

UTOPIA PARK, UTOPIAN CHURCH: A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF JAMES K. HUMPHREY AND THE UNITED SABBATH DAY ADVENTISTS, 1930-2000¹

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Introduction

Scholars of African American religion have noted that almost from the instant that people of African descent in America began to appropriate the symbols of the Christian religion taught to them by their European masters, the brand of Christianity that African Americans practiced exhibited a conflicting strain and contradictory nature.² Eugene Genovese calls the phenomenon the “dialectic of accommodation and resistance.”³ On one hand, African Americans practiced a retooled Christianity that provided them with emotional and psychological strength in an alien, unfriendly world. On the other hand, their Christianity was both a form of self-expression and a vehicle of resistance to the discrimination they often experienced in the broader culture. Yet African American Christianity did not oscillate between accommodation and resistance, holding them instead in dynamic, dialectical tension. United Sabbath Day Adventists reflected this tension in African

¹James K. Humphrey was a Baptist minister who joined the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church shortly after migrating to the United States from Jamaica at the turn of the twentieth century. A leader of uncommon skill and charisma, Humphrey ministered in Harlem, New York, during the time the area became the black capital of the United States, leading his congregation to a position of primacy in the Greater New York Conference of SDAs. Yet Humphrey believed that the African American experience in Adventism was one of disenfranchisement, a problem he tried to ameliorate with the establishment of the Utopia Park Benevolent Association. When Humphrey refused to abort or alter his plans at the request of SDA church leaders, his credentials were revoked and his congregation expelled from the denomination. Subsequently, Humphrey established an independent black religious organization, the United Sabbath Day Adventists. See R. Clifford Jones, “James Kemuel Humphrey and the Emergence of the United Sabbath Day Adventists,” *AUSS* 41 (2003): 255-273.

²The contradictory nature of African American religion is given full treatment by Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer in *African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992). The tension is reflective of the “double-consciousness” that W. E. B. Du Bois, one of the twentieth century’s most probing African American thinkers, believed characterized his people. In 1903, Du Bois wrote: “One ever feels this two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (*The Souls of Black Folk* [New York: Library of America, 1990], 8-9).

³Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Built* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), 659.

American religion. In retaining several salient features of Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) doctrine and organizational structure, even as they splintered to form a distinct religious body, United Sabbath Day Adventists display the juxtaposition of accommodation and resistance characteristic of twentieth-century African American religion.

The Socioeconomic Context

In his historical overview of ministry in the black church, E. Forrest Harris Jr. offers the following division: the pre-Civil War Black Church;⁴ the Formative Period, from the Civil War through Reconstruction; the Maturation Period, from Reconstruction to the beginning of the Great Migration; the Expansion-Renaissance Period, from the Great Migration to World War II; the Passive Protest Period, from World War II to 1955; and the Radical-Reassertion Period, from 1955 onward.⁵ The period during which Humphrey labored as an SDA pastor and later United Sabbath Day Adventist leader was the Expansion-Renaissance Period,⁶ even though the organization Humphrey established in 1930 survived the twentieth century.⁷

Calling the Expansion-Renaissance period a watershed era in the social history of ministry in black churches, Gayraud S. Wilmore says that it was during this period that people of African descent in America needed the church more than ever. He contends that by World War I blacks were more segregated and discriminated against than they had been when the Fugitive Slave Law was enacted. He cites an "unprecedented wave of

⁴During slavery, the black church existed as the "Invisible Institution." The standard work on the church during this era is Albert Raboteau's *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

⁵E. Forrest Harris Jr., *Ministry for Social Crisis: Theology and Praxis in the Black Church Tradition* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1993), 19.

⁶Humphrey gave up leadership of the United Sabbath Day Adventist organization in 1947, five years before his death. His last days were shrouded in uncertainty, conjecture, and suspicion. Humphrey became legally blind toward the end of his life, and, put simply, died a sad man. His spouse of half a century having preceded him in death, his daughter from that union having long since terminated her association with the United Sabbath Day Adventists, and with his family situation the subject of speculation and allegation, Humphrey often felt alone and misunderstood. The bishop confessed that he felt he had not achieved his objective in establishing an independent religious organization that provided African Americans with the power and self-determination they lacked in those denominations operated by whites. Ironically, for reasons that remain unclear, Humphrey's funeral service did not take place at the New York United Church's facility (Ucilla La Condre, interview by author, tape recording, Bronx, New York, June 11, 2000).

