Making Peace with Jim Crow
Religious Leaders and the Chicago Race Riot of 1919

HEATH W. CARTER

Church bells resounded through the muggy air, a call to worship that must have seemed jarringly routine on the first Sunday of August 1919 in Chicago. The burning embers of homes near 47th Street and Ashland Avenue still emitted steady wisps of smoke, which mingled now with the always nauseating stench of the neighboring stockyards. Sleep had not come easy, if at all, for the nearly one thousand Poles and Lithuanians victimized by the previous day’s arson. And while no suspects had been apprehended, Fire Marshal Thomas O’Connor, like most white Chicagoans, knew who was to blame: the “Negroes.” The fires threatened the fragile peace between the races, won the previous Wednesday by the Illinois National Guard, who were unleashed on the city’s streets by Mayor William H. Thompson following four days of gruesome violence. On Monday alone, 17 had died, while 171 blacks and 71 whites had been injured. But the numbers obscure the stories: of a black man named John Mills who was forced off a streetcar by a white gang that proceeded to fracture his skull, much to the delight of two thousand onlookers; or of sixty-year-old white peddler Casmero Lazeroni, who was stoned and then stabbed to death by a black mob at 36th and State streets. The chaos had broken out the previous Sunday when a white stone-thrower, outraged that black boys would dare swim near the 29th Street Beach, hit his mark, Eugene Williams. Within hours of Williams’s body sinking into the frigid depths of Lake Michigan, a race riot was born.¹


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One week later, as the bells tolled, many Chicagoans were on their way to church, an institution that shaped their everyday lives perhaps more than any other. Residents of the “Black Belt”—an impoverished African American district south of the Loop—and the Back of the Yards neighborhood would have seen wreckage whichever way they looked. But even those traveling through neighborhoods less affected by the violence must have had the riot on their minds that morning. One suspects that as neighbors crowded into local churches, they spoke in hushed tones about the newspapers’ screaming headlines and the fearsome prospect of more trouble ahead. What is clear is that religious leaders across the city were deeply concerned about the tumultuous racial situation, and moreover that their congregations were interested in what they had to say. Attendance was inordinately high at churches that morning. In the most

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remarkable example, Olivet Baptist Church, a leading black congregation, turned two thousand persons away from its eighty-six-hundred-seat sanctuary.\(^3\) As pastors and priests rose to address the gathered throngs, anticipation built: What stance would the churches take on Chicago’s festering “race problem”?

Existing literature on Chicago’s 1919 riot insightfully probes its causes. An underexamined question remains, however: How did religious persons and institutions respond to the violent outbreak, and what light does their reaction shed on the relationship between religion and race in early twentieth-century Chicago and across the urban North?\(^4\) The riot caught white religious leaders by surprise. Appalled by the rampant disorder in the streets, they initially called for decisive action to remedy the city’s racial problems. But within a few weeks of order being restored, they had, for the most part, lapsed back into a quiet acceptance of the status quo. Black religious leaders were less shocked but no less concerned. They immediately set about caring for victims, even as they cast the riot as symptomatic of deep-seated civic dysfunction. But they, too, were far from social radicals. Indeed, Chicago’s white and black religious elite shared an underlying conservatism on race; advocates of racial uplift and yet opponents of social equality, the churches proved, in this way at least, bulwarks of Jim Crow.

