Introduction

Looking for Langston

“I do not consider any of my writing anti-religious.”
—Langston Hughes

When the poet Langston Hughes was twelve years old, he attended the annual weeks-long revival meeting in Lawrence, Kansas, with his “Auntie” Reed. A family friend and devout Christian, Mary Reed lived with her husband, James, in the working-class eastern section of town, populated primarily by African Americans, white southerners, and Native Americans. The childless couple had taken Hughes into their home after the death of his grandmother, Mary Patterson Leary Langston. At the special meeting for children—an evening devoted to bringing the “young lambs to the fold”—Hughes sat with the other youths on the mourners’ bench, waiting to be “saved.” Time passed and all the other children had gone forward to accept Christ as their savior except for Hughes and his friend, Westley, son of the town drunk. Hughes was willing to wait; Westley was not. Growing impatient with the Kansas heat and the many eyes staring at them, Westley whispered to Hughes, “God damn! I’m tired o’ sitting here. Let’s get up and be saved.” After Westley went forward, all the attention turned to Hughes. Mary Reed and the rest of the congregation pleaded with him, “Why don’t you come? Why don’t you come and be saved?” But Hughes kept his seat. As he remembered, “I wanted to see him (Jesus), but nothing happened to me. Nothing! I wanted something to happen to me; but nothing happened.”

Following the traditions of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), Hughes had been christened as a child but, at the “age of accountability,” the church encouraged such children to make a public confession of faith. Reed had promised him that at the moment of salvation he would “see and hear and feel Jesus,” Hughes remembered, and
“I believed her.” But not wanting to further detain those assembled who were fervently wailing in prayer on his behalf, Hughes finally relented. “Waves of rejoicing” rose up in the church as the last “young lamb” came forward for salvation. When later that evening his Auntie found him sobbing in his bed, it seemed to confirm for her that Hughes had indeed been saved. The tears, however, were not tears of joy but of shame and disappointment—shame that he had deceived the congregation and disappointment that he had not “seen” Jesus as he had been promised.¹

Hughes included this story as a vignette entitled “ Salvation” in his 1940 autobiography, The Big Sea. With its intentionally ironic title, “ Salvation” told the story of Hughes’s failed salvation experience, an event he considered to be one of the three most important moments in his life. He linked it to two other crucial moments in his life—the realization in his late teens that he hated his father and the rejection by his wealthy Park Avenue patron, Charlotte Louise Van der Veer Quick Mason, in 1930. They were the moments that he divulged with the greatest care and the most obvious pain. Regarding his break with Mason, Hughes wrote, “That beautiful room, that had been so full of light and help and understanding for me, suddenly became like a trap closing in, faster and faster, the room darker and darker, until the light went out with a sudden crash in the dark. . . . Everything became like that night in Kansas when I had failed to see Jesus and had lied about it afterwards. Or that morning in Mexico when I suddenly hated my father.”² Beginning in 1927, Mason and Hughes had developed a deep and abiding, albeit unusual, friendship until she summarily dismissed him as her protégé, cutting him off from her patronage. Hughes had ultimately failed to heed her misguided artistic demands and refused to accept the “primitive” she believed him and all blacks to be. “She wanted me to be more African than Harlem,” he explained. Heartbroken, he eventually retaliated by writing about her, breaking her “code of secrecy.” Doubtlessly, Mason was the subject of the poem, “Poet to Patron,” which Hughes penned in 1939.³ As for his father, James Nathaniel Hughes, who abandoned his family and his country, Hughes had never been close to him. James Hughes was unwilling to abide by American racial codes and had contempt for the poor and all black people, the major source of the conflict between father and son. As their relationship steadily dissolved, even the thought of him made Hughes sick. “I hated my father,” he bluntly stated.⁴
Hughes’s hatred of his father and his break with Mason have been discussed in illuminating detail, but the failed salvation experience has not been granted the same level of attention. Given the chronology of these events, however, the failed salvation experience was the foundational one among the three. Indeed, it affected Hughes’s reactions to his father and to Mason. As Hughes’s principal biographer Arnold Rampersad asserts, “all three moments unveil Hughes’s extreme fear of abandonment.”5 Such fear, however, began that night in Kansas. Jesus had abandoned him in a spiritual or metaphysical sense, his father would do so in an emotional one, and Charlotte Mason would abandon him materially.

The central claim of this book is that Hughes’s failed salvation experience profoundly shaped his approach to religion and became the crucial backdrop for much of his writing. The event set in motion his lifelong quest to understand the nature of “salvation” and the role religion plays in daily life. Indeed, one cannot fully understand Langston Hughes without a careful examination of his thoughts on God, faith, the institution of the church, and matters of ultimate meaning. These concerns permeate the corpus of his work, as Hughes wrote as much about religion as any other topic, particularly on the paired themes of salvation and sin. At the heart of this pursuit was an understanding that in Christian theology, the substitutionary death of Jesus served as the basis of salvation. Hughes heard this claim both from the pulpit and in Sunday school at St. Luke AME in Lawrence, where his family had been members since the 1880s.6 Black Methodists had developed a strong presence in northeastern Kansas by the first decade of the twentieth century, the result of a migration to Kansas from the South that started in the 1850s and increased after the Civil War and the collapse of Reconstruction in 1877.7 But Hughes would have also known of Jesus’s substitutionary death to provide salvation from his own reading of the Bible, the book he declared to be one of his “earliest memories of written words,” along with W. E. B. DuBois’s The Souls of Black Folk. This aspect of the Christian narrative surfaced with great regularity in Hughes’s writing, particularly in the late 1950s and early 1960s, including the short stories “On the Road,” “Big Meeting,” and “Blessed Assurance,” and in what he called his “gospel song-plays,” such as Black Nativity, a theatrical production about Jesus’s birth featuring an all-black cast.8 A Christian theological understanding of salvation from the perspective of his church in Kansas.
Figure I.1. Founded in 1862, St. Luke AME Church occupied a number of spaces in east Lawrence, Kansas, before it broke ground at the corner of Ninth and New York Streets in 1863. Originally composed of free blacks, escaped slaves, and former slaves, the congregation built a permanent edifice in the Gothic Revival style in 1910.
comprised an important aspect of Hughes’s personal and literary exploration of the concept.

