Introduction

A week-long shouting meeting was climaxed Sunday by the United House of Prayer as Daddy (“He’s So Sweet”) Grace baptized thirty white-clad converts with a fire hose at 16th and Christian Streets. With three bands on hand to assure jumping dance music, Grace first made a 20-minute speech. He reminded them that he flew to the South Pacific, stopped the Japanese-American war in 1945, and flew right back. This he did overnight. And his followers, who were spotted throughout the huge crowd, said, “Yes he did.” As Grace raised his hands, with fingernails from one to three inches, and fingers graced with diamonds and sapphires, local firemen turned on the hose. . . . As soon as the water struck them, the converts began dancing, shivering, twisting, prancing. . . . They screamed into the water, praising the sweet name of Daddy while Daddy stood safely under an umbrella and said, “Ain’t I pretty?”

Decades after it was written, this record of a United House of Prayer baptismal event stands as a timeless description of Bishop Grace, the founder of the United House of Prayer for All People who became a minor American celebrity. It is timeless because it captures so many of the pervasive mythological themes about both Grace and his church members: the leader’s extravagance, his claims to fantastic power, his constant focus on himself, and the worshippers who were not afraid of being a public spectacle with their vibrant praise of “Sweet Daddy.” The word “mythological” refers not to the truth value in these themes, but to their dominance of public perceptions about Grace and his church both during his lifetime and in the collective memory of American religious history.

During the four decades of Grace’s religious leadership, the United
House of Prayer frequently attracted mockery from those outside of its ranks. Observers ridiculed distinctive features of the church including the exuberant style of worship, the extensive line of goods for sale named after Daddy Grace, the pomp of annual convocation ceremonies, members’ passionate devotion to the church and to the bishop, and the intricate network of church clubs, each with its own uniform. Grace himself received national exposure in both academic and tabloid form. At times he courted this publicity, while on other occasions it was unwelcome. In addition to attention-getting maneuvers such as wearing flamboyant clothing and jewelry, purchasing high profile real estate, and conducting baptisms in city streets with a fire hose, Grace reputedly accepted massive donations from poverty-stricken followers and used the money to live lavishly. From scholars to newspaper reporters, few hesitated to judge both Grace and his followers negatively. In an early academic example, anthropologist Arthur Huff Fauset characterized House of Prayer members as “gullible” and suggested outsiders should take pity on them and “smile at these manifestations and ascribe them to the child-like nature of the Negro which is attracted to these uniforms, and other baubles.” Popular writers crafted descriptions of Grace as “a brown-skinned P. T. Barnum who cracked the whip in a circus of gaudy costumes, wildly gyrating acrobats and brass bands that played as if God were a Cosmic Hipster.” More recently, in his study of messianic myth among African Americans Wilson Jeremiah Jones compared Grace with Father Divine and Prophet Jones, saying they were all “opportunistic, egotistical charlatans, who elevated themselves for purposes of self-aggrandizement.” Even a former member, in his apostate text, declared: “The House of Prayer still stands as a constant reminder of the gullible nature of mankind.” These examples demonstrate that the House of Prayer was often perceived as an illegitimate religious institution, and this mischaracterization was not without consequence. Grace was rebuffed by other pastors when he made ecumenical overtures, he and his followers were sometimes hounded by news reporters who wanted to substantiate outrageous headlines, and the church was usually designated a “cult” in the most pejorative sense of the word.

It was assumed by many that Grace was the charismatic glue that held his church together, and that once he was gone it would disintegrate. After his death in early 1960, some predicted that followers would be lured away by any new leader who came along. Never having
taken the church seriously to begin with, outside observers underestimated its structural integrity and the commitment of its members to the faith, and they also overestimated the importance of Daddy Grace’s role. Church members ignored these predictions and were optimistic about their future despite sadness over the bishop’s death. As Melvin Adams, a Charlotte pastor, told congregants: “Satan is just waiting for us to stop working, then he will say the House of Prayer is going down. . . . The House of Prayer is not going down. It’s going higher and higher than ever before.” Adams proved correct. Though there were many legal and organizational hurdles in the years following Grace’s death, the church restructured, streamlined, and continued to expand. Today the House of Prayer remains an active church with a national membership in the tens, if not hundreds, of thousands.

To date, neither the United House of Prayer nor its founding bishop have received sufficient scholarly attention. Because nonmembers tended to view Daddy Grace as a caricature, few scholars have bothered to examine the intentionality of his actions, the things that influenced his decisions, or the integrity of his religious leadership. This book is the first to make a serious examination of the religious nature of the House of Prayer, the dimensions of Grace’s leadership strategies, and the connections between his often-ostentatious acts and the intentional infrastructure of the House of Prayer. This book is both a religious history of the first forty years of the institution (1920–60) and an intellectual history of its founder. I am particularly interested in some of the unique and unexpected directions Grace took in his leadership, and herein I attempt to discern what inspired him to make some of these decisions as well as how they affected the institution in the long term. Ultimately, this book helps to fill in the gaps of our knowledge about a man who was well known in African-American communities from the 1930s through the 1960s, but who is now noticeably absent from scholarly literature. Grace’s leadership was exceptionally innovative, and there is much to be gained from reexamining his unique style of decision making. An understanding of each aspect of the church must begin with Daddy Grace but must also include the people, their beliefs, and their practices. In other words, I tell the story of Grace in order to tell also the story of the people who co-created a new American church with him. In the end, the details of this story demonstrate that Grace should be considered among the most distinctive religious leaders of twentieth-century America.
Behind Grace’s Façade

