

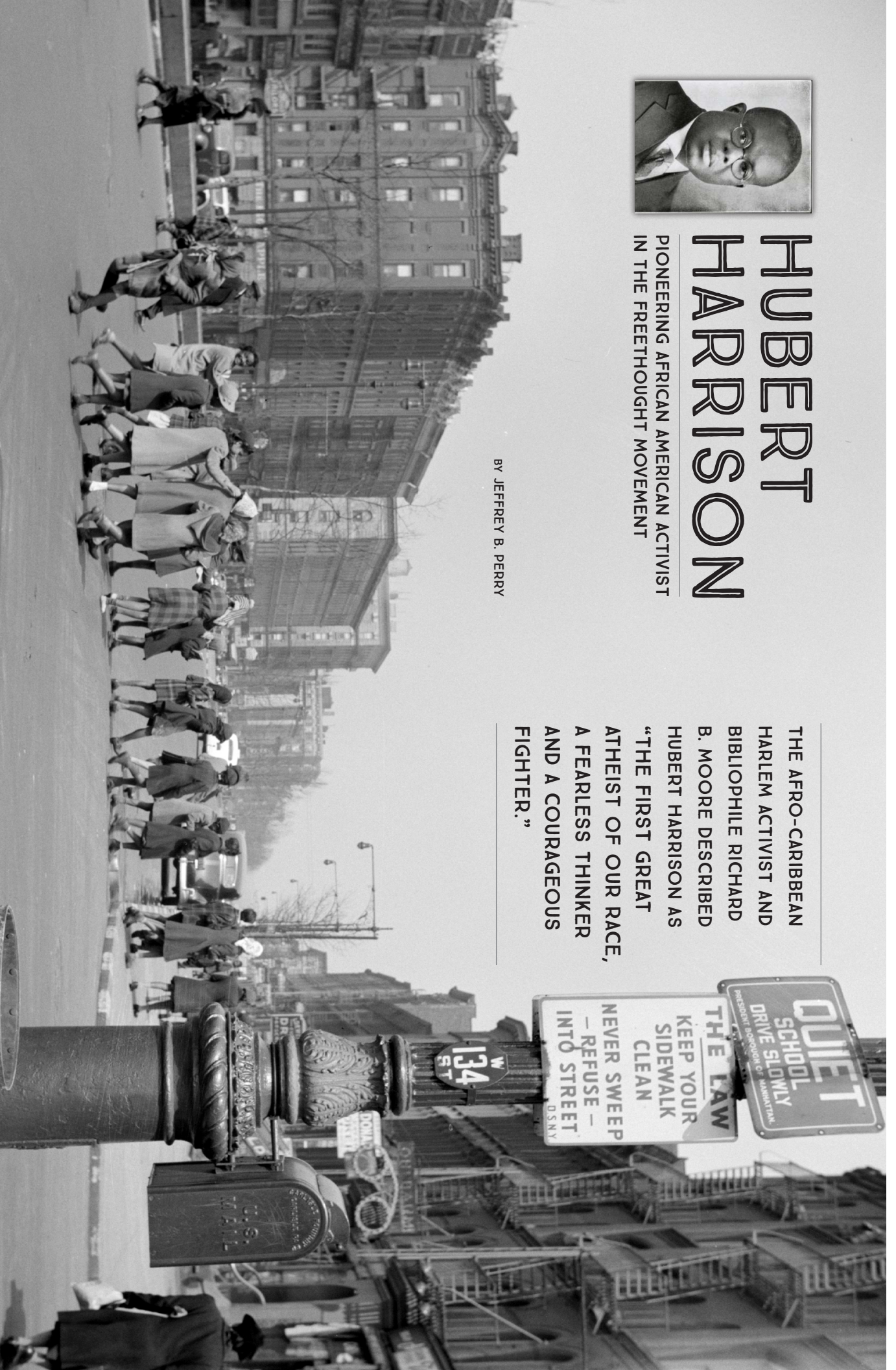


HUBERT HARRISON

PIONEERING AFRICAN AMERICAN ACTIVIST
IN THE FREETHOUGHT MOVEMENT

BY JEFFREY B. PERRY

THE AFRO-CARIBBEAN HARLEM ACTIVIST AND BIBLIOPHILE RICHARD B. MOORE DESCRIBED HUBERT HARRISON AS “THE FIRST GREAT ATHEIST OF OUR RACE, A FEARLESS THINKER AND A COURAGEOUS FIGHTER.”



INTRODUCTION

St. Croix, Virgin Islands-born, Harlem-based Hubert Henry Harrison (1883-1927) was a brilliant class- and race-conscious, writer, orator, editor, educator, and book reviewer and an extraordinary political activist and radical internationalist. He was also a pioneering African American activist in the Freethought Movement. Historian Joel A. Rogers in *World's Great Men of Color* described him as an "Intellectual Giant" who was "perhaps the foremost Afroamerican intellect of his time." Labor and civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph, referring to a period when Harlem was considered the "center of radical black thought," called him "the father of Harlem radicalism." The Afro-Caribbean Harlem activist and bibliophile Richard B. Moore described him as "the first great atheist of our race, a fearless thinker and a courageous fighter."

