

faith that molds history. It is a faith that enables history to crush humanity." It is the opiate.

A subversive religion, Adams concludes, believes that "the resources (divine and human) that are available for the achievement of meaningful change justify an attitude of ultimate optimism. This view does not necessarily involve immediate optimism. In our century

we have seen the rebarbarization of the mass man, we have witnessed a widespread dissolution of values, and we have viewed the appearance of great collective demonries. Progress is now seen not to take place through inheritance; each generation must anew win insight into the ambiguous nature of human existence and must give new relevance to moral and spiritual values. A


realistic appraisal of our foibles and a life of continuing humility and repentance is all that will do, for there are ever-present forces in us working for perversion and destruction."

"History is a struggle in dead earnest between justice and injustice..." says Adams. "Anyone who does not enter into that struggle with the affirmation of love and beauty misses the mark and

thwarts creation as well as self-creation."

A subversive religion requires a subversive God. A creative force worthy of our devotion requires not praise, but care for the creation. Whatever caring, loving spirit may exist in the universe, if it is to act at all in human affairs, it must be through those of us who are willing to serve as its representatives. ■

## THE CHURCH ESCAPES THE MIDDLE-CLASS CAPTIVITY + + +

**Lee Cormie**  **O**N SEPTEMBER 19, 1977, the Lykes Corporation, a New Orleans-based shipping and steel conglomerate, announced it would close its Campbell works near Youngstown, Ohio. The Lykes Corporation had acquired Youngstown Sheet and Tube eight years before and milked it of its assets in order to acquire cash for corporate growth in other fields. ¶ What was just another corporate decision for Lykes had the potential for disaster for the people of Youngstown. Five thousand would be laid off by the closing of the steel works. And it is estimated that at least another 10,000 jobs in the area depend directly on revenue associated with steel production.

While plant closings are not new, the Youngstown case is different. It may yet become a symbol of hope. An Ecumenical Coalition of the Mahoning Valley, under the leadership of Bishop James W. Malone of the Catholic Diocese of Youngstown and Bishop John H. Burt of the Episcopal Diocese of Ohio, has been formed, and has already undertaken several innovative initiatives. In collaboration with the National Center for Economic Alternatives in Washington, they are studying the feasibility of a community/worker takeover of the Campbell works, and have begun the process of securing government and private support for it. They have also pushed for a national commitment that would keep basic steel in communities where steelworkers live, and have used the Youngstown example to focus attention on the plight of communities faced with runaway shops.

A pastoral letter has been drafted outlining the moral and ethical issues involved in the Lykes' decision to abandon Youngstown. It points to the emphasis in the Judeo-Christian scriptures on God's concern with the liberation of his people. Our God, it says, is a God of justice. It criticizes the corporation's decision and the way it was made, and points to the basic human right to useful employment, decent wages and participation in economic decision-making.

If, in a capitalist society, subversion can be defined in terms of undermining the notion of private ownership and control of the means of production, then the Ecumenical Coalition is certainly subversive.

But it is more than that, for it is also promoting concrete efforts to develop alternatives that may become models for other communities. It is no wonder that one corporate executive, on hearing of the efforts of the coalition, exclaimed: "That would be a disaster!"

Not all Christians are in the forefront of progressive change. Some, like those involved in the grass roots opposition to the ERA and those supporting the

rightwing Wanderer Forum, argue that their religion dictates support for conservative and sometimes reactionary causes. Or, what is in effect the same thing, they argue that their faith has nothing whatsoever to do with economics and politics.

A still greater number of Christians can be identified with neither the right nor the left. Like most Americans they have not yet taken a visible stand on the great economic, political and moral issues confronting humanity.

Probably the single most important feature of the major Christian denominations within the U.S. today is their middle class character.

Historically, it is true, the class distribution of white Protestants has been almost as diverse as the class structure itself (although they have always been overrepresented toward the top of the class structure). But large numbers of Protestants who were not initially in

### As the middle-class view that's dominated the church recently cracks up, new perspectives open up

the upper or middle classes were well situated to move upward during the various stages of American economic expansion.

For a long time the Catholic church was identified with those at the bottom, with the waves of poor immigrants throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, but many in these groups too moved upward as the economy expanded.

In recent history, then, the main-line churches, their symbols and rituals, their theological perspectives and institutional forms, have all been shaped by a certain

optimism about the possibility, for oneself or at least for one's children, of affluence and prosperity. The perceptions of the leadership of these churches especially has been shaped by professional middle class experiences and perspectives.

In this context, theology has been abstracted from historical struggles for justice, and focused on the existential issues confronting individuals: death and birth, personal morality, and so on.

