Attitudes toward religion in the fiction of Richard Wright

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While the primary role of fiction is concerned with the narration of imaginary events and the portraiture of imaginary characters, one of its aspects is that it reflects the minds of a people, or a group of people. As such, fiction often reveals values and/or attitudes characteristic of certain facets of a nation. Because of the fact that the Negro in America has been overlooked by whites in the recording of American history, his basic concepts or attitudes are disseminated chiefly through his fiction. Richard Wright is a Negro author whose fiction flourishes with the expressions of attitudes toward aspects of American society during the first half of the twentieth century. This paper proposes to analyze Richard Wright's attitudes toward religion as manifested in his works of fiction, and to determine the meaning of religion for Wright's characters and for Wright himself.

An investigation of Wright's fiction will reveal the essential role which Christian faith assumes in these works. In both his novels and his short stories there are manifestations of religious elements, in the form of ideas, symbols or individual characters. In essence, it is clear that all of his major literary pieces are filled with direct or indirect references to Christianity which create the atmosphere in which the author's thought moves. Further, there is evidence that Wright's utilization of the religious theme in terms of character portrayal and plot development is diverse. Wright's skill at developing diversified religious themes ranges from the simple inclusion of a Negro spiritual—with no apparent religious significance— in "Long Black Song" and "Big Boy Leaves Home" to the extensive utilization of the image of the cross in Native Son.
It is the intention of the researcher to carry out the study by dealing with works—novels and short stories—in which Wright is centrally concerned with religious-moral concepts. The principal sources for the discourse will include four novels—_Lawn Today_, _The Long Dream_, _Native Son_ and _The Outsider_—two short stories from _Eight Men_—"The Man Who Lived Underground" and "Man, God Ain't Like That..."—and three short stories from _Uncle Tom's Children_—"Down By the Riverside," "Fire and Cloud" and "Bright and Morning Star." While the major part of the study will deal with these nine sources, some reference will be given to the following short stories: "The Man Who Went to Chicago" (_Eight Men_), "Big Boy Leaves Home" and "Long Black Song" (_Uncle Tom's Children_). The total number of short stories to be used in the research is eight.

In order to determine the meaning of religion for Wright, the man, the researcher feels that some knowledge of the writer's personal life experiences is necessary. Utilization of Wright's autobiography, _Black Boy_, will establish the basis of comparison between Wright's own feelings and the feelings of his characters. The researcher feels that the inclusion of Wright's autobiography will help facilitate the arrival at a complete conceptualization of Wright's religious attitudes.

There will be three major divisions of the research—chapter one will present evidence of Wright's concern with religious-moral themes; its focus will be concentrated upon the influence of Marxism on Richard Wright's religious concepts. Chapter two will analyze the major religious attitudes represented in Wright's fiction; and chapter three will evaluate his treatment of the Negro minister and the Negro spiritual as an indication of his religious attitude.
In the context of the study, the researcher will deal with the following specified subjects, and Wright's attitude toward each: (a) religion as justification for Negro suffering; (b) religion as a substitute for worldly happiness and personal fulfillment; and (c) religion as an obstruction to Negro progress. To be included in the treatment of these themes are such elements as the white man's use of the Negro church as a control of the Negro community; Negro spirituals, prayers and sermons as representative of his failure to find personal fulfillment on earth; and irony and paradox in religious doctrine, in its application to the Negro race.

The researcher wishes to thank Dr. Richard K. Barksdale, her advisor, whose advice and criticism made this research possible.
CHAPTER I—INFLUENCE OF MARXISM ON RICHARD WRIGHT'S RELIGIOUS CONCEPTS

In order to gain a perspective of the emotional, spiritual and ideological forces that gave birth to Richard Wright's point of view, not only must some insight be gained into Wright's own background, but consideration must also be directed to the general conditions of America during the first half of the twentieth century. Chapter One of the research is designed for just this purpose. One need only to read the following nonfictional works by Wright—his autobiography, Black Boy (1945), Twelve Million Black Voices (1941), Black Power (1954), White Man, Listen! (1957), "The Ethics of Living Jim Crow" (1936), "How Bigger Was Born" (1940), "I Tried to Be a Communist" (1944) and "The God That Failed" (1950)—to recognize the fact that Wright's personal experiences greatly influence, indeed dictate, what he has to say in his fiction, and that his fiction is a response to the conditions in his environment.

This is as it should be, according to the following statement by Herbert Hill in his Introduction to Anger and Beyond: "...In each generation the work of the Negro writer was the response of the creative imagination as an individual reaction to the Negro's social experience."¹

Hill states unequivocally that all literature is a reflection of and a projection of the minds of people and consequently the literature of the Negro must concern itself with the question of race. The crucial importance and significance of the literature of the American Negro is that it presents "the Negro's perception of himself and the variety of his responses to his condition."² Similarly, LeRoi Jones, writing in 1966, summarizes the attitudes of black literary critics toward the American

²Ibid., p. xvi.
Negro writer:

The Negro writer is in a peculiar position, because if he is honest most of what he has seen and experienced in America will not flatter it. . . . Since he is writing about his own life and his own experience, his writing must be separate, not only because of the intellectual gulf that causes any serious man to be estranged from the mainstream of American life but because of the social and cultural estrangement from that mainstream that has characterized Negro life in America. I have always thought of writing as a moral art; that is, basically, I think of the artist as a moralist, as demanding a moral construct of the world, as asking for a clearer vision of society. . . .

Richard Wright's works embody the salient characteristics of the literature of the American Negro community. In all of his works he is concerned with the depiction of "Negro life in all its manifold and intricate relationships." In 1937, writing "Blueprint for Negro Writing," Wright observes that:

Generally speaking, Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America. They entered the court of American public opinion dressed in the knee pants of servility, curtsying to show that the Negro was not inferior, that he was human, and that he had a life comparable to other people. For the most part these artistic ambassadors were received as though they were French poodles who do clever tricks. . . . Shall Negro writing be for the Negro masses, moulding the lives and consciousness of the masses toward new goals, or shall it continue to go begging the question of Negroes' humanity?

Hence, for Wright the role of the Negro writer is essentially to give directives to the Negro community by making articulate the experiences of

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4 Richard Wright, "Blueprint for Negro Writing," New Challenge (Fall, 1937), pp. 53-64.
5 Ibid.
Within the Negro community, the church plays an important role in the lives of Negro people. Traditionally, the Negro church has been the center of Negro culture. From the time of slavery to the present, the Negro church has served as the Negro's sole outlet for his anger, his rage, his terror and his frustrations. It has also served as a political force, offering directives to the Negro people which do not appear threatening to the white power structure. The Negro minister often exhibits a degree of bargaining power— in many cases he is approached by white politicians who request his support in elections in return for favors to the Negro community. Wright fully recognizes the importance of the role which religion assumes in the lives of the Negro people. But he also realizes that the fundamental concepts within Christian doctrine are paradoxical and ambiguous. In the application of the principles of Christianity to the Negro's problems, Wright feels that they support his condition rather than offer him a solution to eradicating his condition. Consequently, when Wright concerns himself with religion within his works his primary concern is with illustrating to the Negro masses the failure of Christianity to eliminate the world's oppression.

That Wright is concerned with the subject of religion and its role in the lives of Negro people is evidenced most clearly in the novels Native Son and The Outsider. Bigger Thomas in Native Son and Cross Damon in The Outsider are Wright's fictional spokesmen who deny the Christian concepts of suffering and hopelessness as a necessary part of

Bigger Thomas in *Native Son* clearly denies the fundamental concepts of hopelessness and suffering affiliated with religious belief. At one point in the novel Bigger is attempting to elude the police and as he listens to a Negro church congregation singing "Steal Away to Jesus," the following thoughts ring in his consciousness:

The singing filled his ears; it was complete, self-contained, and it mocked his fear and loneliness, his deep yearning for a sense of wholeness. Its fullness contrasted so sharply with his hunger, its richness with his emptiness, that he recoiled from it while answering it. Would it not have been better for him had he lived in the world the music sang of? It would have been easy to have lived in it, for it was his mother's world, humble, contrite, believing. It had a center, a core, an axis, a heart which he needed but could never have unless he laid his head upon a pillow of humility and gave up his hope of living in the world.7

This is Bigger's first clear statement of his attitude toward religion but it is not to be his last. Throughout the novel he systematically rejects the words of his mother and of her minister, that life must be characterized by suffering.

Like Bigger Thomas, Cross Damon in *The Outsider* recoils from what he terms the "oppressive" nature of Christianity. Cross Damon's statement of this fact is revealed most clearly when he meets a Catholic priest during his flight from Chicago to New York. Upon meeting the priest Cross's first observation is:

He disliked most strongly all men of religion because he felt that they could take for granted an interpretation of the world that his sense of life made impossible. The priest was secure and walked the earth with a divine

mandate, while Gross's mere breathing was an act of audacity, a confounding wonder at the daily mystery of himself. He felt that the attitude of the priest was predicted upon a scheme of good and evil ordained by a God whom he was constrained out of love and fear to obey; and Cross therefore regarded him as a kind of dressed-up savage intimidated by totems and taboos that differed in kind but not in degree from those of the most primitive of peoples.°

Cross is virtually an intellectual in comparison with Bigger, for Cross has been schooled in the philosophies of Kierkegaard, Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx and Dostoevski, and his interpretation of the world is not as restricted as is that of Bigger Thomas. The regard that each character holds for religion is, however, essentially the same—that religion tends to intimidate rather than to free the minds of men.

William Barrett in "The Decline of Religion" argues that the religious "symbols, images, dogmas and rites . . . had the psychological validity of immediate experience." Richard Wright also argues this point in his autobiography, Black Boy. In a long treatise on the characteristics of the sermons preached by the minister of his grandmother's Seventh-Day Adventist church, Wright states:

Granny was an ardent member of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church and I was compelled to make a pretense of worshipping her God, which was her exaction for my keep. The elders of her church expounded a gospel clogged with images of vast lakes of eternal fire, of seas vanishing, of valleys of dry bones, of the sun burning to ashes, of the moon turning to blood, of stars falling to the earth, of a wooden staff being transformed into a serpent, of voices speaking out of clouds, of men walking upon water, of God

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9 Ibid., p. 421.
riding whirlwinds, of water changing into wine, of the dead rising and living, of the blind seeing, of the lame walking; a salvation that teemed with fantastic beasts having multiple heads and horns and eyes and feet...; a cosmic tale that began before time and ended with the clouds of the sky rolling away at the Second Coming of Christ; chronicles that concluded with the Armageddon; dramas thronged with all the billions of human beings who had ever lived or died as God judged the quick and the dead...

Wright continues:

While listening to the vivid language of the sermons I was pulled toward emotional belief, but as soon as I went out of the church and saw the bright sunshine and felt the throbbing life of the people in the streets I knew that none of it was true and that nothing would happen.\(^1\)

Wright leaves little doubt that many of the religious symbols appeal to his emotions for the moment, but it is also unquestionably clear that full emotional and intellectual belief in the dramatic vision of life held by the church never came to him.

The point that Wright is attempting to express is that any doctrine, religious or otherwise, has to relate to man's everyday experiences. In Black Boy Wright illustrates this principle as he relates how he and his brother would treat the subject matter which they learned in Sunday school classes:

Some of the Bible stories were interesting in themselves, but we always twisted them, secularized them to the level of our street life, rejecting all meanings that did not fit into our environment.


\(^\#\) Armageddon is the scene of the battle foretold in Rev: 16: 14-16, a final and conclusive battle between the forces of good and evil.

\(^12\) Wright, Black Boy, p. 113.
And we did the same to the beautiful humms. When
the preacher intoned:

"Amazing grace, how sweet it sounds!"

We would wink at one another and hum under our breath:

"A bulldog ran my grandma down."

In his fiction Wright utilizes this tendency consistently. In the novels
Lawd Today and The Long Dream and in at least five short stories—"Big
Boy Leaves Home," "Long Black Song," "Bright and Morning Star," "Man,
God Ain't Like That" and "The Man Who Lived Underground"—Wright gives
serious discussions of the place of Christian concepts in the lives of
human experience. Likewise, he gives similar treatment to the role of
the Negro spiritual in the lives of Negro people in the following works:
Native Son, The Long Dream, "Bright and Morning Star," "Big Boy Leaves
Home," "Down By the Riverside," "Fire and Cloud," "Man, God Ain't Like
That" and "Long Black Song." In these works Wright depicts how spirituals
are made to associate with the Negro's common experience. In the short
stories "The Man Who Lived Underground" and "Man, God Ain't Like That"
Wright reveals the implication that if the words of the Christian doc-
trine and the words of spiritual songs are taken literally, there will
be revealed both ambiguity and paradox within the very nature of Christian-
ity. Wright cannot seem to emphasize enough, in his fiction and in his
criticism, that Christianity can have no substance if it is irrelevant
to man's social experience.

The types of sermons described by Wright in Black Boy may be seen
in the majority of his fiction in which he deals with the Negro minister.

13 Ibid., pp. 92-93.
In *Native Son* Wright proclaims this version of the Negro sermon through a prayer by Reverend Hammond. Visiting Bigger in Bigger's jail cell, Reverend Hammond kneels and prays:

"Lawd Jesus, turn Yo' eyes 'n' look inter the heart of this po' sinner! Yuh said mercy wuz aways Yo's 'n' ef we ast fer it on bended knee Yuh'd po' it out inter our hearts 'n' make our cups run over! We's astin' Yuh t' po' out Yo' mercy now, Lawd! Po' it out fer this po' sinner boy who stan's in deep need of it! Ef his sins be as scarlet, Lawd, wash 'em white as snow! Fergive 'im fer whatever he's done, Lawd! Let the light of Yo' love guide 'im th'u' these dark days! 'N' help them who's a' trying to help 'im, Lawd! Enter inter they hearts 'n' breathe compassion on they sperits! We ast this in the nama Yo' Son Jesus who died on the cross 'n' gave us the mercy of Yo' love! Ahmen. . . ."