That sweltering night in Kansas, however, took Hughes beyond the notion of individual redemption, central to his AME upbringing. It also created the space for alternative meanings and modes of salvation found in broader liberal Protestant traditions, which he encountered in New York City and in the lives and writings of Walt Whitman and his “guiding star,” Carl Sandburg. What Hughes came to understand as salvation was by no means stable or fixed but shifted and changed in his life and in his work, often according to the genre in which he was writing. Moreover, for Hughes, salvation was not always a category of “religious” experience, as it also became a discursive means of articulating intellectual, artistic, and political expressions. Indeed, an analysis of religious themes in the work of Langston Hughes shows that he was “working out his salvation,” to employ the rhetorical structure of Philippians 2:12, King James Version (KJV). Such “working out” was foremost and primarily an intellectual, cultural, and artistic enterprise. Failing to “see” Jesus that night disrupted the initial stirrings of belief in Hughes, as he further stated in his vignette as a response to the experience, “I didn’t believe there was a Jesus any more, since he didn’t come to help me.” His life and artistic production, therefore, would always connote a complicated and, at times, fraught relationship with God, with the institution of the church, and with religion more broadly, as he moved unevenly between stances of belief and unbelief, frustration, doubt, and disillusionment. Hughes’s pursuit to understand the nature of salvation, which began that night in Kansas, sat at the center of his thinking, forming and shaping his writing on religious topics, as well as his approach to religion as a phenomenon of human experience.

“Working Out” Salvation

Because Hughes took the initial steps to “work out” his notion of salvation in his poetry, this book draws heavily on his poetic production. It is important to recognize, however, that in a career that spanned over forty years, Hughes wrote in nearly every literary genre—poetry, plays, social commentary, novels, librettos, children’s books, and short stories—and that most of his writing across the genres had some measure of religious
content. Hughes, for example, collaborated with composers whose works were thoroughly religious and overtly theological. He had an extended collaboration with Jan Meyerowitz, the prolific German “composer on moral subjects” in the 1950s to the early 1960s. Born in a German Jewish family that had converted to Christianity, Meyerowitz encountered Hughes’s “blues poetry” and sought him out to be the librettist for his operatic works. No real fan of opera, Hughes nevertheless wrote four biblically based librettos over the course of their decade-long, volatile, and not particularly lucrative collaboration. “The Five Foolish Virgins” (1954) was based on Matthew 25:1–13; “The Glory around His Head” (1955) was an Easter cantata; “Esther” (1956) was the story of the biblical queen; and “On a Pallet of Straw” (1960) told the story of Jesus’s birth. In addition to Meyerowitz, Hughes collaborated with an impressive list of American composers during this period, including Margaret Bonds and William Schumer, for whom he also wrote librettos on religious themes.

Despite a high level of proficiency in other literary genres, Hughes considered himself primarily a poet. Writing poetry was his earliest passion and became for him a “sacred commitment.” He declared to the poet Vachel Lindsay in 1925 that he wanted to write poetry for the “beautiful thing that it is.” Poetry, he maintained, was beauty and light, the metered and measured articulation of life itself. It was never to be propagandistic, nor at the service of “this or that cause.” He composed poetry primarily because he liked it. Writing in the 1950 inaugural edition of the Free Lance, a magazine of poetry and prose, Hughes further developed this philosophy of poetry. “Words are the paper and the string” that “wrap” a poet’s experience, he declared in a brief introduction to the magazine entitled, “A Note on Poetry.” All poetry is personal, he maintained, and though it varied in quality it always revealed something of the interior world and exterior experience of the writer. “Each poet makes of words his own highly individualized wrappings of life segments he wishes to present. . . . Sometimes the word wrappings contain nothing. But, regardless of quality or content, a poem reveals always the poet as a person. Skilled or unskilled, wise or foolish, nobody can write a poem without revealing something of himself. Here are people. Here are poems. Here is revelation.” It was as a poet that Hughes became a central figure of the Harlem Renaissance, “the Bard of Harlem,” the
moniker attached to him by the late 1930s as an obvious comparison to William Shakespeare, the “Bard of Avon.” As Harlem’s bard, Hughes became one of the movement’s brightest stars. Although his poetry can be described a number of ways, Hughes often described himself as a “social poet,” one whose primary intent was to focus on the lives of ordinary working people. Writing for *Phylon* in 1947, he conceded that “having been born poor and also colored,” his poems, particularly the earlier ones, were not about “beauty and lyricism.” They were, rather, about “people's problems—whole groups of people's problems.” And early observers took note. Novelist and poet Margaret Larkin proclaimed Hughes a “Proletariat poet” and “a poet for the people” in her 1927 review of Hughes’s second book of poetry, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*. For Larkin, Hughes was a “new prophet” who had answered the call for poetry to “come out of rich men's closets and become the ‘proletarian art’ of all the people.” In a retrospective on black literature published in 1932, Alain Locke, one of the principal architects of the Harlem Renaissance, described Hughes as one who “sang of his people” and “a militant and indignant proletarian reformer.” By 1935 Hughes’s poems were already being anthologized in collections of proletarian poetry, poetry that was, as Joseph Freeman described it, “inspired by the revolutionary working class.”

The characterization of Hughes’s poetry as essentially concerned with the working lives of ordinary people has been dominant and he remains perhaps best known as a “proletarian” and “social” poet. Religion, however, was just as pervasive a theme in Hughes’s poetry and he wrote nearly as much poetry on religious topics as he did about workers or social protest. Indeed, Hughes’s religious poetry is constitutive of his proletarian and social poetry since it, too, was mostly concerned with the lives of working people and the socially marginalized. In addition to numerous poems in which he implicitly employed religious discourses, frameworks, and imagery, Hughes wrote eighty explicitly religious poems, which involved direct engagement with American religious institutions, black church cultures, Christian theology, and liturgical practices.

