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The Greening of the Gospel (and Black Body): Rev. Ike’s Gospel of Wealth and Post-Blackness Theology

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to explore Rev. Ike’s particular form of positive confession theology and self-representation in relationship to his own professed post-black identity. By fusing the conversionist elements of his Pentecostal roots with the Spiritualist teachings of metaphysics and New Thought philosophy, Rev. Ike offered African Americans a theological vision of attaining material wealth while effacing what he and many of his followers regarded as the multiple negative cultural markers that blackness signified. This was not simply a theology that was preached from the pulpit; it was packaged and presented within media frames. Therefore, this essay will equally unveil and demystify the multiple aesthetic representations and conspicuous displays deployed by Eikerenkoetter, which reflect well-worn strategies on the part of the oppressed that connect understandings of citizenship and freedom with hyperconsumption.

Keywords

Rev. Ike, Neville Goddard, revivalism, New Thought, conspicuous consumption, automotivity

On Sunday, March 9, 1975, *The New York Times* featured Rev. Frederick J. Eikerenkoetter, Jr. on the cover of its weekly magazine. The color photograph was an over-the-top, yet arresting image of the African American televangelist from New York City. Posing inside his Rolls Royce limousine, Eikerenkoetter’s left hand rests beneath his chin modeling a diamond-laden square pinky ring and a thick, gold nugget watch. A brown silk tie covered in golden fleur-de-lis (the French symbol commonly associated with sainthood) complements his tailored brown pin-stripe suit. And his right hand, also bearing the weight of a large diamond ring, is wrapped around a black nineteenth-century walking stick adorned by a gold handle — a gilded accessory that the energetic

thirty-nine-year-old preacher hardly needed when parading across the pulpit of his Manhattan church with the flair of, and physical resemblance to, legendary soul performer Jackie Wilson. The photograph encapsulates writer Clayton Riley's ensuing five-page story, "The Golden Gospel of Rev. Ike."

As part of his televisual persona, Eikerenkoetter's fleet of luxury cars, jewelry adorned body, and overall appearance of financial wealth both proclaimed and performed his gospel-inspired message of "positive self-awareness."¹ This is why Riley's expansive article becomes ancillary to the engaging cover image — an image that, ironically, illumines aspects of Eikerenkoetter's image even as it obscures others. A shadow descends from his brow and eyes, and sunlight illumines his upper torso and arms. Eikerenkoetter's identity, at least in terms of facial recognition, is sublimated into, if not supplanted by, his jewelry-clad, sartorially splendid body and sunlit fingers. Baguettes abate the blackness of his hands, and the aesthetic representations of material riches offsets, if only momentarily, Rev. Ike's race. This was more than an accident. Eikerenkoetter was well known for his provocative proclamation, "I am not a black preacher. I'm a green preacher. I quit being a black preacher millions of dollars ago!"

The purpose of this essay is to explore Rev. Ike's particular form of positive confession theology and self-representation in relationship to his own professed post-black identity. By fusing the conversionist elements of his Pentecostal roots with the Spiritualist teachings of metaphysics and New Thought philosophy, Rev. Ike offered African Americans a theological vision of attaining material wealth while effacing what he and many of his followers regarded as the multiple negative cultural markers that blackness signified. This was not simply a theology that was preached from the pulpit. It was packaged and presented within media frames. Therefore, this essay will equally unveil and demystify the multiple aesthetic representations and conspicuous displays deployed by Eikerenkoetter, which reflect well-worn strategies on the part of the oppressed, that connect understandings of citizenship and freedom with hyperconsumption.

The ministry of Rev. Ike resists easy categorization in terms of the ways scholars traditionally classify black religions: for example, black mainline, Pen-

¹ For more detailed analyses of Rev. Ike's theology and ministry see, Martin Gallatin, "Rev. Ike's Minsitry: A Sociological Investigation of Religious Innovation," (New York University, 1979). Clayton Riley, "The Golden Gospel of Rev. Ike," *The New York Times Magazine*, March 9 1975. Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

tecostal conversionist, thaumaturgic manipulationist, and black nationalistic.² As a youth, Eikerenkoetter attended the Bible Way Baptist Church of Ridgeland, South Carolina and his father was a local itinerant Baptist preacher. But Eikerenkoetter also preached at and ultimately pastored a Pentecostal congregation in town. After a brief stint in the military, Eikerenkoetter returned to Ridgeland to organize a Pentecostal informed yet nondenominational United Church of Jesus Christ for All People. By the 1950s, the technology of healing revivalism began capturing the attention of a cross section of American Protestants. The independent revival and radio ministries of A.A. Allen, William Branham, and, most notably, Oral Granville Roberts impressed and inspired young Eikerenkoetter. He confessed to sitting by the radio to hear Roberts' Healing Waters radio broadcast and attending A.A. Allen's citywide healing crusades. This style of ministry provided the entrepreneurially-minded Eikerenkoetter with a model of ecclesial acclaim and cultural celebrity. In 1964, Eikerenkoetter moved his ministry north to Boston, and within two years relocated again to New York City.

