# Faith and the Historian: Catholic Perspectives

## *Deeply Within: Catholicism, Faith and History*

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I'm not a churchgoer, but I realized, as time passed, that my music is filled with Catholic imagery. It's not a negative thing. There was a powerful world of potent imagery that became alive and vital and vibrant, and was both very frightening and held out the promise of ecstasies and paradise. There was this incredible internal landscape that they created in you. As I got older, I got less and less defensive about it. I thought, I've inherited this particular landscape and I can build it into something of my own.

—Bruce Springsteen, 2005

I find myself in Detroit, Michigan, on any one of many Sundays between 1998 and 2004. I get off the Lodge Freeway, take a right on West Grand, past Ford Hospital, past Hitsville, Motown's original home, and on past some badly run-down houses, to Linwood. A right on Linwood takes me past the Shrine of the Black Madonna, the still-operating site of the Reverend Albert Cleage's Black Christian Nationalist movement. Shortly beyond this church, Linwood becomes C. L. Franklin Boulevard, and I make a left into the parking lot, leave the car, and walk across the boulevard to New Bethel Baptist Church. It's about 10:30 A.M., and the congregation is gathering for the eleven o'clock service. This is Reverend Franklin's former church, the physical space he regularly transcended in the powerful sermons he preached here between 1946 and 1979, the church that made him one of the most influential preachers of his generation. It is also the space where two of his three children whom I met, daughters Erma and Aretha, immersed themselves in the Baptist tradition and established the foundations of their sense of self. New Bethel Baptist Church is ground zero for so much of modern American religious experience and popular culture, and I am writing a biography of Reverend Franklin. As I approach the wooden doors, a member of the congregation acknowledges me, welcomes me with a warm smile, and holds open the door.

But who am I as I enter? In part, of course, I am the social historian and biographer, and that is a role that feels comfortable at this stage in my career. But it has become very clear to me in past visits that I am here more than as the historian. I have shown myself enough in the church beyond the need to make contacts for interviews, and even given three talks from the pulpit on different occasions. No, some part of me I don't know (but is anything but foreign nonetheless) is asking my travel agent to book my return flights home in a way that usually enables me to attend services. Over time, other things have happened to me as well in that church, with that congregation. Gradually I stopped sitting in the visitor's section (although I am still occasionally placed there by the ushers) but rather sit among the worshippers. Then too I found myself voluntarily going forward with most of the congregation for a prayer service in the well of the sanctuary—two hundred or more people, whose joined hands form a bond the strength of which I marvel at, praying as Deacon Milton Hall chants an ancient spiritual in tones that still echo his Arkansas upbringing. But praying? I feel so self-conscious, stymied—how do you do this praying thing? And yet I sense a calmness as well, not quite of belonging, but more akin to

coming closer to an internal home. Later, during Altar Call, when Pastor Robert Smith seeks those who would accept Jesus Christ, two young junior deacons, one of whom I know, approach me. I respond with an informal, "Ahm, but you know who I am. I live in upstate New York." The man I know—his seriousness cuts right through: "You are in this church enough to be a member regardless of where you live. When will you make the jump?" Reading his seriousness, I dismiss the glib retorts that had leapt to mind. I think: "But I'm a Catholic." My vocal cords cannot pronounce those words. Instead, I startle myself as I blurt out, "Not yet."

What does this mean? I ask myself for the rest of the day heading home. I don't think I will become an Afro-Baptist (although it is already clear that the congregation would welcome me as they would any believer). I try, in another approach, to be the social scientist, consoling myself that there are library shelves full of anthropological and sociological literature that warn about "overidentification" by investigatorswith their subjects. True enough, but the "loss" of scholarly objectivity is far distant from the powerful feelings I experience. Over time I began to realize that what pulled me back to that church, well beyond the needs of the research itself, was the palpable, complex expression of faith that encased me in that building. These men and women helped me to name at least part of what was absent in my life. This was no mean feat, as the only thing more rigid than the faith of a recent convert is the persistent denial of that very possibility by one scarred by earlier engagements with other communities of faith. It was becoming clear to me that this book project was going to be very complicated indeed.

I was baptized into the Roman Catholic faith, shortly after my birth in November 1943, at St. Saviour's church in Brooklyn, New York. That parish influenced my early years in many ways. When my father died fourteen months after my birth, it was the parish that supported my mother and her three sons until my younger brother was old enough so that my mother could go to work. All three of us boys went to the parish parochial school, staffed by the Sisters of Notre Dame, through eighth grade. It was in this parish that I made the sacrament of First Communion and celebrated the rite of confirmation, and it was here too that I served as an altar boy for some five years. As I look back on that time now, I am struck by the absence of a recognizable spiritual dimension in so much of that experience. I remember repeated warnings from various nuns that the Russians were poisoning the drinking water,- the obsession with sin, especially of a sexual nature, even at an age when most of us had no idea what the attraction was; and the preoccupation with guilt in the dour Sunday sermons preached by generally uninspired men. I think now that the greatest tragedy lay in the fact that the authorities in both parish and school had the wisdom to ask the central question, Who is God? and the audacity to instruct that one had but to memorize the answer. In this atmosphere, I later came to see, this narrowed perception obscured even the possibility of an engagement with faith beyond belief.