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\(^4\)There has been considerable work on the relationship between the churches and Jim Crow in the early twentieth-century South. For two excellent examples of this see Paul Harvey, *Freedom’s Coming: Religious Culture and the Shaping of the South from the Civil War through the Civil Rights Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); James B. Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005). But the historiography on religion and race in the early twentieth-century urban North remains, by comparison, underdeveloped. Thomas J. Sugrue incorporates a number of religious actors and institutions into his new book on the northern Civil Rights Movement, but the ambitious scope of his narrative precludes extensive attention to the relationship between religion and race in any one locale. See Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008). Wallace Best’s recent book on African American churches in Chicago, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine*, offers a remarkable window into black religious life and touches on some of these issues. But Best is more concerned with the way southern migrants transformed the inner life of churches than in the way that religion intersected with broader civic life. See also John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). This study of how Catholics interacted with the mid-twentieth-century’s changing racial norms filled a gaping hole in the historiography. McGreevy’s ample findings only underscore, however, the need for more extensive study of these connections.
Chicago was hardly alone. Riots had broken out in Charleston, South Carolina, on May 10; in Longview, Texas, on July 10; and in Washington, D.C., on July 20. In Chicago, meanwhile, race relations deteriorated rapidly throughout the early summer, as a wave of bombings against black residences heightened tensions. Those explosive circumstances had clear social roots. A massive influx of southern migrants had more than doubled the city’s African American population in the span of a decade, and as veterans of the war in Europe returned, there were not enough jobs to go around. A deepening housing crisis only made matters worse. The pace of black migration had far exceeded that of residential development, and by 1919 the vastly overcrowded Black Belt had begun to spill into surrounding white neighborhoods, provoking fierce anger and alarm. As rumors of an impending assault on black communities began to swirl, African American religious leaders urged their people to be on guard. Reverend Archibald J. Carey Sr.—presiding elder over the city’s African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) churches—chose Matthew 24:44 as his text for the uncertain season: “Be ye also ready,” he warned the many congregations that he visited.

Chicago’s white religious press displayed no such vigilance. Amidst the degenerating racial climate, the editors of such publications as the Standard and the Northwestern Christian Advocate remained seemingly unconcerned. Articles on labor unrest, the Interchurch World Movement, and the end of World War I continued to crowd their pages. Only the Christian Century demonstrated a measure of prescience. The July 31 issue, which went to press before the riot, included a lengthy editorial on “The Negro Invasion.” Despite its less-than-felicitous title, the piece reflected a relatively congenial attitude toward black migrants, characterizing them as “intelligent and industrious.” The article acknowledged the housing shortage but nevertheless insisted: “[S]egregation is totally out of the question, so far as living conditions are concerned.” Yet in its pragmatic optimism the article failed to apprehend the gravity of Chicago’s racial predicament. The “common problem” would not, as the publication hoped, be “worked out in the spirit of good will, and of Christian brotherhood.” Before the edition arrived in mailboxes, blood flowed in the city’s streets.

The murder of Williamson July 27 pushed Chicago over the precipice. It did not help that policeman Daniel Callahan refused to arrest the boy’s assailant, accosting instead only a black man who had somehow raised the ire of white beachgoers. Away from 29th Street that same afternoon, salacious rumors spread like wildfire. Whites claimed that one of their own had drowned after being struck by a black stone-thrower, while blacks spread word that the

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5Chicago Commission on Race Relations, 106.
police had wittingly sanctioned the boy’s murder. Before long, a roiling crowd had gathered at the scene of the crime. Pregnant with violent possibilities, the situation changed irrevocably when a black man named James Crawford fired a gun at the police. Suddenly, shots could be heard from all around. And even as chaos enveloped the beach, the Ragen Colts, the Hamburger, the Dirty Dozen, and other predominantly Irish street gangs began raiding the Black Belt. Those marauders impelled blacks throughout the city to arm in self-defense, and before long the situation spiraled out of control.⁸

The Chicago police had blanketed the Black Belt by the time that Reverend J. F. Thomas arrived at Ebenezer Church for evening worship on the riot’s first day. Realizing that trouble was afoot and apprehensive of what might happen come nightfall, he cancelled the service, exhorting his congregation to return home and remain quiet. Meanwhile, a small crowd of the faithful gathered at nearby Olivet Baptist Church, where Dr. Lacey K. Williams presided, while outside hooves clattered and alarms clanged.⁹ Not far away, Carey was preparing to preach at Bethel A.M.E. Church at 30th and Dearborn streets when he received a frantic call from his wife, pleading with him to come home immediately. Disregarding her wishes, he set out first to investigate the scene of the violence before eventually making his way back to his family. Home would prove something less than a refuge, however, for as a favor to Mayor Thompson, his good friend and political ally, Carey soon turned his house into a makeshift police headquarters in the riot zone.¹⁰