Poems in which Hughes made implicit use of religious language and imagery include perhaps his most famous, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” a poem he quickly wrote on a train crossing the Mississippi river
on his way to visit his estranged father in Mexico. The poem showcases the influence of free verse on Hughes’s developing craft, as it has all the hallmarks of Whitman and Sandburg. It is also an early demonstration of Hughes’s enduring love affair with black people, a tribute, “rich in expression and moving in its message,” to the glorious black past and the dignity of black character. But what is perhaps more significant, Hughes infused it with spiritual cadences: “I’ve known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins. My soul has grown deep like the rivers.”

The critical praise for “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” highlighted its religiosity. Jessie Fauset, who was serving as literary editor of the Crisis, where Hughes had sent the poem for consideration in 1921, heralded it as evidence of his “great gift” and his “spiritualness,” a term she confessed to having coined especially for him. That sense of “spiritualness” was “the first and greatest essential of the poet,” she further elaborated. Historian Nathan Huggins concurred with Nigerian literary critic Onwuchekwa Jemie’s estimation of the “transcendent essences” of the poem, asserting that in it Hughes captured “some of the force of the spiritual.” The speaker in the poem identifies with “eternal forces” and “transcends” the harsh facts of existence and the “the very conditions which make the statement necessary.” The river is not only a part of “God’s body,” as Jemie had claimed, it is also “eternity itself, with no beginning and no end.” Making symbolic use of the Mississippi as a “timeless” and mysterious sustainer of life, Hughes asserted that so, too, were the “souls” of black people in that they are “deep like the rivers.” “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is a perfect example of Hughes’s implicitly religious poetry in its fusion of racial and religious rhetorics and in his tendency to depict the black experience in religious or spiritual terms. Alain Locke acknowledged this in his cogitations on the poem, calling it Hughes’s “mystical identification with the race experience.”

Hughes’s frank talk of Harlem nightlife in Fine Clothes to the Jew overshadowed his first series of explicitly religious poems in the collection, and many readers panned the book for its greatly misunderstood title and its focus on “low life” and sexuality in such poems as “Jazz Band in a Parisian Cabaret,” “Crap Game,” and “Ballad of Gin Mary.” The attention went to “Red Silk Stockings,” where an unnamed speaker entices, “Put on yo’ red silk stockings Black gal / Go out an’ let de white
boys look at yo’ legs.” Having already been granted the honorific title of “Poet Laureate of Harlem,” Hughes was then dubbed the “Poet Lowrate of Harlem” by the *Chicago Whip*. Others among the black press called him “The Sewer Dweller” and the poems “trash.”¹⁷ But in the “Glory! Hallelujah!” section of the book, Hughes waxes anything but “lowrate,” exploring themes intrinsic to the Christian tradition such as mercy, redemption, sacrifice, atonement, exaltation, resurrection, and the afterlife. These poems evoke the ethos of black church culture and make reference to its material world. In them one hears the rhythmic cadences of the worship service, the fiery tones of the preaching, the exalting testimonies of faith, and the spiritual frenzy of the music.

Hughes’s explicitly religious poems cluster during the mid-to-late 1920s and contain all the imprints of his black Methodist upbringing, a testament to the deep impact it had on him. Indeed, two other explicitly religious poems, which appeared in *The Dream Keeper* in 1932, were also written during the 1920s and were similar in theme to those in *Fine Clothes to the Jew*. They are two of Hughes’s best-known and most evocative poems in this form, “Ma Lord” and “Feet o’ Jesus.”¹⁸ Explicitly religious poems surface throughout Hughes’s body of work, however, including a few during his period of radical awareness in the 1930s, including “God” and “Big City Prayer.” As he turned to an emphasis on patriotism and “the folk” during the 1940s and 1950s, he published such poems as “Heaven,” “It Gives Me Pause,” and “Communion.” He also wrote a number of religious poems that he did not publish during his “gospel years” of the 1960s, such as “Christ” and “Celestial Eye.”¹⁹ They are published here for the first time.

Thinking about Religion

Despite this extensive corpus of religiously infused work, little sustained and comprehensive analysis of Hughes’s religious poetry has emerged. With the exception of French literary scholar Jean Wagner, no major study has focused exclusively on the religious aspect of Hughes’s poetic production.²⁰ This is not to say that there has been no acknowledgment of the religious content in Hughes’s writing, or of the important, if complicated, role religion played in his life. As African American playwright, theater critic, and friend of Hughes, Loften Mitchell definitively states, “religion was important to Langston.”²¹ The absence of forthright analysis
of his religious work, however, has marginalized one of the most perceptive thinkers about religion in twentieth-century arts and letters. It has also prompted the not entirely inaccurate but misleading conclusions by Hughes biographers and literary scholars that Hughes was “secular to the bone,” “notoriously reticent about matters of religion,” and “as a rule . . . stayed away from religious topics and themes.”

These depictions of Hughes have contributed to the general perception that he was antireligious, that is, he was oppositional to religion and religious people, and that his writings bear witness to this stance. Hughes rebuffed this characterization of himself and of his poetry, as he did in a testy exchange with Wagner during an interview with him in 1958. When Wagner asked Hughes to characterize his “personal religious evolution” over the last twenty years and to state if his readers were correct in “considering his anti-religious stand of the 30s” as “merely a short-lived accident,” Hughes responded simply and definitively, “I do not consider any of my writing anti-religious.”

Hughes likely warmed to Wagner’s acknowledgment that his religious views had changed over time, but he rejected Wagner’s implication that his more radical religious poetry of the 1930s was disparaging of religion. He implied, rather, the very opposite. For Hughes, all of his religious writing, including that which he produced during the 1930s, was generative and contributive to religion and was not antireligious.

