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“Concerning ‘Goodbye Christ’”

“Kindly advise how one may secure a copy of a poem of yours, written 12 or 14 years ago, which ran something like this; ‘Goodbye Christ, hello Lenin, burn the churches and hang the Bishops.’”

—J. B. Simmons Jr.

“Is this the Christianity intended for us, or shall we look for another is the question on many minds.”

—Reverend M. A. Talley

“Goodbye, Hughes. All hail to Christ!”

—Reverend Reverdy Ransom

On the afternoon of November 15, 1940, Langston Hughes was headed toward the exquisite Vista del Arroyo Hotel in Pasadena to attend a book-and-author luncheon in celebration of his recently published autobiography, *The Big Sea*. As the car got nearer to his destination, he heard the strains of Irvin Berlin’s recently revised “God Bless America.” The music was coming from a sound-truck parked directly across the street from the hotel, displaying a banner with the phrase “100 percent American” written in gold lettering. A large crowd had gathered in front of the hotel with picket signs emblazoned with Hughes’s name, causing traffic and general chaos. With the car in which he was being driven unable to move forward, Hughes got out a few blocks away and walked, unnoticed, through the crowd.¹ In the hotel lobby the manager and organizer of the event, George Palmer Putnam, met him and explained that Evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson had sent about a hundred of her followers to protest Hughes’s appearance. McPherson had recently denounced Hughes from her Angelus Temple pulpit as a “radical and anti-Christ.” As she warned her congregation, “There are many devils among us, but the most

dangerous of all is the red devil. And now there comes among us a red devil *in black skin!*”² Heeding her call, McPherson’s supporters had come to distribute flyers denouncing Hughes as a Communist and an atheist. Called to keep the situation under control, police arrested a local Four Square Gospel pastor for resisting an officer and another McPherson supporter for advertising without a license. Embarrassed by the ruckus, Hughes withdrew from the event before it began and headed back to Los Angeles.³

McPherson’s anger had been simmering since Hughes unfavorably mentioned her in “Goodbye Christ,” a poem he had written in 1932. She took it as a personal attack and had been on a mission to malign him and thwart his efforts for nearly a decade. “Goodbye Christ” is rarely included among Hughes’s most notable poetry, such as “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” “The Weary Blues,” and “I, Too, Sing America,” but it had a profound, lasting, and at times pernicious impact on his life and career—more so than any of his other poems up to that point. Not long after it appeared in the pages of the *Negro Worker*, the German-based COMINTERN (Communist Third International) journal, Hughes’s career and the reception of his work veered off in directions irreparably out of his control, and in some respects he never fully recovered. Within a few years of the poem’s publication, recognizing its deleterious impact, Hughes attempted to distance himself from “Goodbye Christ” and wouldn’t allow anyone to reprint it. His efforts, however, were all for naught, and as Arnold Rampersad contended, it was “a poem that would haunt him for the rest of his life.”⁴ The poem, which Hughes claimed he never intended for anyone to see, is perhaps the best example of his political poems of a religious nature, written during the 1930s, and it is the clearest expression of his turn to radical politics at that time. It also showcases his philosophical alignment with Communist causes and ideology, an aspect of the poem that generated a great deal of ire and angst from the likes of McPherson. In it, he took on capitalism, the American government, the press, the Christian church, Christian ministers, a sacred text, and a civic saint.

Listen, Christ,
 You did alright in your day, I reckon—
 But that day’s gone now.
 They ghosted you up a swell story, too,

Called it Bible—
 But it's dead now,
 The popes and the preachers've
 Made too much money from it.
 They've sold you to too many

Kings, generals, robbers, and killers—
 Even to the Tzar and the Cossacks,
 Even to Rockefeller's Church,
 Even to THE SATURDAY EVENING POST.
 You ain't no good no more.
 They've pawned you
 Till you've done wore out.

Goodbye,
 Christ Jesus Lord God Jehova,
 Beat it on away from here now.
 Make way for a new guy with no religion at all—
 A real guy named
 Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME—

I said, ME!
 Go ahead on now,
 You're getting in the way of things, Lord.
 And please take Saint Ghandi with you when you go,
 And Saint Pope Pius,
 And Saint Aimee McPherson,
 And big black Saint Becton
 Of the Consecrated Dime.
 And step on the gas, Christ!
 Move!

Don't be so slow about movin'!
 The world is mine from now on—
 And nobody's gonna sell ME
 To a king, or a general,
 Or a millionaire.⁵

It was the poem’s “dismissal” of Christ, however, that many took to be as un-American as it was anti-Christian, and it generated the most ire, angst, and controversy. This bidding Christ “goodbye” was, far above anything Hughes wrote during that period, the most responsible for subsequent contentions of him as Communist and atheist, as Benjamin Mays would demonstrate in his book *The Negro’s God according to His Literature* in 1938 and Jean Wagner would further bolster in his *Black Poets of the United States* decades later.⁶

“Goodbye Christ” became a lightning rod and touchstone all across the United States, and in particular ways within African-American communities; it generated debates about Hughes, African American poetry, and American religion. In terms of 1930s Great Depression literature, however, the poem was not unique. Throughout the decade, leftist or “proletarian novelists” such as Jack Conroy (*The Disinherited*), Michael Gold (*Jews without Money*), and Henry Roth (*Call It Sleep*), wrote about the deleterious effects of capitalism, how the Depression disproportionately affected the poor, and about the lives and living conditions of the working class—often with a strident critique of the religious status quo. And as Morris Dickstein and Cary Nelson note, these themes also “drastically affected” the work of many poets, including William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and Edwin Rolfe, who published in leftist journals such as the *Anvil* (founded by Jack Conroy) and the *New Masses*. Examples of Hughes’s more readily identifiable proletarian poetry include “Let America Be America Again,” first published in *Esquire* magazine in 1936.⁷

I am the poor white, fooled and pushed apart
 I am the Negro bearing slavery’s scars
 I am the red man driven from the land
 I am the immigrant clutching the hope I seek
 And finding only the same old stupid plan
 Of dog eat dog, or mighty crush of the weak.

In “Park Bench,” a lesser-known example, the poem’s speaker proclaims, “I live on a park bench / You, Park Avenue / Hell of a distance between us two.” In theme, literary structure, as well as social and political context, “Goodbye Christ” should take its place among his other proletarian

poetry and the larger body of literature produced during the 1930s with its social commentary on the indifference of governmental powers and religious institutions, on poverty, and the juxtaposition of the “haves” and the “have nots.”

It was not, however, a declaration of Hughes’s commitment to Communism, nor was it a statement of his disbelief in God. More than anything it could say about Hughes himself, “Goodbye Christ” emerged as an expression of a culture of complaint and critique among fellow New Negro poets and an array of African American intellectuals and clergy. In the aftermath of the fundamentalist modernist controversy of the 1920s, the 1930s were a destabilizing time for religion in America as notions of American religious identity were being negotiated and contested. For African Americans, that negotiation and contestation took the form of surprisingly dire appraisals of the state of black churches—that there were too many of them and they were materialist and politically ineffectual. A small but vocal minority even asserted that Communism was more “Christ-like” than Christianity and made calls for a “new religion.” The seemingly antireligious rhetoric of “Goodbye Christ,” therefore, doubtlessly shocked many readers, but a significant body of black intellectuals and clergy, along with some white clergy and laypeople from across the nation, echoed the sentiments of the poem throughout the 1930s with ideas that were fueled, in part, by the devastating impact the Great Depression was having on the lives of the vast majority of black Americans. Indeed, in many ways, the implication of their ideas and the level of their rhetoric eclipsed those expressed by Hughes in “Goodbye Christ.” This group critiqued and complained about the capitalist system, American churches’ alliances with capitalism, and what they saw as an inherent insufficiency in religion itself. Hughes, perhaps unwittingly, became a crucial player in this culture of critique and complaint and his poem became its controversial and much-debated call to arms.

Make Way for a New Guy

Langston Hughes wrote “Goodbye Christ” while on a trip to Russia in 1932. Although he had written many of the poems in *The Weary Blues* when he was in Paris, his detractors immediately made much of the fact that “Goodbye Christ” had been composed during his stay in another

country—and the Soviet Union at that. They were certain his audacity to “dismiss” Christ had come from his experience in the “godless” Communist state.

They were correct, to an extent. Although the ideas in “Goodbye Christ” had been percolating in Hughes since the start of the Scottsboro case and his book tour to the American South earlier in the year, the Soviet Union provided the psychological and emotional space to express them. The Scottsboro case was widely viewed as one of the worst travesties of justice in recent American history, and the racist treatment Hughes received and witnessed on the book tour compounded his disgust with the events involving the case.⁸ The Communist context doubtlessly emboldened him to speak so disparagingly about key aspects of American society, namely, wealth and religion. It is also clear that the Soviet Union made an excellent comparative model. The poem in many ways is a study in contrasts, comparing two very different economic, religious, and social systems. But the Soviet Union is important as a context for another, more immediate reason. Hughes’s experience there was an overwhelmingly positive one. Although the trip ultimately failed in its purpose, it allowed Hughes and his compatriots, for a few months, to have a life in Russia that they could only have imagined as black people in the United States. Hughes experienced a freedom from racial bias and a level of social acceptance unknown to him on American shores. The story of Hughes’s trip to Russia, therefore, is worth recounting in some detail.

Plans for the trip were solidified in the spring of 1932 when Hughes had returned briefly to Harlem from his southern book tour. His collaborator on a musical, *Cock o’ the World*, had sent him an urgent message telling him they were close to signing Paul Robeson—for whom the musical had been written—in the lead role. Hughes’s presence at the meeting would likely seal the deal. After arriving in New York, however, Hughes was not only refused admittance into the building where Robeson’s manager lived, he discovered that Robeson had gone back to London anyway. A few days after that fiasco, he came in contact with Louise Thompson, a longtime friend and a radical social activist who had been one of the prominent figures of the Harlem Renaissance and a founder of the Harlem chapter of the Friends of the Soviet Union. Hughes had learned that she was organizing a trip to the Soviet Union to make a film

about black relations in America. Soviet authorities had reached out to James W. Ford, African American candidate for the vice-presidency on the Communist ticket, to help them find African Americans who could come to Russia to assist them in making the film.⁹ Ford approached Thompson, who immediately set out to find willing participants. She convinced Hughes that his participation in the project would lend it the prestige needed to assist in the recruitment of others. During a brief stop in Harlem, he had agreed to be on the sponsoring committee and reaffirmed his commitment to going to Russia with the group.