In the days that followed more black religious leaders threw themselves into the fray. Mobilizing for peace, they made phone calls and home visits; they decried violence from the pulpit as well as from the street corner.¹¹ Reverend John W. Robinson of St. Mark’s Methodist Episcopal Church staked out a spot at the municipal courthouse early in the week and dutifully attended to the welfare of African Americans arrested during the melee.¹² Monday afternoon, meanwhile, a joint meeting of black Baptist and Methodist ministers, with two black aldermen from the Second Ward in attendance, convened at Olivet Baptist Church. That was the first of at least thirty consecutive days in which Chicago’s leading African Americans would gather at the church to discuss how best to restore the peace and care for victims.¹³ And they would do more than just talk. On Wednesday, as the

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⁸Here again I have relied on Tuttle’s Race Riot. He provides the most reliable reconstruction of the riot’s origins, sifting assiduously through the rumors and mischaracterizations that taint newspaper reports and, to a far lesser degree, that of the Chicago Commission on Race Relations.


¹⁰Logsdon, 72.


violence outside continued to escalate, Williams and Carey stormed into Mayor Thompson’s office to protest widespread police negligence and mistreatment of African Americans. But if black clergymen thus demonstrated their willingness to fight for their people, they did so within sharply defined limits.

Indeed, from the outset black ministers distanced themselves from any hint of radicalism. In an interview with the Chicago Daily News, Thomas told of how he had urged his people to “stand by law and order no matter what happens.” “I don’t care what the past has been,” he continued, “it won’t help us to jump in for revolutionary ideas.” Even blacks’ demands of the mayor bespoke moderation: they insisted merely that he enforce the law, not that he change it. In the eyes of many African American religious leaders, after all, Chicago’s racial problems did not spring from systemic sources. In a statement issued Thursday, July 31, Reverend M. E. Stewart of Quinn Chapel attributed the “growing spirit of hatred between the races” to the moral failings of a powerful few. If black and white Chicagoans would only return to God, he implied, there would be no more riots.

By Friday morning, meanwhile, white religious leaders had begun to make their voices heard. That day’s edition of the Chicago Archdiocesan newspaper, the New World, included two strident articles on the riot. The first, “The Position of the Negro,” suggested that emancipation had been a mistake, and sneered at the very idea of social equality, declaring: “No matter how the colored man is coddled in public print, no white man will, in reality, accept him equally.” The author went on to write, in a sentence ominously lacking any agents, “when they [whites] are thrown in with other races experience shows that the other races suffer, morally and physically.” Elsewhere the author did not hesitate to affix blame, however. “[T]he black man” had catalyzed the current crisis by encroaching upon white neighborhoods, the author insisted. “He depreciated property, he brought panic and fear.” Segregation was, then, not merely the “obvious” remedy for Chicago’s racial problems, but also, the article concluded, “the only possible way.”

The second article, meanwhile, accused the press of exacerbating the city’s travails. “Certainly the passion that is always lurking beneath the surface should not be fanned by any needless and detailed recounting of the disturbances,” the author reasoned. That was convenient logic. Whatever the newspapers’ penchant for

14“The Colored Citizens Committee of Which Rev. A. J. Carey is One of Its Members Called on Mayor Williams Hale Thompson on Wednesday and Blamed the Police for Part of the Race Riots,” Broad Ax, Aug. 2, 1919, p. 4, col. 1. Thompson’s political fortunes had long been tied to the black vote, so the ministers’ appeal may have influenced his decision to summon the National Guard later that night.
15Sandburg.
18“Inciting Riot,” ibid., cols. 2–3.
hyperbole, they had not incited the riot. Irish-Catholic street gangs had. Nevertheless, other ethnically targeted Catholic publications, such as the *Naród Polski*, the official daily of the Polish Roman Catholic Union, adopted similarly antagonistic stances. Comparing the race riot to the pogroms in Eastern Europe, the newspaper argued that both blacks and Jews deserved what they got.