Given that Hughes was at times staunchly evasive about his own religious beliefs, the assertions of his antireligiosi ty are understandable. Many of his personal and professional affiliations were with people unflaggingly antagonistic to religion, he was formally disassociated from religious institutions, and he held palpable disdain for public pietistic displays of religion. But part of the aim of this book is to draw distinctions between the lack of religious belief or nonconformity to conventional religious standards and institutions and antireligiosity. The one does not equate the other. Moreover, this book shows that claims of Hughes’s antireligiosit y have to do, in part, with the very limited ways in which some Hughes scholars have thought about what constitutes “religion” generally, restricting it to matters of “confession,” an uncritical celebration of God and acts of devotion, and an affiliation with religious institutions, mainly the Protestant Christian church. They have also narrowly delineated what one should consider “religious” in the work of Hughes. This limited understanding of religion and the religious content
in many of Hughes’s poems has largely excluded him, as it has other New Negro writers of the first half of the twentieth century, from the history and the historiography of African American religion.

The assertion of Hughes’s antireligiosity has not only disregarded his own declarations about the long-enduring prominence of religion in his writing, specifically his poetry, but also his seemingly balanced assessment of his own stance toward religion. When asked in an interview in 1960 if “religious faith of any kind” influenced his poetry, Hughes responded by referring back to Mary Reed and his church experiences in Kansas. “Yes, I would think very much so. I grew up in a not very religious family, but I had a foster aunt who saw that I went to church and Sunday School. . . . I was very much moved. . . . And when I began to write poetry,” he proclaimed, “that influence came through.” Indeed, when religion becomes a primary category of analysis for Hughes’s poetry, as well as his works in other literary genres, he is revealed to be a thinker about religion of notable range and depth.

Hughes as a “thinker about religion” is a key concept in the book and one that is meant to distinguish him from a “religious thinker” or someone who is “religious,” that is, a believer in a God or deities and an observant practitioner of a particular religious tradition, such as Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. This book makes no claim that Hughes was religious, espoused a particular religious tradition, or made a “confession of faith.” In that sense, it is not a “religious biography” or a “spiritual narrative.” Indeed, the central arguments of the book do not rest on whether or not Hughes was himself a religious person. It is clear from much of his artistic production and various public statements, however, that Hughes maintained and cultivated a religious sensibility and sensitivity to religious systems, and he harbored a deep affection for many aspects of the church of his youth, mainly its worship. He also carefully articulated a set of “personal” religious practices later in his life, having to do primarily with his engagement with the wider religious world and Harlem’s religious communities in particular. That engagement became more pronounced in the 1950s and 1960s, coinciding with significant redirections in the focus of his work. But this book is focused, most of all, on tracing the complicated history of Hughes’s thinking about religion and depicts him in the broadest sense as a public intellectual on matters of religion for the way he expressed those thoughts in his art and other writings.
A significant aspect of thinking about religion for Hughes was thinking theologically. Like many other New Negro writers, Hughes often employed theological terms, discourses, and frameworks such as salvation, sin, prayer, communion, covenant, eternity, and the cross to express his ideas. His literary opus is replete with examples. But thinking about religion also had a public and social component to it. As an aspect of “working out” his salvation, Hughes’s thinking about religion involved a determination to understand the role of religion in public life, and the public function of religion particularly in regard to African Americans. He sometimes spoke of religion as a “private” matter, but Hughes also strongly intimated that if there were any value to be found in religion, it necessarily had to be in the realm of the social. Therefore, to see Hughes as a thinker about religion is to understand that religion was not only important to him, it was absolutely central to a vast portion of his art.

Although this book makes no claim that Hughes was himself religious or religiously observant, it illustrates how and why he took decisive steps at certain times in his career to establish that he had great respect for all religious faiths and that he held those he considered to be “truly” religious in high regard. Hughes’s own declarations about his sensitivity to religion and respect for religious people and communities complicate characterizations of him as antireligious or even atheist. By the early 1940s, however, Hughes went to great lengths to distance himself from any perception that he did not believe in the existence of God. “I am not now, nor have I ever been an atheist,” he stated definitively and repeatedly. To be sure, a principle reason for those adamant denials certainly can be attributed to extant animus toward atheists and atheism, especially among mainstream African Americans. At the same time, the Cold War period in the United States was an exceptionally difficult time for left-leaning writers and artists who proclaimed to be atheists or “agnostics”—those who were skeptical or unconcerned about the existence of God or anything beyond the material world. Hughes likely contemplated what effect even the perception of atheism would have on his career, his marketability, and the freedom to produce his work.

While mainstream African Americans and federal authorities may have disavowed atheists and atheism, however, some of the most prominent writers, activists, and intellectuals of Hughes’s day were outspoken atheists or agnostics, or at the very least had complicated relationships
with religion and the church, including James Weldon Johnson, W. E. B. DuBois, George Schuyler, A. Philip Randolph, and Zora Neale Hurston. In his 1933 autobiography, *Along This Way*, Johnson explained his agnosticism by indicating that he had no inclination toward religion and was simply unsure of God’s existence: “I do not see how I can know; and I do not see how my knowing can matter,” he determined. Similarly, Zora Neale Hurston, who devoted a great deal of her life’s work to the topic of religion, found no personal use for it, particularly for organized religion: “It seems to me that organized creeds are collections of words around a wish,” she stated. “I feel no need for such. . . . It is simply not for me.” When asked whether he was “a believer in God,” W. E. B. DuBois responded, “If by being a ‘believer in God,’ you mean a belief in a person of vast power who consciously rules the universe for the good of mankind, I answer No; I cannot disprove this assumption, but I certainly see no proof to sustain such a belief, neither in History nor in my personal experience.” Among Hughes’s contemporaries and friends, an atheistic or agnostic stance was not uncommon. So, while it is clear from the failed salvation experience that Hughes wavered between belief and unbelief in his lifetime, it is also clear that had he chosen to publicly declare himself to be an atheist, he would have been in good company.

In light of the artistic, cultural, and intellectual spaces Hughes occupied, therefore, his insistence that he was not an atheist likely had little to do with his or anyone else’s negative views about atheism. Another, more significant motivation had to do with his unrelenting commitment to his own self-fashioning and his ideas about the nature and construction of identity. As a matter of principal and as an artist, Hughes eschewed the notion of fixed identities, and the only identity he unambiguously claimed was that of a Negro artist and writer, as he demonstrated in his 1926 cultural and racial manifesto, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” All others were suspect and held at bay, unclaimed or unembraced in the fullest sense.