Yet there were other influences too. As an altar boy I was touched by the liturgical cycle as prayed in the traditional Latin: the higher the Mass the more layered the ritual, as the sanctuary overflowed with priests, altar boys, candles, and incense. But even Low Mass had an affecting influence, as the near-daily participation in a ritual celebration of a power far beyond oneself almost transcended the imperative to reduce this mystery to a matter of memorization. That desire to be connected to such a ritual, and its uplifting possibility, would remain a part of my life even when I turned from Catholicism. In other ways as well these early years at St. Saviour's framed the person I would become. From church, school, and home came the repeated emphasis on the centrality of a moral law in human existence. One was not a free agent, bound solely by personal desire or, as I would later comprehend, social and political goals. Rather, in fulfilling one's commitment to God, one acknowledged a force beyond oneself and discovered, not insignificantly, a responsibility to other human beings as well. The God we worshipped at St. Saviour's was not a providential God as in the Afro-Baptist tradition, whose interventions in human affairs have as an ultimate goal the liberation of his chosen people in this world

as in the next. Yet the Catholicism of my childhood did allow for a sense of the shared worth of all human beings. As important as that was, it was also a somewhat quiescent belief in parish life during the 1950s. Too often, the absence of any other vision suggested, a believer fulfilled the responsibility to both God and man by staying on the correct side of the narrow morality those guilt-inducing sermons emphasized. In the process, a broader understanding of moral law contracted, and individual avoidance of sin became of primary concern. But I nonetheless had some inkling, however ill-formed, that faith might reach beyond those limits.

There was as well another quality that deeply touched me in those formative years, one that has remained surprisingly consistent even as my perspective has revolved around it thoroughly in the intervening years. What I understood of original sin as a child was indistinguishable from the sermonic hectoring that, at its worst, left me at a loss as how to justify any feeling of competence or self-worth. But, I would come to see, the concept of original sin—the inherent fallibility of all human endeavor, the humanness of the frailty that circumscribed thought and deed—remained essential to my being. Years later, when Leonard Cohen sang of being "Like a bird on the wire / like a drunk in a midnight choir / I have tried in my way to be free," I found a power in those melancholy lyrics that brought joy[1]. Cohen's secular voice with its deep spiritual vision encompassed human limitations, and I found in it an exultant relief from the arrogance of thinking that I, or indeed we, actually directed in toto this existence we inhabited. This understanding of my humanness, then, led me to a (re)embrace of the concept of original sin well before I first read Reinhold Niebuhr—and with a spirit so fundamentally different from my first encounter. This sensibility informed my historical writing from the very beginning and proved to be as well a critical bridge in the rediscovery of the spiritual in my life.

My years in parochial school left me with at least one other trait, a love of history. I won the history medal upon graduation, and I still remember the excitement when I realized that "New York" meant there was an "Old York," and that there was some connection between the two. Although more contemporary events than historical at the time, the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 fueled this interest further. The fate of Josef Cardinal Mindszenty was uppermost in the minds of the parish religious leaders, but I was also intrigued by how one group (i.e., the Communists) took over a nation such as Hungary. Partly fueled by the wild speculation about Communist subversion of America in this decade of McCarthyism, I had stumbled on possible links between two seemingly disparate entities. A very early, rough appreciation of historical causality even then appeared on my horizon, although I would never have had the words to express it at that time.

The four years at Brooklyn Prep High School (1957-61) were quite a different experience from grammar school. The Jesuits were demanding teachers who, within careful limits, tested our minds and emerging belief systems. A history teacher in sophomore year offered another intriguing linkage: How, he asked, could nineteenth-century philosophical liberals become twentieth-century philosophical conservatives? That kept me engaged even through the last two years of high school history taught by the football coach, where I learned more about 4-3 defenses than I did about anything else. It was also in high school that I became sharply conscious of class issues. As a financial aid student (the $300 yearly tuition in 1957 was beyond my mother's staunchest effort), I met others my age with money for the first time in a sustained way, and at an age when it counted. Not surprisingly, I deeply wanted to belong (wearing daily, for a year, as my obligatory jacket a classmate's hand-me-down passed on through the parish can have that effect); yet I always felt a beat off. But "the Prep," as we all called it as if there were no other, had its strongest immediate impact on the development of my religious beliefs.