Harrison played unique, leading roles in the largest class radical movement (socialism) and the largest race radical movement (the "New Negro"/Garvey movement) of his era. He was a major influence on the race radical Randolph, on the class radical Marcus Garvey, and on activists and "common people." In 1917 he founded the first organization (The Liberty League) and the first newspaper (*The Voice*) of the militant "New Negro Movement," which was an important precursor to the Civil Rights and Black Liberation struggles of the 1960s. Harrison was the most class conscious of the race radicals and the most race conscious of the class radicals of his era and he is a key link in the two great trends of the Civil Rights/Black Liberation struggle—the labor and civil rights trend associated with Randolph and Martin Luther King Jr. and the race and nationalist trend associated with Garvey and Malcolm X.

Harrison's pioneering work in and around the Freethought Movement, though less well-known, was of similarly seminal importance and it was at times undertaken at great personal risk. The Montserrat-born activist, writer, and freethinker Hodge Kinnon, in the January 1928 *Truth Seeker* wrote, "Harrison was one of the ablest exponents of Rationalism in this city, and was the first and foremost Negro in the cause of Freethought. His scintillating wit, irony, profundity and wide range of knowledge attracted thousands of persons during his many years of outdoor and indoor work." Historian Rogers discussed Harrison's writings in "such radical and anti-religious periodicals as 'The Call,' 'The Truth-Seeker,' and the 'Modem Quarterly'" and described how "his views on religion

and birth-control were often opposed by Catholics and Protestants alike." Rogers added that "at his open-air meetings, he and his friends were obliged to defend themselves physically from mobs at times, never hesitating to speak no matter how great the hostility of his opponents."

BREAK FROM CHRISTIANITY

Hubert Harrison was born on Estate Concordia, St. Croix, Danish West Indies to a laboring-class Barbadian mother and a formerly enslaved Crucian father. He grew up in poverty, was intellectually self-motivated, had access to some books in the library of St. John's Episcopal Church in Christiansted, and benefitted from instruction by an excellent teacher. After the death of his mother, Hubert travelled to New York in 1900 as a 17-year-old

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Hubert's first great intellectual transformation occurred around 1901 when he broke from his previously held religious views. His "Diary" entry of May 20, 1908, describes in great detail the tremendous intellectual turmoil he underwent

circa 1901 as he "divorced" himself "from orthodox and institutional Christianity" and became an "Agnostic." This break "was not effected at once," it came in stages." In the course of his study he read Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* written in 1794 during the second year of the French Revolution. Paine's arguments were, at the time, "irresistible."

In a lecture he delivered years later, Harrison explained, as quoted in the February 11, 1911 *Truth Seeker*, that Paine "popularized the arguments against Christianity and brought them down to the level of democracy." He considered Paine's significance to be the "dual aspect of . . . militant unbelief and democratic dissent," two characteristics that were "truly representative" of "the thought of our time." Interestingly, Harrison would encourage "militant unbelief" and "democratic dissent" for the remainder of his life.

The actual process of breaking with religion brought with it emotional pain and Hubert used this as a spur to system building. In his "Diary" he explained:

I was not one of those who did not care. I suffered. Oh, how my poor wounded soul cried out in agony! I saw the whole fabric of thought and in feeling crumbling at its very foundations, and in those first fearful weeks of stern reaction, I could

not console myself as so many have done with the husks of a superior braggadocio. . . . What had gone was the authenticity of the Bible, that which I had been taught was the word of God. . . . So when my Bible went my God went also. . . .

Then, as he gathered himself together, he also developed a new philosophy of life. He wrote:

Time, the great healer, closed the wound and I began again to live—internally. But I now had a new belief—Agnosticism. I said belief: what I did mean was philosophy of life, point-of-observation, attitude-toward-things. You must have one you know, or you will cease to live.

He then added:

Now I am an Agnostic: not a dogmatic disbeliever nor a bumpitious and narrow infidel. . . . It gives me the keenest pleasure to engage in dialectic with the vulgarian infidels who assume the name of Agnostic without knowing what it means. If I am to explain myself. . . . I would say that I am (in my mental attitude) such an Agnostic as [Thomas] Huxley was and my principles are the same.

Harrison was influenced by Huxley and over the years would include works by him on his recommended reading lists. Huxley, known as Charles Darwin's "bulldog," was a leading exponent of evolutionary theory and had popularized the concept "agnostic." Harrison emphasized that Huxley's "agnosticism" was "not a creed but a method" by which, "in

IN THIS PERIOD HARRISON INCREASINGLY CAME IN CONTACT WITH THE ORGANIZED FREETHOUGHT MOVEMENT— A RATIONALIST, ANTI-RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT WITH A STRONG BASE IN NEW YORK AND A WEEKLY NEWSPAPER, THE TRUTH SEEKER, FOUNDED IN 1873 BY D. M. BENNETT.

you without regard to any other consideration" and "do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable." This enabled Huxley, who "refused[] to put faith in that which does not rest on sufficient evidence," to "look the universe in the face," to believe in "the sanctity of human nature," and to develop "a deep sense of . . . responsibility" for his actions. In his "Diary" Harrison concluded that he would never "be anything but an honest Agnostic" because, as he wrote, "I prefer. . . . to go to the grave with my eyes open."