“Personal” and Public Practices

In distancing himself from allegations of atheism and rejecting characterizations that he was antireligious, Hughes carefully crafted his presentation of a “personal” religion. The existence of his religious
poetry and his sensitivity to religion and religious communities did not shelter him from speculation about his religious faith and affiliations. If anything, they fueled them. Hughes and other African American artists and intellectuals often faced questions about their faith, and doubts about whether Hughes was a person of religious faith began to surface during the 1930s with the publication of such radical poetry as “Christ in Alabama” and “Goodbye Christ.” These questions seemed to gain momentum throughout the mid-1940s to early 1960s, and although Hughes's answers often varied, they typically offered only enough information to trouble the question rather than to answer it outright. “Personal,” a poem he published in the *Crisis* in 1933 is a perfect example. Hughes penned the poem after YMCA officials cancelled a program sponsored by the Los Angeles Civic League in which he was to be featured. They had come across “Goodbye Christ,” which many took as Hughes’s “dismissal” of Christ, and charged him with Communism, antireligiosity, lack of patriotism, and being “anti-Christ.”

In a letter marked,  
Personal  
God has written me a letter.

In an envelope marked,  
Personal  
I have given God my answer.

“Personal” is unique among Hughes’s poetry because, as Mary Beth Culp observes, it is “the only poem in which Hughes spoke of religion in his own voice and not that of a persona of his people.” Ordinarily, Hughes and other twentieth-century black writers did not often speak in their own voices in their religious poetry. They spoke collectively, as if for all black people. This poem, however, is unquestionably about Langston Hughes in his own voice, and that was the purpose it served. Clearly meant to address the matter, the poem also was intended to complicate and perhaps even frustrate any discussion about Hughes's personal faith. Hughes did not intend it to prevent a discussion about the *existence* of a personal faith. That is precisely what “Personal” invites. But for Hughes, the contents of the “letters”—best understood as prayers—were private.
The fact that there was a mail exchange between him and God he left open for public examination, as evidenced by the poem itself. Hughes's evasiveness about a personal religion, however, was not always a matter of deceit or disingenuousness; rather, it clearly was a strategy—a strategy, foremost, to maintain a sense of privacy. As David E. Chinitz and others demonstrate, Hughes was famously private about his personal life and rarely divulged intimacies or particularities, perhaps as a means to preserve the integrity of his approach to life as an artist. But it was also a strategy to shape his own identity with regard to religion—“God has written me a letter; I have given God my answer.” Indeed, Hughes's evasiveness about his own faith was consistent with his evasiveness about other “identities” he seemingly disavowed or disclaimed.

This strategy and purposeful evasiveness apply to the common assertion that Hughes was homosexual. Although in recent years Hughes has appeared in nearly every major anthology and monograph of American and African American gay literary and cultural history, whether or not he was indeed gay—in the mid-twentieth century sexualized version of the word—and harbored same-sex attraction and desire will never be fully or satisfactorily known. Indeed, the questions and the conclusions drawn about Hughes's sexuality have been the source of much contentious debate and have their own history. The views run the gamut. Some of his closest friends, including Arna Bontemps and Carl Van Vechten, insisted that they did not know if Hughes sexually desired men or women, whereas others who knew him in more professional capacities expressed no doubt that he was homosexual. Carl Van Vechten stated that after thirty years of friendship, “never had he any indication that (Hughes) was homosexual or heterosexual.” Jan Meyerowitz contended that he could tell Hughes was gay based solely on Hughes's response to a photo of an “unbelievably beautiful” black man Hughes kept on his desk. “I knew he was a homosexual,” he plainly stated. Carl Bean, Motown recording artist, actor, and founder of the Unity Fellowship of Christ Church in Los Angeles, who met Hughes in New York during rehearsals for Black Nativity in the mid-1960s, argued that Hughes was never “incognito” about his sexuality. Hughes, he contended, was openly gay, as were many in the supportive arts community in which they lived. Echoing what Richard Bruce Nugent had affirmed about black life in Harlem in the 1920s and 1930s, that “nobody was in the closet, there wasn't any
closet,” Bean maintained that in the 1960s the black community of visual artists, writers, and gospel singers in which he and Hughes were involved freely expressed their homosexuality without “any shame,” and it was never called into question. Indeed, so many gospel singers in the 1960s were perceived to be gay that jazz critic Gene Lees called the gospel world “the gospel gimmick.” “What particularly tickles my funny bone,” he indelicately wrote in 1964, “is that a number of the gospel singers are fags. I cannot say that faggotry is as common among gosplers as it is among ballet dancers, but it’s pretty common.” Bean was more delicate but just as insistent: “The idea that there is this big guessing game around Langston is ridiculous.”

The “big guessing game,” however, has persisted long after Hughes’s death, and the scholarship on him has been similarly mixed on the issue of his sexuality. Biographers, Hughes scholars, and literary critics have made contentions about his sexuality, with various levels of certainty and differing evidential approaches that range from depictions of him as heterosexual or “straight,” to asexual and uninterested in sex in a “childlike” way, to simply and only homosexual. Hughes biographer, Faith Berry, for example, argues that Hughes was indisputably gay, and she questioned the integrity of all claims to the contrary. None of these sexual identifications, however, likely reflect Hughes’s sexuality accurately or represent his primary sexual experiences for the entirety of his life, or perhaps they applied at different times. It is also likely that Hughes practiced a form of what Jeffrey McCune calls “sexual discretion,” a performance of “dissemblance” characteristic of some black men of “queer” or “non-normative” sexualities in the face of “the constraints of surveillance.”

