

the resurrection of father divine

GOD COMES TO AMERICA: Father Divine and the Peace Mission Movement. By Kenneth E. Burnham. Boston: Lambeth Press, 1979. \$14.95. BLACK MESSIAHS AND UNCLE TOMS. By Wilson Jeremiah Moses. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1982. \$22.50. FATHER DIVINE: The Utopian Evangelist of the Depression Era Who Became an American Legend. By Robert Weisbrot. Boston: Beacon Press, 1983. \$9.95 paper. RELIGIOUS SECTS, A SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY. By Bryan Wilson. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970. \$2.45.

As Robert Weisbrot notes in his bibliography, a great deal has been written about the noted black preacher, Father Divine, but not much that is favorable. Even such an astute historian of black religion as Wilson J. Moses still lumps him with those “opportunistic, egotistic charlatans, who elevated themselves for purposes of self-aggrandizement. They revealed no abiding concern with ushering in a black messianic era” (12). S. P. Fullinwider, in his excellent study of *The Mind and Mood of Black America: 20th Century Thought*¹ does not mention Father Divine at all.

The earliest studies of this dynamic religious leader stereotyped him as a sensational cult leader and charismatic mountebank.² A few scholarly studies of religious dissent in America contain essays which provide more serious estimates of his role as a progressive reformer: Arthur H. Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis: Negro Cults of the Urban North*; Marcus Bach, *They Have Found Faith*; Charles S. Braden, *These Also Believe: A Study of Modern American Cults and Minority Religious Movements*; and Joseph R. Washington, *Black Sects and Cults: The Power Axis in an Ethnic Ethic*.³ Only Kenneth E. Burnham’s *God Comes to America: Father Divine and the Peace Mission Movement* comes close to providing a full-length study which bears comparison with Weisbrot’s volume.

Weisbrot’s study will clearly be the definitive volume for some time to come. He has not only pulled together all of the previous scholarly and sensational materials into a comprehensive analytical account of Divine’s career, but also he has gone about as far as anyone can go to try to settle the ambiguities and

contradictions in Divine's life and personality. As historians today try to revise their view of the sociological significance of fundamentalist cults and sects in American life, particularly among the urban poor, they are at last overcoming the simplistic and patronizing view which relegates such groups to curiosities. Sociologists of religion like Bryan Wilson have taught us to see that what were formerly described as "primitive" epiphenomena in "civilized" modern society are often "catalysts in history, crystallizing in acute form the discontents and aspirations, and marking the moments of deep structural collapse, and sometimes heralding, or even promoting, social reintegration" (7).

Divine's career bridged the gap between Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X, between the mild reformers of the N.A.A.C.P. and the revolutionary activities of the Black Panthers. He may well have been part of the catalyst which moved black activism from the politics of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. to the civil rights activities of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Father Divine was an exceptional religious leader in many ways. He was one of the few black ministers to preach something different from evangelical escapism; who tried in the 1930s to push his churchgoers into political action; who had no objection to allying himself with Communist groups on certain issues (although he always was an ardent exponent of self-help capitalism); who appealed to and attracted white as well as black members; who constantly stressed the need for active involvement by his church in overcoming American racism; and, of course, he was one of the few who claimed that he himself was God. There also is no denying his eccentricity, and if there is a shortcoming in Weisbrot's account it is the neglect of this in order to stress the more constructive and progressive aspects of Divine's movement.

Divine (officially known as Major J. Divine) was remarkable for his business acumen and for his efforts to buy into and integrate all-white neighborhoods. Determined to do all he could to end racism, Divine effectively embarrassed wealthy racists in the North as well as poor Georgia "Crackers" in the South; he even bought land near Hyde Park, New York, so that he could refer to Franklin D. Roosevelt as "my neighbor."

During the Great Depression, he encouraged communal and cooperative living, businesses and farming. In his Peace Missions he regularly provided free sumptuous meals to anyone who was hungry (though he discouraged his followers from accepting social welfare benefits). Although his followers, black and white, gave up most of their savings and earnings to support his organization, Divine proved to be scrupulously honest (as well as moral) and refused to accept money for preaching the gospel. He rescued thousands of poor people from lives of crime, drink and drugs and gave them the self-discipline and sense of self-worth which enabled them to lead honest, upright, productive lives. His followers also agreed to celibacy, non-violence and restitution for previous thefts. In 1937 Divine's followers exceeded 50,000 and his real estate holdings in over one hundred and fifty Peace Missions were valued in the millions.