Hubert's grappling with a "philosophy-of-life" and his decision to put humanity at the center of his world-view took its toll. He did not have the rituals, institutions, or certainty of faith often provided by organized religion. Painful as it was, Hubert's break from religion made possible a healthy, critical approach to all other matters. The step had a certain logic as had been noted in 1844 by a

young Karl Marx who, at that time, was similarly developing critical talents and a worldview. Marx pitifully stated "criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism." [Marx also added "Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of an unsprited situation. It is the opium of the people.]

EARLY FREETHOUGHT-RELATED WRITINGS AND ACTIVITIES

While he struggled inwardly, Hubert also began to extend his views outward by writing letters, participating in working-class African American intellectual circles, and coming into contact with Freethought-influenced organizations. One of his earliest published letters concerned the English labor agitator, organizer, and self-described philosophic anarchist John Turner who, on October 23, 1903, was arrested in New York and imprisoned on Ellis Island in preparation for deportation under provisions of the Immigration Act of March 3, 1903. That law provided for the exclusion of "anarchists, or persons who believe in, or advocate, the overthrow by force or violence of the government of the United States, or of all government, or of all forms of law, or the assassination of public officials." While Turner did not believe in, or advocate, the use of force or violence, he also

did not believe in organized government and he was being prosecuted and deported for what he did not believe in.

Turner was defended on Preethought and free speech grounds by the *Truth Seeker*, by the Manhattan Liberal Club, and by the Free Speech League (a predecessor of the American Civil Liberties Union) and these groups or-

ganized a December 3 meeting at Cooper Union in New York. After a December 5 *New York Times* editorial defended the government's right "to exclude" Turner and criticized his supporters, Harrison wrote a letter, published in the *Times* of December 15. He maintained that "in this age of so-called free thought and free speech" it was a "duty" to "aid the weaker side when that side seems . . . to be in the right." He added that "to deport a man for exercising the right of free speech when the exercise of that right limits none of the natural rights of any one else, was unjust, tyrannical, and therefore undemocratic."

Another Freethought-related Harrison letter appeared in the September 25, 1909, *New York Times* and discussed Monroeur D. Conway, who was one of the most popular authors of the Freethought movement and a bi-

ographer of Paine. Harrison's letter challenged a previous letter, which held "that it never was impracticable for Conway, with his practical abolition views, to live in Virginia." Harrison countered, elaborating reasons why it was "impracticable" for Conway to remain in that state and he emphasized, "American history owes much to the man who wrote *The Life of Thomas Paine*."

His diary writings and early letters to the *Times* indicate that Harrison's interests were becoming quite secular. He was an agnostic and he was attracted to science, to evolutionary theory, and to some of the radical and progressive intellectual movements of the day including FreeThought, free speech, civil liberties, single taxism, and socialism. It is noteworthy that Harrison met Free-thinkers active in all these various efforts.

SUNRISE CLUB AND THE FREETHOUGHT MOVEMENT

Harrison began attending activities of the Sunrise Club, a FreeThought-influenced, inter-racial forum around 1905. The Club, organized in 1899 by Edwin C. Walker, held dinner meetings every other Monday in Manhattan. Its aim was "to blend alert thought and sociability, introducing to one another men and women of all vocations, parties, creeds, nations and races" and it emphasized that "on all topics debated, the widest ranges of opinion is heartily welcomed." Harrison assisted at one 1905 Sunrise Club activity involving Joseph Rinn, president of the Metropolitan Psychological Research Society, that sought to expose a spiritualist faker. According to Rinn, over one thousand people attended the event while police kept two thousand more outside. Over the years Harrison would speak at the Sunrise Club and one of his talks drew the largest number of African Americans he had ever seen at any of the club's activities.

In this period Harrison increasingly came in contact with the organized FreeThought Movement—a rationalist, anti-religious movement with a strong base in New York and a weekly newspaper, the *Truth Seeker*, founded in 1873 by D.M. Bennett. Its principal editors in Harrison's years were Eugene Montague Macdonald (from 1883-1909) and his younger brother George Everett Macdonald (from 1909 to 1940). The paper described itself as "A FreeThought and Agnostic Newspaper" that sought "to educate the people out of religious superstition." It supported "Free Speech," "Free Press," and "Free Mails" and demanded taxation of church properties, complete separation of church and state, and ends to school prayers, bible laws, and courtroom oaths. Early twentieth century

freethinkers supported science, denied the infallibility of the Bible, asserted the human origin of the Old and New Testaments, denied the existence of heaven and hell, upheld the theory of evolution as opposed to the biblical Genesis, and held that "morally and ethics—or man's relation to man" was "entirely independent of creed or religion." Freethinkers were secular and held that ethical standards arose not from a Supreme Being, but from human action toward other humans beings.