Hughes’s life suggests a spectrum of sexuality rather than one single, unchanging identity. He recounts in his autobiographies several romantic entanglements with women, including a high school sweetheart and a girlfriend in Paris, Anne Marie Cousseuy, also known as “Mary,” with whom he had a tortured and, much to her displeasure, strikingly non-physical affair. It is clear that he had a strong, intimate connection that was quite possibly sexual with Sartur Andrzejewski, his self-described “queer” “eccentric” and “funny” high school friend. He also had at least one brief sexual encounter with “an aggressive crewman” on a boat off the coast of Lagos, Nigeria, in the 1920s. Although he was at various
times the object of desire for other men during the Harlem Renaissance, most notably Countee Cullen and Alain Locke, who embarked on a campaign of literary, aesthetic, intellectual, and sexual seduction of the young Hughes in the early 1920s, Hughes appeared uninterested in them and manipulated their advances to his own advantage and never responded in kind.\textsuperscript{39} One of the clearest and most cited examples deployed to suggest Hughes’s homosexuality is his poem “Café: 3 A.M.” from “Montage of a Dream Deferred,” written in 1951. The poem is striking as much for its implicitly religious discourse as it is for its discussion of homosexuality:

Detectives from the vice squad  
With weary sadistic eyes  
Spotting fairies.  
Degenerates,  
Some folks say.

But God, Nature,  
Or somebody  
Made them that way.

Police lady or Lesbian  
Over there?  
Where?

Indeed, Hughes coupled religion and homosexuality in each of his few works where homosexuality emerged as a theme, including the play “Little Ham,” with its “effeminate youth” character who was a practitioner of “New Thought”; the short story “Blessed Assurance” about a young “queer” church singer; and the short story “Seven People Dancing,” featuring the character “Marcel de la Smith,” a known “fairy.”\textsuperscript{40} The rest of his life and work, however, was full of silences regarding his sexuality. This was intentional on his part, and the fact that questions remain about Hughes’s sexuality is a testament to his success at self-fashioning, for as Shane Vogel claims, “unknowability was something that Hughes cultivated in his life and his literature.”\textsuperscript{41} When it comes to Hughes’s sexuality or his personal religion, therefore, if we are “looking
for Langston,” to evoke Isaac Julien’s dreamy 1989 fantasy-documentary, we do not really find him.42

“Modernist Currents,” New Directions

This book is a work of intellectual and cultural history as well as a historical analysis of literature. Concerned with the history of ideas about religion as much as it is with the materiality of religion as an expression of culture, it also views literature as a viable and vital record of the American religious past. Works of American literature are historical documents in their own right. This tripartite method opens a space to read Langston Hughes religiously; that is to say, it locates him squarely within the context of the wider world of twentieth-century American and African American religious cultures. And a crucial part of that wider world was American religious liberalism. Hughes has long been regarded as one of the most important voices of the Harlem Renaissance and of literary modernism, a crucial aspect of the larger “modernist phenomenon” in the early decades of the twentieth century. Precipitated by sweeping changes in industry and the growth of American cities, modernism rejected traditional forms in art, music, literature, architecture, and social organization to embrace new ideas and approaches. Harlem was a site of “vicious modernism,” in the words of the poet Amiri Baraka, and both the Harlem Renaissance and literary modernism mutually reinforced each other in the construction of an American cultural nationalism, and Hughes’s work sat at the center among black writers.43 Hughes’s religious writings, however, show that he also belongs in the context of American religious liberalism, another crucial aspect of the larger modernist phenomenon. Much of Hughes’s religious poetry and social commentary further elucidates his religious thought, exemplifies his theologically modernist impulses and is, at heart, an illustration of his religious liberalism.

By the time Hughes began publishing in the early 1920s, religious liberalism had been, since the late nineteenth century, a crucial part of the complex tapestry of American religion, finding institutional and non-institutional expression in such interconnected movements as the Social Gospel, New Thought, freethinkers, transcendentalism, and humanism. Many mainstream denominations, from Baptists to Unitarian Univer-
salists had also appropriated it and were putting into practice this new approach to religion that was largely but not exclusively Christian and theistic. Although it had become impossibly diverse and varied among this vast array of religious groups, some common elements of religious modernism from a theological standpoint included a rejection of the Protestant status quo, Christian “myths,” irrationality, and dogmatism. Modernists also lauded “higher criticism” and interrogated the basic doctrines of the Christian faith and the Bible, seeing the latter as a literary source rather than a source of divine revelation. Accordingly, they redirected religious institutional priorities from the ethereal to the material, developing a decidedly social focus in American churches, with enormous political and social implications. Hughes closely identified with this aspect of religious liberalism, and it had a tremendous influence on his own politics, which sought to champion the cause of workers and those lowest down and to strive for racial equality and social justice. In this regard, it is impossible to fully understand such poems as “Let America Be America Again” without some attention to Hughes’s embrace of religious liberalism. Written in 1935 at the height of the Great Depression, the poem expresses the unnamed speaker’s enduring hope in the elusive “American Dream” despite a list of unfulfilled promises. It speaks of a far-reaching democracy that includes all—black, white, and immigrant—and of freedom and equality as social realities, not mere ideals of the nation.

The land that never has been yet—
And yet must be—the land where every man is free.
The land that’s mine—the poor man’s, Indian’s, Negroes, ME—
Who made America,
Whose sweat and blood, whose faith and pain,
Whose hand at the foundry, whose plow in the rain,
Must bring back our mighty dream again.

The far-reaching, all-inclusive world where everyone is a free and equal participant in democracy is as much a social vision reflective of religious liberalism as it is an American principle of government. Indeed, it succeeds as a liberal religious vision where it fails as an American political principle.
Placing Hughes and his religious writing within the context of the “modernist currents” of American religious liberalism makes several historical and historiographical interventions. It casts Hughes as an important participant in the complex flowering of religious movements and trends that were greatly shaping the entirety of American life during the twentieth century. The religious perspectives of Hughes and other New Negro artists and writers, including their critiques, doubts, disillusionment, and frustration, are revealed to be a crucial part of the narrative of American religion. It also underscores the vibrant presence of African American religious liberals during the overlapping eras of the Harlem Renaissance and the Great Migration in religious cultures that had become dominated by theologically conservative voices. An examination of Hughes’s writing on religion links him ideologically with other twentieth-century black religious liberals, including Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Benjamin E. Mays, and Mary McLeod Bethune, for example. Because of their “complex” and “unorthodox” religious views, Barbara Savage identifies Mays and Bethune as part of a “Southern black religious liberalism.” Bethune, in particular, was stalwartly cosmopolitan, Universalist, anticreedal, and adopted “her own theological reinterpretation of Christianity.”