Bigger's response to the minister's prayer is comparable with the response Wright makes to the sermons of the Seventh-Day Adventist church.

Bigger's reaction to Hammond's words are as follows:

"He knew without listening what they meant; it was the old voice of his mother telling of suffering, of hope, of love beyond this world. And he loathed it. . . ."

A parallel may be drawn between the prayer of Reverend Hammond and the prayer of Elder Murray in the short story "Down By the Riverside:"

"Lawd Gawd Awmighty in Heaven, wes a-bowin befo Yuh once ergin, humble in Yo sight, a-pleadin fer forgiveness n mercy! Hear us today, Lawd! Hear us today ef Yuh ain never heard us befo! We needs Yuh now t hep us n guide us! N hep these po folks, Lawd! Deys Yo chillun! Yuh made em n Yuh made em in Yo own image! Open up their hearts n hep em t have faith in Yo words! N hep this po woman, Lawd! Ease her labor, fer Yuh said, Lawd, she has t bring foth her chillun in pain. . . ."

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14 Wright, *Native Son*, pp. 262-263.
15 Ibid., p. 263.
The primary consideration in interpreting the situations in which these prayers are voiced is that in either case, the context of the prayer has little or nothing to do with the situation at hand. In the case of Reverend Hammond, Bigger has been jailed and his destiny is in the hands of white justice and divine punishment is not the question either in the mind of Bigger or in the mind of Reverend Hammond. At the point at which Elder Murray voices his prayer, the Mann family is faced with the problem of escaping the torture of a four-day flood and with providing medical care for Mrs. Mann who is in childbirth. In each instance the minister involved utilizes Biblical symbols and images which appeal to the emotions of the characters rather than provide worthwhile answers to their problems.

In another short story, "Fire and Cloud," the minister, Reverend Taylor, utilizes many Biblical symbols in his reflections upon his entry into the ministry:

... God had spoken to him, a quiet, deep voice coming out of the black night; God had called him to preach His word, to spread it to the four corners of the earth, to save His black people. And he had obeyed God and had built a church on a rock which the very gates of Hell could not prevail against. Yes, he had been like Moses, leading his people out of the wilderness into the Promised Land. ... In those days there had stretched before his eyes a straight and narrow path and he had walked in it, with the help of a Gracious God. On Sundays he had preached God's Word, and on Mondays and Tuesdays and Wednesdays and Thursdays and Fridays and Saturdays he had taken old Bess, his mule, and his plow and had broke God's ground. ... The earth was his and he was the earth's; they were one; and it was that joy and will and oneness in him that God had spoken to when he had called him to preach His word, to save His black people, to lead them, to guide them, to be a shepherd to His flock. 17

17 Wright, "Fire and Cloud," Uncle Tom's Children ( ... ), pp. 131-132.
Here we see that, although much Biblical symbolism is incorporated into Taylor's own life experience, the religious symbols themselves are typical of those expressed in the sermons of the elders of Wright's grandmother's Seventh-Day Adventist church, and in the prayers of Reverend Hammond in Native Son and Elder Murray in "Down By the Riverside."

The fact that Wright focuses a great deal of attention upon the Negro minister is not unusual. According to David Littlejohn, in Black On White, Negro writing is dominated by the fervid, evangelical variety of Negro Christianity which is evidenced in the inclusion of spirituals, sermons and church services. Littlejohn states:

Tour-de-force imitations of the Negro preacher's sermon abound in American Negro writing, an incantatory progression of Scriptural echoes and images, moving through an associative emotional crescendo. The elaborate Negro funeral is a stock-in-trade setting.18

In his novel The Long Dream Wright utilizes the Negro funeral in which Biblical symbols and images abound. In the novel Reverend Ragland sees Death as "God's special messenger," carrying out God's "Divine Plan of Justice."19

Richard Wright is unwilling to lean on disincinated tradition and rejects all superstition, in which he includes all religion, because he feels that it shackles the free human mind.20 This rejection of the Christian faith cannot be more clearly illustrated than it is in the following statement from Black Boy:

I reasoned that if there did exist an all-wise, all-

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powerful God who knew the beginning and end, who meted out justice to all, who controlled the destiny of man, this God would surely know that I doubted His existence and He would laugh at my foolish denial of Him. And if there was no God at all, then why all the commotion? I could not imagine God pausing in His guidance of unimaginably vast worlds to bother with me.

Embedded in me was a notion of the suffering in life, but none of it seemed like the consequences of original sin to me; I simply could not feel weak and lost in a cosmic manner. . . . My faith, such as it was, was welded to the common realities of life, anchored in the sensations of my body and in what my mind could grasp, and nothing could ever shake this faith, and surely not my fear of an invisible power.21

It is significant to note here that Wright recalls this as his belief as an adolescent of twelve, and his position does not change as he grows older.

The research conducted by Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson (The Negro's Church) indicates that Wright is not alone in his rejection of Christianity. It is the observation of Mays and Nicholson that Christianity fails to "challenge the loyalty of many of the most critically-minded Negroes." Witness what the authors have to say concerning the Negro church:

The analysis reveals that the status of the Negro church is in part the result of the failure of American Christianity in the realm of race relations; that the church's program, except in rare instances, is static, non-progressive, and fails to challenge the loyalty of many of the most critically-minded Negroes; that the vast majority of its pastors are poorly trained theologically; that more than half of the sermons analyzed are abstract, otherworldly, and embued with a magical conception of religion.22

21Wright, Black Boy, p. 127.
Compare this statement with a statement by André Gide at a meeting in Paris in 1935:

I consider that on account of its compromises Christianity is bankrupt. I have written, and I believe firmly, that if Christianity had really prevailed and if it had really fulfilled the teaching of Christ, there would today be no question of Communism—there would be no social problem at all.24

Similarly, Wright feels that Christianity, and all other forms of religion whose fundamental concepts are based upon mysticism and superstition, "freeze millions in static degradation, no matter how emotionally satisfying such degradation seems to those who wallow in it."25

Many critics—and Wright is included in this group—have argued the point that Christianity is founded upon injustice, and therefore it cannot offer a solution to the world's oppressed groups. Observe what Thomas L. Hanna has to say concerning Albert Camus's estimate of the Christian faith:

Camus's estimate of the Christian faith is summed up most simply in his remark that "in its essence, Christianity (and this is its paradoxical greatness) is a doctrine of injustice. It is founded on the sacrifice of the innocent and the acceptance of this sacrifice" (The Rebel). This is to say that, to Camus's mind, Jesus of Nazareth was an innocent man unjustly killed; from no point of view can he rule out the fact of the injustice in this event. Hence, when Christians, viewing this event, accept it as a sacrifice—that is, when they accept it as right and necessary—they have denied the one undeniable truth in this event which is that it is horrible and unjust that an innocent man should be killed. This is what is paradoxical in Christianity. And the


greatness in this paradox is that Christians have, in this metamorphosis of injustice, found an attitude which transcends and minimizes the abiding reality of human suffering.26

Hanna continues with what he concludes is Camus's vision of God with the statement that "if this is a world in which innocents must be tortured, and if there be a God who rules, guides, or sanctifies this world, then God is unjust."27

This point is argued by both Negro and white theologians. While they agree that Christianity is founded upon suffering, they also emphasize the point that Biblical doctrine supports the oppressed rather than the oppressor. A contemporary Negro theologian makes the following argument concerning the Old Testament's view of enslavement:

By liberating this people /the Hebrews/ from Egyptian bondage and inaugurating the covenant on the basis of that event, God reveals that he is the God of the oppressed, involved in their history, liberating men from human bondage.28

He continues:

Throughout the Old Testament God's righteousness is revealed on behalf of the oppressed. This is why he was called a "God of war," and why the prophets spoke of his righteousness being identified with the liberation of the poor and the condemnation of the rich. There is nothing in the Old Testament that suggests that God is indifferent toward the economic, political, and social conditions of men. He is unquestionably on the side of the weak. There is nothing in the Old Testament that says that God is concerned about reconciling the oppressed with the oppressors—at least not when the latter continue to believe that they are the master of the world. The consistent

27. Ibid., p. 51.
theme in the Old Testament is the complete sovereignty of God in human affairs—the condemnation of all who make laws at the expense of human misery and the vindication of his will to be for the victims of unjust laws.  

Wright, along with other critics of Christianity, does not argue the fact that Christian doctrine reveals God as the stanchion of oppressed groups. Reverend Hammond's statement in *Native Son* reveals this idea simply: "Jesus let men crucify 'Im; but His death wuz a victory. He showed us tha' t' live in this worl' wuz t' be crucified by it. This worl' ain' our home. Life ever' day is a crucifixion." What Wright argues is that while God is a God of the oppressed, He has failed to offer the oppressed groups any real hope toward the elimination of their state of oppression. Wright feels that in religion the only inspiration offered to the oppressed groups is that they will be vindicated by God after death—they will be happy in heaven while the oppressor will be condemned to the eternal damnation of Hell.

Implicit in the doctrine of Christianity is the belief that man's soul is eternal and if man lives a righteous life his soul shall be resigned to eternal happiness in Heaven, the abode of God. For the Negro this is of great importance. Because he has been completely negated within the American culture, complete and total happiness upon the earth has been denied him. He must then look toward Heaven and the promise of pleasures offered to him there as a consequence of his lack of happiness on earth. According to Wright in "How Bigger Was Born" many people "felt that Jesus would redeem the void of living, felt that

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29 Ibid.
30 Wright, *Native Son*, p. 265.
the more bitter life was in the present the happier it would be in the hereafter."31

Compare what Wright has to say with what Benjamin Brawley has to say in "The Negro and the Arts:"

It is never a sermon on the theory of the atonement that awakens ... ecstasy. Instead, this accompanies a vivid description of the beauties of heaven—the walls of jasper, the angels with palms in their hands, and, best of all, the feast of milk and honey. It is the sensuous appeal that is most effective. The untutored Negro is thrilled not so much by the moral as by the artistic and pictorial elements of religion.32

Again we see the implication that religion cannot be disassociated from man's common experience. Even for the deeply religious, concepts of personal happiness and individual fulfillment are incorporated within their conception of religion. Bigger Thomas proclaims Wright's reaction to the man who looks only toward life after death for the ascertainment of happiness. In a conversation with his Communist lawyer, Max, Bigger is asked:

But Gigger, you said that if you were where people did not hate you and you did not hate them, you could be happy. Nobody hated you in church, couldn't you feel at home there?33

Bigger replies, "I wanted to be happy in this world, not out of it. ..."34 Max continues by asking Bigger, "If you could be happy in religion now, would you want to be?"35 Bigger's answer is, as Wright's would be, "Now,

33 Wright, Native Son, p. 329.
34 Ibid.
I'll be dead soon enough. If I was religious, I'd be dead now."36

For centuries man looked to the inherent concepts of fellowship in love evidenced within the doctrines of Christianity as a focal point for finding solutions to social ills. With industrialization, however, man became more concerned with obtaining happiness on earth--through the acquisition of material goods--than with the spiritual survival of his soul. Through science man also began to regard much of religious doctrine as symbols and images which had real meaning only in man's immediate experience. William Barrett summarizes the nature of man's turn from a religious culture to a secular culture:

The decline of religion in modern times means simply that religion is no longer the uncontested center and ruler of man's life, and that the church is no longer the final and unquestioned home and asylum of his being.37

Barrett concludes with the statement that in losing religion, man was "set free to deal with this world in all its brute objectivity. But he was bound to feel homeless in such a world, which no longer answered the needs of his spirit."38

It was because of the vacuum left by the loss of religion that Communism arose. According to André Gide, "man without God is doomed to defeat and despair, unless he substitutes some other idea of God."39 For more than a decade, Communism filled the void for Richard Wright.

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36 Ibid., p. 330.
38 Ibid.
Cultural and social perspectives are many times influenced by ideological developments which throw a new light on the everyday world of events. From the beginning of time, writers have utilized the prevailing ideologies of the times to project the dreams of mankind. Within the past fifty years the most profoundly affective influence in the lives of man has been Karl Marx's interpretation of history, which is today called Communism. Modern writers, Negro and white alike, have devoted enormous energies toward the interpretation of the impact and implications of Communist doctrine in twentieth-century society. Indeed, many writers have openly joined the Communist Party, believing it to be the only force within modern society that is capable of ultimately destroying the class system. Noticeable among the writers who became Party members are André Gide, Ignazio Silone, Arthur Koestler, Stephen Spender and Louis Fischer—all of whom describe their journeys into Communism and their disillusioned return in The God That Failed. The great French writer, Albert Camus, with whom Richard Wright developed a warm friendship, did not become a member of the Communist Party, but he did support the Party's concern for the elimination of the world's oppressed groups. Richard Wright joined the Communist Party but was overwhelmed by the fact that he could not exercise his freedom as an individual. As will be shown later, Wright's break with the Party was inevitable.

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40 See Richard Crossman, ed., The God That Failed, Bantam Books (New York: Harper and Row, 1950). In the work Richard Wright also describes his affiliation and membership with and his ultimate disillusionment with the totalitarian nature of Communist leadership.

Richard Wright's affiliation with the Communist Party was conditioned by his circumstances. Born in Natchez, Mississippi in 1908, Wright and his young brother were early deserted by their father. From the age of six until he was fifteen he was not to know a permanent home. Like all Negroes of the South, his life was fundamentally characterized by a basic struggle for survival. As a Negro living in the South, Wright learned that "the rules, principles, and institutions of white America did not apply to him." His estimation of the conditions of the South is illustrated quite clearly in his essay "How Bigger Was Born." In the essay he states:

In Dixie there are two worlds, the white world and the black world, and they are physically separated. There are white schools and black schools, white churches and black churches, white businesses and black businesses, white graveyards and black graveyards, and, for all I know, a white God and a black God. . . .