FreeThought attracted many prominent followers including suffragists Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton; orators Hugh O. Pentecost and Robert G. Ingersoll; anti-slavery editor Horace Greeley; Union Army colonel and author Thomas Wentworth Higginson; attorney Clarence Darrow; socialist Eugene V. Debs; authors Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain), and Moncure D. Conway. Others influenced by freeThought included activist Lucy Parsons, anarchist Emma Goldman, and poet and historian Carl Sandburg. Many African American and Afro-Caribbean leaders and writers of the early twentieth century were influenced by freeThought and aware of Harrison's contributions in this area including author Rogers, Randolph Moore, Kimron, poets Claude McKay and Walter E. Hawkins, and journalist/activists Cyril V. Briggs A. and Rothschild Francis. [W.E.B. Du Bois, according to his biographer David Levering Lewis, was "an agnostic and antichristical."]

THE SEPTEMBER 12, 1914 TRUTH SEEKER FEATURED HARRISON'S "THE NEGRO A CONSERVATIVE: CHRISTIANITY STILL ENSLAVES THE MINDS OF THOSE WHOSE BODIES IT HAS LONG HELD BOUND."

Hodge Kitron emphasizes that Harrison was easily "the first and foremost Negro in the cause of freeThought." For years Harrison recommended books published by the Truth Seeker Company and by Charles Watts Rationalist Press in London. His personal collection included books by Conway, Ingersoll, and Ernst Haekel; books about Paine and Herbert Spencer; and catalogs from the Rationalist Press. In August of 1920, in the Garvey movement's Negro World newspaper, Harrison wrote "Those who want good books on science, history, religion and literature at very low prices should write to the Rationalist Press Association of London, England, and ask for their list of six-penny reprints."

THOMAS PAINE COMMEMORATION

In February 1911 Harrison spoke at the freeThought-sponsored Thomas Paine Commemoration Dinner. Publicity for the event depicted him as "a Negro, who has the reputation of being the most scholarly representative of his race in America."

In addition to discussing Paine's "militant unbelief and democratic dissent", Harrison described how deism

in Paine's England led to the development of criticism—textual at first, then the scientific development of Higher Criticism that grew in the 19th Century into Agnosticism and Atheism. In examining the personal deism of Paine, Harrison saw several very positive aspects in his approach. He cited the: (1) common sense criticism including that of numerical blunders in Chronicles and comparisons of the genealogy of Christ given in Matthew with that in Luke; (2) historical criticism such as the fact that the Pentateuch (the first five books of the old testament) couldn't have been written by Moses since it included events after Moses' death—including his burial; and (3) comparative and literary criticism such as that found in the second part of Paine's *The Age of Reason*.

Harrison contended that Paine closed the deistical controversy and brought the debate "down to the level of

all men" to "the level of democracy." In his freeThought work, as in his socialist and race conscious work, Harrison emphasized the importance of democratization of scientific knowledge. Utilizing this approach he continued to express his views publicly.

"MENACE OF EXEMPTION: CHURCH PROPERTY"

In the November 4, 1911 *Truth Seeker* Harrison wrote a front page article "Menace of Exemption: Church Property in New York. Worth \$400,000,000 Plus. Evades Payment of Taxes." The article described how churches with property in New York City worth four to five hundred million dollars evaded payment of taxes. He argued for taxation of church property and against the idea that this was or should be a Christian nation that owed special privi-

THE NEGRO A CONSERVATIVE

By Harrison
The Negro is not a conservative. He is a radical. He is a revolutionary. He is a man who is always ready to take a new step. He is a man who is always ready to take a new step. He is a man who is always ready to take a new step.



HARRISON IN HARRISON

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The Truth Seeker—September 12, 1914.

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The Truth Seeker—August 8, 1914.

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The Truth Seeker—September 1, 1923.

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HUBERT HARRISON WAS OFTEN RECOGNIZED IN THE TRUTH SEEKER AND WAS FEATURED IN THE IMPORTANT "GOLDEN JUBILEE NUMBER" WHICH COMMEMORATED THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE NATIONAL FREETHOUGHT WEEKEND ON SEPTEMBER 1, 1933.

leges to the church. Citing the Census Bureau's Report on Religious Bodies for 1910, he maintained that it made no sense to call this a Christian nation since three-fifths of the people were not church members in any sense of the word. Importantly, religious property was tax exempt and this meant that church property was supported by the taxes of many property holders who were not members of churches at all, a "monstrous injustice not only against three-fifths of the people but also against the secular property of the other two-fifths."