Hughes and these other African American exponents of religious liberalism have not been viewed as religious liberals in the general historical narrative of the movement, nor have they been seen as central to this history. In most cases, they have been absent altogether. But Hughes and other black artists, writers, and intellectuals similarly embraced religious liberalism and did so as a way of life and thinking, riding its currents of cultural sensitivity, artistic expression, ecumenism, cosmopolitanism, and universal secularity. As Leigh Schmidt argues, twentieth-century American religious liberalism, in addition to its reformist commitments, progressive theologies, and its advocacy of the Social Gospel, was “also a set of cultural exchanges—with art, with cosmopolitanism, and with secularism.” It restructured the whole of American life and culture, or what Richard Wightman Fox calls “the broad patterns of living, feeling, and thinking” among the many who had clutched the currents of religious modernism.

Ultimately, an analysis of religion in the writing of Langston Hughes disrupts fixed categories of black religiosity and presents new and alternative sources of religious authority. Prompted by the basic features of American religious liberalism, interplayed with the religion of his
youth, Hughes’s lifelong search for the meaning of “salvation” revealed a notion of black religion as a project of social, cultural, and theological construction, ever evolving, transfigured, and transformed. Over the course of his career, Hughes created a body of writing that sensitively reflected the cultural and spiritual dimensions of his conservative religious background, infusing it with elements of theological modernism. In doing so, he expanded the range of who can speak religiously and what constitutes African American religion. Religion as a category of analysis in Hughes’s writing also lessens the force of fundamentalist modes of African American religiosity that have often policed, overshadowed, or rejected other forms of religiousness. And this, too, is both a problem of history and historiography. African American religious history has primarily been written in a triumphalist mode from the perspective of “belief,” and Christian belief in particular. Stories of survival against impossible odds, of perseverance, and of God “making a way out of no way,” sit at the center of that history, composing its core. The extraordinary importance of evangelical Christianity and black Protestant churches to African American history and culture in large part accounts for this. Historians of African American religion such as Albert J. Raboteau have eloquently discussed how “the gods of Africa gave way to the God of Christianity,” and evangelical Christianity became the prevailing religion of enslaved peoples during the early part of the nineteenth century, embraced for its emancipatory effect on black bodies and psyches.48 “The Negro Church,” before and after slavery, became an expression of black freedom, the birthplace of African American culture, a cohesive force, and in many ways a significant bell ringer for social justice and civil rights. In his epic 1903 book of essays, The Souls of Black Folk, DuBois championed the “Negro Church” as the “social center” of black life, prompting sociologist E. Franklin Frazier to assert in the 1960s that Christianity and the “Negro Church” had provided a “new basis for social cohesion” in postslavery America. Announcing the “death” of Frazier’s conception of the “Negro Church” for the emergence of the “Black Church” in 1970, C. Eric Lincoln affirmed that this more “radical” institution was “the spiritual face of the Black community.” For all these reasons, African American culture has for the most part been viewed as a Christian culture, and this has been a significant basis for the false assumption that black people are “naturally religious.”49
As important as the narratives and perspectives of Christian believers are, as well as the scholarly contributions of those who have chronicled their experiences, African American religious history is much broader than these primarily Protestant and biblically based tales of trial, tribulation, exodus, and deliverance. What has been lost to the historiography of black religion are the voices of the nonreligious, quasi-religious, differently religious, doubtful, disillusioned, and unsure. Their philosophical convictions, spiritual insights, critical perspectives, and historical contributions have been circumscribed, co-opted, or ignored. An entire generation of scholarship on African American religious history has suggested that nonbelievers and religious dissenters have had no say in the construction of black religious culture when, in fact, doubt and dissent, as much as faith, have always played an important role in the formation of religious traditions. Indeed, what Langston Hughes shows us is that “belief” is a process, not an accomplishment. One does not need to be religious in order to have certain religious practices. Being religious is not a profession. Struggle, conflict, paradox, and doubt have played key roles in American and African American religious formation. As social historian of religion David Hempton argues, “disenchantment is almost inevitably a part of any religious tradition, Christian or otherwise, as noble ideals of sacrifice, zeal, and commitment meet the everyday realities of complexity, frustration, and disappointment.”

By troubling and complicating the standard narratives and by decentering Protestant Christian paradigms, the religious writing of Langston Hughes and many other New Negro writers constitutes an important starting point for a new direction in the study of African American religious history. Hughes and his fellow thinkers about religion, in voices of unbelief, qualified belief, critique, complaint, and dissent, chronicle a fuller account of twentieth century African American religion and broaden the characterization of American and African American religion. Greater attention to their thoughts about God, faith, spirituality, the institution of the church, and the role of religion in society will not only transform how we write this history but also will broaden our source base, expanding what constitutes viable material for the study of religious history. A consideration of Langston Hughes, therefore, signals a more inclusive religious history and a greatly diversified historiography. His religious writing moves us beyond the dominance of
standard Christian historical narratives and beyond the superordination of narratives of confession and belief, revealing new religious cultural codes, values, signifiers, and paradigms that include survival, perseverance, exodus, and deliverance, but also uncertainty, mystery, critique, secularity, and universalism. What failed to happen on a Kansas night in 1914 played a vital part in shaping the artistic production of Langston Hughes and in making him one of the most significant writers in twentieth-century American arts and letters. It should now take its place as a moment central to a redirection in the history and historiography of American and African American religious history.