Wright's fiction reflects the Negro's constant concern with physical survival within a hostile society. His characters are representatives of the Negro masses, and they are also products of the South. The situations involve settings in the deep rural South or in large Northern urban centers (Chicago and New York) whose great populations have resulted largely from the influx of Southern Negroes who streamed into these cities at the

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44 Wright, "How Bigger Was Born," p. xi.
encouragement of industry's demand for cheap labor. The period of the Great Migration—circa 1910-1930—encompasses the first twenty years of Wright's own life. Wright's works reveal the unquestionable fact that the Northern migration of the Negro served to further isolate him from his culture. Here he was shunted off into isolated areas characterized by unsafe, rat-infested buildings which were rented to them by whites for enormous fees.

It is in the literature of the Communist Party that Wright first finds what he terms "an organized search for the truth of the lives of the oppressed and the isolated." His initial reaction to the Communistic theory outlining the eventual elimination of world oppression is as follows:

It was not the economics of Communism, nor the great power of trade unions, nor the excitement of underground politics that claimed me; my attention was caught by the similarity of the experiences of workers in other lands, by the possibility of uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole. It seemed to me that here at last, in the realm of revolutionary expression, Negro experience could find a home, a functioning value and role.

Wright is at first associated with the Party as a writer for the John Reed Club. He feels that the Communists have generally "oversimplified the experience of those whom they . . . seek to lead," and he determines to "put meaning" into the way common people feel and to tell common people of the "self-sacrifice of Communists who . . . strive for unity among them."

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46 Ibid., p. 106.
48 Ibid., p. 107.
One of the characteristics of Communism which appealed most to Wright is that it "involves a repudiation of both the cosmology and ethics of Western religion." With the establishment of the first broad united front (1935), the Party began to tone down its antireligious sentiments, and in the last twenty years, religious groups have become desirable members, for the Party has learned that they bring with them the respectability and authority of the religious tradition. At the time at which Wright was initiated into the Party, however,

It fairly flaunted its contempt for religion and delighted to quote a certain sentence which Lenin wrote in 1905: "Religion is a kind of spiritual gin in which the slaves of capital drown their human shape and their claims to any decent human life."

One would expect Richard Wright to agree with this attitude. That he does agree may be illustrated in the following statement by the major character in Wright's short story "The Man Who Went to Chicago:"

America, lusty because it is lonely, aggressive because it is afraid, insists upon seeing the world in terms of good and bad, the holy and the evil, the high and the low, the white and the black; our America is frightened by fact, by history, by processes, by necessity. It hugs the easy way of damning those who look different, and it salves its consciousness with a self-draped cloak of righteousness.

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50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

Similarly, Cross Damon expresses the same philosophy. Cross explains his conception of the history of mankind as dictated by religion: "Modern man still believes in magic; he lives in a rational world but insists on interpreting the events of the world in terms of mystical forces..." Cross then theorizes that industrialization has progressed because its basic characteristic is fear. He continues his presentation of his conception of the progress of mankind thus:

Primitve man, naked and afraid, found that only one thing could really quiet his terrors: that is, Untruth. He stuffed his head full of myths, and if he had not, he might well have died from fear itself...

The degree and quality of man's fears can be gauged by the scope and density of his myths; that is, by the ingenious manner in which he disguised the world about him... His myths sought to re-cast that world, tame it, make it more humanly meaningful and endurable. The more abjectly frightened the nation or race of men, the more their myths and religions projected out upon the world another world in front of the real world, or, in another way of speaking, they projected another world behind the real world they saw, lived, suffered, and died in.

Wright's works fluctuate with characters who create false worlds as the result of their enslavement under religion. In fact, all of the characters who represent the archetypal "faithful" Christian fall within this category.

We have noted earlier that from the first moment that Wright became affiliated with the Communist Party he was concerned that the Party had "missed the meaning of the lives of the masses." What Wright was to

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53 Wright, The Outsider, p. 354.
54 Ibid., pp. 356-357.
finally realize was that Communism, like religion, is indoctrinated with dogmatism and fanaticism, qualities which Wright feels intimidating rather than free the minds of men.

Robert V. Daniels, in *The Nature of Communism*, offers an extensive comparison of the qualities of Communism with the qualities of religion. Observe what Daniels has to say concerning Communism and Eastern and Western religions:

The Communist pattern of reasoning, despite their assertions to the contrary, is metaphysical in both the strict and the derogatory senses. Communism does lack any reference to the supernatural, strictly speaking, but the "Dialectic" represents almost as much of a cosmic will as the vaguely metaphorical theism of liberal Protestantism, not to mention the ethereal abstractionism of some schools of Hindu and Buddhist thought.  

Wright recognizes the parallel between religion and Communism, as is evidenced by Cross Damon's statement in *The Outsider*, which summarizes the position of the Communist Party:

> Thou shalt not depend upon others, nor trust them: for this your Party is a jealous Party, visiting the suspicions of the leaders upon the members of the third and fourth friends of the friends around the Party. . . .

While readers may regard this statement as Wright's attempt at humorism, it must not be taken lightly. Imbedded within the meaning here is Wright's association of religious concepts with those of the Communist faith. Specifically, Communism is given the role of a god.

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57 Wright, *The Outsider*, p. 343.
Daniels makes the following statement regarding the dogmatism inherent within the Communist Movement:

Corresponding to the proletarian movement there can be only one proletarian creed, an exclusive proletarian truth. The party knows the interests of the proletariat best, better than any individual proletarian; therefore what the party says has to be right. With this, Marx's attempt at a sophisticated sociology of ideas becomes a crude defense of dogmatism. Correct ideology is what the leader says it is, and every nonconforming notion is liable to be expunged as a "bourgeois" intrusion. 58

It is here that Wright finds fault in the Communistic doctrine. Although he believes in the principal directives toward the elimination of world oppression, he finds that the totalitarian nature of Communist leaders results in another form of oppression.

Wright realizes that in Communism, the follower must deny his desires for individualism. In Communism man becomes a machine, whose sole purpose is to obey the Party. Observe what the young Communist Gil (The Outsider) has to say regarding membership in the Party:

We're Communists! And being a Communist is not easy. It means negating Yourself, blotting out your personal life and listening only to the voice of the Party. The Party wants you to obey! The Party hopes that you can understand why you must obey; but even if you don't understand, you must obey. If you don't, then the Party will toss you aside, like a broken hammer, and seek another instrument that will obey. 59

Wright eventually leaves the Communist Party because he cannot bring himself to abandon "the individuality which life had seared into . . . [his] bones." 60

Harold Cruse, in The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, states that


59 Wright, The Outsider, p. 183.

the Communists were unable to meet the needs of the Negro people because of the refusal of Party leaders and theoreticians to allow the Negro to help confront the racial issues. Cruse states:

... The unwillingness or inability of the Communists to come to grips with the Negro national group realities was displayed on both sides of the racial fence among Party leaders and theoreticians. It was the white Communist leaders who actually laid down the line, but the Negro leaders followed it without deviation. The whites, for the most part confused themselves, were forced to raise many questions and doubts on the Negro issue—questions only Negroes themselves could have answered.61

It is precisely this argument—that the experiences of the disinherited must be related by the disinherited themselves—that brings Wright's public resignation from the Party in 1942. Two years later he published an article, "I Tried to Be a Communist," in which he openly criticized the maniacal qualities of Communist leaders.62

The effect of Wright's affiliation and disillusionment with the Communist Party is pronounced in his works. This effect may be revealed by a general comparison of Native Son (1940), "Bright and Morning Star," and "Fire and Cloud," Uncle Tom's Children (1938), with The Outsider (1953). The first three works present a picture of Communism as the Negro's hope for a more promising future, while in The Outsider Communism is pictured as another form of oppression. Wright himself states in "The God That Failed" that his disillusionment with Communism


62 Wright, "I Tried to Be a Communist," Atlantic Monthly, Fall, 1937, pp. 53-64.
greatly affected his writing:

I remembered the stories I had written, the stories in which I had assigned a role of honor and glory to the Communist Party, and I was glad that they were down in black and white, were finished. For I knew in my heart that I should never be able to write that way again, should never be able to feel with that simple sharpness about life, should never again express such passionate hope, should never again make so total a commitment.63

This statement is proved conclusively in the works written by Wright after he left the Party. The Outsider, The Long Dream, Savage Holiday— which is not treated in this study—and six of the stories in Eight Men,64 all reflect an essential existential tone.

In summary, the data presented in this chapter reveal that Richard Wright's fiction is a projection of his responses to his environment, as he feels all Negro literature must be. The data further reveals that Wright's personal experience was profoundly affected by two forces—religion and Communism—whose inherently dogmatic principles retard man's desire for freedom and individualism. Wright's indoctrination by Communist philosophy is seen in his novels and short stories of his early writing period; his disillusionment with the totalitarian aspects of Communism is revealed in his novels and short stories written after his break with the Party in 1942. In all of his works, his total renunciation of the mystical and supernatural aspects of religion is revealed.

In essence, Wright's literature is the literature of the Negro experience, and as such, it reveals the Negro's concern with his physical environment, and the forces which affect it. There can be no questioning the fact

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64 In Eight Men, published in 1961, two of the short stories were published prior to 1942, namely, "The Man Who Saw the Flood" and "The Man Who Was Almost a Man," neither of which has any significance for the present study.
that religion is a sustaining affect upon the lives of the Negro people, and that the Communists' theoretical concern with the elimination of world oppression, at first glance, offers the Negro some hope that he may see the time when his world is not isolated from the real stream of American culture.
In the previous chapter we saw that two forces—religion and Communism—greatly affected the mind of Richard Wright. In the chapter our concern was with illustrating the pronouncement of these influences within Wright's fiction and nonfiction. In the present chapter our concern will be with the specific attitudes toward religion as exhibited by characters. In the discussion it will be shown that Wright's characters fall into three basic camps in regards to their religious attitudes—those who firmly believe in the Christian concepts; those who completely rebel against religious superstition; and those who are at a crossroads between belief and denial of Christian doctrine. Because a conception of Wright's own religious views was fairly well established in Chapter One, only a general concern will be given to whether Wright himself agrees with the attitudes expressed by his characters. The present chapter will deal with each of the above indicated attitudes respectively. The Negro minister will be dealt with as an exclusive group in the following chapter and will not be dealt with as a principal member of the above three groups.

A. Characters Who Represent the Archetypal Christian in Native Son, The Outsider, Land Today, The Long Dream and "Man, God Ain't Like That."

In Native Son the archetypal Negro Christian is represented by Bigger's mother, and the parallel within the white community is represented by Mr. and Mrs. Dalton. Mrs. Thomas' concept of religion is deeply tied up with the conditions of her environment. Mrs. Thomas' entire life has been characterized by a simple struggle for survival within a hostile
environment. Consider the events which occur in the opening scenes of the novel. Wright opens the novel with a scene in which the entire Thomas family wages a war upon a huge rat.¹ In the scene we get a clear picture of the despair and hopelessness of the life within the ghetto. Mrs. Thomas' religious concepts are a projection of this environment.

Following the attack against the rat, Mrs. Thomas sings:

Life is like a mountain railroad  
With an engineer that's brave  
We must make the run successful  
From the cradle to the grave....²

Having known only a life mired in despair and hopelessness, Mrs. Thomas' experience cannot transcend the idea of the prevalence of suffering within all life.

Mrs. Thomas' religious views may be seen most clearly when she visits Bigger in his jail cell where he has been confined for the murder of Mary Dalton. Fully realizing that the question of her son's fate is in the hands of white justice and not in the hands of God, Mrs. Thomas has the following advice for Bigger:

"I'm praying for you, son. That's all I can do now," she said. "The Lord knows I did all I could for you and your sister and brother. I scrubbed and washed and ironed from morning till night, day in and day out, as long as I had strength in my old body. . . . When I heard the news of what happened, I got on my knees and turned my eyes to God and asked Him if I had raised you wrong. I asked Him to let me bear your burden if I did wrong by you. . . . Honey, when ain't nobody round you, when you alone, get on your knees and tell God everything. Ask Him to guide you. That's all you can do now. Son, promise me you'll go to Him."³

¹Richard Wright, Native Son, pp. 7-12.
³Ibid., pp. 277-278.
Mrs. Thomas' idea of the righteous life is one that is characterized by hard work and constant persecution. This idea is one that has been handed down from the time of Negro slavery when the Negro was taught that God supports the enslavement of peoples.\(^4\)

Mrs. Thomas' religion is her only source of outlet for the pain and sorrow embued within her very existence. For her, prayer has become an instrument through which she may voice her outrage at a world which she feels demands hardship and suffering of Negro people. Notice the context of her prayer, in Bigger's cell, as she gathers her three children in her arms:

> Lord, here we is, maybe for the last time. You gave me these children, Lord, and told me to raise 'em. If I failed, Lord, I did the best I could. These poor children's been with me a long time and they's all I got. Lord, please let me see 'em again after the sorrow and suffering of this world! Lord, please let me see 'em where I can love 'em in peace. Let me see 'em again beyond the grave! You said You'd heed prayer, Lord, and I'm asking this in the name of Your son.\(^5\)

Inherent within the words of this prayer is Mrs. Thomas' criticism of the conditions of her life. Her final sentence is essentially a demand that God prove His existence by living up to what He proclaims within the scriptures. It is also the emotional plea of a parent to God—as a fellow parent. Mrs. Thomas feels an identification with God because she associates her own suffering for her son with God's suffering for Jesus.

Mrs. Thomas' prayer also reveals that she believes that there is life after death. In the following scene with Bigger the same idea is presented.

\(^1\)In Everett Tilson's Segregation and The Bible: A Searching Analysis of the Scriptural Evidence (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1958), pp. 23-24, the author states that the American white man has interpreted Genesis, 9: 22-25 as a Biblical justification of Negro slavery and suppression. The text involves the curse of Ham, Noah's son.