Harrison asked, "how can the churches—especially the Christian church—reconcile this policy of public dishonesty with their professions of piety?" Advocates of church tax exemption evidently assumed that church property should be tax exempt by virtue of "divine right." Harrison readily took on the divine right argument and pointed out "neither the Bible nor the earlier fathers furnished any ground for such a belief, and the Christian Scriptures themselves contain an implied condemnation of the tax exemption theory." In the "Synoptic Gospels" Jesus paid his taxes and laid down the principle governing such cases by offering the advice to "Render . . . unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's." This, Harrison emphasized, was how "the first Christian paid his taxes."

Harrison also pointed out the role that the Church had played in the downfall of civilizations and nations from Rome to the more recent examples of France, Spain, and Portugal. Through "the extensive system of exemptions and privileges," he argued, "the church first secured a hold on the State and then strangled it." He concluded with a forceful call for taxation of Church property:

. . . since the exemption of church property from taxation is the very root of that power by which the church becomes a social and political menace; since we have the experience of the past and the present to show us the deplorable effects of this power in the national life of a people; since the churches themselves can advance no valid claim (even from their own Bible) to the tax-exemption of their property, and since the exemption of any but public property is unjust and dangerous on grounds of civil and political welfare -- the churches ought to be compelled to pay their just portion of the burden of public expense.

PRETHOUGHT AND BIRTH CONTROL LECTURER

In 1914 Harrison set out to organize his own lecture schedules. Starting in April he held outdoor lectures at 181st St. and St. Nicholas Avenue sponsored by the Harlem Educational Alliance. During the summer, he spoke on science, evolution, and literature, against religious

superstitions; and in support of women's suffrage and "birth control."

As Harrison made his living lecturing on street corners and selling books, his themes were influenced by his socialist views; his rationalist, anti-religious positions; his support of women's suffrage and birth control; and his race consciousness. In New York City in 1914 such a combination of ideas, coming from an African American led to opposition from the authorities and from thugs. Threats were made on several occasions "to force him to stop speaking." His views on birth control and religion were often opposed and at his outdoor talks he and others were often forced to defend themselves physically from mobs.

Harrison was a pioneering African American speaker on birth control. Socialists and free thinkers were prominent in the birth control movement and movement founder Margaret Sanger had been a member of Harrison's Socialist Party Branch 5. Prior to 1914, according to W.E.B. Du Bois, there had been little formal work on birth control done in the African American community "and practically none by Negroes" due to a significant lack of information and "a good many misapprehensions." Harrison made efforts, at times at great risk, to counter this lack of information. While he agitated in favor of birth control, he was, as his later writings indicated, also aware of white supremacist aspects of the issue. In 1920 he would publicly express his opposition to the practices of "the white doctors [who] in their hospitals from the South to Harlem" performed "operations on colored women—unbeknown to them—to be sure that they would not be breeders of men."

The *Truth Seeker* of June 27, 1914, noted that Harrison, was "Giving Outdoor Lectures on Religious Subjects, at Uptown Gathering Places" and "Disposing of Large Number of Paine's 'Age of Reason,' Which He Discusses as the Fifth Gospel, That of St. Thomas." He spoke on Monday nights at 125th Street and Seventh Ave., Tuesdays at 181st St. and St. Nicholas Ave, Wednesdays at 137th St. and Broadway and then repeated at these three sites on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays—and he had "good Audiences" at these talks.

On June 26, 1914, his noontime Friday lecture at Madison Square (Broadway and 23rd St. at Madison Avenue) was interrupted when the police arrested him for "holding a religious meeting without a permit." He had been delivering lectures of an historical and critical nature and, according to the *Truth Seeker*, he had "aroused some opposition from Catholic and Protestant antagonists" who couldn't match his "superior readiness and erudition." The complaint was filed by a man named Sager who objected to Harrison speaking on religion without a license. Though Seeger was more aroused by the "blas-

phemous" language of those who opposed Harrison, none of the opposing troublemakers were arrested or charged despite what was described as their "unbecoming conduct." The arresting officer claimed that he was not bothered by Harrison's lack of license or by the content of his discourse, but that his reason for making the arrest was concern over a possible riot due to the large crowd. In court Harrison claimed that he extended every effort to aid the police in "maintaining order and decorum."

Magistrate Joseph E. Corrigan ruled in Harrison's favor, as he would do in several similar cases. He pointed out the statutory distinction between holding services, which required a license, and speaking on religion, which did not. He added that Harrison had committed no criminal violation and that civil action in the case of unlicensed religious services, when it existed, should properly be brought to the city's corporation counsel. Corrigan stated that he would not tolerate discrimination against a speaker merely for his views, but if the speaker interferred with traffic that would provide ample grounds for police action. He then released Harrison and warned him that he would deal sharply with him if he persisted in the future in defying the police and holding meetings tending to cause disturbances.