One question that remains to this day is who the real man was behind the façade of Daddy Grace. What was Marcelino Manuel da Graca, the human being, like? Was the existence of his church the result of hidden motives—perhaps desires for riches or fame—or was he a sincere, God-fearing man whose every action was a response to a religious call? Very little information is available to answer these kinds of questions, as Grace left almost no writings and even fewer of his spoken words were recorded. After Grace’s death, reporter Phil Casey summed up the way many people had experienced him, writing, “It sometimes seemed it must be easier to strangle eels than to pin Daddy down on points of fact.” Certainly, Casey’s words aptly describe the challenge of uncovering the “real” Marcelino Manuel da Graca who spent decades camouflaged by Daddy Grace, founder and bishop. Now, half a century after his death, only Grace’s church remains as a testament to his intellect, abilities, and achievement. Though the church was once a truly unusual piece of twentieth-century American religious history, today it is a much more mainstream form of Christianity, not readily identifiable with its ostentatious roots. To understand the developmental trajectory of this church, one must inevitably begin with a profile of its founder.

Marcelino Manuel da Graca, most probably the second of five children, was born in approximately 1881 and raised in the Cape Verdean archipelago, off the coast of northwestern Africa. His youngest sister, Louise, remembered that their mother always proudly said Marcelino was “different” from the other children. The da Graca siblings were raised in the Catholic church, which was the only established religion on the islands at that time, but when Grace came to the United States as an adult he had the freedom to pursue different kinds of Christian belief and practice. However Catholicism always remained influential in his life, and even in the 1930s when his own church was well established, Grace admitted that technically he was still Catholic.

Grace always preferred to keep his background cloaked in mystery, saying things such as, “I came from the land beyond the sea.” Occasionally he claimed his parents were from Lisbon, but in fact Gertrude and Manuel had been born and raised on the island of Brava, just as his grandparents, Augusto and Constantina on his maternal side and Louis and Rose on his paternal side, had been. It appears that Marcelino Manuel had great respect for his father, Manuel. As the eldest son, he...
was his father’s namesake, and though he toyed with his own name over the years he always kept the “Manuel” present in his experiments: Charles Manuel Grace; Charles Imanuel Grace; Emmanuel Grace. Grace also appears to have been close with his mother, expressing particular regret when she passed away in July 1933. As he wrote in a letter to one of his assistants later that summer, “I am felling bad over Mother’s death besides other trobles [sic].”

Grace’s native tongue was Crioulo, the language of the archipelago. Immigration records list him as literate in Portuguese and English, but various associates had conflicting opinions on how literate he actually was. In court on one occasion, he was handed a newspaper and forced to prove he could read English. His tidy, careful handwriting may suggest that he had to put great effort into the act of writing his name; on the other hand, it may suggest that he had a formal education. Such an education would most likely have been in a Catholic school where he was taught in Portuguese and which could have been located either in the archipelago or in Portugal. The da Graca family appears not to have been poor despite the fact that their father primarily worked as a mason, so it is possible that they would have found the money to educate their eldest son. Had they been poor, it also would have been out of the question for them to emigrate en masse to the United States, which was a very expensive venture undertaken only by families of means.

Between the time Grace arrived in the United States, somewhere around 1900, and when he started his church in 1921, he was “studying and working and traveling. I traveled almost all my days. . . . I studied on the train, in the street car, in the homes and in the classes.” When asked how he earned a living during that time, he said, “I worked on a farm, I worked in the restaurant, everywhere I had to, I did not want to be idle anywhere I am, and wanted to do something, and I got in anything I chose and worked.” In addition to work and study, he married and fathered two children. His first wife, Jennie, was Cape Verdean. She claimed that she had met Grace at a social event at the South Harwich Methodist Church when she was 16 years old. At the time, Grace was employed at the Snow Inn. He used to ride a bike to Harwichport so that they could attend church together, and Jennie remembered that his favorite hymn was “Shall We Gather By the River?” Her father did not approve of their marriage, possibly because of the eleven-year age difference. Jennie said Grace had left her in approximately 1912 after they argued about the attention he was giving to another
woman, although his niece always claimed the marriage had ended because Jennie “didn’t want a spiritual life.” Grace was never vocal about the existence of his first wife, but he must not have had acrimonious feelings toward her, since her picture hung on the wall in his Charlotte home for decades.

Grace’s second wife, Angelina, was from Mexico. One church member described Angelina as “a light skinned woman with light brown hair, and she had a mole on her face, a large mole, and she had curls.” After their 1932 marriage in Arizona, when Angelina was 19, she moved with Grace to Washington, DC. It seems that they did not really live together, however, because Grace’s primary residence in Washington was on Logan Circle and Angelina lived elsewhere in the city. Nonetheless, she bore him a son in 1935. Like his marriage to Jennie, Grace’s marriage to Angelina lasted only a few years, and their divorce was finalized in 1937. Over the years, many other women claimed to have had sexual relationships or children or both with Grace, but none of these claims were ever confirmed by the courts.