While I cannot now remember any religious class that made an impression, something must have happened in those classes during those years, for I know that my understanding of faith grew enormously by the time I graduated in 1961. In part, to be sure, this is not an unusual adolescent experience, and it was intimately interconnected with an emerging sexuality and the need for self-definition. Indeed, the Jesuits encouraged us to attend weekend retreats (two days of meditation,

prayer, and spiritual talks) in the last years of high school at least as much to inculcate a stern sexual morality as to further a deeper sense of faith. The Jesuits also could taper the meaning of faith to fit a narrowed morality. But in addition to all of that, something else also happened to me. I found myself grappling with the question of God; specifically, whether I could have direct contact with him and what the nature of that would be. Although I did not understand it at the time, this was my first sustained engagement with the possibility of faith beyond a set of memorized beliefs. I struggled with these questions, talked with Jesuits at school about them, and never felt satisfied that I had approached the underlying meaning I sensed. In part this is not surprising, given the depth of the issue I was raising. But I also felt, I recall now, that I lacked both the conception and the inner language necessary to pursue these disturbances in my soul. In 1964 (when I was in a very different place), I wrote to my uncle, a Jesuit missionary in the Caroline-Marshall Islands in the Pacific, and told him, essentially, that I had lost any "personal contact with God" during my senior year retreat. He doubted that, and indeed he was right, for I continued to struggle with the possibility that I might have a relationship with God. My sense of faith was then dominated by an easily grasped set of beliefs, and I could not see beyond the barrier those beliefs created. Yet the strong urge, however inchoate at the moment, to continue this journey intensified and I applied and was accepted into the Society of Jesus, the Jesuit order, in July 1961.

The two-page personal statement I wrote in January 1961 as part of my application to enter the Jesuit order vividly reflected my understandings at that time. (My mother, in her wisdom, kept a copy and I found it among her papers following her death.) I began, perhaps oddly for the occasion, with my father's death when I was fourteen months old. This I termed the day my life began but, rather than exploring the psychological dimensions of that experience (the search for definition in an order of religious men had deep roots in my familial and religious history), I immediately tied it to my family's economic life. Work had been a necessity from grammar school on—delivering packages at supermarkets, delivering newspapers after school, doing odd jobs for neighbors, and the like. But along with the need for work and for the money it provided within a family context, I wrote, work also "educated me. It taught me the ways of people." My seventeen-year-old self then continued: "You may ask—how does this facet of my life enter into my decision to become a Jesuit? Well, I delivered papers for two years, at a very impressionable age, to very poor people in horrible neighborhoods. It just seemed to me that no one was trying to help these people, and I thought that something should be done, although at the time I didn't know what."

The tone of this paragraph amuses me now. How American is it for the product of a rather poor working family such as mine to look with an assumed superiority at others who were, in fact, so much like oneself? But it was also evident that, even at this early age, my understanding of faith had a strong social component—this was, after all, an application for the priesthood. I then suggested that a priest, by addressing the troubled spiritual dimensions of people's lives, might indeed alleviate the pain. I sensed, and remember saying to a friend at about the same time, that the priest might be a bridge between the worlds of the church and social problems. But I remained innocently unaware then of the degrees of complexity at the center of that commingling.

I did attempt to recognize the dimension of faith beyond simple belief, in however limited a fashion. Contact with the Jesuits at my high school, I explained, had "offered me a chance to find God—not merely through memorizing catechism questions—but finding Him through extra spiritual activities." I noted the availability of the sacraments and the counseling by the Jesuits as a particularly valuable aspect of my school experience. And that was it. A few more concluding words—and I was done. Part of me laughs now and wonders what the Jesuits saw in this statement that possessed them to accept me. The very essence of my search for God, that near arithmetical search through "extra spiritual activities," left but little room for a faith within. That I was engaged in some kind of searching, I can now see,- but as I had no inner sensibility (or confidence I should have one) to recognize it, I knew but a far narrower understanding. But I also recognize both the prominence and the relative length of my discussion of

social issues as a catalyst for, and a projected sustaining element of, my vocation. This concern with life around me, and the instinctive effort to span the distance between that world and "knowing God," reflected the core meaning of my youthful Catholic yearning. The explicit duality of that formulation as I experienced it, drilled into me as it was throughout my school years, ill-prepared me as a Catholic for the decade to come, one that would be dominated by the transformations that accompanied Vatican II. Indeed, by the time these stirrings reach my awareness, I had long rejected Catholicism. I experienced Vatican II through my rearview mirror. Yet, oddly, as I changed over time, the desire to span that distance, understood now in a different manner, to be sure, remained a central concern of my work as a historian.

The year I spent at St. Andrew's-on-Hudson, the magnificent 700-acre Jesuit novitiate along the Hudson River just outside Poughkeepsie, New York (now the site of the Culinary Institute of America), proved to be a foundational year in my life. I entered in July 1961 relatively innocent of the person I was, and left a year later sharply self-conscious of exactly how complex a journey I was on. The vehicles of this developmental transformation were multiple: daily meditation early in the morning, followed by Mass, and self-reflection during the long periods of silence during the day. But the central experience was making the "Long Retreat," the thirty days of silence and meditation under the direction of a spiritual advisor that was first devised by St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order. Formally known as the Spiritual Exercises, the intensity of this experience transformed me in the years that followed in complex and often contradictory ways. At the time, however, I had other feelings.

