

HISTORY WORKSHOP

The Department of History

Tuesdays ~ 12:30-1:30 pm ~ 203 Munroe Hall

Religio-Racial Identities and the Politics of Father Divine

Victoria Wolcott

University at Buffalo

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12:30-1:30 pm

203 Munroe Hall



African American religious leader, Father Divine, founded the twentieth century's most successful utopian community. By 1939 his Peace Mission movement was the largest property owner in Harlem, had extensions throughout the United States and abroad, and had nearly a million followers. This talk, part of a larger book project entitled *Living in the Future: The Utopian Strain in the Long Civil Rights Movement*, seeks to recover the political power of the Father Divine movement. Central to his success was the creation of what historian Judith Weisenfeld has called "religio-racial identities." Early twentieth century black religious movements, including Father Divine's Peace Mission, offered alternative political and racial identities through religious teaching. Those in Father Divine's Peace Mission embraced an identity without race or strict gender boundaries. They also created a cooperative empire during the Great Depression that provided ample food and housing for followers and other community members. The Father Divine movement prefigured an egalitarian future without racial segregation or economic inequality. Although in different guises, this utopian vision was reflected in other early civil rights communities, such as the Highlander Folk School and the Harlem Ashram. Like other civil rights pioneers Father Divine drew from Gandhi's teachings on nonviolence and promoted cooperatives as a just alternative to competitive capitalism. And by creating alternative religio-racial identities utopian visionaries like Father Divine rejected segregation and nurtured interracial fellowship.