Not long after arriving in Harlem, Eikerenkoetter began to teach what he described as "the Science of Living" and "Thinkonomics." Both, according to Eikerenkoetter, are concerned with "the teaching of how a person may live a positive, dynamic, healthy, happy successful, prosperous life through the consciousness of the Presence of God — Infinite Good — already within every man. [sic] . . . Thinkonomics will teach you how to break every limitation and solve every problem yourself — so that a new you begins to live more abundantly."³ Eikerenkoetter's United Christian Evangelistic Association, still based in Boston, began publishing *The Science of Living Study Guide* which includes fifty-two weekly devotionals and positive affirmations on such topics as "You Are What You Feed Your Mind," "How to Get the Job You Want," "How to Stop Catching Disease," and "Achieving Your Ideal Figure." The entire text is based on Eikerenkoetter's four core steps of living: "1.) Decide it — Your decision defines what you want. 2.) Believe it — Belief is mental acceptance; mentally accept it now. 3.) See it — In your mind. 4.) Feel it — In your heart."⁴

² For a more prominent example, see Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *African American Religion: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation*, 2nd ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002).

³ Frederick J. Eikerenkoetter, *Rev. Ike's Secrets for Health, Joy and Prosperity for You: A Science of Living Study Guide* (Boston: Thinkonomics Publications), back cover.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

Eikerenkoetter's seeming shift from Pentecostal healing revivalism to this particular appropriation of New Thought metaphysics was not without precedent. African Americans were already familiar with miracle-based ministries that promised physical healing, financial well-being and other tangible evidences of divine intervention. In the first third of the twentieth century, black Spiritualist congregations spread throughout the country in both rural and urban areas.⁵ Blending the older traditions of conjure, ecstatic knowledge, numerology and other forms of magical and metaphysical practices, Spiritualist congregations became particularly popular during the Depression era.

Father Clarence "Preacher" Cobb and the First Church of Deliverance in Chicago began during the interwar era as a storefront in Bronzeville. Cobb's ministry was known for its manipulative use of candles, amulets, and other sacred objects toward transforming one's own material conditions.⁶ Prophet James F. Jones began his ministry as a Pentecostal preacher in Alabama. In Detroit, his prophecies concerning healing and wealth attracted a massive radio audience and mega-congregation.⁷ And in Harlem, there was George Baker, Jr., better known as Father Divine. He applied New Thought metaphysics, including the Unity teachings of Charles Fillmore, to the conditions of white and class supremacy in America by promoting the perfectability of all human bodies, particularly black bodies.⁸ Baker's particular appropriation allowed him to challenge the exclusion of African Americans and the poor from the privileges of the dominant classes without having to call into question the society itself. Historian Jill Watts's description of African Americans' embrace of New Thought captures the paradox of black Spiritualist, metaphysical teachings in regards to racial and economic injustice.

Exercising mind-power and oneness with God, anyone, regardless of race, had the potential to achieve spiritual and social equality. Blacks possessed just as much divinity as whites and, by applying mind-power, could overcome oppression and reap the benefits of American enterprise. Positive thinking allowed African Americans to assert control over their destiny and to combat their feelings of powerlessness in white Amer-

⁵ Hortense Powdermaker, *After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South* (Viking Press, 1939), 291; Hans A. Baer, *The Black Spiritual Movement: A Religious Response to Racism*, 2nd ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001).

⁶ Wallace D. Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915-1952* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 40-41.

⁷ Tim Retzlaff, "Seer or Queer? Postwar Fascination with Detroit's Prophet Jones," *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 8, no. 3 (2002).

⁸ R. Marie Griffith, "Body Salvation: New Thought, Father Divine, and the Feast of Material Pleasures," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 11, no. 2 (2001).

ica. If it was the Race Mind that held blacks in bondage, then by following Fillmore's guidelines, African Americans could conquer white oppression. The solution to racism was quite clear, it rested on a spiritual cleansing of the American mind.⁹

Watts makes an important and instructive point here. On the one hand, New Thought provided African Americans and other historically marginalized groups the power of positive thinking and a sense of divine potentiality. Racial discrimination and economic exclusion were not consistent with a realized eschatology on earth, a heavenly reality available to all. This affirmed followers' acute awareness of America's inherent unfairness, while offering a means to combat against it. On the other hand, spiritual teachers like Baker and Eikerenkoetter could avoid calling the dominant society into question by turning responsibility for inclusion and uplift inward. This allowed persons to covet and indulge in the perceived "blessings" of America's consumption-driven economy without any feelings of guilt in relation to those who lack basic needs.

Moreover, Eikerenkoetter's emphasis on personal health, success and prosperity coupled with an understanding of an indwelling God reflects what historian Catherine Albanese identifies as a "paradigm shift" of metaphysical religion in the twentieth century more broadly. According to Albanese, the writings of Ralph Waldo Trine, especially *In Tune with the Infinite*, helped to shift New Thought's focus from an affective social progressivism of the 19th century to a noetic instrumentalism that was increasingly concerned with individual pleasure. Trine argued that the majority of humanity remains willfully ignorant to the "divine inflow" of supernatural forces and powers of which "we are rightful heirs." "On the other hand," Trine contends, "we can come into so vital a realization of the oneness of our real selves with this Infinite Life, and can open ourselves so fully to the incoming of this divine inflow, and so to the operation of these higher forces, inspirations and powers, that we can indeed and in truth become what we may well term, God-men."¹⁰ Trine's accent on positive flowing energy and the harnessing of this inner "Infinite Life" inspired subsequent metaphysical thinkers, according to Albanese, insofar as an exoteric spirituality developed that "dissolving [sic] so thoroughly into society at large that it became, in some versions, simply part of America

⁹ Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.: The Father Divine Story* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 24.