THE RADICAL FORUM

Harrison's lectures were regularly scheduled for 125th St. and Seventh Ave., 181st St. and St. Nicholas Ave., 163rd St. and Prospect Ave. in the Bronx, 37th St. and Broadway, and Madison Square. As he continued to speak throughout the city his popularity grew. The *Truth Seeker* of August 8 reported that "the people hear him gladly" and on numerous occasions his two-and-a-half hour talks drew fifteen hundred people "without exhausting their [it] interest." He was described as "scholarly, versatile, humorous, and instant in reply" and his talks treated subjects as diverse as history, literature, politics, and religion. The talks on religion regularly included "digressions into polemics and textual criticism of the Bible" and Harrison stressed the "historical and evolutionary point of view." The *Truth Seeker* attributed a "new freedom for street propaganda" in New York City to the efforts of Harrison and to the efforts of anarchists, who were involved in free speech struggles at the time.

Harrison was soon tested by more blatant discrimination and extra-legal methods. Seemingly complicit police behavior was involved in a serious physical confrontation with an uptown mob on August 11, 1914. According to

the *Truth Seeker*, at about 10:30 p.m., after a talk that included a bitter attack on the church in general and on the Catholic Church in particular, a group of about 50 rowdies who waited until the crowd dispersed went after Harrison with "murderous intention." As he entered the underground passage leading to the subway and walked in front of the ticket booth the mob "rushed him and began to beat him." Harrison had been forewarned of danger and was ready, having "provided himself with a leg of the table from which he spoke, as means of defense in case of assault." As he was attacked by the group the ring-leader William McElroy struck at him with an iron bar. Harrison parried the blow and struck back, sending McElroy to the ground and then to the hospital while his cohorts dispersed.

Police reserves suddenly appeared and arrested him, but not any of his assailants. He was taken to the 177th St. Station house and locked up on a charge of felonious assault and placed under \$500 bond. Since he did not have the required bail, he was forced, after a brief hearing, to stay in jail for three days until he went before Magistrate Campbell at the 57th Street court. Campbell had no apparent sympathy for Harrison's views. Again, however, Harrison won acquittal. He argued self-defense and was helped, according to the *Truth Seeker*, by the fact that the testimony

THE TRUTH SEEKER OF JULY 21 NOTED THE APPEARANCE OF THE PAPER, IT ALSO CALLED ATTENTION TO THE FACT THAT "HUBERT H. HARRISON, THE WIDELY-KNOWN FREE-THOUGHT STREET SPEAKER," EDITED IT.

of his accusers was less than credible.

Throughout his ordeal Harrison received no help from the Socialist Party though he was nominally a member. The party paper, the *New York Call*, entirely ignored the case. The support he did receive came from free thinkers and various radical groupings like the Harlem Educational Alliance. Harrison also received support from the *Truth Seeker*, which on August 22 reported that he had aroused the "bitterest animosity" from "Roman Catholic plug-uglies, who find themselves so badly beaten in every argument that their sole resort is the appeal to brute force." It noted that on several occasions these ruffians had threatened Harrison with criminal violence. It was to the free thinkers and other radical groups that he turned.

In the August 22, 1914 *Truth Seeker*, Harrison recounted the successful efforts of lecturer Hugh O. Pentecost, one of the orators who had attracted him to free thought. Pentecost, until his death in 1907, had gone from minister to labor organizer, to agnostic to atheist to anarchist to socialist in pursuit of truth and his lectures attracted large audiences because he was daring, had integrity, and was willing, as Harrison said, to change

"The old garb of truth for a newer one." Since his death, no one had picked up the torch and Harrison, who like Pentecost was at times described as an agnostic and at times described as an atheist, assessed that the times were ripe for again doing such work. [Interestingly, Harrison in February 1919, perhaps drawing from Pentecost, would offer a lecture on "Some Fallacies of FreeThought" for the Washington (DC) Secular League.]

Harrison noted that the radicals of New York were scattered in various organizations and movements including socialists, anarchists, single taxers, and atheists and that since they were generally separated from each other due to the needs of their organizations they did not have access to "the awakening breath of the larger liberalism, from which all alike may draw inspiration." It was this "larger liberalism" that was needed to wait "through the dogmatic corridors of their separate creeds."

Harrison's answer was to seek to unite the splintered radicals through organized lecture programs. The forums were envisioned as a series of lecture courses on popular science, history, drama, politics, sociology, economics, and religion. The lectures in any given series were to be every two weeks with alternate lecture dates used for popular talks on various topics. Literature appropriate for each subject would be sold as well as radical and freethought periodicals such as the *Truth Seeker*, the *Melting Pot*, the *New Review*, the *Single Tax Review*, and the *Mercator*. Harrison realized that such a forum "with a man of African descent as lecturer" would "be unique in the history of New York."