During that long October of 1961, I never found a way to meditate that brought me closer to a sense of the Divine. Meditations for me became these painful interior monologues that inevitably circled back on myself no matter where I started. I felt profoundly inadequate. I found myself unable to envision a God beyond the rigid structure of beliefs I had absorbed as a youth. God was this external umpire, an arbiter of rules with whom only truly sainted people might relate. In a sense, I waited for an apparition during the Long Retreat, a condition guaranteed to produce the inadequacy I experienced. My earlier training had presented the idea of "knowing God" in such a removed manner, uninvolved in my life but for the role as the omnipresent "judge" in this ongoing neo-Jansenist trial, that I had little sense of where my *"I"* became relevant. (The reduction of the central mystery of faith to so mundane a concept that it could be memorized was critical here.) Not surprisingly, I sensed even during that month that my call to the priesthood was not viable; however, I lacked the confidence to act on it. I am glad that the Master of Novices did not intervene and counsel me to leave the seminary. It would take another eight months to decide on my own, but that time of decision proved to be of central importance for my future.

As I have come to understand this experience over the intervening years, I see two different aspects to it. The first looks backward, toward the religious training in my youth, and realizes now how ill-prepared both by experience and training I was for the seminary. At seventeen and a half years old, I had at best a rudimentary sense of self, and the narrowed understanding of the moral and spiritual aspects of my life left me with few resources. There was no place I could identify within my Catholic experience that transcended the circumscribed dimensions of the avid catechist. As that power diminished, so did my identification with Catholic practice that was so intimately intertwined with it. Others (some fellow seminarians, individuals such as Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Daniel Berrigan, and others whom I would read later) felt differently, and at times in the years to come I envied them. But that was not my experience.

The other impact of the seminary experience was quite different. The central power of the Spiritual Exercises for me was the discovery of self. The ensuing eight months of self-examination that focused on the viability of my vocation was, in secular terms, a growing into a consciousness of self that formed the basis of my adult life. I had to decide how I would live that life,-1 began to question the meaning of the inadequacy I had so sharply felt; and in the process I became more conscious of that

responsibility to self than ever before. It may be ironic that in the process I left the seminary and, ultimately, Catholicism. But there is even a greater irony as well: I struggled with that decision in those eight months as in the years that immediately followed from within a recognizable Catholic framework. My concern was with the relationship of this emerging self to my responsibility to God, and if over time that sense of God became less identifiable than the God of my Catholic youth, I remained profoundly influenced by moral and religious sensibilities forged deeply within the Catholic experience. Michael Harrington was by no means the only one raised in the Catholic tradition who could say, more than three decades after leaving the Church, that he remained culturally and, in a certain way, intellectually as well, a Catholic nonetheless. Perhaps the greatest irony of all is that this search, experienced through political activity as through my work as a historian, would bring me, not to Catholicism, but to a sense of the power of faith beyond belief in my life.

In this sense, the struggle to discover myself, to better understand me in my place in the world as found, and to consciously begin that lifelong process of defining the parameters of spiritual and moral life, proved to be the most important meaning I took from the Long Retreat. I say this now not with any intent to be sacrilegious toward that Catholic experience but rather with the realization that this would be, in fact, my path toward an understanding of the spiritual dimension in my life. Not surprisingly, given the tone of my application to the Jesuits, a concern with social and political affairs would be prominent.

I returned from St. Andrew's in the summer of 1962 more pained than ever before at the abyss that lay so enormously between my emerging awareness and the possibility of faith in my life. This tension continued over the following two years as I moved in and out of college (a classics major at Fordham University, into which the Jesuits got me immediately upon leaving the seminary), worked the night shift as a messenger at a printing firm in Manhattan, and then, in the fall of 1963, became a full-time worker at the Railway Express Company and a member of Local 808 of the Teamsters union. Simultaneously, I became active in the civil rights movement, participating in a sit-in at New York's City Hall and at a construction site in Brooklyn, where I was arrested for the first time—both actions protesting the systematic exclusion of black and Hispanic working people from the building trades. That by 1964 I resolved my inner tension by declaring faith, or at least the Catholic faith I knew, irrelevant is not, in retrospect, surprising. As my political activity continued (and fueled for the first time in me an avaricious hunger to read everything), I worked on citywide school boycotts, helped staff a summer leadership camp for young activists from Harlem, and became involved in the anti-Vietnam War movement. Faith seemed to me ever more distant from my concerns. Harshly I dismissed it, quick to point out the hypocrisy I perceived in attitudes and actions by Catholics leaders, and all the while remained consciously oblivious to the profound religious grounding that in fact motivated so many civil rights activists in New York as across the nation. At this point, a different faith dominated, a faith marked by Marxist shibboleths (Marx's writings, beyond *The Communist Manifesto,* lay largely unread) and an insistence that revolutionary transformation was essential if the nation was to survive into the next decade. I can now see that, understood as an expression of faith, my more secular, political formulations shared much with the narrowness that in my youth mistook arid beliefs for faith. To have suggested that much in 1966, however, would have evoked from me only dismissive scorn.