For all his efforts, Weisbrot is unable to provide us with much insight into the early life of Father Divine. His birthplace and birthdate are uncertain and his name may have been George Baker or Frederick Edwards before he began using the signature Major J. Divine in the 1920s. It appears he was born in Georgia, the son of a sharecropper, between 1877 and 1883; he died a wealthy man in Philadelphia in 1965. His career spanned the worst days of segregation and the final days of America's "Second Reconstruction." Shortly before Divine's death, he wrote to Lyndon Johnson praising the President's speech endorsing the Civil

Rights Act of 1965. Divine claimed that his early preaching in the South had led to frequent harassment and arrest because he insisted on attacking segregation and did all he could to preach to mixed white and black audiences. In Valdosta, Georgia, in 1914, when he was known as The Messenger, he was jailed on charges of insanity; in 1932 he was sentenced to a year in jail for being a “public nuisance” in Sayville, Long Island. Racial prejudice was evident in both trials, and he became a religious martyr to thousands.

This book skillfully places Divine in historical perspective as well as in proper social and religious context. Weisbrot compares and contrasts him with “Daddy” Grace, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Marcus Garvey and many other black religious leaders of the day. Divine fares well in Weisbrot’s analysis. Chapters of the book are devoted to describing the activities of Divine’s church, the economics of his widespread denominational institutions, the attitudes Divine took toward political and economic reform and his relationship with labor unions and the Communist Party. Weisbrot’s account makes exciting reading as Divine threads his way through the complex efforts to co-opt, outflank and undermine him. Despite a court judgment against him for financial complaints brought by one of his followers in New York City, Divine managed to escape through it all. For the last twenty-five years of his life, he lived in quiet opulence in a large mansion with his second (and white) wife in Philadelphia.

Weisbrot does not indulge in efforts to psychoanalyze Divine. The book is best in describing Divine’s economic and political activities and weakest in its discussion of his religious views and his personality. Divine tried to keep the media at a distance from his private life, and Weisbrot has not been able to pierce that barrier. Weisbrot could have done more to explicate Divine’s theology—a unique combination of Emersonianism, the Social Gospel, the Protestant Ethic and New Thought. Divine’s conversions, according to the author, were essentially based upon the desperate psychological needs of the down-and-out who wanted direct divine guidance and help in their lives. Divine not only offered them psychological and spiritual support as “God incarnate,” but he also provided a set of moral rules and regulations, found them jobs and instilled in them a sense of self-respect they had lacked. Yet the book fails to elucidate clearly the doctrines and theology at the heart of his appeal. It seems that Divine relied primarily on “charisma” and let people read into his “transcendental” sermons whatever they wished.

Weisbrot’s prime purpose is to describe the social and political aspects of Divine’s movement, and in this respect the book is eminently successful. Divine was a black man with a vision of an integrated world in which distinctions of color were of no significance. Men and women were to be judged solely upon their personal merits, values and accomplishments. Divine gave extraordinary responsibilities to the women who joined his movement; Weisbrot notes that 75-90% of his followers were women; 50% were over 35; 10-15% were white. However, the feminist aspects of the movement are not emphasized by the author.

Divine was not a consistent or original thinker and had no formal education. His career varied between years of quiet respectability and years of intense social protest. Weisbrot believes the crisis of the Depression brought out the best in the man. After World War II, Divine became increasingly conservative, anti-Communist, super-patriotic. However, he never gave up his efforts for racial equality. The remarkable Father Divine has at last found a readable, scholarly and wide-ranging assessment of his life. With this book, a mythic figure, hitherto lost in sensationalism, finally attains the status he earned as a crusader for social justice and desegregation.

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notes

1. (Homewood, Illinois, 1969).
2. See John Hoshor, *God in a Rolls Royce: The Rise of Father Divine, Madman, Menace, or Messiah?* (New York, 1936); Robert A. Parker, *The Incredible Messiah: The Deification of Father Divine* (Boston, 1937); and Sara Harris, *Father Divine: Holy Husband* (New York, 1953).
3. Fauset (Philadelphia, 1944); Bach (Indianapolis, 1946); Braden (New York, 1949); Washington (New York, 1953).