¹⁰ Ralph Waldo Trine, *In Tune with the Infinite; or, Fullness of Peace, Power, and Plenty* (New York: T.Y. Crowell & Company, 1897), 17.

as usual.”¹¹ Eikerenkoetter definitely had plenty of New Thought informed thinkers from which to pull. Besides prominent Spiritualist ministers previously noted, Charles Fillmore’s *Prosperity* (1936), Napoleon Hill’s *Think and Grow Rich* (1937) and Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) were all perennial publishing favorites, and thus part of the religious air Eikerenkoetter breathed in Boston and New York City. Yet Eikerenkoetter later acknowledged that he was influenced distinctly by the teachings of a lesser-known New Thought teacher who lectured and published under the name Neville.

Neville Lancelot Goddard was born in 1905 on the island of Barbados in the British West Indies to Anglican parents. He immigrated to New York City at the age of seventeen to study theatre and dance, eventually touring for a decade as a ballet and ballroom dancer. In 1931 he embraced an Ethiopian born rabbi named Abdullah as a spiritual mentor. According to Neville, Abdullah trained him in scripture, Hebrew, the Kabbalah and varying forms of mysticism. Yet the most influential lesson involved the power of one’s own imagination. “Live as though you are there and that you shall be,” is the one line that underscored all of Neville’s subsequent teachings.¹²

Neville’s primary source text was the Bible. His writings and lectures were peppered with scripture references and quotations. For Neville, the Bible represented neither history nor fact, but rather ideals. Jesus was not a living man but an ideal of the characteristic attributes of the divine — attributes that all persons can achieve via self-creation. Scripture conveys metaphorical and allegorical meaning for persons to embrace. For instance, in a 1951 interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Neville asserted that persons take the commandment “Thou shalt not steal” too literally; and, in the process, never comprehend a much deeper meaning. “If a man look upon any other man and estimates that man as less than himself,” Neville declares, “then he is stealing from the other. He is stealing the other’s birthright — that of equality.”¹³

The biblically-informed, poetic nature of Neville’s prose extended Trine’s favored theme of flow insofar as the message resonated with a cross-section of hearers. Neville believed humanity operated according to a primary law. All human desire *may* be realized, yet all reality *will* be actualized in the visible

¹¹ Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 399. 2007), 399.

¹² Mitch Horowitz, “The Substance of Things Hoped For: Searching for Neville Goddard,” in *The Neville Reader* (Camarillo, California: DeVorss Publications, 2005), xiii.

¹³ George L. Beronius, “Lecturer Presents Bible in New Light,” *Los Angeles Times*, July 7 1951.

world according to human consciousness. Neville's text *Feeling Is the Secret* begins with the line, "The world, and all within it, is man's conditioned consciousness objectified."¹⁴ In keeping with Trine's aquatic metaphors, he proceeds to liken the conscious to a flowing stream, which divides into the conscious and subconscious. The conscious is personal, selective and the realm of effect. The subconscious is impersonal, nonselective and the realm of cause. "The conscious generates ideas and impresses these ideas on the subconscious; the subconscious receives ideas and gives form and expression to them."¹⁵ These two parts of the conscious play gendered roles for Neville. The conscious (male) is generative in terms of feelings and ideas and thus sows seeds toward reproduction. Accordingly, the subconscious (female) gives expression to these ideas and is the "womb of creation."¹⁶ Citing Ephesians 5 where Paul writes, "The husband is head of the wife," Neville suggests that this "may not be true of man and woman in their earthly relationship but it is true of the conscious and the subconscious."¹⁷ The feelings and ideas that extend from the former dictate and determine what the latter will actualize. Neville qualifies the relationship between the two parts of consciousness in regards to the masculine conscious being the "head" over the female subconscious. The relationship is not that of a tyrant, but analogous to romantic love. In an especially problematic metaphor, yet indicative of the American postwar context, Neville states, "The subconscious does serve man and faithfully gives form to his feelings. However, the subconscious has a distinct distaste for compulsion and responds to persuasion rather than to command; consequently, it resembles the beloved wife more than the servant."¹⁸

It is by and through this law and its operation that that "man has control over creation." For Neville, according to this law, persons are able to "feel" themselves into the state they desire. Creation occurs in the subconscious animated by what persons think, believe and feel in the conscious mind. And the

