p. 268). Father Divine explained that his first wife decided that she needed a new body and that “Mrs. Divine presently, as you see her,” was the “reincarnation of the spirit” of Mother Divine (Qtd. in Weisbrot, 1992, p. 110).

When the leader of a religion is recognized as “God” by his following, plans for succession become moot. As Father Divine aged and his health deteriorated, personal appearances became less frequent. One memorable one was the visit, in 1953, of another famous black cult leader, Prophet Jones, whose sect, “Universal Triumph, The Dominion of God, Incorporated” (Washington, 1972, p. 117), accepted the notion that God spoke directly through their pastor (Boulware, 1969). This meeting of two spiritual potentates had the potential of testing the faithful, but that was diffused when Divine greeted his guest with “I am happy to meet you, Your Holiness,” to which the Prophet responded, “God bless you, Your Godliness” (Qtd. in Weisbrot, 1983, pp. 217-218).

Beginning in 1955 Father Divine’s followers faced irrefutable evidence of their leader’s decline. He was secluded for long periods of time, and on those rare occasions that he made public appearances his voice was barely audible. At times Mother Divine made announcements or handled questions. In 1960 came the revelation that he had been hospitalized with a diabetic coma. The faithful explained that he was not really ill, but “was taking upon himself the sufferings and infirmities of humanity to gain salvation for us all” (New York Amsterdam News, 1960, p. 1). In his last public appearance, in 1963, he only watched as Mother Divine delivered the sermon. Within the movement came recognition that the end was near when three residents of the estate, Miss Sunshine Bright, Miss Martha Blessed Love, and Miss Dorothy Darling admitted that although they saw Father Divine daily, they were prepared for “the day when he will not continually be with us” (New York Times, 1964, p. 53). In 1965, at the age of 86, he died, and the ever-decreasing numbers of followers were led by the second Mother Divine, who continued at the helm into the 1990s (Weisbrot, 1992). It is indisputable, however, that religious movements that foster celibacy will eventually face extinction themselves, since their ability to recruit new member never keeps up with losses due to death. Even though the Peace Mission still has some aged members alive today, it is destined to follow the same fate as the Shakers.

For years scholars have struggled with the proper location of the Peace Mission movement in various taxonomies of African American religion. Melville J. Herskovits (1941) believed religiosity to be a controlling factor in the lives of most African Americans to the point that it “causes them, in contrast to other underprivileged groups elsewhere in the world, to turn to religion rather than to political action or other outlets for their frustration” (p. 207). Yet Father Divine’s Righteous Government Platform was precisely a declaration of political action. Arthur Huff Fauset (1944), perhaps the most introspective and detached student of black cults of the 1940’s, theorized that “American Negro cults practice forms of endogamy, in some instances proscribing even with regard to race.” Yet Fauset was forced to admit that “in the Father Divine cult, where marriage is strictly forbidden, there is much greater social catholicity within the cult” (p. 108). One of the foremost authorities of black sects and cults, Joseph R. Washington, Jr. (1972), has written eloquently about the role of prophet or Messiah which characterized the leadership of many religious groups during the Great Depression. Yet Washington concluded that: Prophet or messiah does not fit with the meaning of Father Divine or Daddy Grace. These men are God to their people, the black God who has come to deliver black people from white rule. In this, the cult-type does not fall between the black church or sect types, but transcends them (p. 16). Daddy Grace, who in the opinion of one historian of cults (Washington, 1972) “prostituted” the institution (p. 127), was universally considered to be a mountebank (Moses, 1982). Historian Robert Weisbrot (1983) concluded that “Grace seems to have
differed from many other cultists chiefly in the scale of his rapine” (p. 42). Still, one observer (Fauset, 1944) argued, not without merit, that “many of the magnates in the secular world reversed the Bishop Grace process by becoming ardent sponsors of the Christian church after they had achieved material success” (p. 89).

Although Prophet Cherry, Daddy Grace, and Father Divine were by no means the only religious leaders, black or white, claiming messianic status in the first half of this century their heavenly appeals are representative of this genre. While the three “black Gods” analyzed in this paper never excelled in their public speaking and would be unlikely candidates for inclusion in any anthology of eloquence, they did fulfill the Aristotelian requirements for ethos, or source credibility for their followers. In the midst of great deprivations these preachers provided hope, that most precious of all intangible commodities. When heavenly messages are delivered by heavenly messengers the resulting fusion can have powerfully persuasive consequents. As Fauset (1944) has observed of all cults, there is in adherents “the desire to get closer to some supernatural power, be it God, the Holy Spirit, or Allah” (p. 76). The three sects studied in this paper all had singing, shouting, and hand-clapping in the worship service, another characteristic of black religion (Boulware, 1969). The Great Depression also produced “an apparent vacuum of church leadership which was filled by flamboyant messiahs and cultists like Father Divine and Daddy Grace, whose promise of utopias and provision of social services to the abject poor caught the attention of the press and the imagination of the people” (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990, p. 121). Another reason that messianic appeals were favorably received by black parishioners can be found in the blatant prejudice and discrimination endured by African Americans in the first half of this century. Prophet Cherry constantly reminded his congregants of the degradations inflicted by whites; his theology offered the faithful the prospect of being the “Chosen People,” with all the accouterments of Old Testament martyrdom.

Of the three religious leaders examined here, Father Divine has received the most favorable reviews from historians and social critics. A biography of him (Weisbrot, 1992) in the Black Americans of Achievement series focuses on his charitable endeavors and efforts to reform society. It is not difficult to understand why this black messiah’s heavenly appeals would gain acceptance. Long before there was a national civil rights movement in this country Father Divine was both preaching and practicing integration and racial tolerance. Before government could respond to the needs of the downtrodden, Father Divine ministered to their bodies and souls. Summarizing his career, and possibly composing his own epitaph, he declared: “I am joy, peace, life, and love and everything else that is good” (Chicago Defender, 1965). One biographer (Weisbrot, 1992) effectively summarized: Ecstasy reigned among the poor, the racially outcast, and the troubled in spirit so long as the good Father remained to inspire them. Twice a day, every day, the banquets broke through the monotony of their lives to bring them what they knew with deepest belief was the Kingdom of Heaven on earth (p. 57). As Mohandas Gandhi once observed, “God Himself dare not to appear to a starving man except in the form of bread” (Qtd. in Brembeck & Howell, 1976, p. 85).

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