\(^5\)Wright, Native Son, p. 279.
The conversation begins with this statement by Bigger's mother:

"Son, there's a place where we can be together again in the great bye and bye. God's done fixed it so we can live without fear. No matter what happens to us here, we can be together in God's heaven. Bigger, your old ma's a-begging you to promise her you'll pray."

Slowly, he/Bigger/ stood up and lifted his hands and tried to touch his mother's face and tell her yes; and as he did so something screamed deep down in him that it was a lie, that seeing her after they killed him would never be. But his mother believed; it was her last hope; it was what had kept her going through the long years. . . .

Here it is clearly indicated that Mrs. Thomas utilizes religion as a projection of her own suffering. Having to live a life that bears the deadweight of social degradation, Mrs. Thomas relies upon the idea of a world after death in which she may live without fear of the white man's restrictions and persecutions.

Mrs. Thomas' counterpart in white society is represented by Mr. and Mrs. Dalton, parents of the girl whom Bigger slays. That the Daltons are representatives of white Christians is revealed in the following one-sided conversation between Bigger and Peggy, the Dalton's maid:

"They're /the Daltons/ Christian people and believe in everybody working hard /compare Mrs. Thomas' statement of this same philosophy/, and living a clean life. Some people think we ought to have more servants than we do, but we get along. It's just like one big family."

"Yessum."

"Mr. Dalton's a fine man," Peggy said.

"Oh, yessum, He is."

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6 Wright, Native Son, p. 278.
"You know, he does a lot for your people."

"My people?" asked Bigger, puzzled.

"Yes, the colored people. He gave over five million dollars to colored schools."\(^7\)

Peggy believes the Daltons to be religious because of their "generosity" to the Negro people. In America the Negro has long been regarded as the white man's "burden." According to Alain Locke in *The New Negro*:

> ... The Negro has been more of a formula than a human being--a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be "kept down," or "in his place," or "helped up," to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden.\(^8\)

Justification for this fixed idea has been offered on the basis of the Negro's alleged inferiority in terms of mental intelligence. It is apparent that Peggy, and more importantly, the Daltons themselves, regard the Negro from the point of view that the Negro is a social burden. To deal with this social burden the Daltons have elected to keep the Negro "in his place" by cramping him into an overcrowded and delapidated section on the Southside of Chicago. Knowing fully well that the conditions under which the Negro has been placed are subhuman conditions, the Daltons ease their consciouses by condescendingly donating a very small portion of their enormous wealth toward Negro education. Most whites believe that nothing beyond charity can be done for the Negro, and only a minimum of that is justified since he shows little or no inclination to help himself. They therefore feel that the fact that the Daltons have contributed more than five million dollars to Negro education makes them most deserving

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7 Wright, *Native Son*, p. 57.

to be called Christians. The Dalton's Christianity is superficial, however, in comparison with the absolute faith exemplified by Mrs. Thomas.

Bigger helps to dissolve the cloak of righteousness which apparently shields the Daltons when he realizes that Mr. Dalton owns the real estate company that rents his one-room home:

He had heard that Mr. Dalton owned the South Side Real Estate Company, and the South Side Real Estate Company owned the house in which he lived. He paid eight dollars a week for one rat-infested room. ... Mr. Dalton was somewhere far away, high up, distant, like a god. ... Even though Mr. Dalton gave millions of dollars for Negro education, he would rent houses to Negroes only in this prescribed area, this corner of the city tumbling down from rot.9

These thoughts continue to run through Bigger's mind, especially after he murders Bessie Mears. Forced to hide within the Negro slums, he is overwhelmed with the fact that there exists vacant housing space all over the city but his family is forced to reside in a one-room rat trap.10

Visiting Bigger's cell, Mr. Dalton exemplifies a religious attitude in the following scene with Max, Bigger's attorney:

"I want you to know that my heart is not bitter," Mr. Dalton said. "What this boy has done will not influence my relations with the Negro people. Why, only today I sent a dozen ping-pong tables to the South Side Boy's Club. . . ."11

Max crushes the philosophy behind Mr. Dalton's statement as follows:

"Mr. Dalton!" Max exclaimed, coming forward suddenly. "My God, man! Will ping-pong keep men from murdering?

10. Ibid., pp. 215-235.
11. Ibid., p. 273.
Max sums up his inquisition of Mr. Dalton with the question, "Why is it that you exact an exorbitant rent of eight dollars per week from the Thomas family for one unventilated, rat-infested room in which four people eat and sleep?"13 Dalton's answer is, "Well, I think Negroes are happier when they're together."14 This is the traditional attitude of whites toward the conditions in the Negro ghetto. According to Max, Dalton uses the profits taken from the Thomas family in rents to give to Negro education in order to "ease the pain of their gouged lives" and to "salve" the ache of his own conscious.15 Similarly, James Baldwin, in "Many Thousands Gone," states that American whites have attempted to blot out the Bigger Thomases with good works and the persistence of the Biggers within the society "makes all . . . their good works an intollerable mockery."16

In The Outsider the archetypal Negro Christian is represented only generally through Mrs. Damon, Cross Damon's mother, Sarah Hunter, and a woman from whom Cross rents a room for a brief time in New York. All three characters reveal the fact that the Negro's idea of Christianity is deeply tied up with the physical hardships evidenced in all Negro life.

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12 Wright, Native Son, pp. 273-274.
13 Ibid., p. 302.
14 Ibid., p. 303.
15 Ibid., p. 304.
Mrs. Damon reveals the fact that she has had to resort to religion because of her failure to find fulfillment with Cross's father. Reflecting upon her marriage, Mrs. Damon thinks:

"Even before her son was born in 1924, she knew that she was only in his [his husband'] way, a worrisome wife. It was then that she took her sorrow and her infant son to God with copious tears." 17

Mrs. Damon's association of religion with her own personal sorrow is revealed in her statement regarding her son's name. Admonishing Gross for his treatment of a young girl, whom Gross has made pregnant, she says, "To think I named you Cross after the Cross of Jesus." 18 Mrs. Damon cannot help but associate Cross's actions with the actions of his father, as is revealed in the following statement by Mrs. Damon, and Cross's reaction to it:

"Promising a child and knowing you don't mean it," she sobbed in despair. "How can men do that?"

He knew that now she was reliving her own experience, grieving over the thwarted hopes that had driven her into the arms of religion for the sake of her sanity. . . . His mother was lucky; she had a refuge, even if that refuge was an illusion. 19

Like Mrs. Thomas in Native Son, life's experiences have conditioned the religious attitude of Mrs. Damon.

The attitude of Mrs. Damon is essentially the same as the attitude exemplified by Cross's landlady in New York. In a discussion between the old woman and Cross, the woman states, in a voice "charged with courageous resignation, "I just pray and keep my house straight and wait for the

17 Wright, The Outsider, p. 23.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid., p. 21.
Good Lord to call me home." She enthusiastically and proudly shows her burial shroud to Cross and states, "When I pass to the other shore to meet Jesus, this is what they're going to dress me in." The woman's burial wardrobe includes the following items:

... a pearl-handled fan made of large, colored feathers; there was a faded silk, cream-colored parasol; there was a long, tea-colored ruffled voile dress which had high pleats and a décolleté neckline; and there was a pair of fragile, high-heeled slippers... she had even included a pair of nicely starched drawers and a pair of nylon stockings from which the price tags had not been removed.

Cross thinks, "Christ Almighty! The woman was acting as though she was preparing to go to a cocktail party." According to the following statement by Cross, the old woman's conception of heaven reflects how "the injunctions of an alien Christianity and the strictures of white laws had evoked in... the Negro... the very longings and desires that religion and law had been designed to stifle." Compare what Erich Fromm has to say in "Alienation and Capitalism" concerning modern man's concept of heaven:

Modern man, if he dared to be articulate about his concept of heaven, would describe a vision which would look like the biggest department store in the world, showing new things and gadgets, and himself having plenty of money with which to buy them. He would wander around open-mouthed in this heaven of gadgets and commodities, provided only that there were ever more and newer things to buy, and perhaps that his neighbors were just a little less privileged than he.

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20 Wright, The Outsider, p. 148.
21 Ibid., p. 149.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., p. 140.
This attitude is perhaps a little too extreme when applied to the Negro, but generally speaking, his lack of happiness upon earth almost demands the association of material happiness in his concept of heaven.

The fact that man turns to religion as a result of personal unfulfillment is further exemplified in The Outsider in the character Sarah Hunter. Sarah and her husband have devoted a great portion of their lives as ardent members of the Communist Party. The dictatorial leaders, however, have completely annihilated her husband and left Sarah in a state of confusion. She decides that the church is the only place for lost souls. She informs Cross:

I ditched the church 'cause I felt they were doping me. But, now—I give up. . . . I'm lost; I don't know if I'm going or coming. . . . It scares me. . . . Only God can answer all this. 26

Cross unconsciously thinks that for people like Sarah religion is an escape mechanism:

What did it matter that the church had no answer for the ills of this earth? The priests could at least tell her to stop hoping for anything in this life, to curb and deny her desires, to forget her humiliating color-consciousness, her poverty, that all of that was as nothing in the eyes of an eternal God. And for those who were weak, was that not right, fitting, necessary? 27

Sarah's weakness is virtually the same weakness exemplified in the characters previously discussed in this chapter.

In the novel The Long Dream, Wright does not concern himself with the archetypal Negro Christian. The type is only briefly represented in Emma Tucker, Rex's (Fishbelly) mother.

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26 Wright, The Outsider, p. 413.
27 Ibid., p. 416.
Early in the novel, Emma displays the traditional attitude of the Negro Christian. During an incident in which Fishbelly is apparently very seriously ill, his mother exhibits great concern for him and is attentive to his desires, but as he gets well, she absents herself for hours to do work for the church. When Fish pleads with her not to leave him Emma's response is: "Lots of folks is much sicker'n you, son... Me working for the church is how I thank Jesus for healing you." Emma feels that each favor which God grants must be repaid Him through work done for the church.

Emma is depicted as a faithful Christian throughout the novel. When her husband (Tyree) is unjustifiably murdered by the white police, she does not accept Fish's explanation that he has been tricked into coming to the scene because he has been led to believe that one of the resident prostitutes is dead. Emma's only concern is the fact that Tyree has died in a house of ill-repute. Her attitude toward his death is associated with her feeling of humiliation:

"Son, Tyree couldn't hide what he was doing from Gawd," Emma declared. "Gawd brought it all to the light of day." For Emma, Tyree has not been murdered; his death is regarded as God's punishment for his association with prostitutes.

In *Lawd Today* the archetypal Negro Christian appears abstractly in Jake Jackson's wife--Lil. Lil's conception of religion is revealed through the eyes of Jake; consequently, the ideas are filled with Jake's own inter-

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29 Tyree Tucker's profession is an undertaker.
pretations. Jake informs us that Lil subscribes to religious magazines which emphasize the mystical presence of God in man's everyday experience. He describes the cover of *Unity—A Magazine Devoted to Christian Healing*:

He saw the picture of a haloed, bearded man draped in white folds; the man's hand was resting upon the blond curls of a blue-eyed girl. Beneath the picture ran a caption: "Every Hour of the Day and Night Jesus Flows all Through Me."31

Jake reveals further that Lil is "always talking about how she trusts God,"32 and at the very end of the novel Jake returns home and finds Lil asleep, kneeling at the side of the bed. He exclaims, "Ain't this a bitch! Gone to sleep on her knees, praying. . . ."33 The indication here is that Lil's life is characterized by her dependence upon religion and prayer.

In his short story "Man, God Ain't Like That" Wright depicts a character who takes seriously everything stated in the scripture. The character in question is a young African who has been taught the doctrines of Christianity by white missionaries. In the story Wright reveals, through the presentation of an unschooled African (Babu), the fallacies inherent within religious superstition. Babu combines the Christian teachings of the missionaries with his native jungle religion. Throughout the story allusions are made to the fact that the doctrines of Christianity have not completely taken precedence over Babu's native beliefs.34

Early in the story Babu associates the material he has learned in the missionary Sunday school with the young white artist, John, and his wife, Elsie. Observing that John closely resembles the portraits which he has

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32 Ibid., pp. 21-22.
33 Ibid., p. 186.
seen of Jesus, Babu tells John: "Massa got red beard and blue eyes like Jesus." When John asks him how he knows that Jesus had a red beard and blue eyes, Babu replies that he has seen pictures of Jesus in the Sunday school book. Later, when the couple take Babu to Paris with them, Babu discovers many portraits of Jesus, for which John served as a model. But because of his primitive mind, Babu believes that he has discovered—in John—the real Jesus.

Babu informs John that he (Babu) realizes that God is the God of the white man, as is evidenced by his great material wealth. According to Babu, the white man's accumulation of wealth is the result of his having crucified Christ. He says to John: "White man kill you and prove you God. Then you rose from dead in three days and you make white man powerful." He continues:

... white man he believe in God and white man kill God and God he came back from the grave and he say: O. K. "White man, you find me out. I bless you. You make me bleed and my blood make you pure. ... I give white man fine buildings. ... I make white man powerful. ... Day and night Babu walk white-man streets and look at white man. All white man look alike. But Babu know God hides in white man's land. Then Babu find God's picture and Babu knows why God [Referring to John] took Babu to Paris, Babu know God tests Babu like he tested white man long ago.

Babu believes, on the basis of the scriptural evidence regarding Christ's crucifixion and the blessings which obviously befell those who crucified Him, that man's blessedness is the result of his having washed himself in the "blood of the lamb." Indeed, Babu does just this—he kills John, in

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35 Wright, "Man, God Ain't Like That," Eight Men, p. 137.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., p. 152.
38 Ibid., p. 153.
order that the black man may have a chance at becoming blessed in the eyes of God.

Significantly, Wright does not make this character a representative of the American Negro Christian. Wright's point is explicitly indicated—were all Christians to take Christian doctrine in a literal context, their actions would resemble those of Babu, the jungle Christian.