Hughes went back on tour, ending it out west in Los Angeles. Exhausted after the months-long ordeal, he set out for New York, arriving just hours before the SS *Europa* was to depart. It was doubtful they would have left without him, important as he was to the trip, and also because he had telegraphed Louise Thompson from Arizona, charging her to "hold that boat 'cause it's an ark to me."¹⁰

Astutely aware of Russia's renown as the "motherland of radical socialism," the trip seemingly filled Hughes with a sense of wonder and excitement. At age thirty he had already traveled extensively throughout Europe and Africa, but this trip was on an entirely different scale. In Russia he would witness firsthand the system that had seemingly eradicated social distinctions and racism. He could hardly contain his joy en route to Germany, where he and the rest of the group of twenty-two were to dock first. He spent most of his time prancing around the ship in his favorite outfit—grey flannel pants and a sailor's jersey—and studying German, a little of which he had picked up from Frau Shultz, his father's housekeeper in Mexico.

The rest of the group, which included Mildred Jones, Constance White, Katherine Jenkins, Allen McKinzie, Wayland Rudd, Henry Moon, Sylvia Garner, and Dorothy West, seemed equally happy to be going to Russia, but they made an odd bunch. They had been commissioned to make a movie but only two members of the group, Sylvia Garner and Wayland Rudd, had any acting experience. (Rudd would later be dubbed "Moscow Matinee Idol.")¹¹ The rest were professors, journalists, social workers, and writers. And not everyone shared the radical values of the core group. What they had in common was a near unbridled excitement about Russia, and the first few days upon arrival in Germany and Russia would exceed their wildest expectations.



Figure 3.1. Hughes and the group headed to Moscow on the SS *Europa* to make the film *Black and White* in 1932. In addition to Hughes, the group included Louise Thompson, Dorothy West, Mildred Jones, Sylvia Garner, Allen McKinzie, Wayland Rudd, Henry Moon, Constance White, Katherine Jenkins, Matthew Crawford, Juanita Lewis, Thurston Lewis, Ted Poston, Mollie Lewis, Laurence Alberga, Loren Miller, Leonard Hill, and Homer Smith. (Photo courtesy of the Beinecke Library.)

The group was treated like celebrity royals from the moment they disembarked in Bremerhaven, Germany on June 22. A representative from the Meschrabpom Film Company, which was to make the movie, welcomed them before they boarded a train to Berlin. In Berlin they were introduced to members of the Workers International Relief Organization, the film’s parent body. From there the group boarded a Swedish vessel to Helsinki and then an overnight train bound for Russia. The next morning a banner that read “Workers of the World Unite” greeted them. A brass band played for them. At the Grand Hotel where they stayed they dined on “caviar, roast chicken, fresh vegetables, coffee, and ice cream.” Dorothy West remembered that the waitstaff greeted the group “with such heartwarming bows.” They toured the grand build-

ings and museums with crowds parting for them as they made their way, when they weren't being chauffeured around in luxury automobiles. They were even invited to give special appearances, convinced as they were that "all blacks can sing and dance." At one such appearance, Louise Thompson, Sylvia Garner, and Constance White sang Negro spirituals. Loren Miller gave a talk on Negro literature. Hughes read his poems. This unlikely group of African American moviemakers, immersed in, as Hughes recalled, "the fun and wonder of a foreign land," was having the time of their lives. Years later in an interview for the New York Center for Visual History, Thompson concurred with Hughes's assessment. "We were just a group of young people out on a wild adventure," she said. And Hughes, she contended, was particularly taken with the country. "Langston was received in Russia as he should have been—should be received anywhere in the world. . . . In the Soviet Union he was accorded, not only by the film company, Meshrabpom Films, but by the people of the Soviet Union, with tremendous respect."¹²

The only real problems stemmed from the very purpose for which they had made the trip, the movie itself. Entitled *Black and White* in honor of a poem by Vladimir Mayakovsky, the leading poet of the Russian Revolution, the movie presented difficulties for Hughes and the group from the very beginning.¹³ The first problem was the most basic. The producer chosen for the film, Karl Junghans, was German and spoke neither Russian nor English. He needed a translator to speak to the group, which made communication extremely difficult. The more daunting problem concerned the script. First, it had not been written and was, therefore, unavailable. Waiting for it, most of the group passed the hours in local bars, with some of the men chasing Russian women, who had shown a great interest in them. Second, when the script finally did arrive, it became clear that the Russian writer had greatly misunderstood the dynamics of race in America. Hughes and the group had gotten some sense of this when on a number of occasions Moscovites had asked them if *all* of the group were in fact Negroes. The great disparity in skin tone—some of the cast "looked more white than black"—confused them.¹⁴ Russians, as it turned out, knew very little about black people. They had theoretically identified with the plight of American blacks, but knew nothing about what it actually meant to be black. This frustrated the stated aim of the movie to "depict the actual conditions of Negroes in the United States."¹⁵

The script was a well-meaning yet naïve farce. It told the story of a band of African American steelworkers in Alabama who were engaged in a battle to resist the forces of racism and classism. When oppression of the group by racist southern whites intensified, they joined forces with well-to-do Alabama blacks, who used their own radio station to request help from sympathetic northern whites. Without delay, northern whites head south in defense of their southern black "brothers." It was a fantasy world where intraracial class tension did not exist and interracial cooperation trumped class loyalties. The script had more in common with the optimistic "collective effort" that characterized Russian revolutionary cinema, as well as the 1930s collectivism generated by the Great Depression, but it bore no resemblance to the realities of race in America. "At first I was astonished at what I read," Hughes later recalled. "Then I laughed until I cried. And I wasn't crying really because the script was in places so mistaken and so funny. I was crying because the writer meant well, but knew so little about his subject and the result was a pathetic hodgepodge of good intentions and faulty facts."¹⁶

In a sense the script for *Black and White* indicated that Russians had misjudged just how dire American race relations really were. They understood that black Americans faced much discrimination and were marginalized in American society. They also understood the degree to which blacks were considered second-class citizens with regard to the political process. What they did not understand were the social ramifications of all this and its effect on the social interactions between black and white Americans. It was *because* blacks were largely viewed as second-class citizens that certain social arrangements and political alliances were difficult, if not impossible. As Arnold Rampersad concludes, the script was "ideologically correct," it was just not plausible. Louise Thompson simply remembered it as "impossible."¹⁷ As the most accomplished writer in the group, Hughes was called upon to rewrite the script but he refused, citing his lack of knowledge about steel mills. After a few more weeks of script problems and filming delays, the film company abruptly and without explanation cancelled the project.

Although Communism gained in popularity among some blacks in the United States during the 1930s, due in part to Soviet Russia's efforts to recruit blacks into an international revolutionary movement, the cancellation of *Black and White* confirmed the suspicions of naysayers.¹⁸

Some among the intelligentsia and friends of the group had expressed doubts about the project, as well as Russia's motives even before they left. Carl Van Vechten had told Hughes that he thought the movie idea was ill advised and destined for failure. Word of the cancellation spread quickly and the response from the African American community was immediate. Despite the inroads Communism had made among blacks, many suspected that there were inherent racist impulses within Russian society and that "salvation" for blacks was not likely to be found there. For those who had been monitoring the progress of the film project, its cancellation served to prove this point. An editorial published in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, entitled "Something Rotten in U.S.S.R.," typified the response from those who maintained this view.

Misguided black folk who have for several years been worshipping the Russian Communists and lauding their absence of race prejudice will naturally be surprised to learn these pure and undefiled Bolshevists have succumbed to race prejudice and abandoned the filming of a moving picture intended to depict the exploitation of blacks by whites in America. . . . The Russian Communists, like the dated capitalists they condemn, are following the lines of the least resistance. They are looking out for their interest first, and to them 150,000,000 Russians are more important than 12,000,000 Afra-Americans. Some day American Negroes are going to learn that if they are to be saved they must do it themselves, and not depend on others to do it for them. History should have taught them ere this that salvation, like charity, begins at home.¹⁹

In reality, the issues were, in fact, more economic and political than racial. The Soviet Union was the world's newest republic and desperately in need of international recognition. It coveted recognition from the United States especially, and all the political and financial rewards that were certain to follow. When it became clear that a movie showcasing the racial disparities in the United States would be damaging to those efforts, the Soviet authorities shut it down. After a brief five-day trip to Tashkent in Soviet Central Asia sponsored by the "theatrical sections of the Soviet Trade Unions," most of the group of twenty-two would-be African American movie makers packed their bags and made for home.²⁰ Louise Thompson was the first to leave.

Langston Hughes, however, did not leave. He made plans to go deeper into the USSR to observe for himself the great social transformation that had happened in Uzbekistan. Before the Russian Revolution, the plight of dark-skinned Uzbeks had been comparable to American blacks. They were discriminated against because of their color and viewed as second-class citizens. After the revolution, however, they were elevated in social status, viewed on a par with other Soviet citizens. Some had even begun intermarrying with white Russians.²¹ The cancellation of *Black and White* had been just as much a disappointment to Hughes as it had been to the rest of the group, but it by no means soured him on Russian society. For him, the “Motherland” was still the promised land, in stark contrast to the United States. His experience there had been delightful. No Jim Crow. No “mob rule.” No color prejudice. For several weeks he moved freely throughout Russian society, treated more like a first-class citizen than the second-class citizen he was back home. He was clearly enamored.

Before Hughes departed on his grand adventure into the far reaches of the Soviet Union, however, he wrote “Goodbye Christ,” just after completing another poem, “Good Morning Revolution.” That poem was most certainly inspired by Carl Sandburg’s 1928 volume, “Good Morning, America” and Hughes’s recollection of the banner he saw when he first arrived in Moscow. It was a clear statement regarding his overwhelmingly positive experience in Russia. “Good-morning, Revolution / You’re the best friend I ever had / We gonna pal around together from now on.” “Good Morning Revolution” and “Goodbye Christ” were in a sense companion pieces. Indeed, at least one version of “Goodbye Christ” contained the alternate ending: “Goodbye Christ, Good Morning Revolution!”²² While the first poem bids hello to a new system of government and a new way of life, the second one bids goodbye to an old way of life sanctioned by American religion and American churches. In both poems, Hughes was intent on exposing the differences between Russia and the United States. The contrast is even heard in the tone of the two poems. “Good Morning Revolution” is welcoming, open, and light, while “Goodbye Christ” voices disappointment, disillusionment, and possibly anger. Together they summarized his thinking about the USSR and the United States.