⁷After Humphrey, the New York United Sabbath Day Adventist Church was pastored by William Samuels (1947-1987), William Pointer Jr. (1987-1992), Berwyn La Mar (1992), Howard Brooks (1993-1996), Kevin L. Jenkins (1996-1999), and Princeton Holt (1999-2000). Jenkins and Holt were, like Humphrey, former SDA pastors who had run afoul of the denomination.

lynchings, Ku Klux Klan and other anti-Negro hate groups, violence and dire poverty in the black community” as reasons for the deluge of blacks seeking asylum in the North. As a consequence, Wilmore concludes, black churches were hard pressed to provide sanctuary to newly arrived blacks, some of whom showed up at church doorsteps with all their belongings.⁸

From about the last decade of the nineteenth century to about World War II, African American religion—never a homogenous, monolithic phenomenon but a dynamic, creative force that expresses itself in a rich variety of ways—exploded in a number of forms in American cities. Mainstream black denominations saw many of their members leave to join storefront groups that seemed to more adequately meet the needs of the thousands of blacks pouring into American cities, especially those in the North. The sheer diversity of these religious groups testifies to their fierce independence, a fact that receives additional backing when the names of these groups are brought into focus.⁹ Yet not all African Americans left predominantly white or white-led denominations to join or form black ones.

Why did some African Americans remain in predominantly white congregations? Why did some blacks establish independent black congregations in white-controlled religious groups? How did the black congregations in white-controlled denominations adapt the teachings and policies of these denominations to their cultural context? Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer pondered these questions, failing to come up with meaningful answers. They noted that blacks belonging to white-controlled denominations fell into three broad social categories: a middle class, whose members tended to join the mainstream denominations; a new middle class, whose members tended to join unconventional religious groups; and a working class, whose members tended to join white-controlled sects such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and SDAs.¹⁰ The authors stress that blacks in these

⁸Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black and Presbyterian: The Heritage and the Hope* (Philadelphia: Geneva Press, 1983), 43.

⁹Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), 152.

¹⁰Baer and Singer, 103. The debate over whether the SDA Church is a cult has raged for years, with church leaders vigorously denying the charge. Walter Martin has studied the issue extensively (*The Truth About Seventh-day Adventism* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960] and idem, *The Kingdom of the Cults* [Minneapolis: Bethany, 1997]). In the latter work, Martin, 517, has a chapter entitled “The Puzzle of Seventh-day Adventism,” saying in it that “it is perfectly possible to be a Seventh-day Adventist and be a true follower of Jesus Christ despite certain heterodox concepts.” See also Richard Kyle, who says that SDAs are “an established, institutionalized sect that is set off from society by certain peculiar beliefs and practices.” Included in those beliefs are the Sabbath and dietary practices (*The Religious Fringe: A History of Alternative Religions in America* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993], 151). For Kyle, Seventh-day Adventism is a sect, though one that possesses cultic characteristics. H. J. Bergman argues that whether SDAs are a

religious bodies were still predominantly members of all-black congregations. Citing W. E. B. Du Bois, Baer and Singer claim that particularly in the early twentieth century most African American congregations of white-controlled denominations pitched their message to elite blacks, while all-black denominations catered more to the middle- and lower-middle-class black.¹¹ This was not the case with either First Harlem SDA Church, which boasted an enviable giving record, or the United Sabbath Day Adventists, who, almost from their inception, struggled financially. Yet First Harlem's giving patterns may have been due to the premium SDAs ascribe to stewardship, a concept the denomination views as involving much more than financial contributions. Humphrey's independent Sabbath Day Adventist movement struggled from its inception not because it catered to middle- to lower-class blacks, many of whom were expatriates from the West Indies, but because SDAs tend to look askance at independent movements. Do African Americans who belong to white-controlled religious bodies tend to be less activist than African Americans in black-controlled ones? Not so, according to many scholars.¹²

The United Sabbath Day Adventists: Cult or Sect?