A fairly comprehensive treatment of the religious rebel appears in "The Man Who Lived Underground," but because of the extensive treatment of this character in Native Son and The Outsider, the discussion in this section of the chapter will principally involve the novels.

In Native Son the religious rebel is represented in Bigger Thomas. Bigger's attitude toward religion, like those of the archetypal Negro Christian, is circumscribed by his environment. Bigger's immediate environment is given very much detail in the opening scenes of the novel. Wright paints a vivid picture of the Thomas family's inadequate housing facilities in their violent struggle against a huge rat, and in the scenes which follow, Bigger and his friends comment extensively upon the Negro's isolation from the stream of American culture. As Bigger and the boys observe an airplane as they walk the streets of the Chicago slums, they relate their embittered version of the world—a world in which the white man enjoys all the pleasureable aspects of life and in which the

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39 Wright, Native Son, pp. 7-11.
40 Ibid., pp. 19-20.
Negro must be thankful that he is even allowed to observe such pleasures.

Bigger expresses his feeling of alienation in the following statement:

> I know I oughtn't think about it, but I can't help it. Every time I think about it I feel like somebody's poking a red-hot iron down my throat. God-dammit, look! We live here and they livethere. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knot-hole in the fence. . . . 41

Here we see the basic difference between Bigger's response to his environment and that of his mother. While his mother recognizes the fact that her life is characterized by restrictions and persecution, she develops a toleration for it through her dependence upon religion. Bigger argues that the restrictions and persecution suffered by Negroes at the hands of whites should not exist, and he is not content to delude himself with the contention that the suffering in this life is an insurance of a happy life in the hereafter.

Bigger does not totally rebel against Christian doctrine; his interpretation of religious teachings simply does not reflect the attitude of submission which is evidenced by the archetypal Christian. Witness Bigger's conception of the creation:

> With a supreme act of will springing from the essence of his being, he [Bigger] turned away from his life and the long train of disastrous consequences upon the dark face of ancient waters upon which some spirit [presumably God] had breathed and created him, the dark face of the waters from which he had been first made in the image of a man with a man's obscure need and urge. . . . 42

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41 Wright, Native Son, p. 23.
42 Ibid., p. 255.
Bigger's conception of the creation of man is both religious and secular. He does not question the concept that man was created by God. What he does say is that the Negro was not made in the image of God, but was created in the "image of man." The personality of the Negro has become so negated that he must be completely disassociated with the Biblical conception of the creation of man.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 264.}

At one point in the novel Bigger is attempting to find some satisfying images in his past. As he recapitulates the events in his past, he is disrupted by the sight of a dimly lit church:

\begin{quote}
In it a crowd of black men and women stood between long rows of wooden benches, singing, clapping hands, and rolling their heads. *Aw, them folks go to church every day in the week, he thought.* . . . The singing from the church vibrated through him, suffusing him with a mood of sensitive sorrow. He tried not to listen, but it seeped into his feelings, whispering of another way of life and death, coaxing him to lie down and sleep and let them *white men who are seeking him for the murder of Mary Dalton* come and get him, urging him to believe that all life was a sorrow that had to be accepted. . . . the music sang of surrender, resignation.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 237.}
\end{quote}

Reverend Hammond reiterates this idea in his statement to Bigger: "Tha's what life is, son. Suffering."\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, p. 265.} This is a complete denial of the democratic ideal of individual freedom among men, and since Bigger's primary concern is with freedom of the individual, he cannot accept the idea of man's submission to the domination of others, as the attitude expressed above demands.

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{43} Wright, \textit{Native Son}, p. 264.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p. 237.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 265.
According to Bigger, in a statement to Max, his lawyer, concerning the ineffectiveness of church services,

There was nothing in it. Aw, all they did was sing and shout and pray all the time. And it didn't get 'em nothing. All the colored folks do that, but it don't get 'em nothing. The white folks got everything. 46

This statement may be compared with the statement made earlier by Bigger that Christianity only offers the Negro a promise of happiness in the hereafter. His response to this fact is that he wants to be "happy in this world, not out of it." 47

Bigger's aversion to his mother's attitude toward religion is revealed most explicitly in his comparison of her religion with Bessie Mears' alcoholism:

He hated his mother for that way of hers which was like Bessie's. What his mother had was Bessie's whiskey, and Bessie's whiskey was his mother's religion. He did not want to sit on a bench and sing, or lie in a corner and sleep. 48

Both Mrs. Thomas' and Bessie's conceptions of life are virtually the same. Mrs. Thomas feels that hard work and suffering is spiritually ordained by God and is therefore inherent within the lives of the righteous. Bessie reveals the persistence of hardship in her life at the moment that she learns of Bigger's part in Mary Dalton's murder, and his plan to collect a ransom from the dead girl's parents. She reminds Bigger: "I ain't had no happiness, no nothing. I just work. I'm black and I work and don't bother nobody..." 49 She reiterates this statement later when she learns

46 Wright, Native Son, p. 239.
48 Ibid., p. 226.
49 Ibid., p. 170.
that Bigger's act has been discovered:

Oh, Lord," she moaned. "What's the use of run-
ing? They'll catch us anywhere. I should've known
this would happen." She clenched her hands in front
of her and rocked to and fro with her eyes closed
upon gushing tears. "All my life's been full of hard
trouble. If I wasn't hungry, I was sick. And if I
wasn't sick, I was in trouble. I ain't never bothered
nobody. I just worked hard everyday as long as I can
remember, till I was tired enough to drop; then I had
to get drunk to forget it. I had to get drunk to
sleep. . . ."50

Bessie's attempt to tolerate the hard realities of life through alco-
hol is merely another form of escapism which parallels man's attempt to
escape reality in the artificial world created by religion. Bigger's
point is that the Negro must not merely understand the humiliating condi-
tions of his environment, but that he must engage in some action toward
the elimination of those conditions. Neither alcohol nor religion serves
to direct the Negro toward this type of social action.

Of special significance in Native Son is Wright's illustration that
"the principles of Christianity, like those of democracy, belong to those
who appropriate them."51 White segregationists have utilized the cross,
the traditional symbol of the Christian faith, as the symbol for the Ku Klux
Klan, an organization dedicated to the perpetuation of the doctrine of white
supremacy. The traditional Ku Klux Klan's ritual of the burning cross is
presented in Native Son. When Bigger first sees the burning cross he asso-
ciates it with what Reverend Hammond has told him concerning the cross that
every man must bear in his life.52 The angry faces of the whites dispute

50 Wright, Native Son, p. 215.
51 Joseph R. Washington, Jr., Black Religion. The Negro and Christianity
52 Wright, Native Son, pp. 265-266.
this interpretation:

The eyes and faces about him were not at all the way the black preacher's had been when he had prayed about Jesus and His love, about His dying upon the cross. The cross the preacher had told him about was bloody, not flaming; meek, not militant. . . . It had made him want to kneel and cry, but this cross made him want to curse and kill.53

Earlier, the Negro preacher has given Bigger a wooden cross to emblazon the association of Bigger's suffering with the suffering of Jesus Christ,54 but recognizing that the Ku Klux Klan also uses the cross in order to instill fear in the Negro, Bigger contemptuously discards it.55

In The Outsider Wright reveals much more clearly the motives behind the Ku Klux Klan's use of the religious symbol. In The Outsider Gil's description of his landlord (Mr. Herndon) coincides with all white racists' version of the creation of the world:

All of his arguments boil down to this. God made him and his kind to rule over the lower breeds. And God was so kind and thoughtful as to arrange that he be paid handsomely for it. Of course, he has conceived this God of his in the image of a highly successful oil or real-estate man, just a little more powerful and wonderful than he is. . . . [He] is quite anxious to collaborate with God by shouldering a rifle, if necessary, and helping God to defend what God has so generously given him. . . . [He] feels that God was absolutely right in giving him what he's got, but he does not completely trust God's judgment when it comes to his keeping it.56

The logic in this statement is easily applied to the actions of the Ku Klux Klan. Its use of a flaming cross is simply an instrument through which it

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53 Wright, Native Son, p. 313.
54 Ibid., p. 266.
55 Ibid., p. 313.
56 Wright, The Outsider, p. 198.
aides God in defending His noble gift of white supremacy. It is also an indication that American Christianity has been taught the Negro from a point of view that instills obedience to whites.

Bigger finds freedom and meaning only in the act of committing murder. During his flight from the law, Bigger reflects that "In all of his life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him. He was living, truly and deeply. . . ."57 Bigger rejects the fundamental assumptions underlying Christianity and identifies himself with the world of violence. Witness what he thinks about his attitude toward the murder of Mary Dalton:

Some hand had reached inside of him and had laid a quiet finger of peace upon the restless tossing of his spirit and had made him feel that he did not need to long for a home now.58

All of Bigger's life has been filled with his struggle to find meaning and clarity in his world. By forming an identification with violence he matches the injustice and chaos in his physical surroundings. Bigger feels that as a murderer he does not have to search for an identity. The hostility which the world shows him when it discovers that he has murdered a white woman is justifiable; the hostility shown him before he commits murder is unexcusable. Bigger's resort to murder is not comparable with the patterns of escape evidenced in his mother's religion and Bessie's whiskey. While their actions tend to further negate their personalities, Bigger's actions actually serve to establish for him a definite identity within his environment.

57 Wright, Native Son, p. 225.
58 Ibid., p. 128.
In *The Outsider* the religious rebel is represented in Cross Damon, a character whose very name symbolizes the confusing aspects of Christianity. Mrs. Damon informs the reader that she has named her son Cross, believing that it will make him Christlike. Her misconception is demonstrated clearly in the novel by the fact that her son is the cause, directly or indirectly, of five deaths. Technically, he is also guilty of fraudulently leading his family to believe himself to be dead. Cross's name has two significant implications—either that he is the symbol of salvation or the symbol of damnation. That three of his murder victims deserve to be killed is unquestionable, but the mere fact that he has to murder them signifies his ultimate damnation. Perhaps it will be sufficient to interpret Cross's name as a "cross" between his sacrificial and Satanic roles.

Cross has been brought up in an atmosphere permeated with puritanical rigor. Deserted by his father, his mother indoctrinates him with her own version of Christianity. That Cross is early affected by the paradoxes inherent in her religious conception is revealed in the following statement:

> His first coherent memories had condensed themselves into an image of a young woman whose hysterically loving presence had made his imagination conscious of an invisible God—whose secret grace granted him life—hovering oppressively in space above him. His adolescent fantasies had symbolically telescoped this God into an awful face shaped in the form of a huge and crushing NO, a terrifying face which had, for a reason he could never learn, created him, had given him a part of Himself, and yet had threateningly demanded that he vigilantly deny another part of himself which He too had paradoxically

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59 Wright, *The Outsider*, p. 23.

60 Cross deliberately kills Joe Thomas, who he thinks threatens his survival; he kills Gil Elount, a Communist, and Herndon, Gil's racist landlord, because he opposes their common characteristic of imposing their wills over the wills of others; he also kills Hilton, another Communist, for the same reason. Finally, Cross is responsible for the suicidal death of Eva Elount.

61 Having been in a subway accident in Chicago in which he is assumed to be dead, Cross decides to take advantage of the situation and to remain dead. His purpose is to live his life completely as he wishes, without any commitments.
Cross is confused as to God's reasons for giving man the desire for physical pleasure and then insisting that if man gives in to this innate desire that he will be condemned to reside eternally in hell. Cross resolves that God's denouncement of sensual pleasure only makes his desire for it more persistent. He ultimately chooses to give in to his desires because he feels that a loving God could not have placed man in such a damnable state. Unlike Bigger Thomas, who from time to time exhibits an emotional association with religion, Cross at no point in the novel reveals any emotional or spiritual pull toward religious belief. For him the church has no answer for the world's problems. It's demand for the total negation of the personality appeals only to the weak individual.

Cross is thoroughly schooled in the philosophies of Nietzsche, Hegel, Heidegger, Husserl, Kierkegaard and Dostoevski, and his interpretation of modern civilization reflects their influences. The following statement concerning religion is a restatement of the Nietzschean theory that God is dead:

... Since religion is dead, religion is everywhere. ... Religion was once an affair of the church; it is now in the streets in each man's heart. Once there were priests; now every man's a priest. Religion's a compulsion, and a compulsion seems to spring from something total in us, catching up in its mighty grip all the other forces of life—sex, intellect, will, physical strength, and carrying them toward—what goals? We wish we knew. ... Lucky is the man who can share his neighbor's religion! Damned is the man who must invent his own god!

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63 Ibid., p. 18.
64 Ibid., p. 1421.
65 Ibid., pp. 359-360.
Cross's impression of God as a creature who insists that man deny himself personally and live strictly according to His predesigned pattern, causes him to associate with God all attempts by man to enforce his will over that of another. This is especially illustrated by Cross's utilization of the term "little gods" to describe the Communists Gil and Hilton. Observe what Cross thinks of Gil's description of the Party and outline of how the Party can utilize Cross as an instrument in its program. As Gil continues Cross thinks:

He was not a little shocked at Gil's colossal self-conceit. He acts like a God who is about to create a man. . . . He has no conception of the privacy of other people's lives. . . . He saw Gil's eyes regarding him steadily, coolly, as though Gil was already seeing to what use his life could be put.66

Gil's decision is that Cross must move into his apartment, whose lease is owned by a white racist. Cross will be used as an instrument through which the Party can show its open condemnation of housing restrictions placed upon Negroes.

Cross's decision to do as Gil suggests is not because of any commitment to Communist theories for the elimination of racial oppression in America. He is drawn toward Communism because it, like religion, tends to suggest that its members must negate themselves, become automatons for the instrumentation of Party programs. He becomes affiliated with the Party because of his aversion to men like Gil Blount. He resolves to join forces with Gil in order that he (Cross) may have the chance to "grapple" with him. Cross decides that "to grapple with Gil would involve a total mobilization of all the resources of his personality, and the conflict would be religious in its intensity."67 After meeting Hilton, another Communist,

67 Ibid., p. 176.
Cross comments on the common quality of Gil and Hilton—the desire for absolute power: "They had reached far back into history and had dredged up from its black waters the most ancient of all realities: man's desire to be a god." He realizes that the center of the Communist system is the same naked will to power evidenced in religion.