If *Black and White* had been successfully filmed, it is possible that neither poem would have been written. And although Hughes never

explained his reasons, he always had made it clear that he had never planned to publish the poem or share it with anyone. However, Otto Huiswood, a “light mulatto” and well-known black Communist from Dutch Guiana, somehow obtained the poem and sent it to the *Negro Worker*, where it appeared in the journal’s November–December 1932 issue.²³ By that time, Hughes was off on his journey to Soviet Central Asia, unaware of the gathering storm.

Goodbye, Hughes

The storm hit with great force. Just weeks after it was published in the *Negro Worker*, “Goodbye Christ” appeared in the *Baltimore Afro-American* in January 1933, which introduced it for the first time to a wider African American audience. The response was immediate and explosive, generating heated exchanges in all sectors of the black community. A true touchstone, the poem was debated in schools, social clubs, places of employment, and churches. There had never been a literary work by an African American that had proven to be so controversial among African Americans.

Another African American newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, did not reprint “Goodbye Christ” in its entirety until March 1933. But the debate in its pages began some time before that, and over the course of several months editorials appeared espousing pro and con views from all across the country. The two principal editorialists who most represented this divide were a pastor from Atlanta and an English professor from a historic black college in Marshall, Texas.

Reverend J. Raymond Henderson of the Wheat Street Baptist Church and Melvin B. Tolson of Wiley College began a series of responses to each other about the poem beginning in January 1933. Their exchanges set the tone for the discussion, which by the end of the summer included various voices from around the country. Clearly as annoyed at Hughes for writing the poem as at the poem itself, Henderson began his first editorial with a veiled personal attack. It was “ignorant or stupid” for anyone to rank Christ among the likes of Aimee Semple McPherson, George Becton, and Gandhi. “Any man who has no more judgment and discrimination than to link these names is surely to be pitied.” As for the

poem, it was "not really poetry" by any standard of measure. "Goodbye Christ" was simply an "idea" conceived by Hughes which he attempted to pass off as poetry.

Henderson, one of Atlanta's most "outspoken" black ministers at the time, probably read reprints of "Goodbye Christ" in the black press, as most people did.²⁴ But he knew that Hughes was in Russia when he wrote the poem and that it first appeared in a leftist publication based in Germany. His first intimation, therefore, was that being in a foreign country and publishing in the foreign press gave Hughes the courage to dismiss Christ with a "careless wave of the hand, yet stern voice." The core of his editorial responded to what he believed to be the three prevailing ideas in the poem: Christ has had his day; the Bible is a fictitious story; and Christ is in the way (of social progress). The refutations of the second and third ideas were ordinary enough. The Bible is "the greatest fact of history," proven by its sales record. It is a longstanding best seller, outselling Shakespeare. Rather than Christ being *in* the way, Christ *is* the way. With the refutation of the first idea, however, Henderson was seemingly more thoughtful. Noting first that one should not expect a poet to know church history, he argued that although Christ was born in time, he is timeless. Every generation experiences its own spiritual awakening through a fresh discovery of the meaning of Christ. "The day of Christ, instead of being over," he continued, "has scarcely begun." Echoing what others would say from both sides of the debate, he concluded that Christ is really an "untried door," who has not been given a chance.²⁵

Melvin B. Tolson responded to Henderson's theological refutation of "Goodbye Christ" from a standpoint that was sociological, pragmatic, political, and perhaps prophetic. First, he addressed the personal attacks. He claimed they demonstrated Henderson's lack of familiarity with Hughes. Tolson had made Hughes's acquaintance while completing a master's degree at Columbia University, studying the Harlem Renaissance. He was particularly troubled by the insinuation that Hughes wrote the poem to gain notoriety ("So few people read Langston Hughes," Henderson had claimed) and that he was not sincere. "Nobody who knows Langston Hughes intimately can doubt his sincerity. He has always stood for the man lowest down and has sought to show his essential fineness of soul to those who were too high up—by the ac-

cidents of fortune—to understand.” For Tolson, Langston Hughes was “a Catholic, a rebel, and a proletarian in his personal life and in his poetry and criticism,” a characterization he would expand in his master’s thesis, “The Harlem Group of Negro Writers.” As for Henderson’s claim that “Goodbye Christ” was not really poetry, Tolson quipped, “certain men of the cloth have a way of becoming self-styled judges on everything.” A poet in his own right, Tolson has been considered the first true “modernist African American poet” and “the last of the major poets” of the Harlem Renaissance.²⁶

With the personal sparring over, Tolson launched into his reasons for supporting “Goodbye Christ.” The poem was a “challenge and a warning” to all American churches and all Christians, he began. It should not be laughed at, scorned, or “scandalized by the religionist.” Those who did so were “illogical” and in peril. The poem spoke to the current “tragic modern conditions” as well as to the failings of the church to meet those conditions. It was an outgrowth of the church’s disregard for the ills of society. “The world is in terrible condition today, and if Christianity does not do something to solve the problems of humanity, it will have hurled at it repeatedly such challenges as ‘Goodbye Christ,’” he declared. The terrible social and economic conditions of the day and the church’s lack of response prompted Hughes’s seeming interest in the Soviet system of government. The Soviet system was, in fact, more Christ-like than American churches, he argued, a point reiterated throughout the 1930s by a number of African American clergy. African Methodist Episcopal (AME) minister D. Ormonde Walker, for example, asserted in 1933 that Jesus was the founder of Communism. “Jesus gave communism to the world before Marx or Lenin, or Stalin,” he insisted. In Tolson’s view, “followers of Marx” carried out the teachings of Jesus with tenacity and verve. American Christians, on the other hand, involved themselves in self-serving trivialities. “The leaders of Christianity live in comfortable homes and ride around in big cars and collect the pennies from washerwomen.” He continued, “Magnificent edifices are erected while people go hungry and shelterless. Preachers uphold or see not the ravages of ‘big business.’”²⁷

For Tolson, the issue was not so much what the poem said or did not say about Christ. Indeed, he asserted that he was not interested in “what Mr. Hughes thinks of Christ.” He was more interested in “the *reason* for

the poem than the poem." And the reason for the poem was the pitiful state of affairs in 1930s American society. He ended his response to Henderson by calling for radical change among American churches. The time was past for a church unconcerned with the things of the world. "Christianity must come down from the pulpit and solve the problems of the day. Men will no longer listen to the echo of that beautiful, but illogical, spiritual of long ago: 'You may have the world, give me Jesus.'" Jesus would never sing a song like that, Tolson concluded. Jesus was a "radical" and a "Socialist" whose "guns were turned on Big Business and religionists" and who heralded a "new economic, social, and political power." This was apparently all too much for Henderson, who responded to Tolson by simply restating his earlier points and calling for an end to the debate.²⁸

The debate about "Goodbye Christ," however, did not end. Though the exchange between Henderson and Tolson ceased in the pages of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, in the ensuing months the debate actually gained momentum, prompting even deeper discussions about the state and the fate of American religion. Henderson and Tolson had clearly framed the discussion, leaving many editorialists either to react to or expound upon points the two men had made. J. Edward Hines from Louisiana, an "old personal friend" of Tolson, was the first. Hines tried to understand "just what Mr. Hughes really means by 'Goodbye Christ.'" He asked whether these were Hughes's personal views. Can the "guy with no religion at all" really improve society? To this last question Hines provided his own answer. Noting that Communism supports equality and citizenship rights for all and was opposed to lynching and supportive of the lower class against capitalism, he asserted, "no depressed man would abhor that platform of the 'guy with no religion.'" Indeed, the true teachings of Jesus and Communism share much in common. Both disapprove of race discrimination. Both disapprove of "trials like the Scottsboro trial and a denial of the ballot to Negroes." So for Hines, the challenge was not to Christianity in general, but to the "living tombs" of the American church. The appropriate title of a poem for Hughes to write, he proclaimed, would be "Comeback, Christ."²⁹

The next week, James Oliver Slade, a professor of social science at Morris Brown College, weighed in. Slade wanted his readers to understand, however, that he was also a Christian. He simply did not share the

opinion of those "hasty, unthinking and narrow-minded herd of people who profess Christian faith" by condemning the poem. "Goodbye Christ" may be "sacrilegious," but it was not entirely wrong, and it was a fair indictment of the church. Like Hines, Slade found Communism to be more Christian than American churches. Communism's "altruistic platform" showed more compassion than the American churches and the American political system, and if Communism was "Christ-like," then Hughes was "not so unchristian after all." Edward Taylor followed Slade's editorial with an impassioned one of his own in which he argued that the American church had strayed so far from the teachings of Jesus that many people such as Hughes were merely asking, "is it the true religion or shall we look for another?" The religion that Jesus taught was not circumscribed by race, creed, nation, or theological dogmatism. It was "universal in its application and all-inclusive in its scope." For Taylor, this was the religion to which Christians must return and the "great furor" roused among those who vilified Hughes and his poem only pointed to the fact that "somewhere something is wrong with the present day concept of religion."³⁰

When the *Pittsburgh Courier* finally reprinted "Goodbye Christ" in its entirety—without comment and adding the last line "go ahead on now"—many African American ministers reacted in anger.³¹ The reactions from two black ministers in particular—Bishop Reverdy Ransom and Reverend D. DeWitt Turpeau—demonstrated that the poem had clearly touched a nerve and that not everyone participated in or thought favorably of the culture of critique and complaint. Both ministers responded to "Goodbye Christ" with poems of their own that attempted to "dismiss" Hughes for his irreverence. The reaction from Reverdy Ransom in particular further indicated, as it had with Henderson, that the furor over the poem did not emanate exclusively from politically and religiously conservative circles. A bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Ransom had long championed liberal causes in his denomination and was among the first African American ministers to embrace the Social Gospel.³² He had also been a longtime supporter of the New Negro movement and the New Negro writers in particular, celebrating them as God-ordained arbiters of black culture in a poem he wrote in 1923, "The New Negro."³³ He entitled the following poem "All Hail to Christ: A la Langston Hughes."