In stark contrast to such fighting words, other leading Catholics worked on the ground for peace. Early in the week Reverend Louis Giambastiani of St. Phillip Benizi Catholic Church successfully persuaded his Italian congregation to obey the law and stay off the streets. And in the wake of Saturday’s conflagration in the predominately Catholic Back of the Yards neighborhood, many others sprang into action. Wary of the people’s retaliatory wrath, Chancellor Edward F. Hoban of the Chicago Archdiocese ordered that five masses be celebrated in each parish on Sunday and that priests urge their parishioners to ignore the swirling rumors that the arsonists had been black. Reverend Louis Grudzinski went a step further in a statement published by the Catholic-controlled *Dziennik Chicagoski*. Writing on behalf of the three Polish pastors in the Back of the Yards neighborhood, he insisted that it was in fact the Irish who were responsible for the riots. The Monday following the blaze, at a public meeting at the neighborhood’s Guardian Angel shelter, Grudzinski continued to speak out against escalating anti-black sentiment. Counseling patience and calm, he enjoined the crowd to “not be moved by agitators and then be condemned for having caused the black pogrom.” Meanwhile other Catholic leaders and institutions attended directly to the victims of the violence. Sacred Heart Polish Catholic Church in the Back of the Yards neighborhood hosted a meeting for those interested in helping the newly homeless, even as churches such as Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Bridgeport donated funds to the cause.

Outside the riot zone, meanwhile, the watchword in white Protestant churches that Sunday was consternation. “This riot has come to us as a shock after all our idealism,” rued Reverend Mark J. Fields at Delano Chapel in Evanston. Lewis B. Fisher, in a sermon at St. Paul’s Universalist Church, dubbed the events of the previous week “shocking beyond words.” A resolution of the ecumenical Chicago Church Federation, which was read in worship services across the city,

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19 Whether the *New World*’s fierce denunciation of the press was intended to deflect attention from Irish gangs’ thuggery is impossible to know for sure, but a cynical reading gains credence from this startling fact: The riot was never mentioned in its pages again.


23 His statement explicitly contradicted an adjacent column in that day’s edition, which blamed African Americans for the blaze. See Pacyga, 219.

24 Ibid., 220.

25 Fields, quoted in Norton.

echoed those sentiments: “Recent events in Chicago alarm and shock us,” it began. The document proceeded to identify “demoralizing” social conditions as the cause of the riot. “[H]aunts of vice” and “the vicious American saloon,” both propped up by civic authorities, had turned some “law-abiding” black citizens into “colored hoodlums.” But that was not explanation enough. For “whites have been no less cruel,” the resolution observed. “[I]n a great number of instances the stronger race has fallen upon the weaker with ferocity and without mercy and without cause.” Exhorting white Christians to embrace the golden rule as the clearest “statement of our duty towards our dark brothers,” the federation’s statement went on to proclaim: “[I]t is the manifest duty of the churches to bear emphatic testimony to the need of calmness, sanity and sympathy with all of both races who are oppressed by the inequities of the present social order.”

Not all ministers agreed with that prescription, however. A few called for the legal segregation of blacks and whites. Many blamed the riot on “heathen hoodlums,” and argued that the city’s social ills would only be cured when the people turned to Christ.

As whites mulled over their shock, African Americans struck a different tone in worship. Money poured into the coffers to relieve suffering in the riot zone. South Park Avenue Methodist Episcopal Church raised forty-one dollars, while St. Mark’s Methodist Episcopal Church raised eighty-seven dollars, impressive offerings for an era in which the average worker earned only fifty-three cents an hour. Meanwhile black preachers waxed indignant. “Too much attention has been paid to the Negro vote,” Reverend A. J. McCartney pronounced at Kenwood Evangelical Church, “and not enough to providing for the Negro’s welfare.” At Evanston Christian Church Reverend O. F. Jordan sounded a similar note, declaring that the riot “is only the reflex of general causes. It is not simply the shame of Chicago, but of the nation.” At Olivet Baptist Church, standing before a packed house of nearly nine thousand, Williams encouraged his people to strive for the improvement and self-sufficiency of the race. “We should hasten to build up our marts and trades,” he remarked, “so we can give employment and help to provide against such a day as we are experiencing.” He went on to rebut whites’ accusations that blacks had propelled the violence, pointing out matter-of-factly that “East of Indiana avenue to the lake, and from Thirtieth to Thirty-ninth streets, where the largest number of our people live in a ratio of 500 to 1 white, and in a district through which thousands of whites passed daily, there was but one

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28 Norton.
29 See “Negro Riots Horrid Blot on City”; “Pastors Talk on Race Riots.”
31 McCartney, quoted in Norton.
32 Jordan, quoted in ibid.
outstanding unfortunate occurrence. Let those who charge us with responsibility for the riot explain this fact,” he proclaimed. The undertones of defiance must have excited the thousands gathered, who believed that even in the midst of those dark days, God was not through with them yet.