In a manner that was terribly unclear for a long time, my path toward the realm of faith would partially unfold through an intellectual process. My particular experience with Catholicism all but demanded it. The God of my imagination elicited belief, and in time disbelief as well, but the idea that faith rather than belief was at the core of spiritual life was then foreign to me. This recitation of memorized tenets was also a poor substitute for serious intellectual engagement. Conflating as I did then belief and faith, I dismissed both in one swipe (or so I thought) and sought to feed an intellectual hunger that then had no name. This eventually brought me back to complete my undergraduate degree

at Hunter College in the Bronx and, in the fall of 1968, to the graduate program in American history at the University of California at Berkeley. Political and social life were my concerns, and I thought that I had left behind on the East Coast any troubling questions of faith.

Berkeley was then an enormously exciting place, full of intellectual ferment, political activity, and, in cycles, a fierce engagement with the world. For all its excesses, it was a wonderful atmosphere in which to grow. Before I had left New York I had already begun to question the simplistic analysis that framed my political activity, and that process continued in Berkeley. The quick dismissal of patriotism among both black and white working people that was so prevalent in the antiwar movement caused me to rethink my own experiences: How viable was a politics that separated me, seemingly permanently, from the men and women I grew up with? The point, I came to see, was not to support the war but rather to resist the caricature of these complex lives caused by a blind political belief. Indeed, my favorite quip during these years was to the effect that, having "won" my mind from Catholicism, I damn sure wasn't giving it over to some pseudo-Marxist idiocy!

In this way, then, to study history was to create a space to explore issues fundamental to my world through the experience of others. I did not envision this space as apolitical, but neither did I see it as being driven by immediate political concerns. That type of history, one that would use the past to directly influence the present, I rejected as puerile even in graduate school—a stance that ensured many a heated discussion in seminar or over coffee in the graduate lounge. History's "lessons," I was beginning to understand, were really more complicated, and to reduce humans to categorical groups whose motivations and interests could be neatly determined was profoundly dangerous. It was in this mood, then, in 1969 or 1970, that I decided to do my outside field for the degree with Robert N. Bellah in the sociology of religion.

I remember my explicit motivation clearly. In part, I knew from experience that religion was an important part of many people's lives and its near exclusion in the social history I was reading was disturbing. But the major catalyst at the time for my approaching Bob Bellah (whose career and reputation I was blissfully unaware of at first!) was in fact far more personal. It was coming on a decade since I had entered the novitiate and I thought it was time to resolve my relationship with Catholicism. I had not, it turned out, left these questions behind. As motivation for graduate work, the intensely personal clearly outweighed at that moment the emerging scholarly interest. As I started this journey, I recall feeling an almost detached curiosity about where it might take me and a certain relief that I was approaching an issue that I had finally acknowledged was important to my life. I did not envision a return to Catholicism, nor did I particularly desire that. Rather, I knew that the blanket dismissal of my Catholic experience harmed me in at least two ways: It detached me from the potentially rich emotional and cultural seedbed that formed me; as long as that blockade existed within me, I separated myself from continuing my own understanding of faith. For the reality was, I finally acknowledged, that I had not been able to dismiss this issue of faith as I had once blithely imagined. From the vantage point of three decades later, another theme strikes me as well: I simply assumed that through my intellect I could address, if not resolve, questions of faith. Unwittingly, I began to explore a theme that would play a major role in my future personal and professional life.

My work with Bob Bellah was wonderful, opening up as it did new vistas to explore. In readings with Bellah and in talks with other faculty and graduate students interested in "things religious," I was able to lift the giant weight I had carried for nearly a decade: I no longer had to hide my Catholic past, and my failure with it, in a rush of political/historical intellectualizing. I was beginning to understand that faith, as opposed to the narrowed belief system experienced in youth, came in a grand variety of ways to human beings precisely because as humans we are indeed spiritual animals. Not insignificantly, I felt the joy of bridging, however hesitantly at first, the chasm I had perceived between intellectual and spiritual concerns. Importantly, more than a decade after my first efforts, I returned with very different eyes to the vision I had tried to articulate in my application to the seminary, where in the fullness of my

seventeen-plus years I had lurched toward the possible interplay between religious faith and social life. It was during these years in Berkeley that I first read Dorothy Day, Daniel Berrigan, Thomas Merton, Dietrich Bonhoeff er, and other socially conscious people of faith. In short, I began anew thinking about faith, with one central difference from the past. I began to see more thoroughly than in 1961 that religious faith not only lived within an individual but lived within the individual in the community one inhabited as well. The *"I"* who passively waited for the unimaginable God to reveal himself now claimed a place in both the worlds of faith and of human concerns, and reveled in their commingling. Recognizing spiritual strivings in this fashion went far to free me from the dualities that had so dominated my earlier experiences. As Bellah frequently noted of a far broader process than just my own, it was, in a way, the Protestantization of American Catholicism.