Listen Hughes,
You are not sacrilegious—
Just silly.
You are no more profane
Than the flight of a bat
In the twilight,
Or the screech of an owl,
In the Gothic towers of a temple.
This futility great Shakespeare saw,
In the dog that bays the moon.
Stop on the brimstone, Hughes.
Go away from that mike,
And get the hell off the air.
Stop your kidding,
“Don’t be so slow about moving;
Move!”
Not a religion, but a life
Of Peace and Goodwill,
Would the Nazarene give to the Ages,
While your Saints, Lenin and Stalin,
Spread violence, terror and blood.
So these are the guys,
Who are going to take charge
Of our social salvation,
Led on by a prophet like you.
Alas! And Alac!
Light breaks from the Cross
Of the Prince of Peace
While a growing world-brotherhood
Is slowly building
A Temple of Justice and Peace
According to the Plan
Of the Master—
Goodbye, Hughes.
All hail to Christ!³⁴

Ransom wrote the poem using the same free verse style, similar linguistic frames, and terminologies as "Goodbye Christ," as if to mock Hughes. The central ideas were that Hughes lacked the necessary theological depth for his poem to even merit being considered "sacrilegious" and that as literature it did not rise to the level of the "great Shakespeare." More important, the political systems of the Communist "Saints" Lenin and Stalin were not salvific, but were, rather, bloody and tyrannical. Justice, peace, and brotherhood could only come from Christ, "the Master."³⁵

The poem by D. DeWitt Turpeau Jr., "Father Forgive," revealed more compassion for Hughes than Ransom's poem. But it, too, was dismissive, contrasting Hughes's insignificance with the significance of Christ, who "came down through the ages." Turpeau seemed similarly perturbed at Hughes and bothered by the implications of "Goodbye Christ." "Father Forgive" was his prayer of redemption for one he considered both "childish" and a "self-styled philosophic crank."

Forgive, O Christ, the poet of unlimited promise,
 For his blasphemous words like the thief on the cross,
 Open his eyes to the inevitable ending
 Crowned with disappointment, regret and remorse.
 And for this misinformed and erring young pilgrim
 May I offer a prayer, not as a priest or a preacher,
 That soon he may have a prodigal's awakening,
 And know Thee, O Lord, as his personal redeemer."³⁶

Forgiveness had also been the theme of another African American minister's poetic response to Hughes weeks earlier. Bishop E. E. Bennett wrote "Forgive Him Christ" as a prayer for the "foolish Bard" and his "sacrilegious" poem. He wrote as if fearful for Hughes's soul for having the audacity to "mock his God." "How can he bid Thee "Go"? / Refuse Thine aid, spurn truth / Reject the anguish, pain and dreadful woe." Like Ransom and Turpeau, Bennett was intent on contrasting the supremacy of Christ to the "dust" of Langston Hughes, but for him, "Goodbye Christ" seemed more a simple matter of a sinner in need of redemption.

Forgive!
 "Christ Jesus, Lord God, Jehovah,"
 Forgive and stay Thy Rod.
 Pardon, Lord, the blasphemy, sacrilege,
 Of this blind, railing, son of earth
 Who dares deny Thee God.
 Forgive him, Christ!
 'Tis lack of faith in Thee,
 Injustice, wrongs done his and him
 By some who own Thy name,
 Which prompts his sin.³⁷

Unlike Henderson, none of these ministers attempted to critically engage the poem, either to judge its value as poetry or the quality of its ideas. They seemingly operated from the standpoint that the poem was sacrilegious and its ideas, therefore, meritless. In the end, their responses seemed more akin to panic among marketing executives whose "product" had been defamed. Seen as a challenge and warning, Hughes's poem threatened the relevance not only of these ministers, but also of American Christianity.

Wore Out and in the Way

The Scottsboro case and the Great Depression bolstered a culture of complaint and critique among another set of American ministers, whose sermons and social commentary provided a striking contrast to the likes of Henderson, Ransom, Bennett, and Turpeau. These clerics expressed themselves as politically, theologically, and literarily in synch with Hughes and offered dire assessments of American religion that mirrored and at times exceeded Hughes's in "Goodbye Christ." Their complaints and critiques not only further demonstrated the extent of the poem's polarizing effect, but also revealed what was for them primarily at stake in the debate, which was the very relevance of the American church. Indeed, in their view, the failure of the church to meet the crises of the Scottsboro case and the Depression served as one of culture's key tenets. It was also one of the primary precipitators of the calls for a

"new religion." The Scottsboro case seemed to be an example of how the church was "loosing ground" or had "missed an opportunity," as asserted by a Philadelphia divine who delivered the keynote address before the Baptist Seminar held in Washington, DC in July 1933. Reverend W. H. R. Powell's address argued that "thoughtful" people were losing confidence in the black Baptist church principally because of social inaction. "We are challenged to definite action by the principles involved in the far-famed Scottsboro case. As a denomination, we cannot hope to maintain the confidence and sympathies of our people, especially the young and thoughtful, as long as we refuse to be touched by these circumstances which so seriously affect us." The major problem with black Baptists, according to Powell, was a lack of vision and what he termed "progressive paralysis." Radicalism, industrialism, and the proper distribution of wealth were the issues of the day, yet black Baptists had nothing to say about them.³⁸

Powell used similarly strong language to expound upon these and other points during his keynote address at a Baptist convocation in Philadelphia a few months later. Powell, a fiery and busy minister who simultaneously held a pastorate in Philadelphia while heading a Virginia seminary in Lynchburg, argued that the black Baptist church was losing its historic influence in the black community. While it had a remarkable history, had done great work in the past and retained tremendous potential, it had become unhealthy and stagnate. Certain leaders had become "pus pockets of denominational weakness," Powell contended, and constituted "centers of evil," spreading their pernicious influence throughout the entire black Baptist world, leaving it "diseased and paralyzed." Comparing the present state of the black Baptist church to the Babylonian captivity, Powell argued that the core problem was an idolatrous hold on an outdated, antimodern theology, ill-fitted for the present day. Black Baptists were faced with a choice: "stand aside and make room for a new leadership outside of and contrary to the church," or create a new leadership and a "new faith" responsive to the needs of the day.³⁹

For Powell, "a new social order" was the pressing need for black Baptists. The social injustices that existed around the world—which black Baptists seemed woefully unaware of—were what had prompted the Russian Revolution in 1917, upheavals in Spain and Italy, as well as the rise of the Nazi movement in Germany. In order to face the demands

of the “modern world,” he recommended a “complete revision” of black Baptist creeds and articles of faith. “The principles of Jesus Christ are subject to reinterpretation at the crossroads of every crisis, when it becomes evident that old interpretations are outgrown,” he contended.⁴⁰

Speaking at the same Baptist convocation, Reverend M. A. Talley opened his address with a question he believed was on the minds of many black Americans: “Is this the Christianity intended for us, or shall we look for another?” In answer to the question—which Edward Taylor had attributed to Langston Hughes earlier in the year—Talley, a pastor of Mt. Zion Church in Indianapolis, concluded that blacks had adopted a form of Christianity from “Anglo-Saxons” that had been “de-Christianized” and no longer reflected the values of Jesus. The Christian religion had become corrupted and was merely “a wolf in sheep’s clothing.” No longer the “Bride of Christ,” it was the “Harlot of the Nations.” There was a point at which blacks had “marvelously profited” from Christianity, he asserted, but since the time of slavery and emancipation blacks began to absorb more of the “distorted” religion of whites and have since “not only lost Christ, but we have lost his power and personal life in our religion.” Blacks needed to repudiate that which was handed down to them and “make a new religion.”⁴¹

Dr. L. H. King, pastor of St. Mark’s Methodist Episcopal Church in New York had an even broader message. Rather than implicating his or another denomination for current social ills, he asserted that religion itself was the problem. Speaking at a Methodist Episcopal Clergyman’s conference, King argued that religion was insufficient for the “present age” and must undergo radical change if there was to be any hope for relevance in the modern world. The economic interests of the powerful, who agitated class and racial division, controlled religion in America. Like many who launched these complaints, King called for a new church free of the “myths” of Christianity: “The new church must be more than theological teaching. It must imbibe more of the immanence of God in its relations to humans. It must save the lives of men rather than seek after that elusive thing called the soul. Not one out of ten thousand persons believes in a hell, and a new religion that will bring the richest, fullest and freest experience in living will be the only thing that will meet the demand caused by the revolution in the hearts of the people against the old order.”⁴² Bishop E. D. W. Jones, A.M.E. Zion Bishop of South Carolina,

took a similar view contending that African Americans needed a new religion of "revised beliefs." This new church and new religion should be devoid of the supernatural (the Christian myths) but be anchored in reason and experience. "We should revise entirely our religious beliefs and practices and give to our people the birth of a new church and a new religion," he told his audience. "Neither should be based upon denominational creeds, rituals and ecclesiastical ceremonies, but upon experience, reason, hope, truth and the ultimate triumph of the right." While not inciting a full abandonment of the Christian faith, King and Jones called for a new interpretation of the life and teachings of Christ.⁴³

Throughout the early 1930s, these calls for a "new religion" continued from all sectors of the American Christian church. Many, like R. W. Tryne, called for the wholesale "demythologizing" of the Christian tradition. Tryne's 1933 "sermonette" insisted that science had disproved the most basic tenets of Christianity, including the fall of humanity and the infallibility of Scripture. Others, such as former Howard University president Wilbur Patterson Thirkield, merely sought changes among black preachers, reckoning that too much attention had been given to dogmatic theology and not enough to the "practical ways of life." In all, these calls for a "new religion" showed that many religious thinkers and thinkers about religion considered the church to be antimodern. The real need was for a new church with modern forms based on modern ideas. None other than W. E. B. DuBois suggested this publicly—and in a church. At the December 1932 Young People's Forum at Bethel AME Church in Baltimore, he shocked the listening audience by declaring that he did not attend church because preachers usually had "nothing to say." And when asked, "Do you believe that the present system of religion should be discarded and a new religion based on science substituted?" he simply responded, "yes."⁴⁴