Cross ultimately settles with these "little gods." He kills Gil and Hilton because he recognizes their ability to totally destroy individuality in man. The introductory statement to Book Three which is quoted from St. Paul, explains Cross's actions: "For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that I do not; but what I hate, that do I." He kills Gil, Hilton and Herndon because of his hatred of their viewpoints. But Cross realizes later that by killing these three "little gods,"

He too had acted like a little god. He had stood amidst those red and flickering shadows, tense and consumed with cold rage, and had judged them and had found them guilty of insulting his sense of life and had carried out a sentence of death upon them.

The district attorney, Houston, describes this as one of the characteristics of an atheist: "A genuine atheist is a real Christian turned upside down; God descends from the sky and takes up abode, so to speak, behind the fleshy bars of his heart." But Cross does not consider himself as simply an atheist. In an earlier conversation with Houston he describes his version of the man who has killed Gil, Herndon and Hilton:

He's a man living in our modern industrial cities, but he is devoid of all the moral influences of Christianity. . . . That he's an atheist goes without saying, but he'd be something more than an atheist. He'd be something like a pagan, but a pagan who feels no need to worship.

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68 Wright, *The Outsider*, p. 198.
69 Ibid., p. 187.
70 Ibid., pp. 226-227.
71 Ibid., p. 424.
72 Ibid., p. 316.
Cross is here aiding Houston with his conception (hypothetically) of the man responsible for the three murders, but Cross’s description is not of a hypothetical murderer but a description of himself.

Cross is legally and spiritually outside of the real world, and he technically has no responsibilities or commitments. He has "No party, no myths, no tradition, no race, no soil, no culture, and no ideas—except perhaps the idea that ideas in themselves . . . [are] at best, dubious." As "the outsider" he discards religion and Communism as useless forces in regard to the solution of the world's problems. His outsideness is illustrated most clearly by the fact that although Houston inadvertently discovers Cross's guilt, he refuses to issue an indictment against him. As Cross is released Houston tells him that his punishment will be his absolute solitude—the penalty suffered by all gods. He informs Cross:

You saw through all the ideologies, pretenses, frauds, but you did not see through yourself. How magnificently you tossed away this God who plagues and helps man so much! But you did not and could not toss out of your heart that part of you from which the God notion had come. And what part of a man is that? It is desire. . . .

Later in the evening Cross is shot by the Communists. As he lies dying, Houston asks him why he chose to live the life he has lived. Cross replies: "I wanted to be free . . . to feel what I was worth . . . what living meant to me." Houston then asks Cross what he has found in his search and Cross answers, "Nothing . . . The search can't be done alone." Man cannot escape his desire for human fellowship. Cross Damon, who has found absolute

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72 Wright, The Outsider, p. 377.
73 Ibid., pp. 424-425.
74 Ibid., p. 439.
75 Ibid.
freedom in his position as a man apart from the rest of the world, finds himself devastated with the realization that man cannot be free and happy apart from mankind.

Wright utilizes the basic theme presented in *The Outsider* in the short story—"The Man Who Lived Underground." In the words of Stanley E. Hyman, in "Richard Wright Reappraised," "The Man Who Lived Underground" is "A combination of Nietzschean and Dostoevskyan ethics of 'a world without God'." Like Grass Damon in *The Outsider*, Fred Daniels in "The Man Who Lived Underground" is outside the realm of the real world. From his position behind the walls of various establishments, the character is able to become an invisible part of many people's lives.

The character's regard for religion is revealed in the following scene. As he crawls along the dirty sewer he hears singing. He describes his reactions to the song thus:

> The singing swept on and he shook his head, disagreeing in spite of himself. They oughtn't to do that, he thought. But he could think of no reason why they should not do it. Just singing with the air of the sewer blowing in on them . . . the sight of those people groveling and begging for something they could never get, churned in him.

Again later, hearing the church congregation singing, Daniels reiterates his aversion for religion:

> They're wrong, he whispered in the lyric darkness. He felt that their search for a happiness they could
never find made them feel that they had committed some dreadful offense which they could not remem-
ber or understand.80

This is the same attitude expressed by Wright in Black Boy, that he fails to interpret man's suffering as the consequence of original sin.81* It is virtually impossible to see any logic in a concept which implies that innocent men must be punished for a crime in which they had no part.82

Similar to Cross Damon, the character in "The Man Who Lived Underground" at times takes on the qualities of a god. At one point in the story he sees a group of people in a movie house and the striking re-
semblance between their actions and those he has witnessed earlier in the church service, compels his imagination as follows:

His compassion fired his imagination and he stepped out of the box, walked out upon the air, walked down to the audience; and hovering in the air above them, he stretched out his hand and touched them.83

We see a parallel in another incident in which Daniels dreams that he is:

... bouyed upon a stream and swept out to sea where waves rolled gently and suddenly he found himself walking upon the water how strange and de-
lightful to walk upon the water . . . . 84

In each incident cited above the character has taken on the attitude of God.

During his sojourn beneath the ground, Daniels steals many items from the various establishments above him.85 Among these items are a tremendous

81 Wright, Black Boy ( . . . ), p. 127. (See Chapter I, p. 11).
82 Reference here and in the previous footnote is to the original sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and the resulting curse placed upon succeeding generations of man. For clarification as to what the scripture says regarding the original sin, see Gen. 3.
84 Ibid., p. 33.
85 Ibid., pp. 29, 32, 33, 37, 45, 46, and 47.
sum of money and a hoard of watches and rings. He uses the stolen goods to decorate his underworld home, making wall paper with the money and a floor covering with the jewelry. As he gazes upon the star-studded floor he again imagines himself to be a god, looking down at the twinkling lights of his cities. He justifies his actions in the statement: "If the world as men had made it was right, then anything else was right, any act a man took to satisfy himself, murder, theft, torture."

C. Characters Who Neither Commit Themselves Completely to Christian Doctrine Nor Rebel Against It In "Left Today and "Bright and Morning Star."

The two works which are used to illustrate the character who stands at a crossroads in regard to his acceptance of life as it is viewed by the archetypal Negro Christian are by no means the only works in which the character appears. Wright also deals with this character in the following works: *The Long Dream* (Bex Tucker), "Down by the Riverside" (Mann), "The Man Who Went to Chicago" (Richard Wright), and *Native Son* (Bessie Mears). The works used to illustrate Wright's concern with the character are chosen because the researcher feels that they offer the most comprehensive treatment of the character, and to involve all of the works in which the character is represented would only be repetitious.

In the short story "Bright and Morning Star" the old woman, Sue, is portrayed as a woman who has at one time been devoutly religious, but whose attitude toward religion has been greatly affected by the teachings of her children. As the story begins Sue is depicted singing an old Christian

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87 Ibid., p. 52.
88 Ibid.
hymn, "Hes the Lily of the Valley, the Bright and Mawnin Star." She nostalgically reminisces about the fervent reverence with which she regarded the songs in her past:

She had learned them when she was a little girl living and working on a farm... and later, as the years had filled with gall, she had learned their deep meaning. Long hours of scrubbing floors for a few cents a day had taught her who Jesus was, what a great boon it was to cling to Him, to be like Him and suffer without a mumbling word. She had poured the yearning of her life into the songs, feeling buoyed with a faith beyond this world. The figure of the Man nailed in agony on the Cross, His burial in a cold grave, His transfigured Resurrection, His being breath and clay, God and man—all had focused her feelings upon an imagery which had swept her life into a wondrous vision.

Deeply tied up in this version of Christianity is Sue's association of her own suffering with that of Jesus. She thereby formed an emotional identification with Him. Her own experiences, which had taught her how to "suffer without a mumbling word," placed her on the same level with Jesus.

Sue's sons have taught her that her vision of life does not have to be. They offer her a new hope in the form of Communism:

... Day by day her sons had ripped from her startled eyes her old vision, and image by image had given her a new one, different, but great and strong enough to fling her into the light of another grace. The wrongs and sufferings of black men had taken the place of Him nailed to the Cross; the meager beginnings of the party had become another Resurrection; and the hate of those who would destroy her new faith had quickened in her a hunger to feel how deeply her new strength went.

This statement reveals that Sue has not entirely disassociated herself from Christianity. Her belief in the Communist Party is as spiritualistic as was

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90 Ibid., p. 184.
91 Ibid., p. 185.
her old vision of life. Her new faith is tied up in her old vision of the wrongs and sufferings of the Negro people.

Robert V. Daniels, in *The Nature of Communism*, clearly outlines Communism as a faith movement. 92 Compare what Sue has to say above concerning Communism as a "Resurrection" with Daniel's parallel of St. Augustine's theory of history with that of Karl Marx:93

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Garden of Eden</th>
<th>Primitive communism</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Fall</td>
<td>Onset of class societies and class struggle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Earthly City</td>
<td>Class society (feudalism, capitalism)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Day of Judgment</td>
<td>The proletarian revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The City of God</td>
<td>Communism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Were the Communist Party to successfully carry out its program for the elimination of Negro suffering, it would, for Sue, have the same connotation as St. Augustine's "City of God."

In *Lawd Today* Jake Jackson and his cronies—Doc, Bob, Slim and Al—all give vivid discussions on the subject of religion, but no one of the five reveals his belief or disbelief in the mystical aspects of Christianity.

As the story begins, Jake is shown as he awakens to find, in his bed, one of his wife's Christian magazines. Upon the cover he describes: "the picture of a haloed, bearded man draped in white folds; the man's hand was resting upon the blond curls of a blue-eyed girl."94 The implication here is that God is the guardian of the white man. This idea is again implied, much later in the novel, in a letter depicting the evil and blackness asso-

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92 See Chapter I of this study, pp. 22-23.
ciated with hell and the purity and whiteness associated with heaven. The instance in which this idea is presented most clearly is in a long conversation among Jake, Al and Bob. Al begins a long debate by mentioning New York's Father Divine who, Al claims, envisions himself as God, having drawn under his wing a school of disciples and a huge number of believers. Observe what happens when the fact that Father Divine is a Negro is announced:

Bob let out a long, loud laugh.

"Don't laugh, nigger," said Al. "How you know? He might really be Gawd."

.......

"You know, Gawd did say He was coming again," said Jake.

"And this might be Him," said Al.

"If He is coming, He ain't coming back in no black nigger skin," said Bob.

.......

"Well, said Jake. "I ain't saying he is Gawd, and I ain't saying he ain't Gawd."

"Yeah," said Al, warming to his subject, "All the folks hates us black people, so Gawd might have done made up His mind to show em that everybody's equal in His sight. So He might come down in a black skin, see? He come as a Jew the last time, and how come He won't come as a nigger now? You see, He'd fool all the white folks then."  

From what is said in the above conversation we learn two things: (1) that many Negroes have been firmly indoctrinated by whites to believe that evil is associated with blackness, and consequently they cannot envision God as black, and (2) that many Negroes, through a simple deductive process,

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95 Wright, Lawd Today, pp. 139-143.
96 Ibid., p. 69.
97 Ibid., pp. 69-70.
associate God with persecuted groups—before Jesus was born Jews were the victims of Roman hatred and persecution; Jesus was a Jew; therefore His being a Jew signifies that God purposefully made Him a Jew in order to demonstrate the equality of all men in the eyes of God. Using this rationale, many Negroes believe that were Christ to return to earth, He would naturally be black.

In Lawd Today Wright also illustrates that many people utilize the supernatural and mystical aspects of Christianity for commercial purposes. In the novel Wright devotes more than two pages to a vivid description of a con-artist's use of Biblical material in order to enhance the sale of his product. The man initiates belief in his audience, including Jake, Slim and Al, by first doing a simple magic trick, and then demonstrating the power of his product. The following is a condensed version of the demonstration. The man first fills a glass with what he calls "pure rain-water" and then declares:

See how clear 'tis? Gawd's water, mah FRIENDS, GAWD'SS water! IT'S CLEAN 'N' PURE 'N' SPARKLIN' LIKE YUH 'N' ME WUZ WHEN WE WUZ BO'N INTER THIS DARK WORLD!100

He then fills the glass with a substance which turns the water black; the man associates the blackness of the water with the rundown conditions of men's bodies, which further encourages belief among the audience.101 Having won belief among his audience, the man states:

... Now, mah FRIENDS, there's a CURE fer all this! IF IT WUZN'T SO AH WOULDN'T TELL YUH! Gawd in all HIS MIGHT 'n' GLORY'S done fixed this CURE fer US! ... HIS EYE IS ON THE SPARROW 'N' AH KNOWS HE'S WATCHIN' ME!

99 Wright, Lawd Today, p. 85.
100 Ibid., p. 86.
101 Ibid.
Ain't yuh got no faith? FAITH'S THE SUBSTANCE OF 
THINGS YUH HOPE FOR 'N' THE EVIDENCE OF THINGS YUH 
CAN'T SEE! . . . 'Fo' one jot or title of GAHD'S 
PRECIOUS WORD fails the HEAVEN 'N' EARTH shall pass 
erway! So it wuz written, mah FRIENDS, so it wuz 
written.102

This serves as an introduction to his "Universal Herb Cure All Medicine."

He demonstrates its powers with the glass of black water:

"Ah'm's puttin' jus' a little in this here glass of 
BLACK water 'n' yuh jus' stan' RIGHT where yuh is 'n' 
watch GAHD'S AMIGHTY'S HAN' at work! . . . See how the 
water CLEARS! It ain't never failed! . . . WHAT THESE 
LITTLE HERBS DID FOR THIS WATER THEY CAN DO FOR YUH! 
THEY'LL DO THIS FOR YUH IF YUH'LL ONLY LET 'EM, 'N' THA'S 
THE GOSPEL TRUTH!103

This con-artist cleverly incorporates Biblical terminology with the audience's 
basic inclination for superstition, in order to sell his "Universal Cure-all 
Herb."