In the days that followed, as the unrest throughout the city gradually subsided, the white religious press coverage of the situation only intensified. On Monday, August 4, H. B. Gwyn of the news bureau of the Episcopal Living Church issued a press release calling the riot the worst “exhibition of . . . anarchy . . . since the notorious Haymarket riots.” Gwyn declared that “the Church has a big part in solving this problem.” In the long term, religion would function as a far more effective vehicle of social control than military coercion, the author reasoned. Indeed, drawing on widespread stereotypes, he predicted that “The negroes as a religious people, albeit emotional, will respond quickly to a religious appeal.” Meanwhile, he urged the reader to “pray, too, that the whites may get their Christianity to work in controlling their own people!” Two days later, an article in the Northwestern Christian Advocate construed the riot as not an omen but rather an aberration. “[I]n a few days a normal condition will be resumed,” the author assured his audience, “and the riot will pass into history.” After all, he insisted, the North had none of Dixie’s problems: “There is no deep-set prejudice against the colored man. Chicago, as indeed all Northern cities, withholds no political or economic rights from him.” But that sunny picture was not without its dark clouds. “[A]ny disposition to seek social equality will be resented,” the author warned. The implication was clear: Only by perpetuating white supremacy could Chicago “house its large colored population in peace.”

Notably, one of Chicago’s most prominent African American ministers agreed with him. In an interview with the Presbyterian Continent, Williams assuaged a largely white readership’s fears, saying: “The southern negro comes to the north with a complete consciousness of race separateness. . . . He is not a rebel against the white man.” If whites could get past their presumptions, Williams went on, they would “learn that the negro wants no social equality.” All that African Americans hoped for, he averred, was their “legal rights.” Such assurances dovetailed with Olivet Baptist Church’s broader approach to the city’s rapidly growing population of southern migrants. Ever since being called to the church in 1915, Williams had thrown himself into the founding of social and vocational programs designed to facilitate newcomers’ rocky transition to urban life in the industrializing North. Self-improvement, not social action, seemed to him the most viable way forward for the race.

33Williams, quoted in ibid.
37See Best, 13–15, 46–47.
Other black religious leaders thought the same. During his six-year tenure at the Institutional A.M.E. Church, for example, Carey launched a kindergarten for the children of working mothers, instructional programs in a variety of domestic arts, and an employment service that placed migrants into steady jobs. As churches like Carey’s adjusted to meet the needs of the new arrivals, their numbers ballooned exponentially. In addition to filling the pews, though, that self-help strategy enabled black religious leaders to navigate their tenuous position within Chicago’s power structure. Indeed, by embracing the subordinate position of their race within northern society, they made it possible to cultivate peaceable relations with influential whites.

That willingness to accommodate had theological roots as well, however. Later in Williams’s interview with the Continent, when asked how whites could contribute to improved “feeling between the races,” he urged them to invest more resources into “evangelistic work among colored people.” Like so many other of Chicago’s

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38 Carey served at the church from 1909 to 1915. See Logsdon, chap. 2.
39 “Between 1916 and 1920 alone, the congregations of Salem Baptist Church increased by 51 percent, St. Mark’s Methodist Episcopal by 100 percent, and Walter’s African Methodist Episcopal church by 338 percent.” See Best, 44.
Christian leaders, both black and white, Williams believed that only spiritual regeneration would ultimately cure the city’s ills. Conspicuously omitting any allusion to legislation or policy, he insisted that “The primary thing is to get the people converted.”

On Friday, August 8, the editors of the Sentinel, Chicago’s leading Jewish weekly, finally weighed in on the situation. Rabbi Tobias Schanfarber’s column sounded the same tones of surprise and dismay that characterized the reactions of other white religious leaders. “Here we had been boasting of our twentieth century civilization,” he wrote, “when in the heart of cultured Chicago wild and destructive race riots throw us into consternation and we are all up in the air.” Acknowledging the structural roots of the violence, he went on to rebuke white Chicagoans for neglecting their black neighbors’ welfare. Yet Schanfarber’s solution to the race problem was, quite literally, backward-looking: “As Abraham Lincoln said, we need not associate with the negro nor permit our daughters to marry them, but we must give them an equal opportunity in the battle of life.”