The Soviet Union indeed provided the most immediate context in which to understand "Goodbye Christ" since Hughes wrote it there and was doubtlessly influenced by his Russian experiences. The culture of complaint and critique that had developed among a few New Negro poets, black intellectuals, and some African American ministers and laypeople during the early 1930s, however, is just as significant. Hughes's daring to bid "goodbye" to Christ happened at a time when others from around the country were working toward a radical reconfiguration of

the Christian tradition. Despite the furor among those like Henderson, Ransom, Bennett, and Turpeau, who dismissed Hughes and the poem as "sacrilegious," the poem was integral to an ongoing discussion that questioned the efficacy of black churches and the relevance of American religion. And at least from the standpoint of the African American church, the publication of *The Negro Church* in 1933 by Benjamin Mays and Joseph Nicholson tended to substantiate those claims. Finding that black communities were "over churching," the two sociologists concluded, "except in rare instances it ('the black church') is static, non-progressive and fails to challenge the loyalty of many of the most critically minded Negroes."⁴⁵

Popes, Preachers, and Money

Most people came to the conclusion that Langston Hughes was an "atheist" after the publication of "Goodbye Christ." They took the poem to be a declaration of his nonbelief in God and his rejection of Christianity in particular, what German theologian Rudolf Bultmann calls "conscious atheism . . . the categorical denial of the reality of God as . . . encountered in church dogmatics."⁴⁶ There is little question that the radical poems of a religious nature, of which "Goodbye Christ" was a part, grew from and reflected a time when Hughes was furthest removed from the institution of the church, the most critical of the Christian religion generally, and perhaps his most skeptical about the church, religion, and God. He had demonstrated a capacity for this level of skepticism and doubt the night of his failed conversion at age twelve when he proclaimed that he "didn't believe there was a Jesus anymore." Aside from this moment, however, there are no instances in Hughes's entire body of work that proclaim an outright disbelief in God, or a denial of God's existence. And "Goodbye Christ" does not qualify as such for a reason that many of his detractors missed. Hughes's apparent "dismissal" of Christ necessarily implied Christ's existence and presence. Those who used the poem as evidence of Hughes's atheism, therefore, either misread it or read into it for particular political purposes. In the same way that Hughes would declare that none of his writing was antireligious, he could have also proclaimed that not even the poem most responsible for his reputation as an atheist asserted an unqualified disbelief in God.

The detractors also underestimated the power and misunderstood the role of metaphor as a literary device. In literary terms, "Christ" in the poem can be understood as a metaphor for churches in America. James Oliver Slade was among the few who made this connection when he asked, "is it not likely that Langston Hughes, although knowing the real philosophy of Jesus Christ has conveniently used His name analogous with the church that is the exterior of Christ (the interior) now that He has passed from active human life in order to awaken us so-called Christians who have abused His institution, the church"?⁴⁷ "Christ" in the poem personified the American Christian church in the same way the "guy with no religion" served as a metaphor for the Soviet Union. "Goodbye Christ" compared one religious/political system with another. So the poem was not a statement of non-belief or a call to jettison God because it made no attempt to speak of God directly. It was a call to either reform the American church or to eradicate it.

For Hughes, American churches had become inextricably tied to capitalism, and that was one of the major points of the poem. Indeed, capitalism in his view had become the true religion of America. His use of the language of the market to depict religion in "Goodbye Christ" was meant to demonstrate the corrupting impact of capitalism on his notion of true religion. For this reason, the mention of Pope Pius XI remains baffling. Although he was from aristocratic Italian roots and would emphatically state the Catholic Church's philosophical opposition to Communism as intrinsically atheistic, Pius XI was staunchly anticapitalist and a champion of the poor and working classes, as well as the racially marginalized. Seemingly he was "an autocrat through and through," as John Julius Norwich has claimed, but his pontificate is generally viewed to have been humane and progressive.⁴⁸ The assessment of Gandhi was more mixed, and Hughes appeared to be of two minds about him, producing a later poem in which he hailed the power of the nationalist leader's "fasting."⁴⁹ By the time "Goodbye Christ" was written, Gandhi had already become internationally recognized for his fight for India's independence from the British Empire. He had renounced all material possessions allegedly to devote himself to the cause of the poor and the powerless around the world. Not everyone at the time viewed Gandhi's actions as entirely selfless, politically expedient, or economically viable, however, noting the ways it tended to overburden the very people he

aimed to champion. As Indian independence activist and poet Sarojini Naidu famously quipped, "it costs a lot to keep Gandhi poor." Gandhi became the saintly self-sacrificing anticapitalist and anticolonialist freedom fighter that not everyone believed him to be during his lifetime.⁵⁰

The two Americans mentioned in that group of four in "Goodbye Christ" were another matter. Dr. George W. Becton, also known as "big black Saint Becton," whom Hughes had met, personified the profiteering of capitalist religion. Becton had become famous for the "consecrated dime" program he instituted in which he expected the twenty thousand primarily poor members of his church to put aside a dime a day to be given over to him weekly upon his request in exchange for divine blessing. In what must have appeared to Hughes as a disturbing if unsurprising turn of events, Becton was shot at point blank range by mobsters in Philadelphia just months after "Goodbye Christ" appeared in the *Afro-American*.⁵¹ "Saint Aimee McPherson" was little better than George Becton as far as Hughes was concerned. During the 1920s and 1930s, Aimee Semple McPherson rode a wave of popularity previously unknown to American ministers, with the possible exception of Billy Sunday. Her five-thousand-seat Angelus Temple in Los Angeles netted her millions of dollars annually, providing her a lavish lifestyle that belied her humble Salvation Army roots. Her church services, part of the Four Square Gospel Church, a denomination she founded, were known as much for their theatricality as anything else, and McPherson's Hollywood good looks and flare for the dramatic contributed to her celebrity. As her biographer Daniel Epstein wrote, "Her years on the tent-show circuit had taught her that a religious service is sacred drama, a species of non-fictional theater, pure and simple."⁵² By the time her name appeared in "Goodbye Christ," McPherson's career had already been marked by charges of charlatanism, lawsuits, a mysterious disappearance (and an even more bizarre reappearance), two divorces, and a sex scandal. The protest she staged at the Vista del Arroyo Hotel in 1940 would not be the last time she publicly attacked Hughes for naming her in the poem. Indeed, McPherson harbored a particular animus for Hughes, and until her death in 1944 regularly denounced him from her Los Angeles pulpit. For his part, Hughes made her one of the primary targets in "Christians and Communists," most likely written for his weekly *Chicago Defender* column in 1943. In it, Hughes stated that while McPherson had declared

him "an enemy of religion and democracy," she had shown no interest in the betterment of black people or in efforts to "extend to us democracy." For Hughes, she and Becton were among the worst examples of the Christian religion.

A few months after the Pasadena incident and perhaps sensing a genuine opportunity to clarify his motives for writing "Goodbye Christ," Hughes wrote an article published in the *Chicago Defender* entitled, "Let's Get It Straight." It was subtitled "Poet, a little confused about all the fuss made over a poem he wrote 10 years ago, does a little explaining for those just getting around to it." The article suggested that Hughes was genuinely befuddled by the flap and struck a tone that was defiant but explicatory. Intending to reveal his motivations and the context in which he wrote "Goodbye Christ," he explained that the shock value was his initial primary intent. He wrote the poem "with the intention in mind of shocking into being in religious people a consciousness of the admitted shortcomings of the church in regard to the condition of the poor and oppressed of the world, particularly the Negro people." He disagreed with the common assumption that the Russian context played a primary role in the writing of the poem. Although he wrote the poem while in Russia, he argued, it did not serve as the primary context or motivation for writing. The true context for "Goodbye Christ," rather, were the memories he carried from a trip through the American South just prior to leaving for Russia, the Scottsboro case, and the widespread discrimination he witnessed in other parts of the United States. His impassioned description of the trip and what he saw is near poetic and has all the hallmarks of Hughes's characteristic plainspoken style:

Just previous to the writing of the poem, in 1931 I had made a tour through the heart of our American Southland. For the first time I saw peonage, million dollar high schools for white children and shacks for Negro children (both of whose parents work and pay taxes and are Americans). I saw vast areas in which Negro citizens were not permitted to vote. I saw the Scottsboro boys in prison in Alabama and colored citizens of the state afraid to utter a word in their defense.

I crossed rivers by ferry where the Negro drivers of cars had to wait until all the white cars behind them had been accommodated before boarding the ferry even if it meant missing the boat. I motored as far

north as Seattle and back across America to New York through towns and cities where neither bed nor bard was to be had if you were colored, cafes, hotels, and tourist camps being closed to all non-whites. I saw the horrors of hunger and unemployment among my people in the segregated ghettos of our great cities. I saw lecture halls and public cultural institutions closed to them. I saw the Hollywood caricatures of what passes for Negroes on the screens that condition the attitudes of a nation. I visited state and religious colleges to which no Negroes were admitted. To me these things appeared unbelievable in a Christian country.

