

**“Religion...Is Our Business:”
Religious Workers and Religious Work
at the David C. Cook Publishing Company**

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ABSTRACT

Though scholars have long been attentive to the impact capitalism has had upon the development of American religious life, few have considered religion itself as a site of work, labor, or employment. Yet in addition to being sacred spaces, congregations, synagogues, seminaries, and other ecclesiastical institutions are also workplaces where employers hire employees to carry out what I call “religious work.” The designation of even the most secular task as religiously consequential significantly impacts working conditions at religious institutions, exempting religious employers from having to follow many labor laws while also limiting the response employees can take to workplace grievances. At the same time, attempts by religious employers to attain these concessions from the state contribute to the codification of religion in law. This article draws upon the history the David C. Cook Publishing Company, a printer of evangelical Protestant devotional literature, in order to explore the contentious process surrounding the classification of certain forms of employment as either sacred or profane. Focusing particularly upon the company’s workplace relations during World War II, when the federal government classified it as an “essential industry” on account of its religious products and thereby stunted an attempt by some employees to form a union, the article argues that a labor history of religious employers does not reduce religion to mere economics. Rather it attends more closely to their mutual constitution.

Employees were already worried. For weeks supervisors at the David C. Cook Publishing Company had posted vague signs promising "BIG NEWS" at a company-wide meeting to be held on February 25, 1944. Given the number of changes that had already transformed this publisher of evangelical Sunday school material over the last several years, one could understand the employees' nervousness. The company already had conducted numerous time-and-motion studies, suspended wage increases in favor of a bonus plan that rewarded employees for increased productivity, and, most dramatically, invested in new equipment that threatened to eliminate several ancillary printing positions.¹ The changes had been so sweeping and so swift that some of the company's 350 workers wondered if they might soon need union representation in order to have a say in determining their working conditions. In fact, by the time the meeting finally arrived, more than a few new International Typographical Union members sat in the audience wondering what company president David C. Cook, III might announce. The executive ended up speaking directly to their concerns.

"We have really been making quite a few changes lately, haven't we?" Cook, the grandson of the press's namesake and founder, admitted at the outset. But the changes, he argued, were necessary. "As you know, nationwide boom periods are our company's depression periods," he explained. Americans simply turned to the company's catalog of Bible study guides less when times were flush, and with wartime production pushing the nation toward full employment, the company's sales had dropped precipitously. The recent shop floor changes had helped shore up the company's bottom line, Cook assured, but they were not enough. In the interest of planning for "the post-war days," Cook announced that the company would completely overhaul its management structure. Henceforth a new "Junior Board" of handpicked hourly employees would supervise production and report directly to a "Senior Board" of executives on the best way to "speed up service." According to Cook, this new "Multiple Management" format, as he called it, would inject more "democracy" into what had long been a "one-man organization."² In reality, however, the plan would also make wageworkers complicit in their increasing pace of work.

Fully aware that the proposed changes would expand his employees' workload, Cook again reminded his employees just how vital these modifications were. Not only did they promote the firm's financial wellbeing, they also advanced the company's explicit mission to advance Christ's kingdom by building up Sunday schools. "Religion . . . is our business," Cook often reminded his employees.³ And religion required sacrifice.

RELIGIOUS WORK

Labor has long been a category of analysis in the study of religion. Working people, "the working class," or the work religion requires often surface as objects of inquiry in the field, while religion itself has come to be understood as the product of cultural work. Indeed, a desire among white, middle-class, largely Protestant scholars to catalog the religious deficiencies of working-class Catholics, Jews, and Pentecostals in part drove the field's development in the United States at the dawn of the twentieth century. The material deprivations of industrial work, these pioneering researchers argued, stunted the spiritual development of those who labored on the nation's assembly lines and inculcated supposedly premodern beliefs about the