While African Americans deserved better homes and jobs, segregation seemed to Schanfarber the linchpin of peaceful race relations going forward.

Jennie Franklin Purvin advanced much the same view in the article “Race Prejudice,” which appeared in the same edition of the Sentinel. Purvin bemoaned “the suffering of the black man in our city” and construed the “whole sorry business” as “a white man’s problem.” Yet in her view the white man’s sin was not abuse but rather indulgence. The Chicago machine had “flattered him [the Negro] and paid him political compliments,” and had thus imprudently elevated his expectations of life in the North. Had the local black population continued to approximate the “normal quota” of years past, there might have been no problem. But the deluge of southern migrants had created an altogether unsustainable predicament, causing even Grand Boulevard, “one of the choicest residence streets in our city,” to undergo racial transition. If the answer to Chicago’s race problem seemed to Purvin less than clear, some things were: “Children of the white neighborhoods cannot live amicably among children of the blacks.”

The white Protestant press had a few certainties of its own, one of which was that the race riot afforded the churches an opportunity to act. An article in the Continent declared: “[T]he church is in position to show its moral power not simply by official resolutions; but by the alertness and courageous actions . . . of its members.” The editors at the Christian Century agreed. A column on the riot in the August 7 edition observed: “It is high time that Christian intelligence mobilizes

40“Chicago Shocked to Responsibility in Race Situation.”
42Purvin, “Race Prejudice,” ibid.
its resources of wit and invention and thinks its way through to a Christian and practicable settlement of a problem more formidable and ominous than any internal problem faced by any other nation in the world." 44 A similarly activist spirit had informed the Chicago Church Federation’s resolution, which was reprinted not only in the August 7 issue of the Century, but also in the Baptist Standard on Saturday, August 9.45

Amidst all of the bold talk about Christianity’s role in resolving “the race problem,” an editorial in the Living Church offered two ground rules for the way forward. The first was the preservation of “racial integrity.” “That means that whites and blacks must develop on absolutely separate planes,” the author explained, “and involves the entire separateness of the social life of each, quite as truly for the protection of the one race as for the other.” The insistence that the separation “be maintained at any cost” evoked terrifying possibilities in the wake of the city’s recent bloodbath. The second principle was “a standard of absolute justice in the dealings of the whites with the blacks.” Only if treated fairly would African Americans be able to improve their plight, an outcome that promised dividends for the entire nation. Indeed, the author contended: “Not by keeping the black race down, but by helping to lift them up to the utmost degree, while at the same time ensuring the separateness of the two races, shall we promote . . . the social well-being of the American people.” 46 In championing racial uplift and denigrating social equality, the Living Church placed itself directly in the center of the white Protestant mainstream.

Two articles on the riot in the following week’s Northwestern Christian Advocate emphasized many of the same themes. In one of them John Thompson, the superintendent of the Chicago Home Missionary and Extension Society, deployed the activist rhetoric that was quickly becoming standard fare. “The church should be to the front,” he proclaimed. “We are doing much and exercising a very gracious, helpful ministry . . . . But our voice should be heard on both the housing and the industrial problems that vex the races at this time.” 47 The author of “The Race Situation in Chicago,” meanwhile, sympathized with “the colored man,” whom he identified as “the victim in this case as he is in nearly every clash.” Yet even as he called for “an honest and equitable administration of justice relative to the races,” he felt obliged to denounce those “few” within “Chicago’s Negro population” who “embarrass the entire race by too advanced views on . . . social equality.” He hastened to add, in words surely welcomed by his reader: “The great majority of Negroes are just as sensitive on that question as are the whites.” 48