Although Grace was only five feet eight inches tall, he made certain he stood apart from other men by adorning himself with nothing less than flamboyance. His clothes were unpredictable, but usually flashy. He often wore tailor-made suits of lush fabrics, sometimes in vibrant colors and decorated with gold piping or shiny buttons. He paired the suits with brightly striped vests and hand-painted neckties. For less formal occasions Grace might wear a kimono or his red and silver cowboy shirt or his long, northern fur seal coat. His fingers and wrists invariably clanged with gold bracelets and rings containing precious stones. The fingernails of his left hand, which he allowed to grow several inches, were often painted in red, white, and blue. Grace kept his hair at shoulder length, and in early years he had a mustache and goatee, while later on he often simply drew his mustache on with an eye pencil. Though he mostly maintained a stoic countenance, when he was in the mood to have his picture taken he would smile broadly and stop to offer a variety of poses. To the right of his nose Grace had a small scar or birthmark; this mark makes it possible to confirm the legitimacy of pictures of him, which is helpful because his facial appearance changed significantly as he aged.

Just as he dressed with great forethought, Grace also lived and traveled in style. He always had at least one luxury car for travel, such as a Packard, a Cadillac, or a Pierce-Arrow, and he sometimes had an en-
tourage including a chauffeur, a body guard, invited guests, and any number of other assistants, such as elders, lawyers, or secretaries. His long-time chauffeur John Hero said that Grace usually kept the separation window in the car open, and when the two were alone they had friendly conversation. He added that Grace’s “customary seat [was] the extreme right corner of the car.”

Grace’s various homes, once he began collecting them, were often mansions much larger than anything needed by a single man, and he filled them with antiques and artwork. In his New Bedford home on County Street he had a collection of photographs that included one of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whom he admired and for whom he had once campaigned. Another photo was of Dean Martin; Grace’s niece said he was unfamiliar with Martin but kept it because it had been a gift. Grace also seemed to collect bits of memorabilia: in a Charlotte safe opened after his death, for example, Grace had placed letters reportedly written to him by people asking for help, blessings, and to become members of his church.

Despite his extravagant taste in homes and clothing, for entertainment Grace enjoyed more simple pleasures. For example, at his County Street home he often sat on the lawn, just looking at the view. To relax in the evenings he played piano. He said he never watched television or listened to the radio, but he kept light fiction around the house that he sometimes asked others to read to him. Grace said he did not read the newspapers because he did not understand them. However, it is clear that he kept abreast of current events, particularly international ones, because occasionally he spoke about them to followers. Therefore, it seems likely that he either read the newspaper or listened to the radio, even if only irregularly.

Grace believed that travel was one of the best forms of education, and so during his lifetime he went to Africa, Europe, the Middle East, and the Caribbean, in addition to traveling all over the United States. He avoided airplanes, preferring trains and cars for cross-country travel, and ships to go abroad. In 1936 he bought a vacation home in Cuba, twelve miles outside Havana. It was a somewhat unusual choice because it was located in a beach town known only for its casinos, yet Grace eschewed gambling. For entertainment, therefore, he probably spent time on the beach and kept company with his traveling companions. Returning home from Cuba he once said, “I just returned from the land of sunshine and flowers. If I am able to take a trip for recreation,
for a good time and to be among courteous people, I never miss the land of Cuba. I regret that I had to leave there so soon.”

Aside from lavish living, Grace had few identifiable vices. He neither smoked nor drank. His favorite foods were coffee, which he purportedly drank constantly, and various types of toast, including cheese toast, raisin toast, and cinnamon toast. As one visitor recalled, “Of all the foods served during the hours-long breakfast, Daddy seemed to mostly eat cinnamon toast. The more toast Daddy downed, the more he was served.” Grace then insisted his guest have some too, though she was not really interested.

Grace preferred to sleep in the mid-morning hours, from 5 a.m. to 10 a.m., which put him on a slightly unusual schedule. But in most other ways, Grace’s personal habits did not distinguish him from other men.

Possibly because he was a target for accusations of impropriety, Grace’s lifestyle vacillated between complete privacy and intense publicity, and this fact contributes to the difficulty of reconstructing his life and work. Grace had hundreds of associates but very few close friends. Aside from several long-term House of Prayer assistants whom he counted as friends, such as Grace Magazine editor Ernest Mitchell, chauffeur John Hero, and assistant Melvin Spencer, his social circle was small. Notable friendships with people outside of the church that he maintained over several decades included those with Edward Rogall, a Jewish businessman in New York who assisted him with real estate; J. S. Nathaniel Tross, a Guyanese pastor of a Methodist church in Charlotte; Samuel Keets, a white real estate speculator from Washington, DC, whose nickname for Grace was “bishops”; and Ernesto Balla, a Catholic Portuguese doctor who lived in New Bedford and was named in Grace’s will as an executor of his estate. What is observable is that Grace liked educated people of all races. When he had the opportunity, he invited people for dinner in his home. He enjoyed just sitting and talking; friends attested that in addition to knowing a lot about the Bible, Grace spoke intelligently about history, and he had a sense of humor. Afterwards, Grace might sit down at the piano and “tear it up” to entertain his company, as Keets described.