_Lawd Today_ is permeated with Jake's and his cronies' discussions of 
Christianity and Christian men104 but at no point in the novel does any one 
of these characters state specifically a confirmed belief in the concepts 
of Christianity. Their position is related to that of an onlooker, offering 
comments upon the nature of religion but like the agnostic, declaring that 
they do not know whether or not there is validity in Christianity. _Lawd_ 
_Today_ reflects the same existentialistic viewpoint presented in _The Outsider_ 
and "The Man Who Lived Underground," but in _Lawd Today_ it is not carried 
to the extremity of the presentation of a world without God.

102 Wright, _Lawd Today_, pp. 86-87.
103 Ibid., p. 87.
104 See _Lawd Today_, pp. 10, 21-22, 38, 59, 60, 62, 69-70, 85-87, 138- 
144, 152-153 and 157.
In the present chapter an attempt has been made to assay the religious attitudes represented among various characters. It was generally concluded that in regard to their religious attitudes, Wright's characters fall into three basic groups—those who firmly believe in the concepts of Christianity, those who completely rebel against religion, and those who are on the borderline between belief and denial of Christian doctrine.

The data presented in the chapter reveal that in the nine works used to point out the religious attitudes represented among Wright's characters, eleven characters (in five works) fall into the first group; three characters (in three works) fall into the second group; and nine characters (in six works) fall into the third group. The total number of characters used to illustrate the various types is twenty-three, two of whom are white. Each of the three groups has characteristics which distinguish it from the others; however, the Negro characters in all three groups interpret religion as it relates to their environment.
That Wright is concerned with the role of the Negro minister within the Negro community is manifested by the great number of times that the Negro minister is represented in his fiction. Because one of the minister's tools is the spiritual song, this chapter will deal with the Negro minister and the Negro spiritual simultaneously. In the chapter an attempt will be made to assay the role of the Negro minister in Wright's works as it compares with his role in the real Negro community. Among the twelve works of fiction utilized in this study, five works offer clear and comprehensive portrayals of the Negro minister as a necessary part of the Negro community. In all but one occasion the Negro minister is called upon by members of the community who have problems which they wish the minister to resolve. The major concern in this chapter is in whether or not the minister solves the problems, and the types of solutions that he offers. Further, the chapter will analyze the role of the Negro spiritual in the lives of Negro people and determine if today it has the same purpose as it had for its creators—the American Negro slaves.

The Negro minister as the spokesman for the Negro community is an historical concept which has been carried over from the time of slavery. When the Negro church was first instituted in America, the Negro minister was informed by whites as to what was to be taught the slave congregations.1

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The strong restrictions placed upon Negro worship are comprehensively appraised by John Hope Franklin in *From Slavery to Freedom*. Witness what Franklin has to say concerning white control over Negro churches during slavery:

In 1833, Alabama made it unlawful for slaves or free Negroes to preach unless before five respectable slaveholders and when authorized by some neighboring religious society. Georgia enacted a law in 1834 providing that neither free Negroes nor slaves might preach or exhort an assembly of more than seven unless licensed by justices on the certificates of three ordained [white] ministers. Other Southern States soon followed the example of these, passing more drastic laws. . . .

This early evidence of white indoctrination of the Negro minister survived the period of slavery. Traditionally, the majority of Negro ministers in the rural South, and the untutored Negro ministers in the North, have felt compelled to rely upon the white community for directives for their own church programs. As a further form of indoctrination, the whites tended to slant the interpretation of the scriptures in a manner which led Negro ministers to believe that the Bible itself supports the oppression and/or suppression of peoples.

In four of the novels and short stories under consideration in this study—*Native Son*, "Down By the Riverside," "Fire and Cloud," and "Big Boy Leaves Home"—the Negro minister is portrayed as the leader of the Negro community. In all four works the members of the respective communities call upon the minister to give them directives in their moments of distress.

In *Native Son*, the minister (Reverend Hammond) is summoned by Bigger's mother when she learns that he has been arrested for the murder of a white

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2 Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom*, p. 199.

girl. Visiting Bigger in jail, Hammond tells him:

Fergit ever'thing but yo' soul, son. Take yo' mind off ever'thing but eternal life. Fergit whut the newspaper say. Fergit yuh's black. Gawd looks past yo' skin 'n' inter yo' soul, son. He's lookin' at the only parts yuh that's His.4

Hammond continues by offering Bigger a comparison between his sin and the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden:

It wasn't enuff fer man t' be like Gawd, he wanted to know why. 'N' all Gawd wanted 'im t' do was bloom like the flowers in the fiel's, live as chillun. Man wanted to know why 'n' he fell from light t' darkness, from love t' damnation, from blessedness t' shame. 'N' Gawd cast 'em outa the garden 'n' tol' the man he had t' git his bread by the sweat of his brow 'n' tol' the woman she had t' bring fo'th her chillun in pain 'n' sorrow. The worl' turn'd ergin,'em 'n' they had t' fight the worl' fer life. . . .5

Here Hammond has formed an interesting parallel between Adam and Eve's desire for knowledge with Bigger's questions: "Why they [whites] make us live in one corner of the city? Why don't they let us fly planes and run ships. . . ."6 According to Hammond, man's desire to know why things exist as they are can only lead to man's destruction. For Hammond, man's only concern should be his soul, the part of him which belongs to God. All life must be characterized by suffering,7 and the reason for the suffering is the original sin of Adam and Eve;8 the fact that the white man's restrictions upon the Negro are the primary causes of the Negro's suffering has nothing to do with Hammond's interpretation of life.

4 Wright, Native Son, p. 263.
5 Ibid., pp. 264-265.
6 Ibid., p. 23.
7 Ibid., pp. 265-266.
8 Ibid., pp. 264-265.
In "Down By the Riverside" Elder Murray calls upon the Mann household, which is in the face of a four-day flood. Mann is confronted with the problem of obtaining a boat for escape and securing medical attention for his wife, who is in labor.

Murray's encouragement for the family is in the form of a prayer which, although it applies directly to the situation at hand, offers the Mann household no meaningful answers to the problems it faces. Compare Murray's prayer with the occasion on which it is voiced:

Lawd Gawd Almighty in Heaven, wes a-bowin befo Yuh once ergin, humble in Yo sight, a-pleadin fer forgive-ness n mercy! Hear us today, Lawd! Hear us today ef Yuh ain never heard us befo! We needs Yuh now t hep us n guide us! N hep these po folks, Lawd! Days Yo chillun! Yuh made em n Yuh made em in Yo own image! Open up their hearts n hep em t have faith in Yo word! N hep this po woman, Lawd! Ease her labor, fer Yuh said, Lawd, she has to bring foth her chillun in pain...9

Murray incorporates within his prayer much Biblical material, and applies it to the Mann family, but nowhere in the context of the prayer is there any hint as to how the family can meet its problems. Also noticeable about the prayer is the fact that Murray does not ask God to help the family to solve its problems—his plea is that God help the Manns to "have faith" in His teachings.

Significantly, after completing his prayer, Murray stands and sings: "Ahm gonna lay down mah sword n shiel Down By the Riverside."10 The song itself is significant because it applies to the occasion at hand, and, because later Mann does literally "lay down his sword and shield down by the riverside" because it is upon the bank of the river where he is killed.

9Wright, "Down By the Riverside," Uncle Tom's Children, p. 62.
10Ibid., p. 63.
by an angry white mob.

In both *Native Son* and "Down By the Riverside," the Negro minister conforms to the traditional, untutored Negro minister.\(^{11}\) The vocabularies of the ministers would indicate that they are on the precipice of being completely illiterate, as is the case with all of Wright's Negro ministers. For both Reverend Hammond and Elder Murray, everything is interpreted in terms of the scriptures, and in each case neither minister offers any solution for the problems of his supplicants.

In "Fire and Cloud" and "Big Boy Leaves Home" a different version of the Negro minister is seen. In "Big Boy Leaves Home" Elder Peters is called upon by the Morrison family because of Big Boy's involvement in the killing of a white man. Arriving at the Morrison home, Peters listens carefully to the boy's father's recounting of how Big Boy and three of his friends went swimming on the forbidden property of a white man, and of the resulting deaths of two of Big Boy's friends at the hands of the white man.\(^{12}\) When Peters learns that Big Boy, in his terror, has killed the white man, he resolves that the best possible solution for the Morrison family is that Big Boy attempt to hide until he (Big Boy) is able to leave town. He vetoes a suggestion that Big Boy hide in the church, stating, "Naw, Brother, thall never do! They'll get im there sho. N anyhow, ef they ketch im there itll ruin us all."\(^{13}\) In this simple statement, we can see the implication

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12 Wright, "Big Boy Leaves Home," *Uncle Tom's Children*, p. 38.

that the white man is aware of the important role which the Negro church assumes within some Negro communities, and he believes that in such communities, the church or the minister is the first thing the Negro thinks of when he is in trouble.

"Fire and Cloud" presents another type of Negro minister in Reverend Taylor. Taylor is portrayed as a Negro minister who evidences a change in his conception of the role of religion in the lives of the modern Negro.

Taylor's attitude toward religion is at first reflected as an attitude similar to that of Hammond in Native Son and Murray in "Down By the River-side." The time of the story is obviously during the Depression—Negroes and poor whites are near-dying because of the lack of food. As Taylor looks at the empty, fertile land, he thinks:

> The good Lawds gonna clean up this ol worl some-day! Hes gonna make a new Heaven n a new Earth! N Hes gonna do it in a eye-twinkle change; Hes gotta do it! Things cant go on like this forever! Gawd knows they cant!14

At this time Taylor has no answer for the problems facing his community, but he believes that in time God will give him an answer.

Taylor's congregation pleads for the church to lead them—to give them the direction in which they must go in order to secure food for their families,15 and Taylor surmises that the solution to their problems must be derived through prayer. He prays as follows:

> Lawd Gawd Avmighty, Yuh made the sun n the moon n the stars n the earth n the seas n mankind n the beasts of the fields! . . . Yuh made em all, Lawd, n Yuh tol em what t do! . . . Yuhs strong n powerful n Yo will rules this worl! . . . Yuh brought the chillun of Israel outta the lan of Egypt! . . . Lawd, Yuhs a rock

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14Wright, "Fire and Cloud," Uncle Tom's Children, p. 131.
15Ibid., p. 136.
in the tima trouble n Yuh a shelter in the tima storm! . . . Lawd, Yuh said Yuhd strike down the wicked men who plagued Yo chillun! . . . Yuh said Yuhd destroy this ol worl n create a new Heaven n a new Earth! . . . Try us, Lawd, try us n watch us move t Yo will! Wes helpless at Yo feet, a-waitin fer Yo sign! . . . 16

He continues:

The white folks say we cant raise nothin on Yo earth! They done put the lans of the worl in their pockets! They done fenced em off n nailed em down! Theys a-trying t take Yo place, Lawd!

Yuh put us in this world n said we could live in it! Yuh said this worl was Yo own! Now show us the sign like Yuh showed Saul! Show us the sign n wull ack! We ast this in the name of Yo son Jesus who died tha we might live! Amen. 17

Taylor's prayer, like those of Hammond and Murray, forms an association between the immediate problem being experienced by his community and excerpts from the Bible. Too, like those of Hammond and Murray, Taylor's prayer offers his congregation no actual solution to the problem of obtaining food for their starving families. When one of the members asks him, "But, Reveren, whut kin we do," 18 Taylor's answer is, "The issues wid Gawd now, Sistahs n Brothers." 19

Taylor is pictured not only in his relationship to his own community but also in his relationship to the white community. He is confronted by the Communist Party and the local white government officials. The Party wants Taylor to use his influence to encourage his congregation to join

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17 Ibid., p. 138.
18 Ibid., p. 138.
19 Ibid.
in a march which is to be staged the following day;\(^{20}\) the mayor wishes Taylor to use his influence to discourage his congregation from participating in the march.\(^{21}\) Taylor refuses to commit himself to the wishes of either the Communists or the mayor.

Hadley, a member of the Party, informs Taylor that he is handicapping his people by not endorsing the march. He demands of Taylor:

> Are you leading your folks just because the white folks say you should, or are you leading them because you want to? Don't you believe in what you're doing? What kind of leaders are black people to have if the white folks pick them and tell them what to do?\(^{22}\)

Smith, one of the deacons, who represents the traditional "Uncle Tom," states the same thing when he argues against Taylor's endorsement of the march:

> What kinda leader is you? Ef yuhs gonna ack a fool n be a Red, then how come yuh want come on out n say so sos we kin all hear it? Naw, you ain man enuff t say what yuh is! Yuh wanna stan wid the white folks! Yuh wanna stan in wid the Reds! Yuh wanna stan in wid the congregation! Yuh wanna stan in wid the Deacon Board! Yuh wanna stan in wid everbody n yuh stan in wid nobody!\(^{23}\)

It is clear, even to an "Uncle Tom," that a leader must take some position in regards to problems. A leader cannot offer his followers directives if he simply straddles-the-fence.

It is only after Taylor is severely beaten by the whites whom he has so long pleased, that Taylor decides that his ideas concerning life are wrong. Returning home following the beating, he tells his son, "Ah done seen the sign! Wes gotta git together. Ah know what yo life is! Ah done felt it! Its fire!"\(^{24}\) He finally realizes that it is not through humility

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\(^{20}\) Wright, "Fire and Cloud," *Uncle Tom's Children*, pp. 142-147.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., pp. 147-151.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., p. 144.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., p. 155.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., p. 178.
and submission that the white man will respond to the Negroes' problems, but through his knowledge that the Negroes are determined to fight for what rightfully belongs to them. The first step in this direction is to show the white man that the Negro community is unified. The sign which has been given to Taylor is "Freedom belongs to the strong!" 25

Joseph Washington, in Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in The United States, argues that, from its original institution, the Negro folk religion has been attractive to the Negro people because of their desire to be free and the church has permitted them some measure of freedom. In religious worship the Negro may present before God his outrage at his white oppressors. 26 Washington further argues that the Negro ministers have "misconstrued the historic intent of the folk religion. . . . They have forgotten that black religion is a tradition interested not in pseudo-Protestantism but in freedom with equality." 27 In "Fire and Cloud" Taylor's change in point of view reflects the concepts stated by Washington.