In a September 28 "Diary" entry Harrison wrote that he would lecture once a week on Sunday afternoons. His "Radical Forum would be "A forum for free spirits. A place where men and women, sick of the insincerities of cults and creeds, can mentally walk abroad and recreate themselves." The soon expanded his schedule and during the remainder of 1914 he lectured for the "Radical Forum" six days a week at the New Harlem Casino at Lenox Avenue and 116th St. and throughout the city. His talks included such subjects as: "Modern Materialism"; "Jesus Christ and the Working Man: A Challenge to the Christian Socialists"; "The Natural History of Religion"; "The Nature of Religion"; "The Class Struggle: A Criticism and Confession"; "The Roots of Religion: A Study in Primitive Psychology"; "Sex, Sinners, and Society"; "The Worship of Death"; "Romanism and the Republic"; "How God Grew: The Evolution of the Idea of God"; "Evolution: Social and Organic"; "The Manufacture of Gods"; "The Origin of the Priesthood"; and "A Defense of Atheism."

"THE NEGRO A CONSERVATIVE"

The September 12, 1914 *Truth Seeker* featured Harrison's "The Negro a Conservative: Christianity Still Enslaves the Minds of Those Whose Bodies It Has Long Held Bound."

In the article Harrison challenged the role of Christianity and called for "Negroes . . . [to] shake off the trammels of such time-serving leaders as Mr. [Booker T.] Washington," who was, at the time, the most powerful "Negro" leader in the country.

Harrison discussed how in "intellectual endeavor" the dominant attitude of "the American Negro" has been "conservative." He noted, that "in theological criticism, religious dissent, social and political heresies such as Single Tax, Socialism, Anarchism . . . the Negro in America has taken no part" [though there was a "glimmer of change" in some of the younger generation]. He attributed this to the fact that:

Christian America created the color line; and all the great currents of critical opinion, from the eighteenth century to our time, have found the great barrier impassable and well-nigh impervious. Behind the color line one has to think perpetually of the color line, and most of those who grow up behind it can think of nothing else. Even when one essays to think of other things, that thinking is tinged with the shades of the surrounding atmosphere.

He added that the obstacles to "Negro education" such as the meager 58 cents per pupil spent annually in certain southern counties" further helped to explain "the dearth of thinkers who are radical on other than racial matters."

After noting that African Americans "have suffered more than any other class of Americans from the dubious blessings of Christianity" Harrison offered some historical context:

It has been well said that the two great instruments for the propagation of race prejudice in America are the Associated Press and the Christian Church. This is quite true. Historically, it was the name of religion that cloaked the beginnings of slavery on the soil of America, and buttressed its continuance. The church saw to it that the religion taught to slaves should stress the servile virtues of subservience and content, and these things have bitten deeply into the souls of black folk...

When the fight for the abolition of slavery was on, the Christian church, not content with quoting scripture, gagged the mouths of such of their adherents as dared to protest against the accursed thing, penalized their open advocacy of abolition, and opposed all the men like [William Lloyd] Garrison, [Elijah Parish] Lovejoy, [Wendell] Phillips and John Brown, who fought on behalf of the Negro slave. . . .

. . . Here in America the spirit of the Negro has been transformed by three centuries of subjection,

physical and mental, so that they have even glorified the fact of subjection and subservience. . . . their spirits had been completely crushed by the system of slavery. And to accomplish this, Christianity—the Christianity of their masters—was the most effective instrument.

This historical perspective helped explain why "the church among the Negroes today exerts a more powerful influence than anything else in the sphere of ideas" and prompted Harrison to comment:

Nietzsche's contention that the ethics of Christianity are the slave's ethics would seem to be justified in this instance. Show me a population that is deeply religious, and I will show you a conservative population, content with whips and chains, contently and the gibbet, content to eat the bread of sorrow and drink the waters of affliction.

Looking ahead, Harrison "feared" that many years must pass before the leaders of thought among any people in this country contribute many representatives to the cause of FreeThought. There were "a few Negro Agnostics in New York and Boston, but these are generally found to be West Indians from the French, Spanish, and English islands." Cuban and Puerto Rican cigarmakers were "notorious infidels, due to their acquaintance with the bigotry, ignorance and immorality of the Catholic priesthood in their native islands." But in the United States if one encounters "a Negro-American who is reputed to have Agnostic tendencies" that perspective is "self-denial, if ever, openly avowed." He could hardly blame that person because he knew "the tremendous weight of the social proscription which it is possible to bring to bear upon" said person.

Under such conditions, he urged the "rising generation of Negroes" to "shake off the trammels of such time-serving leaders as Mr. Washington, and attain the level of that higher education, against which he solidly sets his face" and enter into the critical and dissenting "intellectual heritage of the last two hundred years."

TEACHING AT THE MODERN SCHOOL 1914-1915

A major influence on Harrison's developing views on education was his late-1914 through 1915 work as an adjunct professor of Comparative Religion at the Ferrer Association's Modern School on East 107th St. in Harlem. The school was an outgrowth of a series of protests of the October 13, 1909, murder of the Spanish anarchist and educator Francisco Ferrer y Guardia. Ferrer had been charged with being the "author and chief" of the July 26, 1909, general strike in opposition to the Spanish Army's calling up of reserves to fight in the colonial war in Mo-

THE NEGRO A CONSERVATIVE

Christianity Still Enslaves the Minds of Those Whose Bodies It Long Held Bound.