¹⁴ Neville Goddard, *The Neville Reader* (Camarillo, California: DeVorss Publications, 2005), 174.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ To be sure, the incoherence of Neville's argument at certain points is not lost on the author here. For Neville to suggest "the conscious impresses the subconscious while the subconscious expresses all that is impressed upon it," would seemingly make the conscious "the cause" and the subconscious "the effect." But, it seems that Neville has inverted this in order to emphasize the ways the subconscious actively gives form and expression to the ideas impressed upon it by the conscious mind. The conscious mind is generative in terms of conceiving an idea (which, of course, would make it the "womb of creation"), but the subconscious has the agency as far as actualizing the idea. *Ibid.*

subconscious “never fails to express that which has been impressed upon it.” Thus Neville admonishes to “Be careful of your moods and feelings, for there is an unbroken connection between your feelings and the visible world.”¹⁹ At the root of all disease (dis-ease) is an “emotional disturbance” such as fear and doubt that the conscious impressed upon the unconscious. This is the reason Neville taught persons to profess, “I am healthy” or “I am wealthy” rather than “I will be” either of these states of feeling or being. To profess the latter is to confess in the conscious mind that one *is not* at the moment of utterance. Conversely, to feel and enact the object of one’s desire is to sow positive and productive seed within the subconscious. The feeling of desire alone is insufficient. Persons must assume the feelings of being and having what one wants. “You never attract that which you want,” Neville contends, “but always attract that which you are. As a man [sic] is, so does he see.”²⁰

Eikerenkoetter’s philosophical indebtedness to Neville is apparent in his popular teaching series, “The Feeling Gets the Blessing.” Originally recorded some time in the 1970s, this six-part set has remained in circulation ever since.²¹ It includes the lessons, “Tell Your Feelings How to Feel,” “Tell Your Mind What to Think,” and “The Changeless Law.” Eikerenkoetter’s derivative appropriation of Neville coupled with creative appeals to scripture extends the belief that the subconscious mind is the source of all reality. In *Tell Your Mind What to Think*, the mind is divided into the gendered dimensions of the conscious and subconscious. The former feeds the latter ideas about poverty, sickness and lack, just as it can impress images of wealth and health. “You use the conscious mind to decide what you want. . . . Then it (the conscious mind) deposits that seed with the wife, the subconscious.” Eikerenkoetter contends that there are many competing messages in the world speaking to the conscious mind making it imperative that persons exercise discipline and reject all negative ideas or emotions. This is what it means to have “mastery” over the conscious mind; the capacity to cancel out negative messages that pour into the conscious mind by arresting anything synonymous with doubt, dejection or despair. As an example Eikerenkoetter cites Joshua’s charge to the Children of Israel to “choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve” in regards to the people devoting themselves to the God of Abraham or the “gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living.” Eikerenkoetter argues that Joshua is

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 186.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ “The Feeling Gets the Blessing” is currently available as a six-CD set on Rev. Ike’s ministry website: <http://store.revike.org/feelinggetstheblessing1.aspx>.

referencing the mind. “Who will your mind serve?” Eikerenkoetter asks, “Will it serve the world or will it serve you?”²²

Eikerenkoetter appeals to a traditional Pentecostal trope that castigates all things “worldly,” which, of course, would resonate with many of his listeners. But at the same time, he is able to redraw lines around the spiritual district of which is considered “worldly” or “sinful.” Material goods and possessions are no longer considered the things of the world. Rather it is the mindset that calls into question one’s ability or worthiness of having such material possessions that Eikerenkoetter considers sinful. The evangelist often made a not-so-veiled reference to and dismissive critique of the Poor People’s Campaign organized by Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference around the time of King’s assassination. The purpose of the campaign was to address economic justice, fair housing and job creation for the poor. But Eikerenkoetter argued, “All these poor people’s crawl-ins, and poverty-council beg-ins, are used as a part of the negative self-image psychology that is the real oppressor of black people in this country, because it keeps people turned against themselves, hating themselves for needing help so much.”²³ And in his message *Tell Your Body to React* he goes further to say, “Being poor has become a status symbol. People are getting damn proud of their poverty, even banding together and saying ‘look we’re poor.’”²⁴

One can disagree with Eikerenkoetter’s politics as well as his disingenuous depiction of the SCLC’s intent while conceding the consistency and coherence of his argument. If every thought impressed upon the subconscious must be expressed “be it good, bad or indifferent,” identifying with poverty can only give way to an expression of poverty. Eikerenkoetter explained this as his central concern during a 2005 interview. He interpreted the language of poor people’s march as giving black people a poverty image. While some believed identification with the poor to be honorable and, as Eikerenkoetter dismissively described, “a badge of honor,” it was a self-fulfilling prophecy for him. The language of poverty, regardless of its intended use, makes negative impressions upon the subconscious that will inevitably manifest. Hence, the origin of Eikerenkoetter’s other well-known saying, “The best thing you can do for the poor is not be one of them.” Poverty, for Eikerenkoetter, had less to do with economic status or earnings among the poor. It involved self-identification

²² Frederick J. Eikerenkoetter, *Tell Your Mind What to Think/Series Lesson #2* (Boston: Thinkonomics Publication).

²³ As quoted in Riley, “The Golden Gospel of Rev. Ike.”