The Negro minister in The Long Dream is not pictured in a situation in which the Negro community elicits his help in the face of a problem. Reverend Ragland does, however, represent the Negro minister who has been thoroughly indoctrinated by whites.

In the novel, a fire in the Negro ghetto causes the deaths of forty-two Negroes. In the events following the tragedy Tyree Tucker is murdered as the result of a plot instigated by the chief-of-police. All forty-three Negroes are buried in one large funeral service. In an emotionally charged

27 Ibid., p. 38.
eulogy, Ragland interprets all forty-three deaths as the fulfillment of "God's divine plan." Consider the following excerpt from Rangand's lengthy text:

"Some folks in this town's talking about trying to find out who's guilty of causing these folks to die. They even talking about sending folks to jail." Looking out over the sea of black faces, he gave forth an ironic, hollow laugh: "Ha, ha! Don't them fools know that no man can kill 'less Gawd wants it done? . . . When Gawd calls you, it's for your own good! Oh, if we could, just for one second, see through Gawd's eyes, how foolish and ignorant we would know we is."28

Ragland gives no consideration to the fact that the death of Tyree Tucker is the result of a plot instigated by the white police chief, nor to the fact that the fire which caused the deaths of the other forty-two Negroes was caused because of the unsafe conditions of the houses in the ghetto—an area in which the Negro is forced to live by whites. Instead, Ragland elects to interpret the deaths from a Christian point of view.

It has been stated previously that the sermons and prayers of the Negro minister reflect that their content has largely an emotional function. The scriptural material is incorporated into man's immediate experience and has little or nothing to do with actually finding solutions for problems confronting the Negro people. The subject matter utilized in the sermons and prayers of the Negro folk religion tends to offer the listener a temporary spiritual uplift because he immediately forms an identification with the suffering experienced by the Biblical characters.

One of the Negro minister's most effective instruments for the arousal of emotional belief among Negroes is the Negro spiritual. A product of the Negro slave songs, the Negro spiritual tends to offer the Negro an instrument through which he may "articulate his overwhelming concern with freedom."29

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In Wright's novels and short stories the Negro spiritual is most significant when it is used outside of the religious context. Among the twelve works used in the study, nine utilize the Negro spiritual. Of the nine that include the Negro spiritual, only three involve situations which may be interpreted as strictly religious in context. In the following works the Negro spiritual is used in a strictly religious context: The Long Dream, "Down By the Riverside," and "Man, God Ain't Like That."

In the novel The Long Dream the Negro minister uses the song, "I'm Nearer My Home Today Than I have Ever Been Before" because its theme fits naturally the occasion at hand—a funeral. Likewise, in "Down By the Riverside" the minister sings, "Am Gonna Lay Down My Sword and Shield," which also fits naturally the occasion at hand—a flood. And in "Man, God Ain't Like That," Babu, the jungle Christian, sings a mixture of spirituals. Of greatest significance among them is the verse:

Alas, and did my Savior bleed,
   and did my Sovereign die?
Would he devote that sacred head
   For such a worm as I?

Babu's songs are concentrated upon the cross and the blood of Christ because he feels that the white man's prosperity is based upon the fact that he murdered Jesus, and Babu resolves that he too must "crucify" Christ in order to become prosperous. In each instance here indicated, the song in question has a direct application to life that virtually over rides the religious context in which it appears.

30 Wright, The Long Dream, p. 322.
31 Wright, "Down By the Riverside," Uncle Tom's Children, p. 63.
32 Wright, "Man, God Ain't Like That," Eight Men, p. 137.
In "The Man Who Lived Underground" and "Bright and Morning Star" the songs have religious implications, but they are incorporated into the stories more to enhance the plot than to signify religious meaning. In the opening scenes of "The Man Who Lived Underground," the character hears a Negro church congregation singing, "Jesus Take Me to Your Home Above." The song directly applies to the occasion because the character is physically beneath the ground. Later, when Daniels attempts to enter the church, he is ordered out. During the process of his eviction the congregation sings:

Oh, wondrous sight upon the cross
vision sweet and divine
Oh, wondrous sight upon the cross
Full of such love sublime.

Here the theme of "love" in the song directly conflicts with the hatred which the people in the church show to Daniels.

The woman in "Bright and Morning Star" explains that the spirituals hold significance for her because she is able to identify with their themes of suffering and humiliation. The story opens with her singing, "He's the Lily of the Valley, the Bright Mawnin Star," and the figure of speech is carried out at the end of the story when the woman herself becomes, through an act of heroism, "a bright and morning star."

In Native Son, "Fire and Cloud," "Big Boy Leaves Home" and "Long Black Song," the characters sing spirituals in a completely secular atmosphere. In Native Son Mrs. Thomas sings, "Life is like a mountain railroad ... from the cradle to the grave," because she envisions her life as a harsh

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34 Ibid., p. 61.
35 Wright, "Bright and Morning Star," Uncle Tom's Children, p. 182.
36 Wright, Native Son, p. 14.
struggle from birth to death. In "Fire and Cloud" the marching crowd sings:

So the sign of the fire by night
N the sign of the cloud by day
A-hoverin oer
Jus befo
As we journey on our way. . . .\[37\]

The song has significance because it relates to the minister's stated fact that he has received a "sign"--in the form of a fiery beating by whites--that "freedom belongs to the strong."\[38\]

In "Big Boy Leaves Home" and "Long Black Song" the spiritual is used to illustrate how the Negro interprets the themes in the songs in relation to his own environment. In "Big Boy Leaves Home," Big Boy and his gang hear a train heading North and they sing, "Dis train bound fo Glory,"\[39\] associating "Glory" with the vision of Negro freedom in the North.

In "Long Black Song" the spiritual is used to illustrate the woman's feelings of ecstasy. Consider the following scene as the woman (Sarah) listens to "When The Roll is Called Up Yonder:"

"When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound. . . ."
She rose on circling waves of white bright days and dark black nights.

. . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .

"When the saved of the earth shall gather . . . ."
Her blood surged like the long gladness of summer.
"Over the other shore . . . ."
Her blood ebbed like the deep dream of sleep in winter.
"And when the roll is called up Yonder . . . ."
She gave up, holding her breath.
"I'll be there. . . . ."\[40\]

\[37\] Wright, "Fire and Cloud," *Uncle Tom's Children*, p. 178.
\[38\] Ibid., p. 180.
\[39\] Wright, "Big Boy Leaves Home," *Uncle Tom's Children*, p. 19.
Compare her feelings during her sexual intimacy with the white radio salesman:

She held tightly, hearing a mountain tide of blood beating against her throat and temples. . . . A liquid metal covered her and she rode on the curve of white bright days and dark black nights and the surge of the long gladness of summer and the ebb of the deep dream of sleep in winter. . . .

The obvious similarity between the vocabularies used in these occasions indicate that Wright is using the spiritual to illustrate its role as the initiator of emotional ecstasy and that the spiritual functions in the secular as well as in the religious aspect of the Negro folk tradition.

In the present chapter an effort was made to appraise Wright's treatment of the Negro minister in order to determine what role Wright feels the Negro minister must assume in the Negro community. The research showed that among the twelve works used in the study, Wright offers comprehensive treatments of the Negro minister in five instances. Two of the Negro ministers are pictured as persons who fail to meet intelligently the problems being faced by the people in their communities; two of the Negro ministers offer worthwhile suggestions toward the solutions to the problems being faced by the people in their communities; and one Negro minister is not called upon by his Negro community.

The chapter also showed that Wright's concern with the Negro spiritual is comparable with his concern with the Negro minister. In his works, the spiritual becomes a "spirit ritual," serving to evoke emotional reactions upon the listener. While Wright does present the spiritual in situations that are religious in context, the research shows that his concern with the spiritual is basically relative to its significance in the everyday lives of the Negro people.

Wright, "Long Black Song," Uncle Tom's Children, p. 113.
American Negro literature is the literature of the Negro community. As such, it reflects the minds of the Negro people, revealing the Negro's perception of himself and his various responses to his condition. Essentially, the Negro American has been denied full participation in American society; consequently, his tradition reflects a strong concern with the dream of justice and equality for all men. Negro literature is a projection of the Negro's inherent concern with the problem of race. Richard Wright's works embody the characteristics of literature of the Negro community. His canon—fiction and nonfiction—has one central purpose, namely, the depiction of the life of the Negro masses, so that the life of the Negro masses can be improved.

The values and attitudes which are revealed in Wright's fiction are circumscribed by his environment. Born in Natchez, Mississippi in 1908, Wright was brought up in an atmosphere of religious piety, against which he began to rebel at a very early age. In his autobiography, Black Boy, he recalls his early awareness of the contradictions between the subject matter which he learned in Sunday school classes and in his grandmother's Seventh-Day Adventist church, and the life he observed in the real world. As a youth, Wright did not succumb to the authoritarian discipline of his puritanical grandmother, refusing altogether to adopt her paranoid fantasies of religion. He became, as it were, obsessed with the vision of freedom; being a Negro, however, made the ascertainment of real freedom impossible. In writing, Wright found the outlet which provided him with a means of expressing his individualism. As a writer, he chose to function
within his race as a purposeful agent, dedicated to creating values by which his race could acquire a new faith in life—a faith that his dehumanizing condition need not exist, but that in order to make it nonexistent the Negro must show that he is willing to fight, indeed to die, in the struggle for the realization of the dream of American justice and equality.

Believing that freedom for the Negro could not be attained under the present political conditions of American life, Wright turned to Communism, whose ideology is specifically geared toward the total annihilation of world oppression. It was in the literature of the Communist Party that Wright first found what he termed, "an organized search for the truth of the lives of the oppressed and the isolated."¹ He joined the Communist Party in 1932 because he felt that he could relate meaningfully the experiences of those whom the Communists sought to lead. Although he eventually left the Party because of his realization that Communism, like religion, is indoctrinated with dogmatism and fanaticism which enslave men’s minds, he could not easily discard the essential influence of the ethics of Communism. The works which he wrote during the thirties and early forties—Uncle Tom’s Children (1936), Black Boy (1937), Lawd Today (1938)² and Native Son (1940)—show a pronounced Communistic point of view in regard to religion, and while the works which followed his departure from the Communist Party—The Outsider (1953), Savage Holiday (1954), The Long Dream (1958) and Eight Men (1961)—do not give the Communist Party the heroic position which it assumes in some of the earlier works, they do exhibit many of the

²Lawd Today was not published until 1963.
fundamental assumptions of Communistic doctrine.

Communist doctrine regards all religion as an instrument by which men create false worlds which retard any realization of a decent human life. The influence of Communism in regards to its attitude toward religion is reflected consistently in Wright's works, all of which fluctuate with characters who create false worlds as the result of their enslavement under religion. Most noticeable among these characters are Mrs. Thomas in Native Son and Mrs. Damon in The Outsider. Likewise, in these two novels are Wright's most vehemently stated refutations of the tendencies in religion which intimidate Negroes to believe that their subhuman conditions are preordained by God. Bigger in Native Son and Cross Damon in The Outsider are Wright's own spokesmen, who declare that religion is an escape mechanism which enables many Negroes to tolerate the restrictions and persecutions that are the deadweight of social degradation.

This research has been an effort to assay the role which Christian faith assumes in Wright's fiction and to determine the meaning of religion for Wright's characters and for Wright himself. Essentially, the research data show that Wright's interest in religion is always concerned with its relatedness to the Negro's environment. Repeatedly in his novels and short stories, Wright argues that religion cannot be disassociated from man's common experience. In situations in which the characters represent the archetypal Negro Christian, and in situations in which the characters represent the atheist, or religious rebel, one fundamental assumption is always in evidence—that the Negro's religious attitude is conditioned
by the circumstances of his environment. The archetypal Negro Christian simply develops a toleration for his debased environment by focusing his attention upon a vision of happiness and fulfillment in the hereafter. The very fact that he wishes to enjoy a happy life in the world to come implies that he is frustrated in the physical world—which denies him access to happiness, and demands that his life be characterized by a constant struggle for physical survival. The Negro whose attitude reveals a complete rejection of life as viewed by the archetypal Negro Christian, also develops this attitude in relation to his environment. He, however, does not feel that the Negro's social condition is indelible. But in order for it to be destroyed, the Negro must gear himself toward social action, a quality which the religious rebel feels is totally absent in all forms of religion.

Statistically, the research shows that, among the twelve works that are directly involved in the study, twenty-eight characters exhibit some type of attitude toward religion. These twenty-eight characters are divided into four groups: (1) the archetypal Christian; (2) the religious rebel; (3) the noncommittal or agnostic Negro; and (4) the Negro minister. Among the four groups, eleven characters (in five works) appear in group one; three characters (in three works) appear in group two; nine characters (in six works) appear in group three; and five Negro ministers (in five works) appear in group four. With the exception of two characters in group one, all of the characters are Negroes. Wright's distribution

3 Only three characters are discussed in the group, but reference is made to the fact that three other works include the combined total of six characters who take no definite stand, either for or against religion.
of characters fairly well represents the sociological distribution of their representative types within the real Negro community.

The attitudes toward religion which are manifested in Wright's fiction are informed by his concern with the Negro's dream of justice and equality. In the presentation of his characters' points of view, Wright makes it clear that because religion tends to intimidate rather than to free men's minds, it must fail, ultimately, to meet intelligently the problems faced by Negroes in today's society. If his criticism appears to be too extreme on occasions, one must realize that Wright's purpose, his determination as a prose writer, was to awaken America to the harsh realities of Negro life.
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