In an attempt to understand the religious diversity evident in African American religion, Baer and Singer proposed a typology of black sectarianism, coming up with a four-cell matrix in which each cell represents a different type of sect. As they see it, mainstream denominations accept the cultural norms of the broader society, aspire to obtain a piece of the proverbial American pie, and primarily draw members from the middle class who have achieved a measure of social legitimacy and stability. Second, Messianic-Nationalist sects combine religious beliefs with a goal of achieving political, economic, social, and cultural autonomy. Founded by charismatic individuals whom followers tend to view as specially gifted leaders, Messianic-Nationalism groups tout a glorious black past and a future age of accomplishment for blacks. Third, Conversionist sects lean toward an otherworldly apoliticalism, eschewing activism. They prize conversion and sanctification, and are often criticized as being escapist. Fourth, thaumaturgical sects utilize the magical as a means of achieving such socially acceptable goals as wealth and health.

cult or sect is not as important as why cults exist and the reasons people join them (*The Religious Fringe: Cults, Cultists and Seventh-day Adventists* [College Place, WA: H. J. Bergman, 1991]).

¹¹Ibid., 49.

¹²Ibid., 108. See also August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880-1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966), 222.

Like mainstream denominations, they generally accept the cultural norms of the larger society.¹³ In this typology, the United Sabbath Day Adventists fall into the Messianic-Nationalist category.

Arthur Huff Fauset has noted that the penchant of black churches to split from white-led denominations in the early part of the twentieth century was due in part to their nationalist tendencies. Especially when these groups existed as “cults,” nationalism often eclipsed a focus on more traditional and widely accepted Christian tenets, including foundational doctrines such as the Trinity.¹⁴

United Sabbath Day Adventists, like the SDAs from whom they splintered, resist being identified as a cult, holding that they are in the mainstream of evangelical Christianity.¹⁵ Yet one reason United Sabbath Day Adventists may have flourished, especially from 1930 to 1950, was because of the social climate permeating black America. According to Miles Fischer, during those two decades “some unorthodox religious group which makes a definite appeal to Negroes” was to be found “almost in every center, particularly urban.”¹⁶ Exploiting the slowness of the organized Christian churches to address the emotional and social as well as the spiritual needs of the urban masses, these groups were led, for the most part, by unlettered individuals who deliberately avoided the historical-critical method of biblical interpretation popular at the time. These leader-preachers appealed directly to Scripture in search of material for the proof-text kind of preaching for which they were known. C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya contend that this was an era characterized by a “relative quietism and an apparent vacuum of church leadership” into which cult leaders flowed with promises of utopia.¹⁷ Black cults and sects met in storefronts and other unpretentious

¹³Baer and Singer, 55-64. See also idem, “Toward a Typology of Black Sectarianism as a Response to Racial Stratification,” in *African-American Religion: Interpretative Essays in History and Culture*, ed. Timothy E. Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau (New York: Routledge, 1997), 257-276.

¹⁴Arthur Huff Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis* (New York: Octagon, 1970), 9, 76.

¹⁵The terms “cult” and “sect” are usually used pejoratively. Yet, as Joseph Washington Jr. reminds, historically several religions were seen by outsiders as cults before they evolved into sects and then churches. Christianity itself was initially regarded as a Jewish cult. It then became a persecuted sect before growing into a denomination and finally into a triumphant world movement and accepted church. See Joseph R. Washington Jr., *Black Sects and Cults* (New York: University Press of America, 1986), 1, 2; and James R. Lewis, *Cults in America* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1998).

¹⁶Miles Mark Fischer, “Organized Religion and the Cults,” in *Afro-American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985), 392.

¹⁷C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 121.

assembly halls, often operating social ministries out of them.

Joseph R. Washington Jr. states that sectarianism is the response to power desired and denied, adding that the black "cult-type" was not just a religious movement. It was also a political, social, and economic force that spoke of ultimate black triumph over antagonistic principalities and powers—a "call to new life" and a "call to new power" in this present world. Though they created an abundance of myths, advocates of the black "cult-type" lived in a world devoid of myths. Yet their central and ultimate power was God, who empowered their leaders to transcend the immediate materiality of the world with transcendent, supernatural force.¹⁸