Grace was also quite close with several of the females in his family, particularly his younger sisters Sylvia and Louise, and niece Marie Miller, the daughter of his sister Jennie. Curiously, he demonstrated only minimal interest in his two sons, Norman and Marcelino, and he had an on-again/off-again relationship with his daughter, Irene.
One on one, it seems that Grace used speech as much to say nothing as to say something. Reporters often noted that the bishop deflected any questions he did not want to answer by offering refreshments or talking at length on a completely different subject. House of Prayer members who sought help from Daddy Grace found that when his response to a question was silence, it meant “no” or disapproval. His friend Dr. Balla commented that despite his intelligence, when Grace spoke in parables he was difficult to understand. Keets added that he was honest, but hard to pin down. “His word was one hundred per cent, if you could ever get him to commit himself,” he said after Grace’s death.

What remains most elusive about Daddy Grace is how he felt about his life. Did he experience a tension between his public persona and his “real” self? Or was the “real” Grace exactly what everyone saw, what he presented to the world? Most of his life was spent living as a celebrity. Even in the solitude of his own homes, where he was attended to by followers who worked as caretakers, he was on public display. This meant he was left little room for personal weakness. I suspect that in order to navigate that kind of complicated existence, deep down he must have been a truly private person, a loner. His intense privacy made it possible for him to appear as a captivating leader with his human needs and feelings always concealed from public view. The moments when a more personal Grace shone through were fleeting, and so in the end we do not really know who and what moved him. Who, for example, caught Grace’s attention one night during a service in New Bedford, prompting a reporter to note that “a look of casual recognition came over his face as he sighted a familiar figure in the audience”? And who or what was it that provoked the rare, completely genuine smile captured by a photographer visiting with Grace in Norfolk? All of these things are unknown, and what Grace thought about in his private time, what worried him, and what gave him the most pleasure will always remain his secrets.

**Overall Themes of Investigation**

In my interpretation of Grace’s leadership of the United House of Prayer I raise numerous questions about the relationship of action to belief, the relationship of followers to leader, the relationship of church to context, and the relationship of self-identity to institutional identity. My
explorations of the answers has resulted in several themes’ being woven throughout the text, most of which are not limited to one section, but rather recur as pieces of the church story bring them to the fore.

One theme is the myriad influences on Grace’s leadership choices. Grace’s cultural heritage surely affected his understanding of race and class, his ideas about religious rituals and festival traditions, and his concepts about church hierarchy, as they all bear the marks of his Cape Verdean background. Other influences that were key in particular moments include both his friends and his rivals. Exploring each of these elements helps reveal both Grace the religious leader and Grace the man, and in turn helps us to learn about the followers and the institution.

In fact, an understanding of the people who followed Grace is a theme very closely tied with an understanding of Grace himself. We do not have the demographic data to know much about Grace’s flock, but some aspects can be gleaned from considering characteristics of the leader whom followers built and supported, and characteristics of the church in which members channeled their energies. Is Grace in some sense a collective representation of the House of Prayer membership? Is his role a projection of their needs, constructed by their desires? To a degree the answer is yes, and therefore we can learn about the church members by learning about his role. However, Grace was not solely shaped by the followers, but also by his own creative energies, and therefore in considering his personal influences we in turn learn about his institution.

Another theme is the group identity of the House of Prayer, ranging from what it was like at various moments in time to the ways it was created through ritual. The construction of sacred space and time in the church seems to have occurred in ways unlike what most people would expect and understand. Therefore, I consider distinctive facets of the House of Prayer, such as the meaning of money and goods, which sometimes bordered on totemic; the ritual aspects of fund-raising and donation; iconography within the church; and the symbolic function of property and wealth. I am also intrigued by the way in which a group of people organizes and shapes itself into a religious institution; thus, I continually ask what the component parts of a religious institution are, and how they all came together in this particular instance. Not surprisingly, some of the House of Prayer’s pitfalls are as helpful in exploring the theme of institution-building as are its successes.

Although it is certainly a relevant path of investigation, in general I
am less concerned with white racism, white oppression, and white perspectives on the church than I am with the view from the inside. Therefore, I continually ask what everyday life was like for the African American church member, and therefore, what the church meant to him or her. How did the church fit into his or her worldview and experiences, and how did it subsequently shape them? As much as possible, I approach my questions about institution-building and identity from an inside view, using followers’ words to express that for themselves. I am hampered by the fact that I am, by every definition, an outsider. Nonetheless, I believe that my work comes much closer to a sympathetic portrait than any prior study has, and therefore my work represents a step forward.

Situating the Study of Daddy Grace

Very little academic work has focused on Daddy Grace and the United House of Prayer, and the corpus of published pieces primarily consists of decades-old essays by social scientists who conducted site visits and interviewed members. Foremost among these works is Arthur Huff Fauset’s *Black Gods of the Metropolis*, the book version of his dissertation in anthropology. Fauset’s pioneering project, mostly based on fieldwork done in Philadelphia in 1940–41, examines several forms of urban African American religion that were newly emergent at that time. The United House of Prayer was among the groups he studied. Partly because Fauset’s study was broad, considering the history and organization of the church as well as its beliefs and practices, and partly because it was one of the earliest published pieces, his work on the House of Prayer became definitive. That is unfortunate, because in my estimation Fauset had a clear bias against the House of Prayer, which prevented him from evaluating the church fairly. As a result, subsequent work on Grace and the church not only draws on his research but also recycles his bias. Particular manifestations of this are examined in chapters 3 and 4.