²⁴ Frederick J. Eikerenkoetter, *Tell Your Body How to React/Series Lesson #4* (Boston: Thinkonomics Publication).

and self-conception that ultimately creates the conditions within the subconscious mind that subsequently determines one's class position. He often used his mother as an example. Although she made only \$65 per month, as he so often repeated, "she would have objected to being called poor." In his view, civil rights leaders were frustrating their own ends by inundating the individual consciousnesses of the disaffected with terminology that debases rather than uplifts the human psyche. As he reflected back on this dynamic he asserted, "You've got to be careful with your self-image. And I saw that particularly during the 70s this danger of poverty and blackness becoming synonymous. And I couldn't have any part of that."²⁵

Such a concern with self-image provides further insight as to why Neville Goddard's particular strand of New Thought metaphysics attracted Eikerenkoetter. Remember, for Neville, it was not simply about positive imagining toward personal transformation in the future, but positive representation in the moment. "I am" is a stronger feeling than "I will." Or, put another way, "You never attract that which you want but always attract that which you are conscious of being."²⁶ If Eikerenkoetter was concerned with blackness being synonymous with poverty, then he used mass mediated frames to offer an image of what it meant to transcend both. Like the photograph of Eikerenkoetter on the cover of *New York Times Magazine*, the plethora of pictures peppered throughout the pages of his *Action! Magazine*, or his own carefully constructed image on television, his sartorial flamboyancy was intended to signify his positive self-conception. New Thought metaphysics rebuffed conceptual connections between blackness and poverty by providing philosophical justification for honorific displays of wealth accumulation. And the hyper-visual tools and techniques of mass evangelism provided the means for Eikerenkoetter to put his philosophy on display. It's not enough to positively think oneself out of the bondage of poverty. Persons must purchase themselves into power with an aesthetic performance of freedom. Eikerenkoetter's conscious "feeling" and overt display of wealth did more than impress the idea of wealth upon his subconscious. It disentangled Eikerenkoetter's body from negative racialized significations that he seemed to believe would locate him within a community characterized by negative energy. If "Black means poor.

²⁵ Jonathan Walton, "Personal Interview with Rev. Frederick J. Eikerenkoetter," (Bel Harbor, Florida 2005).

²⁶ Goddard, *The Neville Reader*, 184.

Black means help me, boss, because I can't do anything for myself," as Eikerenkoetter was fond of saying, what is the alternative?²⁷

Cultural theorist Paul Gilroy offers an insightful historical framework to understand the interconnections of freedom and consumerism in American history. On the heels of emancipation, a U.S. flavored Victorian uplift ideology had a strong impact on nationalistic forms of black politics in the twentieth century. Particular ways of thinking about status, property, race and nation cross-pollinated with anxiety about racial alienation and aims of inclusion.²⁸ The assimilationist, bourgeois model of Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey's Pan-Africanist yet imperialist system of black mercantilism provide two prominent examples. Here money and markets are integral to black advancement and civic participation. And citizenship defined according to the rights of all and responsibility toward maintaining a just and open society was superseded, Gilroy suggests, by consumer culture insofar as brands, styles and objects began to frame cultural norms and racial identities. Commercial environments even established the terrain on which black politics was envisioned.²⁹ According to Gilroy,

Political outlooks were being reshaped by patterns of interaction in which racialized subjects discovered themselves and their agency through their social life as consumers rather than as citizens. Many African Americans formed and signified their solidarity through objects: finding and losing themselves as they moved through an ever more commercially saturated space from which politics would gradually be evacuated or in which it would be allowed to degenerate.³⁰

²⁷ Riley, "The Golden Gospel of Rev. Ike," 13.

²⁸ The purpose of Gilroy's work here is to offer a counter-narrative to this singular view by demonstrating that there was in fact a "moral economy" based on a universal, human freedom that was incompatible with racial hierarchy and not dependent on consumption. But by doing so, Gilroy sketches skillfully a picture of a developing symbolic system of market relations and exchange, on a transnational level, that would both regulate and reify racially segregated and stratified societies. See chapter one, "Get Free or Die Tryin'" in Paul Gilroy, *Darker Than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

²⁹ The early 1960s student led sit-ins provide a compelling example. These demonstrations were not originally grounded in claims of equal justice based on citizenship. Rather, for these college students with bourgeois aspirations, the ability to spend money at downtown lunchcounters was perceived as a necessary precondition for first-class citizenship and middleclass status in the South. More than a fight against segregation, lunch counter protests were a struggle for absorption into consumer culture. Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: Sncc and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 12-15.

³⁰ Gilroy, *Darker Than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture*, 11-12.

Human recognition, then, involved the embrace of mass consumer culture and its privatizing effect on society.

Gilroy goes on to suggest that there are two poles among historically subjugated people between which symbolic value can be negotiated, shoppers' rebellion and resignation. The former involves disrupting crass consumerism by removing the value from the perceived "prizes" of labor and wages. This sort of ascetic posture can take many forms that include, but are not limited to, conferring intrinsic value to work or an ultimate concern for perceived "higher" moral values such as altruism. The latter, "shoppers' resignation" characterizes those who seek to deflect the blows of racism by buying in, literally, to the current system. Material goods are consumed and adorned, in Gilroy's words, "as a means to seem wealthier, prouder, and thus more respectable, more worthy of recognition."³¹ Identity, then, is underwritten by consumption. And the value of one's life and the markers of human freedom are measured by one's ability to spend — what Gilroy refers to as "transgressive freedom."