Arthur Huff Fauset posits that people were drawn to the cults for a number of reasons: a desire to be closer to the supernatural, the charismatic personality of the leader, and race consciousness. Additionally, they wanted to rid themselves of physical and emotional illness.¹⁹ The first three of Fauset's reasons seem to apply to the United Sabbath Day Adventists. Many of those attracted to the new religious movement expressed a desire for "a closer walk with the Lord," and found that the articles appearing in the *Messenger*, the United Sabbath Day Adventist journal, spoke to that desire and need. Additionally, race consciousness was a factor that drew people to the United Sabbath Day Adventists. Indeed, the group had splintered from the SDAs on that very issue. Finally, Humphrey's charismatic personality was no small draw to the group.²⁰

That Humphrey may have had problems with the law and may have spent time in jail on charges that were ultimately dropped in no way detracted from his appeal and/or discounted his influence. Not a few of the cult leaders of Humphrey's time had run afoul of the law themselves. Yet, according to Fischer, it was uncommon for a cult leader to be "adjudged guilty of anything other than insanity." According to him, one cult leader of the era was arrested twenty-six times, including six times for insanity. Another, Father Chester Talliafero, founder of Saints' Rest in Philadelphia, was arrested three times for gross misconduct "only to be detained in an asylum from which he was released."²¹ Cult leaders were charismatic personalities whose appeal depended in part on physical and psychological idiosyncracies, and even quirks. Indeed, a distinguishing

¹⁸Joseph R. Washington Jr., *Black Sects and Cults* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 245.

¹⁹Fauset, 107-109.

²⁰Irene Jarvis, interview by author, tape recording, Brooklyn, New York, August 15, 2000; Bernice Samuel, interview by author, tape recording, St. Albans, New York, April 17, 2000; Dorothy Simmonds, interview by author, tape recording, Mt. Vernon, New York, June 11, 2000; La Condre.

²¹Fischer, 397.

feature of the independent black-church movement was the captivating, if not transfixing, personality of the leader, an element that applied to the United Sabbath Day Adventists. Humphrey's "stately bearing" helped to set him apart as a specially chosen vessel of God, and his struggles with the SDA denomination only added to his allure.²²

The most celebrated Harlem religious leader during the 1930s was Father Divine, or George Baker, as he was named at birth. More than any other African American religious leader during the time, Father Divine personified and epitomized the "Black Gods of the Metropolis" tradition. Divine's Peace Mission achieved legendary, if not mythical, status in New York City because of his power and clout. Allegedly, a letter was once addressed to him simply as "God, Harlem, U. S. A.," and the United States Postal Service delivered the piece of correspondence to him.²³

Divine's fame and notoriety were challenged by Daddy Grace, the most flamboyant and controversial of the "Black Gods of the Metropolis." Grace, who was born in the Cape Verde Islands, established the United House of Prayer for All People in Massachusetts in 1921. More messiah than nationalist, Grace presented himself as the liberator African Americans had been looking for, appealing to them to turn to him for salvation. To be sure, Grace never promoted himself as a deity. Yet his penchant for flashy jewelry, shoulder-length flowing hair, and fancy suits did set him apart, as did the assortment of household goods and toiletries bearing his name that his organization promoted.²⁴

There are stark differences between Humphrey and these "Black Gods of the Metropolis," the most obvious being that at no time did Humphrey conceive of himself as a messiah or deliverer. Humphrey never had any delusions of grandeur and never called himself God or the son of God in the theological sense. He deliberately avoided a life of flamboyance and ostentation, and was never carried on the shoulders of followers, driven in a horse-drawn carriage, or chauffeured in a limousine.²⁵ To be sure, Humphrey

²²La Condre.

²³Two excellent works on Father Divine are Robert Weisbrot, *Father Divine and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983); and Jill Watts, *God, Harlem, U. S. A.: The Father Divine Story* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

²⁴Fauset, 155.

²⁵Marcus Garvey, the diminutive Jamaican who succeeded in establishing the first mass black movement in America, was known for the grand parades his Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) staged. In them, Garvey, often bedecked in plumes and royal attire, rode in limousines and was sometimes carried aloft. Scholars are divided as to whether Garveyism was a religion or not, or as to its religious elements and dimensions. Fauset did not include the movement in his study of black cults in the urban north. Yet other scholars could not help but see religious elements in Garveyism. See, for example, Randall

was urbane and suave, but empire building was never on his agenda. His book was the Bible, and he remained a Bible student and preacher to the end, keeping the attention of his members riveted on the Bible. Humphrey lifted up Jesus Christ as the Living Word. Yet, as all conscientious clergy do, he did appeal for funds to keep his organization afloat. But the bishop never focused attention on finances to the exclusion of other critical organizational issues.