45Interestingly, the resolution was also reprinted on August 9 in a nonreligious African American newspaper, the Broad Ax. See “The Chicago Clergy’s Message on the Negro,” Broad Ax, Aug. 9, 1919, p. 5, cols. 1–2.
46“Race Riots,” Living Church, Aug. 9, 1919, 514.
48“The Race Situation in Chicago,” ibid., 797.
One article did strike a different tone, however. In his column on “The Race Clash in Chicago,” Reverend Frank Orman Beck went beyond merely blaming whites for instigating the riot. Indeed, he issued a scathing rebuke of an all-too-pervasive “colorphobia.” A native of Wayne County, Indiana, Beck had studied theology at the University of Chicago and earned his Ph.D. from Edinburgh University. Forty-seven-year-old Beck had served seven years as a Methodist minister on the south side of the city, during which time he had become known for his work with troubled boys. His unusual pedigree perhaps helps to account for his unique slant on Chicago’s racial strife. True Christians could never condone “racianity,” he argued. Its golden rule—“Do unto [the] white man as you would have white men do unto you. Unto Negroes consult your liking”—fundamentally subverted Christ’s teaching. Beck went on to lash out at those who believed legalized segregation would solve the city’s racial problems. Construing that would-be solution as a violation of the created order, he asked with righteous indignation: “Who made [the segregationist] . . . a partitioner of God’s land and sky?” The only real way forward, in his view, was for whites to reexamine their souls. They must “bury prejudice,” he insisted, and meanwhile “pray that [the long-suffering Negro] . . . may have patience to endure while the white race tardily but surely struggles upward toward the light.” While paternalistic undertones suffused Beck’s concluding words—and in fact much of his article—he nevertheless offered as progressive an outlook as anything white Chicago could then muster.

As days passed into weeks, white Protestants’ words translated into few actions. The Chicago Church Federation established a commission to study the city’s race problem, but it would meet only irregularly and produce little in the way of concrete findings. In the meantime, even the rhetoric began to flow more slowly. The Standard published “Equal Before the Law” on August 16, in which the editor hammered home the same points about equal justice, the church’s obligation to act, and the absurdity of social equality—“the very thing which our Negro leaders do not advocate”—that had dominated coverage to that point. Then, nearly three weeks passed before the Continent published a cover story on “The Race Problem,” in which increasingly well-worn ideas were rehashed. Four “certain principles” were offered: “First . . . the black man must be honestly recognized as an authentic human son of God. . . . Second, the black man must be secured equal rights as an American citizen. . . . Third, the rise of the black man to better economic status and more ample education, must be welcomed. . . . Finally, the white man must do everything in his power to make the black man proud to be

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50 For a biographical sketch of Beck, see Franklin Rosemont, introduction to Hobohemia: Emma Goldman, Lucy Parsons, Ben Reitman & Other Agitators & Outsiders in 1920s Chicago, by Beck, ed. by Rosemont (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 2000).
51 Beck, “Race Clash in Chicago.”
black.” The last point derived its rationale from what the author tellingly viewed as a universal assumption, namely, “that the two races ought each to maintain its own blood strain pure from admixture.” The prospect of integration was, for the author, nothing more than a “bugaboo.”

By early September only the Methodists continued to show any sustained interest in questions of race. An article in the September 3 edition of the *Northwestern Christian Advocate* proposed interracial fellowship as a means of improving black-white relations. The author’s specific suggestions were paternalistic, yet more hopeful than most: “White pastors in Chicago could do well to invite accredited Negro leaders into their pulpits,” the author observed, going on to say: “Let the Negroes tell the whites their faults as candidly as we have been telling the Negro his. Let the white population get an opportunity to ‘think black’ for an hour or two.” Meanwhile, on September 4, the Methodist Home Missions Council convened an interdenominational meeting of Christian leaders in New York City to discuss the emerging racial crisis in the nation’s cities. Those leading lights accomplished little. By the time they left they had agreed only that there was in fact a problem and that the church was obliged to do something about it.

A *Northwestern Christian Advocate* column dated October 1 offered a more detailed program. “Saving Democracy from Race Riots” urged the churches to adopt a holistic approach to ministry in the black community. African Americans needed more than sermons; they also required job training, community centers, recreational facilities, and emergency shelters. Indeed, democracy would only be preserved, the author reflected, if Christians worked to remove the “barriers that now prevent any group of people from realizing the best of which they are capable.” Methodists would, in the medium term at least, fail to live up to that monumental “challenge and . . . task.” By the time the weather turned cold in Chicago they, too, had seemingly forgotten about the riot and the many specters it raised.