As one unashamedly resigned to shopping, Eikerenkoetter often held up purchasing power as both a symbol and by-product of positive self-image and thus freedom. Negative thoughts caused persons to walk by windows on 5th Avenue and say, "that's not for me."³² Conversely, persons attract luxury goods such as jewels, fine clothing and cars by imagining themselves with them, and purchasing such goods whenever possible. In the words of Neville, "You never attract that which you want but always attract that which you are conscious of being."³³ Describing life in Ridgeland, Eikerenkoetter recalled, "I would pick up a stick and make the noise of a motor. In school between lessons I would take my notebook and draw all kinds of cars. The intellect didn't know what was happening but these Rolls Royces were in me. They had to come out."³⁴ Eikerenkoetter's inordinate emphasis on visible goods leads me to believe that despite the rhetoric of "feeling good" and "positive self-affirmation," consumption was a public performance of both intrinsic and extrinsic value. And when consumption is tied to freedom extrinsically, public acknowledgment becomes a precondition of value. Similar to metaphysical theories that posit perception as a prerequisite of existence — "if a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? — Eikerenkoetter appears to adhere to this kind of subjective idealism. Is one really consuming if no one

³¹ Ibid., 26.

³² Eikerenkoetter, *Tell Your Body How to React/Series Lesson #4*.

³³ Goddard, *The Neville Reader*, 184.

³⁴ Frederick J. Eikerenkoetter, *Get Your "But" Out of the Way/Series Lesson #1* (Boston: Thinkonomics Publications).

notices? Is one really wealthy if one's wealth is not on display for others? And if one neither notices one's wealth nor consumption, is one, then, really free? Hence, one's ability to consume alone is not necessarily a precondition for freedom. Rather, Eikerenkoetter raises the bar of human freedom to one of conspicuous consumption.

Economist Thorstein Veblen coined the phrase "conspicuous consumption" to describe the excesses of America's upper economic echelon of industrialists during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the era known as the "Gilded Age." Men like Commodore Cornelius Vanderbilt and J.P. Morgan defined the ethos of the era with their 250-room mansion and 1,000-piece gem collection, respectively. Of these extravagant displays of wealth, Veblen wrote in his classic text *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, "In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only in evidence." And "conversely," Veblen notes, "the failure to consume in due quantity and quality becomes a mark of inferiority and demerit."³⁵ Symbolic and honorific value trumps pecuniary worth.

What Veblen's theory does not consider is the role of race. As previously noted, brands and objects contribute to the framing of cultural identities, providing conspicuous consumption with a distinctively racialized component. When black and brown bodies come to signify cultural deficiency, pathology, poverty and exclusion — an a priori negative symbolic value — then the honorific element and social utility of luxury goods becomes that much more expensive. The negative appraisals of non-whiteness within a context that privileges whiteness serves as an additional racial tax burden in any attempt to attain commodity-based freedom on the part of people of color. Economists Nikolai Roussanov, Kerwin Kofi Charles, and Erik Hurst offer empirical evidence to support this assertion with their findings on spending patterns across racial groups. By reviewing data collected from 1986 to 2002 by the federal Bureau of Labor and Statistics, they found that all subgroups of African Americans and Hispanics, excluding older households, spend about 30% more of household incomes on "visible goods" such as clothing, jewelry and cars than whites at equal income levels.³⁶

³⁵ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class; an Economic Study of Institutions* (New York: The Macmillan Company; [etc., 1912), 36.

³⁶ Kerwin Kofi Charles; Eirk Hurst; Nikolai Roussanov, "Conspicuous Consumption and Race," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* CXXIV, no. 2 (2009).

Yet race alone is not what determines one's spending patterns. Research findings suggest that the wealth gap in a given community is a better predictor of who embraces conspicuous consumption as a viable strategy of social status. After comparing the spending patterns of whites in Alabama against whites in Massachusetts within similar income levels, the authors discovered that the former engaged in conspicuous consumption at much higher rates than the latter. This led the researchers to conclude that the proximity between the poor and the middleclass is a more important variable than race or culture as to who purchases luxury goods as a means of social honor. Where there is major wealth divide between groups who live in close proximity, such as the white working and upper classes in Massachusetts, conspicuous consumption is not a viable option to confer a status boost. But when there is not a great income divide among persons living in close proximity, as is often the case in black and brown communities, honorific displays of wealth are more effective at assisting persons in delineating themselves from other community members. Particularly for persons of color seeking to deflect the gaze of cultural logic that correlates black and brown skin with working and lower classes as was clearly the case for Eikerenkoetter.

This may explain, in part, Eikerenkoetter's seemingly obsessive efforts to disassociate his body and ministry from all racial (read: black) markers. Throughout the course of his public ministry, for instance, Eikerenkoetter seemed to sport a chemically processed conkline hairstyle that was standard among African American entertainers prior to embrace of natural hairstyles in the 1970s. The intent was to emulate the slick, straightened hair of white males, as "kinky" hair texture was regarded among many circles with derision. But even as late as 2005, Eikerenkoetter was conscious to remind interviewers that his hair texture was "natural," a result of his "Dutch ancestry." In his *New York Times* advertisements for the Palace Eikerenkoetter emphasized the church's geographic location. The ads stated, "The Church is NOT located in Harlem, but in the Washington Heights section of Manhattan." What is more, in describing his ministry in New York's *Amsterdam News*, Eikerenkoetter, speaking of himself in third person, declares, "Rev. Ike is the first and only non-White evangelist to date to operate on the mass, sophisticated level and with the scope and style of the major white evangelists. Controversial, flamboyant, and ostentatiously wealthy, Rev. Ike has commanded the respect of the establishment by his evangelistic success and business acumen."³⁷ The major