*James K. Humphrey and the United Sabbath Day
Adventists: An Assessment*

What kind of black religious leadership did Humphrey provide? E. Forrest Harris Jr. has identified four styles or models of black religious leadership relative to the "liberation praxis" in the African American church: the pastoral, the prophetic, the reformist, and the nationalistic. The pastoral model seeks to "comfort and to console those battered by life's adverse circumstances"; the prophetic seeks to "reveal the contradictions inherent in the life of the community and dominant culture and to clarify the ethical vision of justice in situations of human oppression"; the reformist is a "mix of politics and religion" on behalf of a disenfranchised black community; and the nationalistic model, which believes that self-determination is a basic ethical and political right of people, advocates "some form of racial separation to allow blacks to gain a self-determined vision and control over their own destiny." The effectiveness of each model is tied to "moral accountability to the black community." Summing up, Harris says that ministry in the black church is "an attempt to preach, teach, and live out the biblical message of freedom under God so that it powerfully impacts the realities of black existence in a context of cultural, social, political, and economic oppression." Yet this does not mean that black religious leaders discount inner transformation. Indeed, they generally hold that inner renewal is at once a prelude and postlude to social transformation.²⁶

K. Burkett, who examines Garvey as a black theologian (*Garveyism as a Religious Movement: The Institutionalization of a Black Civil Religion* [Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1978]). See also Henry J. Young, *Major Black Religious Leaders: 1755-1940* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977); Wilmore argues that Garveyism was "in the best tradition of the Black Church in America" (*Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 203). Randall K. Burkett posits that the Garvey movement cannot be fully understood apart from its religious dimensions (*Black Redemption: Churchmen Speak for the Garvey Movement* [Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978]). Tony Martin is widely considered the authority on Marcus Garvey (*Marcus Garvey: Hero* [Dover, MA: Majority, 1983]); idem, *Marcus Garvey: Message to the People* (Dover, MA: Majority, 1986); and idem, *The Pan-African Connection: From Slavery to Garvey and Beyond* (Dover, MA: Majority, 1983).

²⁶Harris, 93-98.

Using Harris's scheme, a reasonable conclusion is that Humphrey was prophetic and nationalistic as an SDA minister and more pastoral as leader of the United Sabbath Day Adventists. To be sure, as Harris has allowed, African American religious leaders have seldom been exclusively one or the other, combining many elements of each model in their attempts to serve their congregants.²⁷

Did Humphrey accomplish his objective of creating self-determination among black Adventists who keep the Sabbath? And did the United Sabbath Day Adventists become the autonomous religious organization its founder envisioned?

Measured merely by numbers, the United Sabbath Day Adventists have failed to thrive, especially in comparison to black SDA churches. As the twenty-first century dawned, the average weekly attendance at the New York United Sabbath Day Adventist Church was sixty; today there are no viable branches of the group elsewhere. Most urban African American SDA congregations, especially those in New York City, have membership in the hundreds, while Ephesus SDA, the outgrowth of the reorganized First Harlem SDA congregation, has a current membership of approximately 2,200. Still, success is not always a function of numbers. New York United may be small in numbers, but not in spirit or pride.

Regrettably, not many African American SDAs are familiar with the name James K. Humphrey or the group he founded, and even among those familiar with the history of the Sabbath Day Adventists there is much confusion. Yet Humphrey's bold move in establishing an independent religious organization, replete with General Conference sessions modeled after those conducted by SDAs, inspired a generation of African Americans caught up in the throes of the Great Depression and World War II. To West Indians, struggling to resonate with a new culture, and to indigenous blacks, many of them newly arrived from the South, Humphrey's stance against an established power heralded a new day of resistance and nonacceptance of conditions and practices he and his followers considered hostile toward people of African descent.

Unable to reconcile Christianity's teaching of inclusion and community with SDA behavior he considered discriminatory,²⁸ Humphrey concluded that the time had come for an independent church, founded and operated by blacks. Such an organization would be an antidote to the lack of self-determination and power evident in the African American population. Moreover, the new religious body would more effectively evangelize the black community, meeting not just its spiritual but its social, political, and

²⁷Ibid., 93.