Beyond the work of Fauset are several notable essays published on the House of Prayer. G. Norman Eddy’s preliminary attempt at typologizing “storefront” religions included a section on the House of Prayer, based on observations that seem to have been conducted in Boston. As part of graduate work in anthropology at Yale, Alexander Alland was
one among a group who analyzed religious trance in the church in 1959–60.\textsuperscript{44} John Robinson’s 1974 history essay on the church was intended as an update to Fauset’s work, and he added interesting evaluations of the House of Prayer in the post-Grace years.\textsuperscript{45} In 1977, Arthur Carl Piepkorn used unique sources to put together a brief portrait of the House of Prayer in a survey of Pentecostalism.\textsuperscript{46} As part of a 1989 collection on religious leaders, John O. Hodges wrote a short, pithy entry about the history of the House of Prayer and Grace’s role in the church.\textsuperscript{47} And finally, Danielle Brune Sigler has recently reopened the field for study with two essays on Grace that question previous assumptions and raise many issues worthy of fresh exploration.\textsuperscript{48}

Daddy Grace and the House of Prayer were also examined in a handful of unpublished dissertations and theses. The earliest significant piece is that by James Daniel Tyms, who visited churches in the Washington, DC, area and included a chapter on Grace’s leadership in his 1938 master’s thesis in religion.\textsuperscript{49} Chancellor Williams’s dissertation on economic endeavors in several religious groups included a chapter on the House of Prayer, partly based on written surveys and partly based on visits he made to East Coast churches from 1942–46.\textsuperscript{50} Albert Whiting’s 1952 sociology dissertation was the first work to focus solely on the House of Prayer. He conducted fieldwork in Augusta, Georgia, over several months in an effort to create a psychological profile of typical church members.\textsuperscript{51} Some unique biographical work on Grace was included in Jean E. Barker’s 1993 master’s thesis on Cape Verdean immigrants.\textsuperscript{52} And finally, Danielle Brune’s (Sigler’s) 2002 dissertation, a cultural biography of Daddy Grace, offers particularly good treatment of the early years of the House of Prayer, as well as compelling analyses of popular misconceptions about Grace’s leadership.\textsuperscript{53}

Survey texts in both American religion and African American religious history regularly mention Daddy Grace, but rarely go beyond that. Specific books are discussed in detail in chapter 4; however, the overall trend is that Grace and his church are treated as interesting but insignificant, and they receive decreasing attention in these works as the decades pass. An example is Catherine Albanese’s highly regarded textbook on American religion. In the first edition, from 1981, one paragraph describes Grace and his church, and it is written in the past tense without giving any indication that the church still exists. By the third edition of this book, in 1999, Grace and the church had been com-
pletely written out of the text, no longer an important enough piece of American religious history to remember. This dismissal is not uncommon in the history books and is at least preferable to the church’s treatment in those books that continue to malign and mischaracterize Grace and the House of Prayer. Another trend in the history texts is that Grace is always paired with a discussion of Father Divine, another religious leader with whom he is typically confused. Often, the men are elided into a single “type” of which each is purportedly representative; sometimes the “type” describes their leadership, their theology, their organization, and/or their followers. The history books in particular show that the two men have become so closely identified with each other that scholars seemingly cannot mention one without mentioning the other. R. Marie Griffith articulately summarizes the problem this way:

When Divine has been analyzed as a religious leader, he has most often been viewed (at least until very recently) through the narrow and often racialized lens of a “cult leader,” indistinguishable from Bishop Charles M. “Sweet Daddy” Grace and other so-called “black gods of the metropolis.” This lumping together of disparate figures has meant that their substantive teachings have been deemphasized, if not neglected altogether.

I examine the issue of the collapse of Grace and Divine in chapter 4, including the history of this trend and how it has affected research.

Among books focused on African American religious history, the lone standout worthy of praise is Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer’s African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation. This text is concerned with sociological categories of Black religion and how particular groups have acted to accommodate or challenge American social norms. As an example of a group that does not clearly fit into one category of their typology, Baer and Singer discuss the House of Prayer at some length. Their work is unique because it implicitly recognizes the church as an institution distinct from its founding father, and because it considers it an alive and evolving organization.

Although the House of Prayer, at least in its first several decades, could certainly be counted among American New Religious Movements (NRMs), it has not been examined by scholars trained in this field of
study. This may be due to the fact that after Grace's death the church began a process of internal transformation that moved it toward socio-religious legitimacy, and therefore by the time the NRM field began to flourish in the 1970s, the church was beyond the bounds of its purview. Additionally, since the trend in the NRM field has been toward the study of new religions populated by white and/or Asian peoples, the neglect of the House of Prayer is not especially unusual. However, it is somewhat surprising that scholars have not reconsidered Daddy Grace or his church even within broad historical studies of NRMs in the United States, as many of the typical questions posed in this area are relevant to House of Prayer development.