³⁷ Frederick J. Eikerenkoetter, "Evangelism in the Church," *New York Amsterdam News: Special Bicentennial Edition*, Summer 1976.

white evangelists to which Eikerenkoetter refers were mentioned earlier in the article, “Billy Sunday, Dwight L. Moody, and presently, Billy Graham and Oral Roberts.” He continues, “These men head or headed gigantic mass evangelistic movements addressing multiple thousands at meetings. Billy Graham and Oral Roberts reach millions by radio and television on a regular systematic basis. These evangelistic efforts were and are multimillion dollar enterprises with no counterparts led by Blacks, until the appearance of Rev. Ike, an nonwhite, on international TV in 1972.”³⁸ And, finally, there were the cars. At one point Eikerenkoetter boasted of having a fleet of sixteen Rolls Royces in his possession. Like the oil barons and captains of industry discussed in Veblen’s classic text, it was not enough for Eikerenkoetter to afford luxury items. He had to demonstrate his purchasing power to the black community, lest he be considered a part of the industrial class as opposed to a “gentleman of leisure.”³⁹ Driving through the streets of New York City in a Rolls Royce that matched the color of his particular suit of the day had the intended purpose of modeling goods consumed for evidence rather than service, a distinctive marker of pecuniary honor.

Ironically, this latter demonstration situates Eikerenkoetter within as opposed to outside a historical frame of black cultural practice. The private vehicle holds a special place in American life in general, and black America in particular.

³⁸ Ibid. Unfortunately, Eikerenkoetter is overt in his racial biases while playing loose with historical facts in his attempts to align himself with the white “Big Operators.” First, he credits Billy Graham with his outreach to blacks and makes the erroneous statement that “Even before integration became a popular cause, Billy Graham never would have conducted a segregated crusade.” This is not true as Graham conducted and participated in many segregated crusades during the 1950s and even 60s throughout the deep South. Second, he ignores the size, scope and ministerial mission of historically black denominations such as the Church of God in Christ, National Baptist Convention and African Methodist Episcopal Church. He states that “Black preachers are still preaching the same ‘Pie in the Sky’ theology taught to them by slavemasters,” imputing upon black preachers a criticism that was more appropriate for his “Big Operators.” Finally, in his professions that he is the only black minister “to preach Positive Self-Image Psychology,” to achieve national acclaim “formerly accorded only to White evangelists,” or to operate a “multimillion dollar ministry” he ignores willfully one of his ministerial mentors, Prophet James F. Jones. In 1950, Jones was a national radio presence, with a ministry value of a reported \$2 million, and a 6,000 member congregation in Detroit, of which, one-third of the membership was white. Jones was even invited to the White House as a guest of Eisenhower. Steven P. Miller, *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); “Prophet Jones: Bizarre Detroit Evangelist Builds Himself a \$2 Million Kingdom in Slums in Six Years,” *Ebony*, April 1950. See chapter 2, “Something Within” in Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism, Religion, Race and Ethnicity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

³⁹ Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class; an Economic Study of Institutions*, 74.

So much so that Paul Gilroy describes the automobile as an “ur-commodity” that serves as “an unspoken prerequisite for the exercise of substantive citizenship.”⁴⁰ Blacks constitute thirty percent of automobile consumers, yet comprise only twelve percent of the population. And from early blues recordings to current hip-hop culture, we know there to be a fascination with, if not fetishization of, the automobile as a symbol of all status levels or human emotions and pleasures; i.e., wealth, fame, success, love, jealousy, sexual pleasure. Whether Robert Johnson’s 1936 *Terraplane Blues* where a stalled car becomes a metaphor for a cheating mate or R. Kelly’s 1993 *You Remind Me of Something* where a woman is reduced to a misogynistic metaphor for a jeep, the automobile is a staple of black vernacular culture and imagination.⁴¹

To be sure, the association of cars and freedom within black cultures is a logical one. Wherein the Jim Crow railroad car and rear-seating public buses signified mobility under the conditions of dehumanization and humiliation, private cars were symbols of liberty, and in demonstrations like the Montgomery bus boycott, instruments of equality. This contributes, in part, to the reasons the automobile occupies such an important place in African American communities. It is understandable, then, that the automobile holds a similar coveted, contested, and thus complicated place within African American religious communities. Religious scholar Gayraud Wilmore suggested in his classic text *Black Religion Black Radicalism*, “The myth that all black preachers drove Cadillacs during the Depression and all black churches had plenty of money belongs to black folklore.”⁴² This may be true. But this does not mean that the automobile has not been a distinguishing characteristic of many nationally recognized African American male clergy dating back to the pre-Depression era.

This is especially the case when popular media outlets, both historically black and white, profile African American ministers. In the summer of 1932, for instance, columnist I.P. Reynolds wrote positively about local pastor and recording artist J.M. Gates in his popular “What Sam of Auburn Avenue Says” published in the *Atlanta Daily World*. The feature reads, “Stately and grand

⁴⁰ Gilroy makes this assertion based on, in part, how Hurricane Katrina in 2005 demonstrated that there is an unspoken assumption that American citizens “should” own private automobiles, and that instant mobility is a privilege available to all “citizens.” See Gilroy, *Darker Than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture*, 13.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁴² Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983), 161.