²⁸See Jones, 259-260.

economic needs as well. More importantly, it would be a visible monument to the black theology of liberation.²⁹

To be sure, Humphrey's brand of activist rhetoric never did approximate that of the nineteenth-century black liberator David Walker, whose cry to "awaken his afflicted brethren" struck a responsive strain within them that was broad and deep.³⁰ Nor was Humphrey's message a new interpretation of what other black "liberators" had been saying for a long time. Even Humphrey's act of leaving the SDA Church, in 1929 a predominantly white religious body, was not unprecedented. Long before Humphrey established his independent organization, Richard Allen had walked out of the Methodist Church to do just that.³¹ Indeed, in its break from the SDAs, United Sabbath Day Adventists saw history repeating itself, claiming that both Richard Allen and Humphrey broke from their denominations because of white mistreatment of blacks.³²

To the United Sabbath Day Adventists, launching an independent religious organization was truly a revolutionary act. They asserted that Christianity was birthed in revolution, having been founded by an individual who renounced the "ideas and ideals of the religious leaders of his day" in favor of the "practical and humane." Protestantism, too, had been born in revolution, the Protestant church developing and growing through the sacrifices of pioneers like Huss, Jerome, Zwingli, Melancthon, Tyndale, Latimer, Knox, Ridley, and Cranmer. It was in the tradition of these individuals that, according to United Sabbath Day Adventists, Humphrey had stood up to the SDAs. Inspired by their legacy of resistance to injustice and error, Humphrey and his supporters had "raised their voice against such enormities, realizing that all men are

²⁹According to James H. Cone, the establishment of independent black churches was, and continues to be, a "visible manifestation of Black Theology" (*A Black Theology of Liberation* [New York: Seabury, 1969], 59). Cone has distinguished himself as a leader among scholars of black theology, writing extensively on the subject (*God of the Oppressed* [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1975]; and idem, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1999]). Other works that explore the phenomenon known as "Black Theology" include Will Coleman, *Tribal Talk: Black Theology, Hermeneutics, and African American Ways of "Telling the Story"* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000); James H. Evans, *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); J. Deotis Roberts, *Black Theology in Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987); and Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999).

³⁰See Peter J. Hinks, *To Awaken My Afflicted Brethren: David Walker and the Problem of Antebellum Slave Resistance* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997).

³¹See Carol V. R. George, *Segregated Sabbath: Richard Allen and the Emergence of Independent Black Churches, 1760-1840* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

³²*United Sabbath Day Adventist Messenger*, August 1932, 14-15.

created equal." Seventh Day Baptists had been compelled to create an institution, they claimed, "where all can serve the creator instead of the creature, and work in fairness and righteousness to all."³³

Humphrey never claimed to be a deliverer of his people like the OT character Moses. Instead, Humphrey chose to cast his struggle with the SDA denomination within the broader framework of race relations. Yet one reason people embraced Humphrey was because of the mood of the times. A glut of migrants from the South and a stream of immigrants from the West Indies conspired with economic uncertainty to create the ideal conditions for a religious leader such as Humphrey. As thousands of newly arrived blacks searched for meaning amid the limited material resources they encountered in American cities, they turned increasingly from the mainline churches to small, independent sects and groups with unique names and extraordinary leaders. Thus Humphrey was but one in a generation of religious leaders who held themselves out as viable options, if not irrefutable answers, to the strange and new challenges of urban life.

The post-Humphrey Sabbath Day Adventist Church has been beset by challenges that have seen its numbers drastically reduced, and attempts at reconciliation with the SDA denomination continue to be frustrated by long-held, deeply entrenched grudges Sabbath Day Adventists refuse to give up.³⁴

³³Ibid., 13-14.