divine that threatened the nation's progress.⁴ The prejudices of this early diagnostic impulse in part fueled the field's more recent turn toward cultural studies. Where scholars once saw faith as something tarnished by work, many now see religion as a category born of human labor. In contrast to older models that articulated supposedly universal standards of religion against which individuals and communities were judged, scholars now see religion as something people live, invent, or discursively construct in particular times and places for particular purposes. As Jonathan Z. Smith penned decades ago, "*homo religious*" is also always "*homo faber*," ever always creating the religious worlds he inhabits and that scholars study.⁵ And in the last decade scholars have attended at length to the role capitalism plays in religion's making through commerce, politics, and employment. Thanks to the work of several historians, we now know how corporate executives trafficked in religion to facilitate the selling of other wares, how labor organizers employed scripture in combatting workplace injustices, and how business leaders clothed the free market in sacred robes in order to roll back secular regulations.⁶ Indeed, attending to matters of faith has come to mean attending to matters of work as well.

Despite recognizing the impact remunerative work has had upon religious life, however, scholars have been reluctant to see religious life itself as a site of work, labor, or employment. Consider, for instance, the David C. Cook Publishing Company. Though long known as a purveyor of Sunday school literature, the firm is rarely discussed as a workplace where groups of individuals entered into economic relationships built around the specific modes of production. Yet the former was in many ways entirely dependent upon the latter. Though employees knew—and the company frequently told them—that their work contributed directly to the world's evangelization, the Cook company hired its workers primarily as typesetters, foundry workers, shippers, and apprentices, not as ministers. The same is true for more than just religious publishing houses. Though the parties of these contractual relationships might be titled administrator, secretary, advance man, or even janitor, those who labor in churches, denominational offices, seminaries, and other ecclesiastical institutions are nonetheless employees hired to carry out what I call "religious work."

By "religious work" I mean those forms of employment or compensated labor whose services contribute to the functioning of identifiably religious institutions or workplaces. This includes not only the work of ordained ministers or seminarians, but also church organists, parish school teachers, support staff at religious institutions, and, as we shall see, the employees of religious publishing houses. Describing even these more secular occupations with the title of religious work captures the heightened expectations employers often ascribe to certain forms of labor as well as the deeper meanings workers can draw from their toil. While both a public school teacher and a parochial school teacher might find purpose in the work of educating future citizens, for example, the parochial school teacher's location in a religious institution places him or her within a web of additional idioms, rituals, and practices that shape both their work and their workplace. School administrators might expect teachers to maintain a rigorous, and possibly uncompensated, devotional regime, while teachers themselves might engage in tasks outside of their official job descriptions in support of a shared religious cause. This is not to suggest that the definition of religious work is either stable or easily identified, however. Rather, religious work is a malleable and contested category whose contours are forged in the competing claims of employers, workers, and the state as each attempts to designate certain forms of labor as religiously consequential in order to bring about certain ends.⁷

The consequences of designating particular positions as "religious" can be significant. Debates over the boundaries of religious work have often been sites where particular understandings of religion become codified into law. Through the Free Exercise and Establishment Clauses of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment, for example, the courts have developed a "ministerial exception" for religious employers that exempts them from having to follow many anti-discriminatory or fair labor laws in the hiring of ecclesiastical employees. In 1885, for instance, the Supreme Court ruled that immigration laws forbidding the importation of contract labor did not apply to churches on the grounds that the spiritual work of "ministers, rectors, and pastors" was in no way part of a "common understanding of the terms 'labor' and 'laborers'..." According to Justice David Brewer, ministers were a part of a class "whose toil is that of the brain." This distinguishing feature of faith, Brewer continued, separated ministers from the ruddy world of manual and clerical labor, which the anti-immigrant act was intended to address. Though focused on legal definitions of work, then, the case also reified an understanding of religion as primarily about belief and thought into court precedent.⁸