* * *

This book is arranged chronologically, but since narrating a life’s work can never be done in an exact, linear fashion, each of the five chapters looks backward and forward in time even as they attempt to capture particular time periods in Hughes’s life. The book covers the religious works written over the span of Hughes’s career, beginning with his early poems during the overlapping periods of World War I, the Harlem Renaissance, the Great Migration, the Great Depression, and World War II, and it ends with his gospel song-plays of the 1960s. Chapter 1, “New Territory for New Negroes,” depicts Hughes as the quintessential New Negro of the 1920s and the key figure among other Harlem Renaissance writers who wrote on religious themes. His range, versatility, and prolificacy made him the chief exemplar among this group, but Hughes was by no means the only New Negro writer of religious poetry. This chapter develops Harlem as both the real and the imagined space and context for Hughes’s religious writing and New York generally as the seedbed of his religious liberalism. It is a religious history of Harlem for the early decades of the twentieth century and sees it as a city of religion and churches. It demonstrates the particular ways Hughes both carefully navigated and forthrightly engaged this culture, participating with various churches and religious movements and writing extensive commentary on religion reflecting that engagement with the religious world of Harlem, as well as the wider world of American religion.

Chapter 2, “Poems of a Religious Nature,” continues the exploration of Hughes, as poet, by looking specifically at the large amount of poetry he devoted to religious themes. The chapter shows that Hughes wrote
various types of religious poetry over the course of his lifetime, revealing religion as a pervasive theme from the 1920s to the 1960s. Hughes collaborated with two French literary theorists, Jean Wagner and François Dodat, to bolster this aspect of his portfolio, producing two original documents meant to highlight not only his religious poetry but also his thinking about what constituted religious poetry. Ironically, however, the conclusions Wagner and Dodat drew about Hughes's religious poetry are responsible, in part, for his enduring reputation as antireligious.

Chapter 3, “Concerning ‘Goodbye Christ,’” is the story of one poem, which Hughes wrote in 1932. “Goodbye Christ” is one of the most important and consequential poems he ever wrote and one of the most polarizing, having a profound effect on his career as a writer. “Goodbye Christ” best represents Hughes’s “racialized religious poetry” among the others he wrote during the 1930s. It is the poem most responsible for depictions of his anti-religiosity, as his exchange with Jean Wagner demonstrates. And the poem did signify a time when Hughes was honing his left-leaning political sympathies and activities and expressing most forthrightly his disillusionment with religion and the American church in particular. The poem became a flashpoint in various circles throughout the 1930s and, for the remainder of his life, the basis for opposition to Hughes by conservative Christians and nationalist ideologues. The chapter shows, however, that “Goodbye Christ” rightfully belongs to the larger context of other “proletarian” works being produced by American writers in the Depression era. Moreover, the poem aligned Hughes with other black intellectuals, ministers, and social critics who publicly expressed radical critiques of American religion and churches during this time. They comprised a culture of complaint and critique about the very nature and function of black religion in the interwar period. Hughes disavowed “Goodbye Christ,” however, when he appeared before Joseph McCarthy and the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations (PSI) in 1953, characterizing himself as someone with vastly changed political views and different ideas about the social purpose of poetry.

Chapter 4, “My Gospel Year,” takes the story of Hughes’s religious writing into the late 1950s and early 1960s. By that time Hughes had turned, thematically, almost exclusively to the topic of religion, making them his “gospel years.” Although he was still producing work of
a “secular” nature, the majority of his creative energies were devoted to works with religion as the central concern. *Tambourines to Glory*, a book Hughes also produced as a play and finally as a poem, is the centerpiece of this chapter. In telling the story of Essie Belle Johnson and Laura Wright Reed, two Harlem friends who started a church to amass wealth, Hughes showcased, foremost, his ever-expanding interest in religious themes, expressions, and institutions. The book and play, however, were essentially a culmination of Hughes’s thinking about religion over the course of his lifetime, and every aspect of what he had come to appreciate in black religion and religious institutions, as well as what he had come to despise, found expression in *Tambourines to Glory*. Hughes consistently maintained that the story was about “racketeering in religion,” but it was effectively much more complex than that. In addition to underscoring how and why churches such as “Tambourine Temple” were able to exploit many black and poor people in Harlem, Hughes provided a sophisticated analysis of the very nature of “good” and “bad,” viewing them as complicated and constitutive parts of the other. *Tambourines to Glory* also put Hughes’s religious liberalism on display in a fictionalized, embodied way. Although he set the story in a Harlem storefront, resonant with all the allusions to “pre-modern” expressions of black worship and theology, Hughes anchored the narrative on some of the basic frameworks of American religious liberalism, including the Social Gospel.

Chapter 5, “Christmas in Black,” recounts the dramatic ordeal of bringing Hughes’s “gospel song-play,” *Black Nativity*, to life on Broadway in 1962. The last major production of his career, the play was also among his most lucrative and became an international phenomenon. Like *Tambourines to Glory* and other theatrical productions in this genre that Hughes wrote during the early to mid-1960s, *Black Nativity* emphatically signaled his turn almost exclusively to the topic of religion. More than this, however, the production expressed Hughes’s confidence that black religion and particularly black gospel music were the last and most viable exponents of “authentic” black culture. All others, including jazz and the blues, had been appropriated and co-opted by white Americans. *Black Nativity* indicated a gradual yet distinct change in Hughes’s views on the commercialization of black religion and gospel music and the theater as an appropriate venue for its display while it raised those same
questions for many theatergoers and social observers. As a religiously themed Broadway production, with an all-black cast for only the second time in American history, *Black Nativity* generated inevitable comparisons to Marc Connelly’s 1930 play, *The Green Pastures*. The two plays shared much in common in terms of their depictions of black religiosity and the controversy provoked by those depictions. Indeed, rather than a simple reenactment of the Nativity story with black actors, *Black Nativity* proved to be a complex feature in the complicated and polarized racial terrain of the 1960s. Many black theatergoers were not interested in dramatic productions that seemingly verified notions of innate black religiosity and otherness while white audiences in the United States and abroad were seemingly all too willing to do so. For all of the racial and class divisions it exposed, as well as the debates about the relationship between church and theater, however, *Black Nativity* was a worthy capstone to Hughes’s long and storied career because for the last time it placed religious spaces, themes, frameworks, and discourses at the very center of his artistic production.