³⁴Almost from the moment they splintered, attempts have been made from both sides to reconcile United Sabbath Day Adventists with SDAs. Before his death in 1947, Humphrey often visited SDA congregations, and attempts at reconciliation intensified after his death. Humphrey's immediate successor, William Samuels, went so far as to invite a delegation from the local regional conference, the Northeastern Conference of SDAs, to make a case for reconciliation before his church. The event was a watershed in that it represented the first time SDAs had met with Sabbath Day Adventists to intentionally try to broker an agreement between the two religious bodies (Joe Mesar and Tom Dybdahl, "The Utopia Park Affair and the Rise of Northern Black Adventists," *Adventist Heritage* 1/1 [January 1974]: 53). Yet attempts to bring the two groups back together have met with no success. Early barriers included Sabbath Day Adventists' refusal to accept SDA policies on property ownership. Property ownership had played no small role in the break of 1929, and it was only after the local conference, union conference, and General Conference officials had agreed at the business meeting of the First Harlem SDA Church on the night of November 2, 1929, to turn over the title of First Harlem's building, that the SDA church leaders had been allowed to leave the premises unharmed. When the judge, in ruling on their property in the 1930s, stated that Ellen G. White was not a prophet, he unwittingly created another barrier to Sabbath Day Adventist reconciliation to the SDA Church (La Condre). Yet the main reason United Sabbath Day Adventists refused initially to return to the SDA organization was their belief that black conferences within the SDA denomination lacked the autonomy and power Humphrey had envisioned they would have (Mesar and Dybdahl, 53-54). The bishop had pictured regional conferences as the answer to the lack of self-determination among African American SDAs, a dream he believed had not come true in the present structure (La Condre). As the twenty-first century dawned, Princeton Holt, pastor of the New York United Sabbath Day Adventist Church, had as one of his major

Sabbath Day Adventists have experienced difficulty attracting clergy aware of its history and committed to its vision, with the result that pastoral tenures since William Samuels have been marked by tension and apprehension, if not suspicion.³⁵ Still, as the twenty-first century dawned, New York United Sabbath Day Adventists pulsed with hope and the promise of a return to the "glory days" that would spark unprecedented church growth and outreach sure to bring transformation to the Harlem community.

Ostensibly, Humphrey founded the United Sabbath Day Adventist organization because of the treatment people of color were experiencing in the SDA Church. The bishop had no doctrinal disputation with the SDAs, unless one counts his unclear position on Ellen G. White. Yet Humphrey, doctrinally an SDA to the end, embraced a theology of service that reflected a historic African American synthesis of pietism and pragmatism. Consequently, Humphrey refused to drive a wedge between the spiritual and social needs of his people. He combined moral regeneration and renewal with economic and educational self-help initiatives. For Humphrey, any theology that failed to resonate with pressing, real-life issues such as social injustice was meaningless, and when it became clear to him that SDA theology was not addressing black issues, he reasoned that he could remain true to Adventism's essence while repudiating its practices.

Assessing Humphrey's career based on his personality is difficult. That he was part of a generation of ambitious West Indians who rose to leadership in Harlem is a tenable argument. Yet what motivated him psychologically is difficult to gauge. Admittedly, his immigrant status, as

objectives the return of that congregation to the SDA denomination (Princeton Holt, interview with author, tape recording, New York, New York, August 11, 2000). Yet Holt knew he faced daunting hurdles, not the least of which were the deep-seated attitudes of distrust and hostility that a feisty minority still had for the SDA Church, which they believed mistreated Humphrey.

³⁵William A. Samuels, an Antiguan who moved to New York City in 1910 and was married by Humphrey in 1919, was a member of First Harlem SDA Church until the split in 1929. He became Humphrey's "right-hand man" when Humphrey established the United Sabbath Day Adventists, and led the group from 1947, when an ailing Humphrey gave up leadership, to 1987. Samuels's major accomplishment was the erection of New York United's present facility, a beautiful brick structure believed to be the only church building constructed by Adventists in New York City. Yet it was under Samuels's watch that Sabbath Day Adventist membership plummeted, the main reason being the backlash over the alleged use of tithes funds to build the facility (Aileen Hunter, telephone conversation with the author, March 4, 2001). After Samuels, a succession of "first-day" ministers followed, including one who claimed he was a black Jew. These individuals functioned more as pulpit preachers than as pastors/ministers, with few, if any, ever articulating a renewed or expanded vision for the Sabbath Day Adventists. Indeed, both the day-to-day operation and long-term planning for the church were left in the hands of an administrative body, which jealously guarded its power. New York United's last two pastors of the twentieth century were former SDA ministers, who, like Humphrey, had run afoul of SDA Church policy.