It was not that the Soviet Union played no part in the writing of the poem, however. Coming on the heels of his experience during his America tour, the trip to Russia provided a contrast between Soviet and American societies that seemed striking and noticeably clear. With regard to the construction of an egalitarian society, Marxist Russia had accomplished what Christian America had miserably failed to do. “There it seemed to me that Marxism had put into practical being many of the precepts which our own Christian America had not yet been able to bring into life, for in the Soviet Union, meager as the resources of the country were, white and black, Asiatic and European, Jew and Gentile stood alike as citizens on an equal footing protected from racial inequalities by the law.” Hughes, as he put it, was “deeply impressed by these things.”⁵³

He was impressed because like most Americans in the 1940s, Hughes would have been well aware of depictions of Russia as atheistic and anti-religious. Yet, in this supposed godless country he and his cohorts had been received with a hero’s welcome and the country functioned apparently without regard to racial, ethnic, or class differences. The contrast was glaring and one of the principal supports for the claim from some within the culture of complaint and critique that Communism was more “Christ-like.” It was in the spirit of contrast that Hughes penned the poem. But in his explanation of the contrast Hughes also revealed the central irony of the poem—a word he would use again and again to describe it. It was not only Marxists who had bid Christ “goodbye,” it was also Christians, those who had forsaken the most basic principles of their faith with regard to American blacks. “In the poem I contrasted what seemed to me the declared and forthright position of those who,

on the religious side in America (in apparent actions toward my people) had said to Christ and the Christian principles, 'Goodbye, beat it on away from here now, you're done for.'" "I gave to such religionists," he further explained, "what seemed to me to be their own words merged with the words of the orthodox Marxist who declared he had no further use nor need for religion."⁵⁴

In "Let's Get It Straight," Hughes also dealt with the poem's subjectivity. He was clear on one point: he was not the "I" in the poem. Those who read "Goodbye Christ" should no more see him as the subject as they would in his other poems, where he was clearly not the subject because of time, place, gender, or social location—the blues poems, for example. The "I" in the poem, rather, was a complicated amalgam of voices. In addition to the hypocritical Christian and the godless Marxist, the voice was that of "the newly liberated peasant of the state, collectives I had seen in Russia merged with those American Negro workers of the depression period who believed in the Soviet dream and the hope it held out for a solution of [*sic*] their racial and economic difficulties." What he did not, and perhaps could not, say, was that among the amalgam of voices was his own, for as he would strongly imply in "A Note on Poetry" for the *Free Lance* magazine in 1950 and plainly state to James Emanuel in 1961, he was to be found somewhere in all his poems and his stories. "Of course, I am in all of them," he wrote.⁵⁵

What most clearly annoyed Hughes about the way in which people read "Goodbye Christ" had less to do with his subjectivity and more to do with their limited perspective on the entirety of his work. They often failed to view it in light of his other work and also considered him somehow immutable. He had written "many verses most sympathetic to the true Christian spirit" for which he had "great respect," but his detractors seemingly took no notice. He had even won the Harmon Award from the Federal Council of Churches for his novel *Not without Laughter*. Perhaps more importantly in his view, he had changed as a person and as a poet over the last ten years. His political views and approaches had mellowed. Stating that he had left the terrain of the "radical at 20" to become the "conservative at 40," he insisted that he could no longer write such a poem as "Goodbye Christ." Indeed, he harbored doubts about the political efficacy of poetry. The world was long past the time when a poem could shock people into consciousness. He stated, "I would not

now use such a technique of approach since I feel that a mere poem is quite unable to compete in power to shock with the current horrors of war and oppression abroad in the greater part of the world." The war had proven that humanity was in a sad state, "both Marxists and Christians can be cruel." Changes in government, therefore, must be preceded by a change in the human heart. On that note, he ended "Let's Get It Straight" with what was effectively a prayer for civic and social salvation. "Would that Christ came back to save us all. We do not know how to save ourselves."⁵⁶

Poet and Poem under Pressure

After the publication of "Let's Get it Straight" in January 1941, it became clear to Hughes, his publishers at the *Chicago Defender* and at Knopf, his lawyer, and many of his friends that "Goodbye Christ" was a problem he needed to address in a public way with a public statement that went beyond that essay. Since the publication of the poem in 1932 Hughes had received a "mountain of mail" regarding it, making it an ever-increasing and distracting factor in his career.⁵⁷ Aimee Semple McPherson had not ceased her attacks from the previous year and the *Saturday Evening Post* had printed an unauthorized spread of the poem in its Christmas issue—without commentary, which suggested it was a "new poem." The embarrassing episode in Pasadena was damaging enough, but Hughes's publisher at Knopf and his lawyer, in particular, felt that the unauthorized reprint in the *Post* "required a comeback and explanation."⁵⁸ So at the Hollow Hills farm of his friend Noel Sullivan in Monterey, California, and desperately sick with the flu, Hughes began writing a statement he called "Concerning 'Goodbye Christ.'" He would revise and edit the statement for the next twenty years.

Hughes disliked making "statements," but he was even more averse to controversy and it distressed him that a poem from his past required any response at all. Writing to several friends throughout the months of January and February 1941 he revealed just how disheartened he had become. To Matthew Crawford, an African American labor rights activist whom Hughes had met in California in 1932, he wrote: "Golly! How I hate all this controversy! Deluged with letters from everybody left, right, colored, and Christians." To Louise Thompson he despaired,

"the New Year came down on my head like a ton of bricks!!!" because of the flu, a toothache, and "Aimee and the SATURDAY EVENING POST." He enclosed a copy of the statement in his letter to Thompson and requested that she get back to him with her reactions, conceding as he also did to Crawford that the situation required "some sort of statement." "I had intended, as usual with me in controversial matters, to simply say nothing," he further stated, "but . . . GBC ['Goodbye Christ'] . . . just won't down."⁵⁹ Thompson and Hughes had been friends since the late 1920s when she arrived in Harlem after a short teaching stint at Hampton Institute. They remained close friends through Hughes's tumultuous breakup with Charlotte Mason (for whom Thompson worked for a time), his dispute with Zora Neale Hurston over the authorship of "Mule Bone," her brief marriage to the gay writer and one-time Hughes collaborator, Wallace Thurman, and the failed movie-making expedition to the Soviet Union. She was convinced that Hughes was special and gravely misunderstood. To her, Hughes was a person of "many moods," and "the things that he felt deepest about he scarcely ever talked about." Their bond was a strong one, and it was clear why he would seek her advice about "Goodbye Christ."⁶⁰

Shifting at times between apology and defense, the various versions of "Concerning 'Goodbye Christ'" expressed Hughes's view that the poem had been greatly misunderstood and wrongfully handled by his enemies. Over the years, the poem had been reprinted (even though Hughes had taken it out of circulation) by the likes of the KKK, the Minute Women of America, and Gerald L. K. Smith and his America First Party. Smith, "minister of hate," an ultra-nationalist and "nationally known Negro-hater," who was also an anti-Communist and anti-Jewish agitator, had turned the poem into a rallying cry against Hughes and anyone who supported him.⁶¹ Smith was also prominently featured alongside McPherson in "Christians and Communists." While most of the statement was intended to address the contention that Hughes was a member of the Communist Party, it was just as adamant that he was not an atheist, issues that most of his detractors, including Smith and McPherson, had conflated. Indeed, later versions of the statement addressed accusations of irreligion in greater detail than accusations of his alleged membership in the Communist Party.

The first versions of “Concerning ‘Goodbye Christ’” struck a defiant and politically charged tone, as had “Let’s Get It Straight.” Hughes characterized those who used the poem to stain his reputation as “the most anti-Negro, anti-Jewish, anti-Labor, and anti-Roosevelt groups in our country.” They could “hardly be called Christians,” he insisted, because their actions did not honor Christ. They made democracy and religion a reactionary “evil” that masked their hatred of blacks and their anti-Semitism. Conceding that he had once belonged to organizations that supported leftist causes—as did other high-profile Americans such as Ernest Hemingway, Dorothy Parker, and Vincent Sheen—Hughes concluded the statement by asserting his “freedom of speech” and his right to oppose his attackers. The poem was “no reflection on Christ” and was not intended to be antireligious, as they had claimed. It was, rather, “a poem against racketeering, profiteering, racial segregation and showmanship in religion which, at the time, I felt was undermining the foundations of the great and decent ideals for which Christ stood.”⁶²

Hughes tempered the defiant tone of the statement after Joseph McCarthy and the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations (PSI) called him to give testimony before them in March 1953. The subcommittee had been established in 1948 to continue work done by a special committee chaired by Harry S. Truman during the Second World War to investigate allegations of corruption in the national defense program. When McCarthy assumed the chairmanship in 1953 he continued the work that had been started by others to redirect the focus of the subcommittee, turning it into a tribunal to expose Communist subversives among federal employees as well as the general public. Hughes was genuinely baffled by the subpoena, as he explained in writing to McCarthy, “the space apparently provided in the subpoena to inform me why my presence is required is entirely blank.”⁶³ Although the subpoena contained no explanation, as the hours of the interrogation passed it became increasingly clear to Hughes that “Goodbye Christ” sat at the center of the committee’s interest in questioning him.

It is likely Hughes first thought the summons had something to do with rumors that he was homosexual. By the 1950s, speculation that Hughes was gay had been a mainstay of Harlem gossip for many years, and as historian David Johnson shows, in 1950s Washington, suspected



Figure 3.2. Langston Hughes before the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, March 26, 1953; Hughes testifies before the PSI on day two of his interrogation. He is accompanied by his lawyer, Frank D. Reeves. (Photo care of AP Images.)

homosexuals and Communists were both considered serious threats to national security.⁶⁴ The true impetus for the summons, however, was likely more personal and more sinister. Hughes had been under the watchful “eyes” of Hoover and the FBI since the Pasadena incident in 1940, and they had gathered a great deal of information about him, much of it plainly wrong, including the notion that he belonged to thirteen different Communist organizations. Indeed, if Hughes was concerned that he would face questions about his alleged homosexuality, he need not have worried. Hoover’s informants not only considered Hughes to be heterosexual but also to be married to a white woman named Sonya Croll with whom he had a son and whose mother was a “known Communist operative.”⁶⁵ In the information-gathering, Hoover had come across “Goodbye Christ” and had been using it across the country in a speech entitled “Secularism—A Breeder of Crime” in which he vilified Hughes and Communists in American society. When the editors at Abingdon-Cokesbury Press asked him to submit a written version of his speech for publication, he was put in the ironic and awkward position of asking Hughes for his permission to use the poem in the published essay. Specifically, Hoover wanted to say, “The blasphemous utterances of one who sought public office on the ticket of the Communist Party, as represented by Langston Hughes, in a poem entitled ‘Goodbye, Christ’ reflect their [secularists’] true aims.” The editors had refused to publish the essay without Hughes’s permission. After many months of back and

forth, Hughes ultimately refused. Hoover was humiliated and his anger at Hughes likely played a role when, five years later, Hughes received the summons in the mail from McCarthy.⁶⁶