While the courts initially grounded the ministerial exception in the difference between ministerial and wage labor, however, the concept has seen wider application throughout the twentieth century. As the Supreme Court recently ruled in *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran School vs. the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission*, religious employers can apply the ministerial exception even to employees whose tasks are primarily secular if the employer considers their work integral to its religious mission. In the case of *Hosanna-Tabor*, the court dismissed a suit for reinstatement brought by an elementary teacher that the school permanently replaced while she was on approved medical leave. In its unanimous ruling, the court accepted the school's argument that even though its teachers primarily taught science, social studies, or art, the school's commissioning of certain teachers to lead morning prayers and teach religious classes rendered them as a type of minister whose employment lay outside the court's jurisdiction.⁹ In the years since the court's decision, other religious schools such as Loyola University in Chicago have cited the ruling in attempting to discourage part time instructors from organizing on the grounds that adjuncts also minister to students.¹⁰

Though attentive to the occupational dimensions of religious institutions, the study of religious work by no means reduces religion to mere economy. Rather, it encourages a more integrated understanding of their mutual constitution. This article draws upon the history of the David C. Cook Publishing Company to argue that religious organizations are themselves sites of economic activity and that their employees require further study as religious subjects. In telling the labor history of a religious workplace, it seeks to understand the complexities and consequences of designating forms of employment as either sacred or profane. Founder David C. Cook, Sr., for example, initially incorporated the press that bore his name not only to produce Christian literature but also to experiment in modes of Christian production. For Cook, every worker was a kind of minister entitled to the social and economic respect due to that status. After Cook's grandson took over the firm in 1937, however, a newfound concern for the doctrinal veracity of the company's publications eclipsed the founder's vision of a Christian workplace. Under Cook III's leadership the designation of the company's employees as religious workers took on a harder edge, something utilized in order to gain an employee's compliance as opposed to the grounds upon which to afford them greater

respect. The deteriorating working conditions that accompanied the shift soon prompted a handful of employees to turn to the International Typographical Union for help in organizing the plant. Yet the campaign ultimately failed. The onset of World War II provided Cook III with the opportunity to attain his own "ministerial exception" that allowed the company's ultimate product—the nation's salvation—to overshadow the conditions under which employees worked.

RELIGIOUS WORKERS

The David C. Cook Publishing Company actually originated in the space between religious and nonreligious work. Founder David C. Cook's father Ezra was a Methodist preacher from upstate New York who had been forced by a throat ailment to surrender his ministry and take up printing in Chicago in the 1850s. Young David picked up both his faith and future trade from his father, working alongside him as a printer's devil and volunteering as a Sunday school missionary in churches throughout the city. After determining that most denominational Sunday school literature suffered from either loose theology or poor design, Cook combined his areas of expertise and published his own lesson help in 1873 titled *Our Sunday School Gem*. When the paper's circulation hit 80,000 in just two years, Cook recognized both a spiritual need and a business opportunity and incorporated the publishing company that bore his name. The venture quickly proved a success. In a little over five years time Cook moved the company from rented rooms in downtown Chicago to larger quarters in suburban Elgin. By 1902 the company completed construction on a sprawling, nineteen-acre factory outfitted with the latest printing technology. At its peak in the 1920s the firm claimed to be the largest distributor of nondenominational Sunday school literature in the nation, employing over three hundred workers who turned out more than fifty titles with an annual circulation of two million.¹¹

From the very beginning Cook envisioned his enterprise to be something of a cooperative, cross-class Christian endeavor. He claimed a "corps of faithful coworkers" who shared his vision "heart and soul" had followed him to Elgin and declared themselves "willing to cast in their lot with him, wherever he might choose to live and whatever he might decide to do."¹² In return, Cook publicly promised to make his press the most appealing place to work. He paid the highest wages of any press in Elgin and guaranteed his operators full, or annual, employment as opposed to piecework. While other presses often closed during slack times or hired operators only for a publication's particular run, Cook remained open year round, occasionally taking on respectable secular work to keep his workers employed.¹³