well as his status as an African American in an essentially segregated society, shaped his thinking and ministry. Based on what has been preserved of his writings and sermons, clues to his personality slowly evolve, with Humphrey emerging as a complex individual, a study in paradox and ambiguity. That he was a gifted leader is certain. During his tenure as bishop of the United Sabbath Day Adventists, congregations were spawned and attendance at United Sabbath Day Adventist General Conference sessions was high. And although Humphrey managed his organization closely, it does not appear that he was victimized by megalomania.³⁶ To the congregations he spawned across the country, Humphrey assigned and fostered indigenous leadership and autonomy, and the bishop was not averse to female leadership.³⁷

Yet Humphrey never pursued his dream of Utopia Park once he split with the SDAs. Undoubtedly, the struggle to keep a new religious organization afloat during economically,³⁸ socially, and politically difficult times, as well as conflicts within the infant organization,³⁹ consumed much of the bishop's time and energy. Still, that Humphrey aborted the project for which he gave up a successful career as an SDA minister is noteworthy. More

³⁶While he did not rule with an iron hand, Humphrey did manage his church closely. The bishop authored all the materials used for study in the Sabbath School, and, beginning in 1934, served as editor of the organization's journal. Humphrey was usually present for the rehearsals of both the senior and youth choir and seldom took a vacation. Yet what amply demonstrates Humphrey's close management style is the role he played in the church's treasury department. Humphrey is remembered as teaching the treasury staff how to "keep the books," even showing them how to wrap coins (La Condre, interview).

³⁷Although men dominated the leadership roles of the United Sabbath Day Adventists, two women were voted as departmental leaders at the group's General Conference Session in 1939 (*United Sabbath Day Adventist Messenger*, June 1939, 8).

³⁸Humphrey and the United Sabbath Day Adventists certainly proved false the myth that during the Depression all "black preachers drove Cadillacs" and all "black churches had plenty of money." His organization was poor, like most other small independent black churches, and during its infancy began to experience the secularism that was then sweeping through city churches (Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 161).

³⁹Almost from their inception, United Sabbath Day Adventists experienced internal conflicts. It appears that as early as 1934 a power struggle imperiled the group. At the Fourth Annual General Conference Session that year, the vice president and secretary of the infant group were removed from office, as were the editor and assistant editor of the *Messenger*. No reasons for the actions were noted in the periodical. Also at that Session, Humphrey's title was changed from president to moderator of the Session, ostensibly because the word "President" is more political than religious." Samuels, Humphrey's first successor as leader of the organization, claimed that the only religious body that used "President" for its chief officer was the SDAs, and that since "moderator" denotes a "chairman," "it seems to us more fitting than the word 'President'" (*United Sabbath Day Adventist Messenger*, January, 1935, 8). Yet Samuels assumed the title of president when he later became leader of the group (*United Sabbath Day Adventist Messenger*, January-March 1953, 3).

importantly, it does not appear that Humphrey or the United Sabbath Day Adventists ever promoted or operated any coherent, comprehensive program for the economic uplift of its members or community. Admittedly, Humphrey encouraged youth to seek higher education, but he never entertained plans to operate a school on any level in New York City. United Sabbath Day Adventists sponsored no benevolent or burial societies, as other black religious groups did. Indeed, it appears that after his split with the SDAs, Humphrey became far more conservative in his theology, and the group he established became a deradicalized church.

Conclusion

The emergence of the United Sabbath Day Adventists forms an important chapter in the history of race relations in the SDA Church. Humphrey's break with the SDA Church in 1930 set the tone for black-white relations in the SDA Church since then, and almost certainly was the catalyst that sparked the creation of the separate administrative structure for blacks in the denomination in 1945.⁴⁰ United Sabbath Day Adventists view their church history as one of resistance to, not domination by, an established, superior power. They are pleased about the stand Humphrey took against the SDA Church, viewing him as a pioneer in the struggle of people of African descent for autonomy and self-determination both within and outside the church. Additionally, they are inclined to argue that their stand is the reason for the gains African Americans have made in the SDA Church. Furthermore, they contend that the real beneficiaries of Humphrey's stand are not the United Sabbath Day Adventists, but African Americans in the SDA Church. Yet to say that Humphrey's split helped to modernize the SDA Church is to arrive at a conclusion for which credible evidence is lacking.

⁴⁰Mesar and Dybdahl, 53.