The first day of the interrogation was a "closed session" conducted by Republican Senator Everett McKinley Dirksen of Illinois. Roy Cohn served as special counsel. After a few preliminary questions concerning Hughes's age, employment, and residence, Dirksen explained that Hughes had been called before the subcommittee because of a federally funded propaganda campaign. Congress had appropriated over eighty-five million dollars "for the purpose of propagandizing the free world" with pro-American literature to be placed in libraries.⁶⁷ When it was discovered that Hughes's poetry books had inadvertently been a part of this effort, the subcommittee deemed it necessary to have him explain if his work was in fact pro-American rather than pro-Communist.⁶⁸

Roy Cohn, who already at that early stage in his career was recognized as one of the most ruthless lawyers in the country and who would later in his life vehemently deny his homosexuality, made repeated attempts to get Hughes to confess that he had been a member of the Communist Party and that he still believed in the ideals of Communism.⁶⁹ Hughes responded by saying he had never to his knowledge attended a Communist Party meeting, and as to whether he believed in Communist ideals, "I would have to know what you mean by your definition of communism," he retorted. When Dirksen took command of the questioning he wasted no time revealing that the interrogation was rooted in the Pasadena incident and one of Hughes's poems, "Goodbye Christ." Before reading the first stanza of the poem, Dirksen stated that his "familiarity with the Negro people" led him to conclude that they were "innately a very devout and religious people." He wanted to know if Hughes thought "the Book [the Bible] is dead" and whether or not "Goodbye Christ" could be considered an accurate reflection of African American religious values. The underlying current of the question was to determine if the poem represented Hughes's atheism, and therefore, his belief in Communism.⁷⁰ Hughes responded, "No sir, I do not." Seemingly looking for an opportunity to teach his inquisitors something about literature and the craft of poetry writing, Hughes responded at length when Dirksen asked him about his "purpose" for writing poetry. "You write it out of your soul," Hughes began, "and you write it for your

individual feeling of expression. First sir, it does not come from yourself in the first place. It comes from something beyond oneself, in my opinion." Hughes concluded by asserting the spirituality of poetry and of life. "There is something more than myself in the creation of everything that I do. I believe that is in every creation, sir." Dirksen registered his befuddlement that these "rather ethereal thoughts" could "suddenly" come upon Hughes.⁷¹

The session intensified when Dirksen and Cohn attempted to get Hughes not only to declare himself a Communist but also to name names. When asked if he knew Paul Robeson, Hughes answered by saying that he knew him well before his fame but not so much since. The answer did not please the committee, as Cohn launched into a tirade about the consequences of "not telling the truth." Cohn was particularly keen on getting Hughes to confess to writing an article in 1949 for the *Daily Worker* in which Hughes defended Communist leaders. He also wanted him to implicate the *Chicago Defender* and to claim ownership of a number of other poems, including "Ballad of Lenin," "When Sue Wears Red," and "Good Morning Revolution." Hughes claimed the poems as his own, but sensing that admitting so was turning the tide of the interrogation, he requested an extended time to tell the story of his life, which he insisted would help the committee to "interpret" his authorship of those poems. After a period of more testimony and interrogation, Cohn again attempted to get Hughes to declare at least an affinity with the Communist Party. Hughes responded by saying that he has at times disagreed with the Communist Party, particularly its attack on black leaders and found himself to be "under attack" by Communists who looked unfavorably on his "sympathy and interest and encouragement to religious groups and religion in general." Again, Cohn was not satisfied. "Would you call this poem, 'Goodbye, Christ,' a sympathetic dealing with religion?" Hughes held his ground. "Yes, I would."

All pretensions about the true reason for which Hughes had been summoned before the PSI, however, were abandoned during the public session chaired by Senator McCarthy two days later. (What happened in the interim of the two meetings remains a mystery.) Sure in the knowledge that "Goodbye Christ" prompted the subcommittee's insistence that he was both an atheist and a Communist, Hughes had his lawyer,

Frank D. Reeves, an African American from Washington, DC, read the latest version of “Concerning, ‘Goodbye Christ.’”

Perhaps the most misunderstood of my poems was “Goodbye, Christ.” Since it is an ironic poem (and irony is apparently a quality not readily understood in poetry by unliterary minds) it has been widely misinterpreted as an anti-religious poem. This I did not mean it to be, but rather a poem against racketeering, profiteering, racial segregation, and showmanship in religion which, at the time, I felt was undermining the foundations of the great and decent ideals for which Christ himself stood. And behind the poem is a pity and sorrow that this should be taken by some as meaning to them that Christianity and religion in general has no value. Because of the publication of this poem—which more than fifteen years ago I withdrew from publication and which has since been used entirely without my permission by groups interested in fomenting racial and social discord, I have been termed on occasion, a Communist or an atheist. I am not now an atheist, and never have been an atheist. . . . I am not a member of the Communist Party now and have never been a member of the Communist Party.⁷²

McCarthy did not read from “Goodbye Christ” as Dirksen had done at the “closed session,” but he placed it on file, where it remains as part of the *Congressional Record*. Seemingly pleased with Hughes’s denunciation of the poem, as well as his statements that he was neither atheist nor Communist, the subcommittee nevertheless pressed further:

COHN: That poem, you no longer hold any of the views expressed in that poem? Is that correct?

HUGHES: No, I do not. It is a very young, awkward poem written in the late 1920s or early 1930s. It does not express my views or my artistic techniques today.

MCCARTHY: It was written at a time when you were devoted to the Communist cause and you would not subscribe to this at this time at all?

HUGHES: No, Sir, I certainly would not.

MCCARTHY: Thank you.

COHN: No further questions of Mr. Hughes, Mr. Chairman? Mr.

McClellan?

MCCARTHY: Thank you very much, Mr. Hughes.

HUGHES: I am excused now?

COHN: Yes, you're excused.⁷³

Hughes's answer reflected an important shift in his statements about "Goodbye Christ," as he began for the first time to downplay the significance of the poem, understate its quality, and to emphasize that it had long been misused and misunderstood. He had been conquered and his exhaustion showed.

Possibly as a further means to humiliate Hughes, McCarthy and his fellow inquisitors forced him to provide examples of his work that showed his "pro-democratic belief" and "faith in Democracy" when throughout the 1940s that was precisely the theme of many of his poems and other writings. When Senator McClellan asked, "have you written other works, other books that repudiate the philosophies expressed in these writings that we now find in the libraries?" Hughes mentioned "Freedom's Plow." Written in 1943 for a radio program at the request of Lester B. Granger, executive secretary of the National Urban League in New York, the prose poem was an optimistic social vision of America that saw blacks and whites building the country together.

America!
Land created in common
Dream nourished in common
Keep your hand on the plow!
Hold on!

In explaining the poem to PSI members, Hughes said that the country had "many problems still to solve," but it was "young, big, strong, and beautiful." Justice was for all and "all of us are a part of democracy."⁷⁴

In addition to "Freedom's Plow," much of the work of Langston Hughes during the 1940s, especially during the war years, expressed confidence in the democratic process. In a striking departure from the radical themes of 1930s poetry and prose, these works were "nationalist" in sentiment. In such poems as "Words Like Freedom," "The Black Man

Speaks,” Freedom [1]” and “Freedom [2],” Hughes seems to suggest that black people’s participation in a war to spread democracy and to stop fascist tyranny would transform American race relations. In “The Black Man Speaks,” the question is mostly rhetorical, stated as if the process had already begun:

If we’re fighting to create
A free world tomorrow
Why not end *right now*
Old Jim Crow’s sorrow?

In “To Captain Mulzac,” Hughes revisits the “unity” theme he had expressed in “Freedom’s Plow.” Depicting America as “a crew of many races—yet all of one blood,” Hughes intones that the hope of the country was in the combined efforts of its black and white citizens. “In union, you, White Man / And I, Black Man / Can be Free.” At the end of “The Sun Do Move,” a play he wrote for the Skyloft Players in Chicago in 1942, the protagonist, Rock, and the audience sing “The Star-Spangled Banner.”⁷⁵

Before Hughes was dismissed from the proceedings, the committee dealt him a parting insult. McCarthy asked if he felt he had been “mis-treated” by the subcommittee during the interrogation. Hughes replied that he was “agreeably surprised” at how “courteous and friendly” the proceedings had been, and particularly Dirksen, who was “most gracious.”⁷⁶ Not once throughout the two-day session was Hughes pressed to further expound upon his stated intent that “Goodbye Christ” aimed to address profiteering and racketeering in American religion. And then McCarthy winked. In a move that was doubtlessly given to punctuate his victory over yet another detainee before his government-sponsored tribunal, McCarthy “flashed [Hughes] a wink.”⁷⁷ The ordeal was over, the humiliation complete.

The appearance before the PSI devastated Hughes. At the end of two days of rapid-fire questioning he acquiesced (as most did) by denouncing a poem he had previously proclaimed “good.” Faced with McCarthy and his inquisitors, Hughes chose to give the subcommittee what they most desired—a reason to earmark “Goodbye Christ” as an atheistic piece of Communist propaganda. In doing so, Hughes employed what

David E. Chinitz calls his “ethics of compromise.” It was both an artistic and political compromise, but to do otherwise would have further jeopardized his reputation and quite possibly his career. That had become painfully clear over the course of the two sessions, and he was gravely concerned about it. A few weeks after the proceedings, Hughes wrote John Sengstacke, the editor of the *Chicago Defender*, to give him assurances that “the name of the DEFENDER only came up once.” Hughes had not stained the newspaper and he, as a frequent columnist, had come out “entirely in the clear.” He made a similar point in a letter to Frank Reeves a month after the ordeal. “All of my publishers are pleased with the outcome of the hearings, have backed me up beautifully, and are going ahead with their publishing plans in relation to my work.⁷⁸ The real blow had been to his dignity.