Even where the churches have promoted concern for issues of social justice, like Catholic support for early labor union struggles, their policies have tended to promote the view that reform rather than radical structural change would solve the problems.

Blacks have always found it harder to be optimistic about their chances in U.S. society and their churches have historically been important centers of resistance and subversion, as well as of refuge and recuperation from the daily struggles for survival. In this century, though, with the clear emergence of a black middle class, many blacks are beginning to complain that many of their churches too have become imbued with the optimism of the myth of upward mobility that will solve all problems of economic injustice and material want.

The economic and social changes that have promoted upward mobility for some have also been sources of strain and tension for others. Fundamentalists, revivalists, born-again charismatic movements, inside and out of the main-line churches, have been reactions to these changes. In the midst of the social and personal alienation that accompanies social transformations—like the immigration from rural to urban areas in the middle of this century—these movements have reflected an often romanticized longing for the past, its values, life-styles and politics.

Clearly these movements tap sources of resentment and anger that could also fuel progressive social change. Yet their faith generally promises individual salvation and a better society simply on the basis of individual conversion. When they have not avoided explicitly political activity, these groups have all too often been drawn towards the right wing.

The theological and institutional perspectives of the major denominations, linked to the myth of upward mobility, have been experienced as meaningful within the context of the real—if at times slight—upward mobility of many Christians, especially for those in leadership positions within the churches. The 1970s, however, has been a decade of "austerity" and diminishing aspirations. Not surprising it is also a time of profound crisis in values and meaning—as well as politics and economics. This conflict is evident within the churches in the proliferation of diverse theological positions, confusion about mission and about the means and ends of theological education, and in a serious questioning of the relationship of the church to society.

Contemporary Christians, particularly those on the left, confront a variety of issues: What is their moral imperative to identify with the poor and oppressed in their struggles for liberation as evidence of their faith? And, once that is accepted, what are the sources of poverty and oppression? At the same time, so that

this identification will not be purely passive, at most helping a few individuals enjoy better lives amidst a sea of poverty, what are the kinds of social change necessary to create a better society, what are the specific organizational steps that have to be taken now to begin that process?

Given the threatened and changing social bases of the churches these issues have and will continue to emerge in a variety of concrete ways.

Already, for example, there is a deep sense of crisis in many inner city churches, and a growing awareness of the need to become politically involved. In a number of cities like Buffalo, Milwaukee and San Antonio, there are massive, church-based community organizing projects underway with the goal of empowering people to maintain and improve their own local communities.

These ecumenically based projects have manifested a willingness to confront local power structures in the form of a corrupt city hall or a redlining bank. They reflect an important step in the politicization of the Christian faith. Whether these kinds of responses ultimately manifest a belief in reform within the system or in subversion and radical social change, of course, remains to be seen.

Groups have also emerged in response to specific problems. The Ecumenical Coalition of the Mahoning Valley is one example. Often they are pushed to the left, towards a more systemic critique, after they begin to grapple with the specifics of their problem and the economic and political forces at work.

A few groups, like ACTS, the U.S. branch of the international Christians for Socialism movement, inspired by Latin American liberation theology, self-consciously understand themselves in ideological terms.

The ecumenically oriented ACTS chapters, now numbering seven, for instance, seek to interpret their faith and their understanding of the role of the church from the perspective of the needs of the oppressed. In understanding both the sources of current injustice and strategies for change they look to Marxist analyses and the experiences of Marxist parties and movements. The goal of Christians for Socialism generally and of ACTS too is not to start a new Christian political movement or party, but, while working within existing parties or organizations, to revitalize the faith of Christians and the churches' policies.

Other groups are also raising questions of analysis and strategy. A revitalized Methodist Federation for Social Action is specifically looking at Marxist analyses as a way of understanding the crises in the U.S. and on a global scale today.

The Church and Society network in the Episcopal Church, publisher of the journal *Witness*, is another example of Christians seeking a clearer analysis and strategy. In addition, the Episcopal Coalition of Urban Bishops has just completed a series of urban hearings seeking input into decision-making concerning the church's role in the cities; and the coalition is simultaneously sponsoring a series of institutes, in collaboration with the Institute for Policy Studies, on the global dimensions of the urban crisis.