By HUBERT H. HARRISON.

It would be a difficult task to name one line of intellectual endeavor among white men in America, in which the American negro has not taken his part. Yet it is a striking fact that the racial attitude has been dominantly conservative. Radicalism does not yet register to any noticeable extent the contributions of our race in this country. In theological criticism, religious dissent, social and political heresies such as Single Tax, Socialism, Anarchism—in most of the movements arising from the reconstruction made necessary by the great body of that new knowledge which the last two centuries gave us—the negro in America has taken no part. And today our sociologists and economists still restrict themselves to the compilation of tables of statistics in proof of negro progress. Our scholars are still expressing the intellectual viewpoints of the eighteenth century. The glimmer of a change is



HUBERT H. HARRISON

A representative of the race of which he here writes, Mr. Harrison is giving open-air FreeThought lectures to larger audiences in New York. He has once been arrested for expressing himself, and again for defending himself when physically attacked, but was both times discharged.

HARRISON'S ARTICLE CHALLENGING THE ROLE OF CHRISTIANITY FEATURED IN THE SEPTEMBER 12, 1914 TRUTH SEEKER.

rocco. He was killed in Barcelona's Montjuich fortress, reportedly through the joint efforts of the Spanish crown, church, and state.

The Modern School attempted "to apply the principle of freedom in education" and to challenge the education-al-system-reinforced habits and culture that helped to maintain the existing industrial-political system. Historian Paul Avrich describes the school as "an important focus of cultural and social ferment in the years preceding the First World War" at a time when "many of the seminal ideas of twentieth-century politics and art were being developed." Avrich adds that "Anarchism, socialism, syndicalism, revolution, birth control, free love, Cubism, futurism, Freudianism, feminism, the New Woman, the New Theater, direct action, the general strike" were all "intensely discussed" at the Modern School.

On October 13, 1914, Harrison attended the 5th anniversary of

the death of Ferrer at the *Forward* Building, 175 East Broadway. Leonard Abbott, first president of the Ferrer Association, president of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association, president of the Free Speech League, former member of the Socialist party, and an instructor at the Modern School, had written to him asking him to speak. In 1914 Harrison lectured to the Modern School's Saturday night adult classes on "The Natural History of Religion."

From February to April 1915 Harrison offered a series of "Lectures in Comparative Religion" at the school. His topics included: "The Two Religions of India"; "The Religions of China"; "The Religion of Islam"; "Paganism and Christianity"; "The Debt of Christianity to Paganism"; "Monotheism and Morality"; "Religion and Government"; "Why All Religions are Reactionary"; "Religion and the Proletariat"; "Religion and Culture"; and "An Agnostic's Apology—The Duty of Free Thinking and Plain Speaking."

FREETHOUGHT, THE MILITANT "NEW NEGRO MOVEMENT," AND "THE FATHER OF HARLEM RADICALISM"

By 1916 Harrison was turning to concentrated work in the "Negro" community and laying the basis for the militant "New Negro Movement" that he would formally found in June 1917. In the months leading up to that founding he continued his freethought talks. He lectured in 1916 for the NY Secular Society and on December 10, 1916, he lectured at Lafayette Hall in Harlem on "Radical Results of the Higher Criticism; or Infidelity Among Our Ministers." A late-January 1917 handout

headlined "Are You A Freethinker?"

Or Does Some Minister, Priest, or Rabbi Own Your Brain, If not, Why not Come to Our Lectures

Every Sunday Afternoon at Three o'clock at the Harlem Masonic Hall, 310 Lenox Avenue, Corner 126th Street." Harrison was scheduled to

lecture for the Next Six Weeks Before the Secular Society of New York beginning February 4, 1917.

After Harrison came out with *The Voice*, the first newspaper of the militant "New Negro Movement" on July 4, 1917, the *Truth Seeker* of July 21 noted the appearance of the paper. It also called attention to the fact that "Hubert H. Harrison, the widely-known Free-thought street speaker," edited it.

Six years later the *Chicago Defender* of January 19, 1924 commented that "The public issue of the *Truth Seeker*, a powerful weekly of 50 years' standing, has devoted a column to and used a picture of Dr. Hubert H. Harrison" in its commemorative issue of September 1, 1923.

Clearly, the Freethought Movement had significantly influenced Hubert Harrison, "the father of Harlem radicalism" and founder of the militant "New Negro Movement" and clearly, Hubert Harrison had contributed significantly to the Freethought Movement! **NS**



This article is largely drawn from *A Hubert Harrison Reader*, edited and intro by Jeffrey B. Perry (Westview University Press) and Jeffrey B. Perry, *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883-1918* (Columbia University Press), which is the first-volume of a projected two-volume biography.

Dr. Perry is currently working on the second volume of the biography and on a project to make other Harrison writings, including Harrison's "Diary," widely accessible. His website is www.jeffreybperry.net.