Rev. J.M. Gates, the nationally known pastor, glides down Auburn in his Hupp car. You may say what you may but all races have celebrities among them and can boast of them so the Negro race has a celebrity in the person of the Rev. Gates. In his line of work he has no peer as a sought for minister.⁴³ Interestingly, Gates' celebrity is both contained within and confirmed by the high-end Oldsmobile that "glides" down one of the most prominent African American thoroughfares in the country, "Sweet Auburn" as it's affectionately known. And, of course, one cannot ignore the relationship between luxury automobiles and black masculinity that is a constitutive element of black cultural celebrity.

Similar can be said of Rev. C.L. Franklin, the larger-than-life radio revivalist and recording artist who pastored the New Salem Baptist Church in Detroit for over three decades. Reverend Franklin had a penchant for brand new Lincolns and Cadillacs that he transported from city-to-city along his singing and preaching circuits. Members of his touring group would drive one of Franklin's luxury automobiles to an appointed destination in advance of his scheduled flight arrival. This would provide Franklin with his own car service as well as the celebrity cultural capital associated with grandiose displays of luxury. But, as historian Nick Salvatore points out, this practice was also part of a larger racial strategy, which placed Franklin on the offensive against the indignities of segregation and discrimination throughout the country.⁴⁴ Franklin sought to limit the instances in which he might be subjected to the racial slights and dehumanizing gaze of, for instance, the white southern service industry.

Like the harrowing tale of when on one occasion Franklin's group experienced car trouble in a southern town. Rather than wait for an African American mechanic among a growing, curious crowd of whites who appeared perturbed by the fashionably dressed preacher, Franklin walked to a car dealership and purchased a new car with a bulging cash clip from inside his suit pocket. To be sure, such a narrative reveals Franklin's anxiety informed practices of conspicuous consumption, as well as his righteous indignation and courage. Salvatore's reading of the episode is correct. For Franklin "to thwart so publicly the pretensions to superiority of that white crowd, in a manner

⁴³ I.P. Reynolds, "What Sam of Auburn Avenue Says," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 14, 1932.

⁴⁴ Nick Salvatore, *Singing in a Strange Land: C.L. Franklin, the Black Church, and the Transformation of America* (New York and Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 187.

reminiscent of a Jack Johnson folktale, was both daring and dangerous. Black males during the 1950s had been lynched and murdered for less.⁴⁵

Salvatore's historical framing of this narrative problematizes Rev. Ike's own accounts of similar experiences, homiletic tales that offer no hint of the intractability of southern racism of the era or the sorts of white racial resentments often fostered by public performances of black wealth and privilege. For instance, Rev. Ike's sermon *Get Your 'But' Out of the Way* concludes with a homiletic anecdote that he admits to telling "time and time again." It's based on the first time that he ever preached in New Orleans. Ike tells of how his "Jewish director of operations" dashed out immediately following the evening's evangelistic meeting to secure a cab to return him and Rev. Ike to the hotel. As the many African Americans in attendance began to pour out of the convention center, with a mocking southern drawl, Ike testifies the white cab driver as saying, "I wouldn't ever ride one of them in my cab." The director of operations then replies, "Well, there is one coming. But this one can buy your whole fleet of cabs." Immediately, according to Rev. Ike, the cabdriver repentantly says, "Well I don't mind riding him!" And, according to Rev. Ike, "when I go to New Orleans now they send their high ranking officers to my room to personally escort me all the way to the platform. They drive all the way up behind the curtain with me." Ike used this story to impress the point upon his audience, "That's why you'll never catch me riding around with a bunch of rabble rousers chanting black power. Black power without green power is no power. And when you get enough green power, people won't care what color your face or anything else is!"⁴⁶

Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to identify the philosophical sources of Frederick J. Eikerenkoetter's *Science of Living* while also unveiling larger cultural patterns of response to racial discrimination that informed Eikerenkoetter's ministry. By blending the techniques of Pentecostal revivalism with the teachings of New Thought metaphysics, Eikerenkoetter developed a strategy to transcend the perceived pejorative markers of his own racial identity. Wherein blackness had come to signify poverty and pain in Eikerenkoetter's mind, the perceived wealth of white evangelists became a positive and productive model

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Eikerenkoetter, *Get Your "But" Out of the Way/Series Lesson #1*.

to emulate. What is more, the teachings of Neville Goddard offered the philosophical framework for Eikerenkoetter to both cognitively embrace and aesthetically embody a luxury-laden lifestyle. Yet, as this essay reveals, the very cultural practice of shoppers's resignation in the forms of conspicuous consumption and fetishization of automotivity as an ultimate symbol of freedom actually locate Eikerenkoetter within, rather than outside of, a well-worn tradition of African American response to racial injustice. This may be why what some may have interpreted as gratuitous displays of wealth on the part of Eikerenkoetter had much a greater spiritual significance for his followers. Eikerenkoetter's embrace of money and material goods as a means of beating back the specter of racism resonated with a community well-versed in the ideal. For African Americans who have exhausted many different options in attempts to live the "American Dream," the prescription to "Live as though you are there and that you shall be," seems just as good an idea as any other. It is no surprise, then, that the contemporary Word of Faith movement and its prevailing themes of "health and wealth" and post-racial Christian reconciliation continue to influence both classical Pentecostalism and mainline denominations alike.