Daddy Grace has also been written about in more “popular” types of publications, though these were usually more concerned with the leader than with the church. Numerous magazines profiled Grace over the years including *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Ebony*, and *Jet*. Biographer Gordon Langley Hall included a chapter on Grace in his 1964 work *The Sawdust Trail: The Story of American Evangelism*. And former church member Paul Hunter published a monograph in which he used his perspective as a House of Prayer apostate to evaluate its beliefs and practices and to compare it with other religious bodies. But even taken together, the majority of these sources—from unpublished manuscripts to well-regarded essays and everything in between—merely repaint a one-dimensional picture of Daddy Grace and the people who followed him. Ultimately, there is a dearth of academic work on Grace and the House of Prayer that both treats them seriously and evaluates them critically.

**Source Challenges**

While all of the early social science studies are problematic in some way, they are also valuable because they contain firsthand observations and interviews from the Grace years. My work draws on many of them, but I have been careful to interrogate the material presented and to consider the time, place, and motives of each author. In some cases this was easier than others; for example, an appendix to Whiting’s dissertation includes transcripts of the personal history interviews he conducted with House of Prayer members. As a result, the members’ words can be read independently from the interpretation Whiting provides throughout the text of his dissertation. Such benefits were not available in all cases,
however, and so I have made many judgment calls about what should be read as fair or truthful reporting and what should be read with a grain of salt.

The slant of the early studies is just one among many hurdles I have experienced in my research process. Another issue is the lack of primary source material available. I have made the best out of what I could find, but research on Grace and the church would be tremendously enhanced by more data from the *Grace Magazine* and other church publications. The few copies of the house organs that are available—four and a half issues of the *Grace Magazine*, and seven issues of the *House of Prayer Quarterly*—offer a wealth of insight, and additional issues would only add to our understanding of the church. Both of these publications are discussed in more detail both in chapter 5 and the essay on sources, as are the collections of other church publications and ephemera that aided this study.

I regret that the church itself played no part in assisting me with my research. Historically the House of Prayer has been maligned by academic writers, even when the church welcomed such researchers initially. It is therefore no surprise that the church developed an institutional reluctance to speak with outsiders. As part of interpreting Mark 3:22–29, the House of Prayer taught that writers were troublemakers because they asked too many questions: “The scribes ask contrary things thinking that they will get a false answer and that they may be able to write a false statement concerning Jesus. . . . We have Pharisees today among the children of Grace.”60 The church urged everyone to stick together and be of one mind, which implied keeping church business private. “Speak only that which you know,” seemed to be the Biblical lesson members have followed, though at one time Elder Mitchell specifically said that bylaws prevented members from speaking about the church without permission.61 The House of Prayer leadership appears to believe that outside knowledge about their church might threaten it in some way. For example, as did Grace, the organization has continued to inflate its membership numbers grossly; this suggests it is aware that size is often translated as importance. The last membership statistic reported, in 1974, was four million; it seems that no information has been offered since then because the same number continues to be reprinted.62 Based on my own research, I believe a current rough estimate of twenty-five thousand to seventy-five thousand is more likely; however, I do not have enough information to suggest this number is
anything more than speculative on my part. Had the church been responsive to assisting my research, I would have hoped to clarify details such as this one.

Another source challenge is the fact that parts of this work are heavily dependent on newspaper articles. The use of newspapers as source material is quite problematic. Every paper targets a particular audience, and many have particular agendas, and for these reasons the reporting is often skewed to serve an internal purpose (or purposes). Additionally, the stress on publishing an accurate story versus a story that will sell varies from paper to paper and from year to year. I have taken great care in evaluating the stories I have used, cross-referencing information whenever possible and looking for patterns of accuracy and fallacy in reporting so that I could get a sense of what information was trustworthy. I also tried to use a wide variety of newspapers in an effort to find different interpretations of the same events. It is my hope that I have successfully filtered out many of the exaggerations. As a tangential note, by using the morgue of the New Bedford Standard-Times, I saw how reporters borrowed heavily from previous work; many of the same catchy phrases and descriptions were used verbatim in their articles for decades. This trend was never far from my mind as I studied and evaluated newspapers of all sorts.

As it happens, Daddy Grace’s words were recorded in newspapers more often than anywhere else. By hunting down his statements, I have attempted to present a fuller picture of his person and his leadership than has previously been made. I frequently use quotes from House of Prayer leaders and members so that, as much as possible, they can describe themselves in their own words. This is especially true in sections related to religious belief. Granted, these quotes, usually culled from newspapers and secondary sources, are not as desirable as would be information obtained through individual interviews. However, I have done my best to piece together the myriad voices within the House of Prayer to provide a fair and realistic portrait.

Structure of the Text

Four elements serve to organize this book: chronology, leadership lessons, geography, and religious history. First, because it is a history of the development of an organization, the account unfolds chronologi-
ally. Overall, the time frame begins with Grace’s birth in 1881 and extends just beyond his 1960 death, with the majority of the text falling in the window of 1922–62. Occasionally there are instances in which the text jumps briefly forward or backward in time in order to raise an issue or highlight events relevant to the topic at hand.