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*Religion can be the most subversive of forces, serving as the strength of oppressed people and the foundation of their liberation. Martin Luther King Jr.'s perception of the religious community as the suffering servant of humanity gave substance to the non-violent tactics of the civil rights movement (above). Likewise, the church and the unity of faith has supported and strengthened efforts to organize farmworkers (right). Religious communities, like Glide Memorial Church (below), were heavily involved in the activism of the '60s. Photos by Bob Fitch*





In August 1975 the Black Theology Project sponsored a conference on the Black Church and Black Community in Atlanta attended by some 200 clergy and lay leaders. The participants at this working consultation issued a message at the end of their time together that spoke of the "moral, material and spiritual" crisis that confronts blacks today. And they located the "root problem" in "capitalism, nurtured by human wilfulness, and served by the exploitation of sexism and racism."

The journal *Sojourners* is significant as the vehicle for raising questions of economic and political analysis for a growing circle of evangelical Christians. The list could go on.

Whatever happens within these different groups will depend on the wider political climate. The struggle within the churches reflects that in the larger society. An example from a few years ago

## The movements inside the church mirror those in the larger society

will illustrate this situation clearly:

In 1974, under the title "Theology in the Americas," a project was launched to bring together groups of Christian activists, church leaders, and theologians from North American and Latin America, along with some social scientists, to examine more closely the sources of oppression and to share reflections on the appropriate Christian response to

these problems. In preparation for a conference in Detroit in August 1975, 60 reflection groups were formed around the country to reflect on what their own experience had taught them concerning these issues.

At the conference itself, three strong responses to oppression emerged: among some white North Americans and the Latin Americans a powerful denunciation of class oppression and imperialism; among blacks a denunciation of racism; among women a denunciation of sexism. Inevitably, challenges arose, each group accusing the others of overlooking the special forms of oppression characteristic of its experience. The conference did not see a resolution of these differences.

Each of the interest groups that emerged at the conference (blacks, women, labor, white "middle class," Hispanics, Asian Americans, as well as professionals within the churches) was mandated

to seek to understand the interrelated nature of sexism, racism and class oppression in the context of international structures of domination and dependence. These groups are continuing to work under the umbrella of Theology in the Americas, seeking to promote structural social change and a return within the churches to an original identification with the oppressed in their struggles for justice.

Clearly, though, the issues are bigger than the churches; they are issues confronting all groups seeking justice and a better way of life for all.

In the midst of the battles for radical social change there is also a battle for the human soul, for human values and meaning and a new vision of human possibilities. This battle is already going on within the churches. How that battle is waged and resolved may have a lot to say about the future of social change in this country.

# CLAUDE WILLIAMS: MERGING RELIGION & ACTIVISM

**Bill Troy** IN THE EARLY 1930s there appeared in the Deep South one of the most significant mass movements in the history of that region. Poor black and white farmers who had labored for years under various "sharecropping" arrangements came together during the Depression to form the Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU). Squeezed by declining cotton prices, absentee land ownership and a New Deal farm support policy that put free money into the hands of plantation owners, thousands of farm workers dropped their hoes and marched—in the face of organized terror—to demand a better day for themselves and their families. At its height the STFU counted some 20,000 members.

The movement raised some remarkable people into positions of leadership. One of the most unlikely, yet gifted, of them is still around. Claude Williams is a white preacher. He's 83 years old and lives in a trailer outside Birmingham, Ala.; where the force of his mind and personality are still enjoyed by a host of political friends dating from STFU days to the present.

When the sharecropper movement began in 1934 Claude Williams was pastoring a small Presbyterian mission church in the mining town of Paris, Ark. He lived there with Joyce King Williams and their two children.

Claude and Joyce had moved to Paris after serving an established Presbyterian church in Tennessee for seven years. During that time the social gospel and other forms of progressive thought began to penetrate the South, gradually helping the Williams to clarify their own growing recognition of the poverty and racial injustice around them. By the time they left for Paris, the fundamentalist faith of their upbringing had changed so radically that the conventional church could never hold them again.

In Paris they created a whirlwind. The town was desperately poor and the little church on the brink of extinction. Soon both were buzzing over the preacher who opened a pool hall in the church, encouraged the young people to read everything from the Bible to socialist theory to magazines on nudism, and preached sermons on the compatibility of the Bible and evolution.

Claude quickly became a friend and

champion to coal miners in the area trying to reorganize a union. While he was traveling the district speaking for the union, Joyce was keeping open house for miners, young people, children and anybody who needed a roof for the night or a bite to eat.

After four years the squires and ladies who ran the church got rid of the preacher for neglect of his duties. But by then the Williams had come into contact with the considerable political ferment taking place throughout Arkansas.

Both the Socialist Party and the Communist Party were active in the state. There were militant councils of the unemployed in Fort Smith and Little Rock. Exciting things were happening at Commonwealth College, Arkansas' famous labor school. And, first and foremost, there was the Southern Tenant Farmers Union.