In addition to reducing turnover, these policies also contributed to Cook's larger goal of imbuing the workplace with as much religious significance as the content of the company's periodicals. In an era defined by strikes, boycotts, and other conflicts over the "labor question," Cook saw his plant as an opportunity to show, in the words of one colleague, "what a man can do who practices the principles of the kingdom of God in business, who does justly, loves mercy, and walks humbly with his God."¹⁴ Unlike most denominational publishing houses, which typically split the creation of a publication's content from its production either by outsourcing the work or operating a separate press, Cook consolidated the entire publishing process under one roof. Editors and artists worked alongside press operators and bookbinders, and Cook made it company

policy to promote "fellowship" among the departments.¹⁵ An early advocate of welfare capitalism, Cook installed bowling alleys, a cafeteria, baseball fields, and other amenities in his new factory where white- and blue-collar workers could interact and grow in association. Though he did not require his employees to be Christian, Cook nevertheless saw a connection between the quality of the company's publications and the conditions under which they were produced. "Indeed, 'house policy' at the present time is based upon this foundation," Cook wrote shortly before his death. The depth of reader's devotion would be immeasurably "supplemented by the hearty cooperation of all associated with the David C. Cook Publishing Company," he claimed.¹⁶

With shop floor relations so dependent upon Cook's vision and singular personality, the company was bound to go through changes after his death in 1928. Initially ownership transferred to Cook's oldest son, David C. Cook, Jr., who, like his father, acquired both his faith and his profession while on the job. A Cook employee since 1907, Cook, Jr. initially expanded the company's operations despite the nation's financial collapse shortly after his appointment. It was the nation's boom periods, after all, that were the company's depressions periods. He added new publications, created a department for adult Bible classes, and expanded the lesson writing staff while also updating existing publications with insights drawn from the training of public school teachers.¹⁷ Whether the son would have continued his father's policies at the workplace is not known, however, for Cook, Jr. died unexpectedly a mere four years into his tenure. Soon thereafter the company's most senior position fell upon the shoulders of Cook, Jr.'s twenty-four-year-old son David C. Cook, III. Unlike his father and grandfather, Cook III's twentieth-century childhood denied him the opportunity to work at length alongside his family at the plant in Elgin. While his forefathers had spent their youth in the shops, Cook III spent his days in compulsory education and only joined the company after he received what one promotional pamphlet called a "thorough university preparation." Indeed, Cook, Jr.'s wife Frances Kerr Cook actually served as the company's interim leader for five years after her husband's death while the board waited for Cook III to finish his studies at the University of Chicago. He official took the reins in 1937 whereupon he quickly went to work implementing many of the management principles he had learned in school.¹⁸

Many of the youngest Cook's initiatives reflected the new executive's efforts to understand the company he had just inherited. In 1941, for example, Cook brought in consultants to conduct a job evaluation program of all hourly employees. To the great distress of nearly every worker outside the editorial department, the company required secretaries, bookbinders, shippers, and press operators to meet with an "employee analyst" and draw up a concise job description of their position—apparently for the first time.¹⁹ Yet Cook's efforts were also part of a broader "program of modernization" grounded in the scientific management techniques pioneered by Fredrick Winslow Taylor that would bring the by then forty-year-old factory up to date.²⁰ With the knowledge gained from the job evaluation program, the company introduced a variety of labor-saving machinery in every department, consolidated the press's clerical workforce into a shared pool, and conducted a series of time-and-motion studies to root out any remaining inefficiencies. Cook even replaced his grandfather's factory whistle with more precise punch clocks, something both employees and the local community protested at length. He compromised by using both.²¹

In addition to bringing the Elgin plant up to speed, Cook's changes also reflected his efforts to adapt

to the reality of religious publishing in the wake of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversies. Religious readers had become much more attuned to the doctrinal leanings of their publications after a series of theological conflicts—many of which had been fought through periodicals—rocked most Protestant denominations throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The market for devotional literature became fragmented along theological lines, requiring independent presses like Cook to situate itself within an increasingly partisan terrain.²² In response to these trends, Cook III attempted to shore up the company's evangelical credentials by strengthening and expanding its editorial team. At the same time he was streamlining the press's production departments, Cook recruited a number of high-profile religious figures to the firm's editorial board who could vouch for the press's orthodoxy. Among the names of those Cook enlisted to keep "every page of every publication non-controversial (as well as evangelical) in spirit" were such conservative divines as Moody Bible Institute president William Houghton, *The Fundamentals* pamphlet series contributor and pastor of Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church John Timothy Stone, and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary president John R. Sampey.²³

The growing importance of the press's editorial staff to Cook's image even manifested itself in the company's branding. Under Cook Sr.'s leadership, for instance, the company prominently displayed the entire Elgin plant on the company's letterhead (Fig. 1).