Second, each chapter is driven by an argument about a leadership lesson that affected Grace, zooming in on moments when the nature of Grace’s leadership changed or grew. I trace the causes and effects of these changes and posit the significance for his overall religious leadership and, in turn, for the institution as a whole. These aspects of Grace’s leadership style are not all equal: some are more distinct than others, some are more readily observable than others, and ultimately, some are more important to the church in the long term than others. This imbalance is the natural by-product of retelling the history of a real person and a real church.

Third, geography provides the book’s narrative framework. Each chapter examines the House of Prayer as it existed in a particular urban setting or, in some instances, two settings, and when appropriate I include information about the city itself to help contextualize aspects of the church being discussed. The cities chosen are relevant to particular moments of change in Grace’s leadership. In some instances these places serve merely as backdrops to the story; in other instances, the nature or character of the city in question plays an important role. Certainly, one could look at the activities of the church and aspects of Grace’s leadership without thinking about where and when they took place, but from a sociological perspective the geographic and socio-cultural context always adds much to our understanding of a religious group. This approach is in line with the broader theory of “religious economy,” which acknowledges that a system of religiosity can best be understood in relation to the other social systems operating in the same environment. Hence, we must consider what Grace dealt with in order to establish and maintain a church in any given place, as well as what prospective members encountered each day beyond the House of Prayer doors. Furthermore, in Grace’s absence, the people leading that church and the faithful in the pews continued to be shaped by their cultural, political, and social environment. Therefore, understanding something about that place helps us to understand the character and significance of that region’s Houses of Prayer.

The fourth and final element that governs the text’s structure is a
gradual unveiling of the history of this particular religious tradition. Because there are many interesting, sometimes unusual, aspects of Grace’s church—such as theology, characteristics of the membership, music, rituals, and many others—I discuss these elements as they become relevant to particular moments in House of Prayer history, rather than all at once in a single spot. Thus each chapter contains sections that advance the details of the religious history by addressing the question of what the United House of Prayer for All People under Daddy Grace was all about.

Chapter Overview

The first chapter, “The Call of God Brought Him,” introduces Grace’s prebishipric life by examining the social, political, and cultural circumstances of the Cape Verde Islands during the time he lived there, and by considering the picture of early twentieth-century immigrant life in the New Bedford region. Grace first came to public attention in 1922 with the establishment of his second church, located in New Bedford. By examining the local culture and the social divisions of New Bedford, as well as the theological identity of the early United House of Prayer, I posit that with this church Grace intentionally used the principles of the market to compete with other local congregations for membership. His success with this early strategem became one of the hallmarks of his approach to Christian evangelism and repeated itself throughout his forty-year career as a religious leader.

Chapter 2, “The Usual Miracles,” examines Grace’s earliest efforts at beginning the southern wing of his church in the latter 1920s, particularly in Georgia. I examine his experimentation with methods of attracting potential converts, and as part of this I consider House of Prayer theology and rituals in more detail, most especially the role that healing played in the lives of members. Additionally, this chapter traces the first phases of Grace’s evolution from a reactive, defensive man to a religious leader who always stayed above the fray, no matter who tried to attack him or how.

The third chapter, “Led By a Convicted Man,” is concerned with several issues related to membership in the United House of Prayer. One significant piece of this is whether followers believed Grace was God and to what extent that idea influenced their commitment to the institu-
tion. Though rules for church members were stringent and uncompromising, Grace himself did not always live up to the standards he set. The most egregious early example of his deviance is demonstrated by the Mann Act trial, a case in which a follower accused Grace of rape. On one hand, details of the case serve to contrast the life of the bishop with that of his followers, especially in the realm of behavior. But the Mann Act trial was also a defining moment for the institution because of what it came to symbolize. Rather than causing members to lose trust in Grace, the perceived senseless persecution of the bishop strengthened member support for their leader. And, rather than the declension that might be expected following a scandalous trial, Grace learned that his member base thrived on the unity brought by defending his good name.

Chapter 4, “He Ousted God from Heaven,” examines a 1938 incident that altered the course of Daddy Grace’s institution-building strategy. In the spring of that year Grace bought the building that housed the Harlem headquarters of Father Divine’s Peace Mission Movement, and then he evicted both the members and their leader. This chapter tells the story of that incident, situating it within the larger context of Depression-era Harlem society. An examination of the long-term effects of the Harlem purchase demonstrates that it inadvertently taught both Grace and Divine significant new lessons about ways to sustain their churches, though each man implemented his new ideas uniquely.

Chapter 5, “My Joy Is Completed in Charlotte,” recounts the story of the church and its leader during the heyday of the 1940s and 1950s. In this period, the United House of Prayer for All People increasingly ran itself without needing Daddy Grace’s constant attention. Regional and local leaders managed most day-to-day affairs, and Grace had the time and freedom to begin refining more peripheral aspects of his church. In some sense, during these two decades the church gained momentum as an institution while the bishop was releasing the reins of his directive leadership. The story of the church during this era is essentially the story of an institution in its prime, with the results of Grace’s design finally flourishing on an observable grand scale; yet the story of the bishop during this period is that of an elderly man in the summertime of his leadership, rarely in any particular place or focused on any particular thing but nonetheless occupied with making appearances and experimenting with new ideas.