In Claude Williams the STFU found one of its most effective organizers. This was due in part to the warmth and forcefulness of Claude's energetic personality. Raised in a sharecropper home in west Tennessee, he understood the people he was working with and was accepted by them. Much of the work required careful underground organization, meetings held by pre-arranged signal under cover of night. Local people understood that Claude was willing to accept the same dangers to which they were exposed.

There have been few radical movements in America that more effectively joined the efforts of poor blacks and poor whites. To Claude this dimension of STFU activity was a matter of unswerving principle. Many of the union's

most remarkable black leaders were recruited through his efforts. He carried out this conviction in a common sense way, devoid of the romanticism that afflicted so many activists from outside the region.

Neither did this commitment hamper his effectiveness with poor whites, whom he understood even better, having been one himself. One of the union's most remarkable recruits was a white sharecropper preacher named A.L. Campbell, who attended one of Claude's organizing meetings as a spy for the Ku Klux Klan. It was precisely Claude's forceful and reasonable attack upon "Ku Kluxism," as distinguished from individuals who belonged to the Klan, that brought Campbell over to the union's side.

But Claude's most distinctive contribution to the union lay in his religious approach to organizing. He had started his career as a fundamentalist Christian, then gone through successive changes influenced by modern Biblical interpretation, contemporary science, the social gospel and finally Marxism. At each step of the way, he felt impelled to reinterpret the Bible.

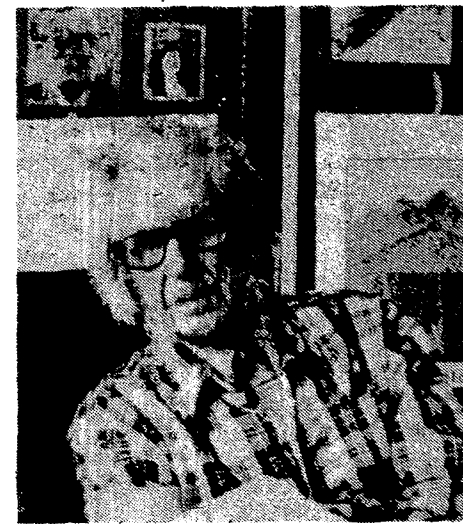
Sometime in the '30s, Claude read Lenin's *State and Revolution*. Finding it "the most revealing commentary on the Bible I had ever seen," he went back to "the Book" and found there the story of an international revolutionary people's movement. From Moses calling the first strike in Egypt to the Son of Man opposing the Roman Empire and its lackeys, the story was all of a piece.

At the same time Claude knew from his own experience the pervasiveness of religion among poor rural southerners. He knew the Bible was their primary guide for living, the church their major institution. Union organizing meetings often took place in churches and Claude soon found that unless the preacher went along with the union message, "we might as well go home."

Determining to use the people's religious framework to advantage, he learned to make the case for the union in terms of the "positive content of the gospel."

For seven years, beginning in 1940, he labored at this task through his own organization, the People's Institute of Applied Religion. First on behalf of the STFU and developing CIO activities in the South, later in the defense plants of wartime Detroit, the People's Institute formalized this religious approach to union organizing into a remarkable methodology.

Three to ten-day institutes would gather together up to 50 cotton field or defense plant working preachers and Sunday school teachers, black and white, male and female. They worked day and night, each session beginning with prayer, scripture and song.



Bill Troy

## The Bible demands activism

The first day all were encouraged to share the most pressing problems their communities faced—food, shelter, wages, education, working conditions. Then an institute leader made a presentation based on these problems, using one of the unique orientation charts Claude devised in 1940.

The charts, by means of simple pictures and diagrams—always buttressed with Bible references—traced the story of "people's religion" and related that story to the concrete social and economic problems "of this world". The charts were presented sermon style, the kind of talks folks were used to hearing from someone "who had a conviction to impart."

Later sessions used mimeographed worksheets to analyze the political causes of people's suffering and to suggest collective remedies. Still others focused on concrete skills in union organizing. Throughout the meetings they sang, transforming a number of traditional hymns into some of today's best known freedom songs.

Among the interesting things to be learned from these unique assemblies, perhaps the most striking is the importance of meeting people on their own terms, in light of the positive, progressive aspects of their own view of the world.

Claude and his co-workers had a definite message to impart—the necessity for collective class struggle—but they did it by building on language, symbols and experience that people understood. The result was an intriguing experiment in workers' education based firmly in the historical reality of the Deep South. ■ Bill Troy is a Methodist minister associated with the Southern Appalachian Ministry in Higher Education, based in Knoxville, Tenn.