Why did Chicago’s white religious leaders so quickly lose interest in “the race problem” that captivated them throughout the late summer of 1919? To be sure, allusions to racial issues did resurface intermittently in the months ahead. Following an outbreak of violence in Omaha, Nebraska, the *Continent* ran an article in its October 9 edition, “Making an Anti-Riot Bulwark.” On November 14, “Law and Order” appeared in the *Sentinel*, decrying the injustice of an Arkansas verdict that sentenced eleven African Americans to death. And on December 12, the *New World* published a column on “Business and the Negro.” But four more
months would pass before the Christian Century featured a piece on “A Serious Inter-Racial Situation,” and an even longer silence would follow after that.60 Clearly the white religious press had moved on: “the labor question” and the ecumenical movement preoccupied it once more.

The persistence of those particular issues offers, perhaps, a clue as to why whites’ attention to race proved so ephemeral. No one knew what to do about labor unions and social radicals, about the masses of immigrants who so threatened Victorian views of decorum and Protestant hopes for a Christian civilization. Nor were they sure of what to think about ecumenicism, disagreeing at times vehemently over the possible implications of the ill-fated Interchurch World movement. On the question of race, however, Chicago’s white religious leaders had more settled views. They believed that the churches should support the material improvement of African Americans, so long as they understood their place. Indeed, though whites rarely deployed the phrase, they almost uniformly embraced the “separate but equal” philosophy set out in Plessy v. Ferguson. That consensus nourished not only a robust confidence that they knew the answer to Chicago’s racial problems, but also a thoroughgoing complacency in addressing the same. With so many unknowns in the world, there was little time to waste on an issue as clear-cut as race.

In retrospect, of course, it is easy to see that the issue was anything but clear-cut. Myriad tensions existed within white religious leaders’ beliefs about how best to address the race problem. First among those was the question of whether

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evangelism or social action was a more effective strategy. Soul-winning and almsgiving were never mutually exclusive options, but as we have seen, contemporaries frequently viewed them as such. At the heart of the debate were conflicting views of the church’s mission in the world. Another source of contradiction emerged from whites’ desire to improve the conditions in which African Americans lived on the one hand, and yet to enforce rigid social hierarchies on the other. Later developments would highlight the incommensurability of those dueling hopes. But for the time being, whites’ views on race seemed to them consistent and wholly consonant with biblical faith. Thus they stood stalwartly behind Jim Crow in the North, propping up evil in the name of the Lord.

But what about African American churches? What course did they follow in the months after the riot? While the paucity of manuscript sources makes it difficult to weave a seamless narrative, it is clear that religious leaders were among the most vocal African American interlocutors in the civic debates about race. On Sunday, August 31, for example, Quinn Chapel’s Stewart preached to a large assembly on the social roots of the riot.61 Meanwhile, the regular meetings at Olivet Baptist Church eventually parlayed into a new Peace and Protective Association, which brought together African American leaders from all over the city interested in improving the plight of their race. The conversations from those gatherings frequently spilled over into the public square. On September 21, for instance, the association held a mass meeting at the Eighth Regiment Armory in order to discuss the causes of and remedies for racial violence.62 Yet despite all that activity, there is little indication that African American Christian leaders posed a fundamental challenge to the ways of the Jim Crow North. Whether out of fear or conviction, they too voiced skepticism of social equality. Chicago’s black churches would not march for civil rights—at least not yet.

If we are truly to understand the relationship between the churches and Jim Crow in Chicago, as well as in other cities across the North, then we must not only pay attention to the ways that religious leaders and institutions conceived of race, we must also recover the voices of the people in the pews. Sources for these ordinary folk are notoriously difficult to find. Yet an excerpt from the December 20, 1919, edition of the Chicago Whip underscores the urgency of the task. “The Negro Church. . . . has awakened,” it proclaimed. “It is preaching race consciousness.”63 That no such awakening turned up in these pages poses not so much an interpretive problem as a challenge for future work. If we are to find the seeds of racial progress anywhere in Chicago’s churches during that period, perhaps we should look not to the strong but rather to the weak.