Ironically, despite the very real epiphany I experienced, I still conceived of these intellectual and spiritual dimensions as largely separate. Or so I thought, at least. Through a certain process of trial and error, I entered into a dissertation, a biography of the American socialist leader Eugene Victor Debs, consciously conceiving the project primarily as the intellectual/political "compartment" of my newly expanded sense of self. This was important to me, of course, as I sought to explore in all its strengths and weaknesses the meaning of an American dissenting tradition through a biographical study of one of the nation's preeminent dissenters. But almost against my will the issue of faith interjected itself. Early in my dissertation research, I presented a paper to a discussion group at Berkeley's Graduate School of Theology on Debs and American religion,- at roughly the same time, I remember talking with a member of the history faculty about understanding Debs's life from within the concentric circles of Christian suffering and redemption. Both approaches were heavy-handed, but they announced loudly and clearly, even if I did not always hear, a deeper theme that would not go away. I remained fascinated, for example, by the heavily evangelical socialists of the American Southwest whose revival-style organizing proved influential for a moment before World War I.

The very issue of faith, I can now see, attracted me to Debs in the first place. He was a vehicle for me to explore that dissenting tradition, to gain perspective on my personal and generational experience with dissent as well, and perhaps contribute to a rethinking of the old dictum that history is nothing more than past politics updated. But, in the language of the distinctions I was now sensitive to, Debs was a man of faith rather than of narrow belief. He rejected both the triumphal understandings of American life embraced by those in power and the narrow, materialistbase class proclamations of the Marxist minority. Rather, Debs grasped the promise of American life in a fashion that would have made both Horatio Alger and Communist leader William Z. Foster blanch. Debs's faith lay grounded in the possibility of American democracy, in the potential that resided in the heart of the national experiment if only the people would grasp it. Romantic at times, to be sure, yet the Debs who thrilled and inspired me was the one who repeatedly told audiences that "I do not want you to follow me or anyone else,- if you are looking for a Moses to lead you out of this capitalist wilderness, you will stay right where you are. I would not lead you into the promised land if I could, because if I could lead you in, some one else would lead you out. *You must use your heads as well as your hands,* and get yourself out of your present condition." Here was the fundamental Debs, the socialist leader who understood the centrality of the individual in the crowd before him, who recognized the bonds between that individual and the larger collectivity, and who preached the need for that individual's soul to soar beyond the limitations triumphalists of any belief might impose. He was a man of faith who persisted against great odds while bearing serious personal faults that also affected his public role. It was this Debs, moreover, who chose the one picture that adorned his cell at Atlanta Federal Penitentiary during his last incarceration after World War I: the contorted visage, crowned with thorns, of the crucified Christ[2].

In the decade I spent living with Gene Debs, I thought much about faith's relation to intellect, especially in the political realm. It was not just that a socialist in capitalist America needed faith but rather that Debs's very vision of America's promise was itself a profound act of faith. But with the

exception of the last chapter, which I titled, "A Species of Purging," following a phrase in one of Debs's prison letters, overt discussion of any religious sensibility was largely sotto voce, echoes of a private dialogue with myself. Pleased as I was with the book when finished, I also knew I needed to return to this issue of religion. For I had done enough reading by 1982 to realize that no serious history of American people could be written that did not take into account the religious sensibilities of the individual or group under discussion. But rather than engage that idea directly, I promptly ran from it, polishing in the process a series of feints and spins as I worked out how I might continue as both a biographer and a social historian. Despite this complicated avoidance strategy, I would soon discover that my next biographical companion would insist that I explore anew this issue of faith[3].

Amos Webber was many things—a black man born free in Pennsylvania in 1826; a janitor and messenger; a Civil War veteran; a husband and father; and a community activist in both Philadelphia and Worcester, Massachusetts, whose political and social activities helped to provide structure and direction for other black Americans. But above all he was a chronicler, a man whose faith in the meaning of his own experience propelled him to maintain a chronicle for exactly half a century before his death in 1904. As I got to know Amos Webber, that fact alone stunned me. But over the course of researching and writing the book, the power of Webber's faith in two additional ways equally impressed me. His commitment to democracy, to the possible that might yet supplant the actual, was as profound an act of faith as any I have ever encountered. Sharply aware of lived social reality, Webber devoted much of his life to building and strengthening institutions and organizations within black America that both gave expression to black creativity and culture and simultaneously insisted on the right for full inclusion as American citizens. As I wrote in the book's epilogue: "Belittled as a porter, a janitor, and a messenger in the eyes of so many whites, he was in fact a man who could make an act of faith in the future and work intensely for its fulfillment."[4]