The modern, orderly, and amenity-rich factory visually underscored Cook Sr.'s perspective that the quality of the press's publications was in part bolstered by the conditions under which they were produced. Shortly after his arrival, however, Cook III commissioned an updated logo that featured only the Doric columns of the administrative building where executive and editorial staff worked (Fig. 2).

The factory's age likely contributed to this decision, for by 1940 a number of renovations and additions gave the plant a hodgepodge appearance. But the change also reflected the value Cook placed on his writers and editors as the company's public face. Once a company that took pride in its shared religious mission, Cook increasingly located the source of its religious value in the contributions of a select few under Cook III's leadership.

For press operators, deteriorating working conditions accompanied their evolving place within the company. The rapidity with which Cook introduced new equipment—in one instance bringing in five new presses in a month—led to a rash of workplace injuries as employees struggled to learn the new machinery. In one month in 1945 alone a printer's devil got his fingers caught in a proving press, a loose cam rolled onto the leg of another operator, and a warehouse worker had an entire pallet of paper fall on him. According to one worker, many in the plant had "the jitters" over the company's safety record.²⁴ As



Figure 1: David C. Cook Publishing Company's annual merchandise catalog for 1908, complete with an image of the new factory as a selling point. Image courtesy of the Winterthur Library, Printed Book and Periodical Collection.

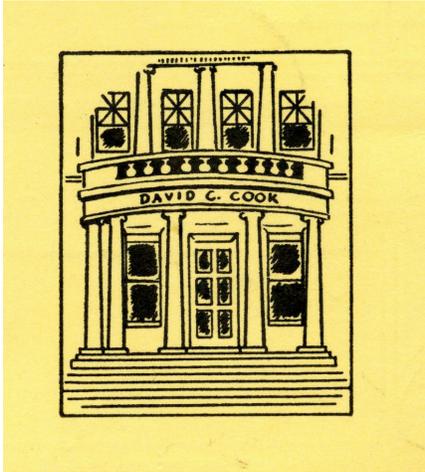


Figure 2: David C. Cook Publishing Company Logo, c. 1940. *You...And Your Company* (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook Publishing Company, n.d.), 43. Image courtesy of the Elgin Historical Museum.

a result, the company began to experience increased turnover in the shipping and printing departments while executives noted a growing “absentee problem” as well.²⁵ The issue became all the more acute with the onset of World War II. Not only did military service draw a number of employees away, but so too did the opportunities in wartime production in factories throughout Chicago. In contrast to the sweeping changes then unfolding at the Cook company, the high wages and steady employment of federally-contracted factory work likely seemed appealing to a number of Cook employees.

For those who did stay at Cook, a number turned to the International Typographical Union (ITU) in order to address their growing list of workplace concerns. William Rasmussen, for example, had been with the company since 1913. Hired by Cook, Sr. himself at the age of fourteen, Rasmussen had worked his way up the company without incident, eventually settling into the foundry where he proofed press plates. But in 1937—the same year Cook III became president—Rasmussen submitted an application as a new member with the ITU. And he was not alone. By 1945 Elgin Local 171 was taking in dozens of applications for new members, many of whom noted they had never before been a member of a union.²⁶