By the early 1960s, versions of “Concerning ‘Goodbye Christ’” made little mention of Hughes’s enemies, the wrongful way they were using the poem, or of his “freedom of speech.” It had transformed into a carefully constructed, nondefensive explanation of the poem and an obliquely worded statement about faith. Hughes had long been frustrated that the bulk of his religiously themed work had not suggested the possibility that he himself was religious. In the closed session with the PSI he had remarked to Dirksen, “Certainly I have written many religious poems, many poems about Christ, and prayers and my own feeling is not what I believe you seem to think [those poems] as meaning.”⁷⁹ In his view, not seeing his work as religious or failing to entertain the possibility that he himself could be religious was a choice made by those who did not understand him, had little capacity to rightfully interpret literature, or sought to do him harm. Later versions of the statement attracted sharper attention to this aspect of his work and drew inferences about what it could mean for Hughes personally. As he had before the Committee, Hughes wanted to emphasize changes in his own views and those in his work. Indeed, he had made a definite shift in his work, having proclaimed to Louise Thompson as early as 1940 that he was “laying off political poetry for a while . . . and going back to nature, Negroes, and love.” He had also, in his words, “gone back to the Church,” although he did not clarify what that meant.⁸⁰ Hughes still claimed that his detractors had misunderstood the irony of the poem, but he devoted more space in the statement to highlight

the repeated occurrences of religious themes in his poems. Religion had long been a key feature of his poetry, but his readers seemed to have ignored this, he claimed. They had also ignored the prominence of religion in his other works, as he stated in a version of "Concerning 'Goodbye Christ'" sent to Jean Wagner in 1960: "In my *Selected Poems* (Knopf, 1959) there is an entire section of poems on religious themes, 'Feet of Jesus,' and Marion Anderson has sung my modern spiritual of the same title. For the theatre I have written an opera, *Esther*, score by Jan Meyerowitz, the text derived from the Bible story, performed by the Boston Conservatory of Music and at the Spring Festival of the University of Illinois." In the aftermath of his appearance before the PSI, Hughes redoubled his efforts to draw attention to his religious writings, particularly his poetry. He had produced a great deal of work on the topic of religion and was at the time almost exclusively writing religious-themed plays and other works. It was time such was brought to the attention of his detractors as well as a wider readership.

Hughes focused a great deal of attention on admirers who wrote him with their concerns about "Goodbye Christ." Excerpting heavily from the statement, he wrote a personal letter in 1961 to Harold Blake from Iola, Kansas, for example, stating that the "circulators of 'Goodbye, Christ' ignore the whole body of my work and my writing over a forty-year period, during which time I have written many poems of a religious nature." That was precisely the point he also made to a Catholic nun from Evansville, Indiana. Sister Rose Veronica of Reitz Memorial High School had written him inquiring if the poem meant that he held no belief in God. Hughes first apologized for the way she had become acquainted with the poem—through the propaganda of those who were "up to no good purpose"—and reiterated that "Goodbye Christ" was an ironic and satirical poem that should not be taken literally. He then pointed her to his works that portrayed religion in a more conventional manner. But perhaps sensing that more would be required if he were to convince a skeptical nun that he was not an atheist, Hughes ended the letter on a personal and more reflexive note. "I hope that some of the material I am sending you under separate cover will indicate to you that I sincerely believe myself to have a much deeper religious feeling than those who are circulating my long out-dated (and, I feel, misunderstood) poem."⁸¹ Presenting himself as someone with "religious feeling"

was still an evasive move, but Hughes meant to assure the admiring nun that he flatly was not a nonbeliever.

Hughes seemed especially attentive to those who wrote him expressing their concern for his soul's salvation. Gerald S. Pratt Sr. of Honesdale, Pennsylvania, wrote Hughes with concerns for his spiritual state after coming across a copy of "Goodbye Christ" distributed by the conservative radio commentator Fulton Lewis Jr. From the 1930s to the 1960s, Lewis had made his mark as a staunch opponent of liberal causes, from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal to Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. In the summer of 1960 he launched an attack on the National Council of Churches for recommending Hughes's book *The Negro American*, which he falsely alleged included "Goodbye Christ." Pratt wanted to straighten out in his own mind Hughes's "political and religious status."

Did you write the poem entitled "Goodbye, Christ"? I have a copy of this poem and it is such a vile piece of literature that I would be ashamed to even quote from it. I understand that you are the author and the purpose of this letter is to inquire if this is true. Are you a Christian and do you claim to write literature that is helpful and conducive to Christian living? For what purpose are your writings, to make people better and lead them to Christianity or to lead them away from belief in Christ?

As a response, Hughes sent him a collection of material, including, presumably, "Concerning 'Goodbye Christ.'" He also included the transcript of the hearing before the PSI, and a copy of the poem "Prayer for the Mantle-Piece," on which he wrote at the bottom of the page, "copied especially for Gerald S. Pratt who queries my thoughts about God." Lewis renewed his attacks on Hughes months later, even after Pratt had asked him to cease because "Goodbye Christ" should be viewed as a product of a "youthful period of extreme radicalism." When Hughes learned of the renewed attacks he wrote Pratt to inform him. "I advise you of this," he said, "because you have been so kind as to be concerned in the past. And I have very much appreciated your interest."⁸²

Hughes's responses to these inquiries were never unambiguous with regard to the theological specifics of his own beliefs, but he always offered assurances that he was far removed from the radicalism of his youth, drew attention to large body of his "poems of a religious nature,"

and depicted himself as superior morally to his many detractors. Such was the case in 1961 when Hughes wrote back to Mrs. Fern Worthington of Boise, Idaho. Worthington had come across a copy of “Goodbye Christ” and wrote to express her dismay about the poem and about what it allegedly suggested about Hughes’s moral and ethical comportment. “Are you a Christian and do you claim to write literature that is helpful and conducive to Christian living?” she wanted to know. In response, after pointing out that his detractors always seem to “ignore” the presence of religion in his poetry, he strongly insinuated that *they* were the ones who lacked morality and religion, noting their silence and inaction about recent events. “They do nothing about four little six-year old girls beset by a howling mob in New Orleans last year. . . . they never lift a voice about lynchings, bombing of Negro homes and schools, or any of the problems of democracy related to race in our mutual country.”⁸³ The tone and tenor was similar in a 1963 exchange with Raymond Konkle of Pontiac, Michigan. Konkle had written Hughes, dismayed that “anyone could have written such a blasphemous poem” as “Goodbye Christ.” He urged Hughes to turn to Christ and ask to be saved from his “lost condition,” including with the letter a pamphlet entitled “Facts You Should Know and Believe to Be Saved.” Hughes responded within a few days thanking Konkle for the pamphlet and for his concern. He indicated, as he had done many times at this point, that “Goodbye Christ” had been circulated over the last thirty years against his will by his enemies, who were “up to no good purpose” and were “anti-Negro, anti-Jewish, anti-labor.” “Personally,” Hughes concluded, “I think that I have a great deal more religion than they have and that the entire orientation of my writing has been to attempt to achieve good in the world rather than evil.”⁸⁴

The Politics of Political Poetry

One of Hughes’s chief detractors, Reverdy Ransom, eventually shifted positions. Although he did not change his mind about the theological implications of “Goodbye Christ,” he became dismayed at the level of opposition Hughes had been receiving from those he called “narrow minded religionists.” Eight years after he published “All Hail to Christ: A la Langston Hughes,” Ransom wrote Hughes to assure him that he “deeply sympathized with the motives” that prompted him to write

"Goodbye Christ."⁸⁵ Indeed, Hughes received a great deal of support throughout the years from those who not only "deeply sympathized" with his motives but also wholeheartedly agreed with what he said in the poem. One of the first to do so in the aftermath of the Pasadena incident was a "militant young minister" from Los Angeles, Clayton D. Russell, pastor of the People's Independent Church. Russell preached a sermon in January 1941 based on Hughes's poem in which he blasted "modern churches and modern Christians" for their inattention to the poor and the marginalized as depicted in the poem. News of the sermon spread rapidly throughout California, and the *Chicago Defender* picked it up. Like many ministers had done in the 1930s, Russell identified the state of the American church as the problem, not Hughes or his poem. Indeed, the poem was a "challenge to the church," as it had lost sight of its mission to the world and, therefore, its "effectiveness for good." Christianity, he asserted, was "headed toward a supreme crisis," having been the one to say "goodbye" to Christ. As for Hughes, he was only the messenger and his personal religion was not in question or at stake. "'Goodbye Christ' could have been written by an atheist, an idiot, a thinker, a Communist, or a Christian," Russell concluded.⁸⁶

The responses to the poem over many years—pro and con—demonstrated the degree to which it had become a cultural flashpoint. It generated extensive debates about Hughes, poetry, and religion in America during a time of national crisis, and it had a profound impact on the discourse about American religion and irreparably shaped the perception of Hughes's work if not the actual direction of it. Many of the professional decisions Hughes would make after the Pasadena incident and his appearance before the PSI would be in light of those experiences, as well as the continued existence of a poem over which he had long ago lost control. And despite his efforts, it would continue to serve as the basis for claims that he was Communist, antichurch, and antireligious.

"Goodbye Christ" was not a statement of Hughes's "atheism," however, nor was it an indication of his alleged membership in the Communist Party. It was, rather, a denunciation of what Hughes perceived as the corrupting influence of capitalism on American churches, which provided fertile ground for "profiteering" and "racketeering" by religionists. Far from being a remote example of antireligious sentiment, the poem was integral to the proletarian poetry of the 1930s, as well as

to a culture of complaint and critique among clergy as well as laypeople who implicated American churches for social inaction. Like Hughes, who wanted to "make room for a new guy," these clergy and laypeople called for a radical redirection of American religion and a rethinking of Christian theology. J. B. Simmons shows the depth of the sentiment even as he misconstrues the contents of the poem. Having forgotten the title of "Goodbye Christ," Simmons—Toledo, Ohio's first black councilman—wrote Hughes in 1946 requesting a copy. "Kindly advise how one may secure a copy of a poem of yours, written 12 or 14 years ago, which ran something like this: 'Goodbye, Christ, hello Lenin, burn the churches, and hang the Bishops.'"⁸⁷ Hughes retained Simmons's letter but, of course, did not honor the request.

Almost certainly Hughes had "Goodbye Christ" in mind when he wrote in 1964, "Politics can be the graveyard of the poet. And only poetry can be his resurrection."⁸⁸ The poem, one that Hughes likely never intended to publish, had indeed "haunted" his career and shaped people's perception of him as an artist—far out of his control. The enduring significance of "Goodbye Christ," however, is the way it pushed Hughes to consider the limits as well as the potential of his craft, and its contribution to the discourse on politics and religion during the 1930s and beyond. The poem provided an important backdrop to his decision to retreat into the world of theater and his gospel song-plays in the late 1950s and early 1960s. But there, too, he would find no safe haven.