As I grew more sensitive to the currents in Webber's life, I became intrigued with the sources within him that allowed for that public expression of both faith and hope. Prior to his war experience, Webber regularly attended black churches in Philadelphia and Worcester. Indeed, Webber begins his chronicle in 1854 with a discussion of a religious revival in Philadelphia, and throughout commented on religious matters. But church records also suggest that he was active in a variety of church affairs, including as an organist. His fraternal associations only reinforced this religious-based foundation. Both the Grand United Order of Odd Fellows and the Prince Hall Masons, created in the face of segregated policies by white cofraternalists, were deeply embedded in the black religious experience. But in the almost four decades following his mustering out of the service in 1865, his political, fraternal, and social activities remained as before, but he never mentioned his own involvement with a church. Further, when he did discuss revivals and other religious matters in these postwar decades, he almost always stressed how the intensity of the faith expressed had in fact declined since the prewar years. This may be simply the reactions of an aging, not-so-graceful curmudgeon but, although there is no evidence, I began to think otherwise. The war had done something to Amos Webber's faith; it altered it, or at least its expression, in subtle but critical ways. Perhaps, in the face of the carnage that was the Peninsula campaign of 1864 in Virginia, he questioned the very existence of God. Perhaps it was another experience, or even the totality of his wartime service. What impressed me was the evocation of his prior faith in his criticism of postwar religious expression, coupled with his continued affirmation of faith in his political, cultural, and indeed spiritual involvements across the latter part of the nineteenth century. Webber remained too guarded a chronicler to allow me to grasp its sources, but his ability to reach beyond experience to faith deeply touched me.

As I finished *We All Got History* in the spring of 1995, I sensed that the issues I had approached in that book still left many coiled strings yet to unravel. But in contrast to the period following *Citizen and Socialist,*

I did not run from them, although I had no idea precisely where they might take me. I knew I wanted to write about race again: I had gone to Berkeley to study with Leon Litwack precisely because I saw racial issues as the central prism through which to gauge the meaning of American democracy. (Debs, in this sense, was an excursion away from my original intent.) I also knew that I was particularly interested in examining religious commitments, and their relationship to political life and the development of social consciousness, more directly than ever before,- I was already listening to tapes of some C. L. Franklin sermons. My original instinct was to complicate this by writing a multiple biography of three working pastors in Detroit, what my editor at Little, Brown, Geoff Shandler, referred to as my "Detroit Trilogy": Reinhold Niebuhr, pastor of a Lutheran church in the 1920s; Father Charles Coughlin, nationally known anti-Semitic Catholic pastor of the Shrine of the Little Flower; and Franklin. The more I read, and the more I listened to his sermons, the more Franklin occupied my consciousness. Despite the generational, cultural, and occupational differences that exist between us, I came to see that his understanding of faith's relation to social life unwittingly addressed my own awkward formulations nearly four decades earlier. That Franklin embraced his faith seriously, even as he moved into the world with it, was important to me; even more, however, was the nature of that faith as I began to understand it. As was generally true throughout the Afro-Baptist community, Franklin's God was transcendent, yet dwelled within the world as found; was immanent as well; and promised a salvation to his people that was simultaneously personal and collective, in this world as in the next. The gap between that God and the believer's "I," so broad in my own experience of Catholicism, all but disappeared in Franklin's sermons without, paradoxically, ever equating the two. Franklin's faith, as I continue to understand it, impresses with its depth and complexity (he never felt compelled to reject his intellect), but most of all with its *availability.* Mystery abounds, but faith and hope ground the individual in their God's promise of deliverance within as without. An emphasis on the tenets of belief pales before the power of this immanence in people's lives[5].

In ways that I never could have predicted, my understanding of faith in my own life has deepened in the years since I began this book. To a large extent, the congregation at New Bethel has played an important part in this, as I noted at the beginning of this essay. But I have also done more than sixty interviews with people throughout the country and the issue of faith has usually been an important component of their relationship to C. L. Franklin. This too has propelled me further on my own journey. In Memphis, for example, in 1999,1 listened while the Reverend Benjamin L. Hooks, the Baptist minister who led the NAACP during the 1970s, explained how his liberal politics and his fundamentalist profession of faith were anything but contradictory despite the prominence of the contemporary Christian right; and he shared his understanding of similar processes in his friend and fellow Detroit minister, C. L. Franklin. Some days later in the Mississippi Delta, in a small, primly neat house, an eighty-three-year-old Mrs. Cleo Myles talked of her knowledge of Franklin and so much more. She shared the same baptismal class with her more famous friend, and they were baptized together with other youths in the Sunflower River on the last Sunday of August 1929. As important as her discussion of Franklin was for me the biographer, her expression of the centrality of her faith—she has remained in the same church in Cleveland, Mississippi, since 1929—struck me personally as well as professionally. Throughout this journey of research that was, in reality, so much more, my engagement with people such as Mrs. Myles or Deacon Milton Hall drawing out the palpable faith of the New Bethel congregants, Sister Rosetta Tharpe's words called out to me more times than I can remember:

> There's something within me
> More than I can explain.
> All I can say, Praise God
> There's something within[6].