For the union, the timing was fortuitous. Elgin Local 171 had actually eyed the David C. Cook Publishing Company for some time after having organized the town’s other major presses shortly after its founding in 1896. But its efforts consistently failed to gain a foothold at Cook in part because of Cook, Sr.’s public pledge to pay the highest wages in town.²⁷ The formation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in 1936, however, energized the union. A founding member of the new federation of industrial unions, the ITU played an important role in promoting the CIO’s cry for workers to take advantage of the New Deal’s various labor provisions in organizing. Local 171 heeded the call, undertaking a multi-year effort to bring the closed shop to all of Elgin’s presses. Two years later ITU headquarters lent their support to the cause, voting to expand the union’s Chicago district to include Elgin, which granted the local greater access to the union’s organizational resources, and appointing an organizer to oversee the local’s campaign. At the same time William Rasmussen and other Cook employees showed up at the local’s office looking to join the union, then, Local 171 was aggressively pushing to organize area presses with massive rallies and a concerted outreach to nonunion workers.²⁸

The ITU made a fairly straightforward argument in favor of unionization to religious publishers like Cook. But it was one that rested on a particular conception of the printer’s role in the manufacturing of religion. According to the ITU, printers could stand as bulwarks against those forces that sought to defame religious texts, but they did not invest a faith’s publications with any kind of spiritual significance. At the same time Elgin’s Local 171 sought to organize Cook, for instance, ITU Local 635 in Poplar Bluff, Missouri, attempted to convince the General Baptist Church’s Board of Publication that the denomination stood to benefit from

using only adequately trained union workers. Only "a union shop is worthy to handle the publication of religious literature," the ITU argued, because union labor prevented undesirable or antagonistic elements from disrupting the denomination's work by placing the production process under the control of "those who take no part in radicalism, violence and communistic activities." Yet while the "principles of religion and the principles of unionism" might go "hand in hand," ITU's Local 635 claimed that press operators only supported the work of ministers and other religious writers. They were not religious workers themselves.²⁹

Cook responded to the growing union presence in his plant in two ways. First, he attempted to compensate for the declining working conditions by introducing a number of fringe benefits. Following the gains made by the ITU in plants around Chicago, Cook, for the first time, introduced a forty-hour workweek, extended paid vacations to hourly staff, organized a company credit union, and constituted a "Social and Welfare Committee" that would try to facilitate more interaction between the editorial and production departments.³⁰ In a somewhat morbid concession to the plant's recent safety record, Cook also offered a new hospitalization plan that contributed to the medical costs of workplace injuries.³¹

In addition to addressing these more material concerns, however, Cook also went to great lengths to cast employment at the company as a kind of religious service. In contrast to the ITU's argument that printers only served to support the efforts of ordained religious workers, Cook III argued that even the lowliest Cook employee ministered to the world through their work. The first page of a new employee manual published in 1944, for example, informed employees that in addition to working for Cook they were also servants of the most high. "Building Sunday schools is our business," Cook wrote. "We are publishers of a series of interdenominational lesson helps and story papers; we are printers and suppliers of merchandise aids and program helps to Christian education..." Regardless of one's position in the plant the manual informed employees that their "greatest contribution to Christian education" occurred while they were on the clock.³² The company sought to reinforce this message in other ways as well, in one instance soliciting lesson ideas from across the plant and offering a prize for the best one. Regardless of one's position at the company, the announcement read, every Cook employee was also a kind of "Sunday school teacher, superintendent, or officer..."³³

America's entry into World War II provided even greater opportunities for Cook to cast wage labor as a form of ministry. Shortly after the war began Cook announced that the company would provide the Department of Defense with an unlimited supply of its periodicals and lesson helps at no cost in order to ensure military chaplains were equipped with the most up to date devotional literature. In editorials published in the company's cleverly titled newsletter *What's Cooking?*, Cook III highlighted how such service constituted a singular contribution to the war effort. "What can we do to help win the war?" he rhetorically asked employees in one article, "The answer is, we are already doing more than we think . . . By offering help to the chaplains with appropriate printed literature, by encouraging the boys in the army to see more and more in religion . . . the employees of Cook's, are doing a valiant job of helping to win this war."³⁴ While the company might not manufacture bullets, tanks, or medical supplies, they nonetheless provided the nation with something equally as vital: morale. Because "religious spirit is so important today in preserving the high morale of the men in the Armed Forces and the folks at home," Cook wrote in 1942, every member of the company should be "proud to have our part—an unusual and majestic part—in the winning of this war.