Chapter 6, “Chaotic Confusion,” examines the House of Prayer in
the aftermath of Grace’s 1960 death. Skeptics publicly anticipated that the church would fall apart without Grace’s charismatic leadership, and the initial tumult and confusion in the church only bolstered this opinion. Though Grace’s managerial carelessness caused intense disorder, reconsideration of the events following his death allow us to understand what transpired as not merely random chaos and confusion, but as a new wave of leadership utilizing the foundations laid by Grace to bring about major church restructuring. Additionally, theoretical frameworks from the study of New Religious Movements allow us to see the path of the United House of Prayer mirroring that of other institutions whose founding leader has died.

Contribution to Scholarship

In an effort both to fill in the gaps of the historical records and to demonstrate the religious significance of this church, which has been sidelined for far too long, I use various subfields of religious studies to examine Daddy Grace and his church. American religious history, particularly theological family groups, aids me in placing the House of Prayer in a theological context. By considering religious developments contemporary with the church, particularly Pentecostal belief and practice, the House of Prayer emerges not as something wild and crazy but as something quite in line with the most vibrant religious strain of twentieth-century America. In this regard, the House of Prayer does not stand out as original. By using the more particular lens of African American religious history, the House of Prayer can be readily compared with other forms of religion created and/or led by African Americans. Certainly, the House of Prayer can be categorized with churches that fulfilled some of the social needs of African Americans when middle-class-oriented Black churches would not. The reason this aspect is not my primary focus, however, is that although this may help us understand the House of Prayer in a given moment, it does not help us understand the church as it has developed over time, because being a refuge church for those shut out of mainline denominations is not what defines it as an institution.

Today, the House of Prayer is most frequently studied in the context of African American religious history because its membership has predominantly been Black. However, several aspects of the church explain
why it should also be considered within the New Religious Movement field. First, Daddy Grace fits the popular understanding of a “charismatic leader,” an epithet often used to describe founders of new religions. Second, like other NRMs, the House of Prayer has tended toward insularity, which makes those on the outside suspicious of what happens on the inside and casts it as “other” to a degree that has at times been extreme. This leads readily to a third factor, which is that mainstream America, in its reception of the church, has consistently treated it as a marginal religious group. Such treatment can be seen in all forms of printed material about the church, from newspapers to academic evaluations. These factors, plus the fact that it has long been referred to as a “cult,” provide ample reason to consider the House of Prayer alongside other relatively new religious groups. By using frameworks from the study of NRMs, I add support to recent theories about the fate of religious groups after a founder’s death, and I also participate in the ongoing debate about how to recognize when a new religion stops being “new.”

The House of Prayer history as a whole also provides numerous points of support to the theory of religious economy. This theory posits that the free practice of religion in the United States operates in much the same way as an unregulated capitalist marketplace, and thus many terms from economics can be used metaphorically to describe parallel processes in American religious spheres, or the “religious economy.” The benefit of using this terminology is that it turns historic events and concrete data—like a particular tent meeting, a convocation parade, or the number of Houses of Prayer in a given neighborhood—into more abstract, depersonalized concepts. Hence, it is easier to evaluate that data in terms of qualities like success, dependency, influence, etcetera. Using this theory, members and potential members of churches become religious consumers, religious activities turn into products, and mediating between the two are proselytizers and ministers, or salespeople. The relationship of supply and demand also affects how people respond to a particular product, as do time, place, and other unique circumstances. In the case of the United House of Prayer, this terminology aids us in thinking about Grace’s target audience, his use of various religious products to attract consumers, his particular strategy for manipulating supply and demand, and the reasons his buyers remained so committed to the Grace brand of religion.
Ultimately, this work contributes to scholarship by giving full-length treatment to a religious organization and leader that has been repeatedly dismissed in academia, and it both broadens our knowledge of African American religious history and addresses questions relevant to NRM studies. Academic interest in Pentecostalism is still growing, mirroring to some degree the explosion of the religion itself, and as a result this history of an early, independently organized Pentecostal church is also valuable for the field of Pentecostal and Apostolic studies. Lastly, because I consider Grace’s work in half a dozen localized settings, portions of the text add to our knowledge of working-class religious life, and therefore the overall social history, in these cities. While I cannot claim the work is absolutely comprehensive, I have attempted to be as thorough as possible, both in the array of sources consulted and in the topics broached.

Just as I did when I began this work, I again ask myself, Why was Daddy Grace successful? Was he successful because people followed him? Maybe, as Wilson Jeremiah Jones wondered about Marcus Garvey, Grace merely stepped into a role that happened to be vacant at the time. In other words, maybe he didn’t lead people into something; maybe the people were there, ready to be organized and led, and he was the man who happened to be in the right place at the right time. Could it have been the same movement, more or less, if a different person had stepped up to lead? My work has led me to conclude that the answer to this question is a definitive no. The shape of the United House of Prayer for All People was absolutely dependent upon the vision of Daddy Grace, the leadership choices he made, his background and life experiences, and even on the strange tension between his intricate control of the church structure and his careless record keeping. He did not act alone, but he did act with distinction, and without him this particular institution never would have been born.