One Sunday in September 2003 I entered the pulpit in Cornell's Sage Chapel to give the homily. I had done this before, at Sage and at New Bethel, but for the first time I moved beyond the protective covering of a straight historical account. In a presentation I entitled "Son of Man," I followed Franklin's famous sermon, "Dry Bones in the Valley," and took my text from Ezekiel 37:1-4. In preparing my text, I had marveled anew at the complex, intertwined layers of meaning embedded in Franklin's sermon. There was the theme of the liberation of his people, always important in his sermons, and a reassertion of the power still vital in the prophetic tradition. But there was something else as well. As Ezekiel considered biblical Israel's problems in the midst of its Babylonian captivity, he experienced a vision in which those difficulties, visualized as "a valley of dry bones," weighed down his spirit. Pressed by his Lord with the demand, "Son of man, can these bones live?" a paralyzed Ezekiel stood inert, overwhelmed by the desolation that filled his soul. As Franklin preached his message, for the prophet to overcome this isolation and despair would require a deeper commitment in faith, one that might reach beyond the limits of human knowledge, the boundary of human finiteness. Teaching by familiar analogy, Franklin instructed that Ezekiel, with all of humanity's knowledge, could at best but diagnose the evil before him,- he could not "write a prescription" that would cleanse. It was only when an Ezekiel, tested to his very limits, touched the faith beyond reason and uttered in awe and hope, "Lord, thou knoweth," that he glimpsed another possibility. Yet, in the short run, his despondency intensified, but Ezekiel persisted and then, "one morning, the valley began to rumble." Franklin's Ezekiel chanted through faith the skeletalbones back toward completeness as the foot sought out an ankle, which in turn found the leg, and on until from a fractured hopelessness the prophet, in his Lord, created the possibility of human wholeness[7].

In the pulpit that morning, I stunned myself. Although I largely relied on C. L. Franklin's words, the emotional affect I gave them as I delivered my text had everything to do with me. It was not that I tried to mimic
Franklin (which would have been a travesty), but I claimed his words for myself as I became aware of new understandings of inner tensions that had long been forming during my immersion in Franklin's world. Faith and reason were not, as I had once thought, inexorably opposites or, as I later thought, separate entities each in its own air-locked cubicle. Reason might not actually bring you to faith—that, Franklin's Ezekiel suggested, would require something else—but it was not necessarily an obstacle either. The finiteness of human existence, that reverberation of the original sin of my youth, was actually a release from an impossible burden precisely because it remained a sign of fundamental limitations. New doors to my own interior opened.

There is no simple ending possible for this essay. There is no question but that my intellectual work has led me to new understandings professionally and personally on this matter of faith, and that I have grown in complex ways during the course of my career as a historian. This is a joy. Catholicism itself, however, remains as distant as before. Although I have not been in a Catholic church as a worshipper for almost four decades, my occasional forays over the years into services for a variety of reasons have usually left me with the disturbing feeling, as Yogi Berra brilliantly framed it, of "deja vu all over again." Sermons more often than not are as narrow as I remember them, and the weight of my memory might color those that are not. Despite the changes since Vatican II, I am still struck by what I experience there as the profound distance between one's God and one's *"I."* I do not see Catholicism in my near future, yet I still feel its influence deeply within. Embedded in this mingled, arabesque pattern is a journey with no announced destination, with no ending one might term final. I have sought to identify one or two of the pattern's major threads, but the central weave is beyond my ability to name, and certainly to direct.

## Notes

I would like to thank Maria Cristina Garcia, Joseph McCartin, Robert Orsi, Albert Raboteau, Ann Sullivan, and Leslie Tentler Woodcock for their sensitive and demanding readings of earlier drafts of this essay. The Springsteen quote that opens this essay is from Jon Pareles, "Bruce Almighty: Having Lost His Bet on John Kerry, the Boss Turns to a Higher Authority," *New York Times,* April 24, 2005, Section 2, 1, 24.

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[1] Leonard Cohen, "Bird on the Wire," *Songs.from a Room,* CBS 63587. Some years before this 1969 release, a song by Bob Dylan struck me and stayed with me, but I was not then able to think about his words in relation to my experience with faith. Dylan sang: "Ah, my friends from the prison, they ask unto me, / 'How good, how good, does it feel to be free?' / And I answer them most mysteriously, / 'Are birds free from the chains of the skyway?'" Bob Dylan, "Ballad in Plain D," *Another Side of Bob Dylan,* Columbia CL 2193/CS 8993, released August 1964.

[2] Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana, 1982

[3] For a brief account of how I came to write about Amos Webber, see the preface to my book, *We All Got History: The Memory Books of Amos Webber* (New York, 1996).

[4] Salvatore, *We All Got History,* 320-21.

[5] Nick Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land: C. L. Franklin; the Black Church, and the Transformation of America* (New York, 2005).

[6] Sister Rosetta Tharpe, "There Is Something Within Me," *Shout Sister Shout* (Proper Records Ltd Pi301), disc 1 of the 4-disc set, *Sister Rosetta Tharpe: The Original Soul Sister* (Proper Records Ltd Properbox 51).

[7] For a more complete discussion of this sermon, see Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land,* 158-63.