For Cook church materials are strong in the upbuilding of religious spirit."³⁵

Cook's portrayal of employment at the plant as a form of religious work served the company's purposes in several ways. To start, it recast the company's deteriorating working conditions as sacrifices rendered unto a higher calling. While the Depression and war might have led to a stagnation of wages and an increased pace of work, Cook pleaded with his employees that "we must all work together to check waste, save materials, and increase efficiency in order that we may survive to build a strong Christian faith in the hearts of all people."³⁶ Emphasizing this shared ethic of service and sacrifice also countered the ITU's efforts to make clear distinctions between the contributions of press operators, executives, and editors. No matter the challenge, Cook III claimed, "we at Cook's pledge our work, our lives, and our income more strongly than ever...to the sole aim of Victory—a victory for Christianity more powerful than has yet been won in all the earth."³⁷

Beyond a rhetorical weapon in his battle with the ITU, however, Cook's emphasis upon the fundamentally religious nature of the company's work also became the grounds upon which he sought certain allowances from the state. With the start of the war, for instance, the War Manpower Commission put in place several "stabilization plans" that regulated the nation's economic output in order to meet the military's wartime needs. Firms the Commission designated as "essential industries" received unrestricted access to production supplies and a lower Selective Service designation for their employees. Companies deemed inessential, by contrast, saw limits placed upon their access to materials and disruptions to their workforce. For Cook a nonessential designation meant the company would face crippling restrictions to the amount of paper it could order as well as the possibility that employees might be reassigned to other "essential" shops. But in 1943 Cook applied to be classified as an essential industry on the grounds that the company provided the armed forces with a sizeable portion of its religious literature. The Commission agreed. Sharing the news with his employees in yet another *What's Cooking?* editorial, Cook assumed the classification would be "a real gratification to everyone working at Cook's," as it confirmed that "they are as valuable to the war effort as anyone who is on the production line of war plants, for it has long been known that religious influences and literature are of prime importance to the boys in the trenches and foxholes of modern warfare."³⁸

Cook had reason to be grateful. Not only did the company's designation as an essential industry remove restrictions placed upon its production, it also effectively stunted the ITU's efforts to unionize the plant. As an essential industry, any labor dispute at the press would now be under the oversight of the War Labor Board, a federal body created with the authority to arbitrate any labor dispute in order to ensure wartime production went uninterrupted. While unions had initially hailed the Board's creation as a boon to organizing at the start of the war, the Board quickly proved a disappointment in practice. Its first directive forbade strikes or workplace disruptions of any kind and as the war progressed the Board showed itself reluctant to certify new unions as bargaining units beyond what the National Labor Relations Board had done before the war.³⁹ In short, Cook's classification of his employees as religious workers amounted to a kind of ministerial exception that enhanced the company's power in shop floor politics. Not only did the portrayal of the company's work as distinctly religious help justify the wage reductions or pace increases that had occurred before the war, it also helped alleviate the company's obligation of having to recognize

or negotiate with its employees. While the ITU and Cook disagreed over the degree to which printers contributed to the ministry of religious publication, the state effectively ruled that the employees of the David C. Cook Publishing Company carried out religious work.

RELIGION AS WORK

In the end, the David C. Cook Publishing Company never needed the additional authority granted to essential industries by the War Labor Board in their fight with the International Typographers Union. The Board's injunction against strikes actually opened up a rift within the ITU after a sizeable faction claimed the ban was unconstitutional and chose to disregard it. When the union's leadership attempted to bring the recalcitrant members under control, the ITU descended into chaos as various factions struggled for control. Resources once directed to local campaigns like in Elgin soon dried up as the union's work ground to a halt for much of the war. By 1942 Local 171 reported in the *Typographical Journal*—which actually ceased publication for a time due to the conflict—that their “work has taken another nose-dive” as members joined the military, left to take jobs in war production, and failed to receive their union's support.⁴⁰

But Cook also never had to confront the ITU directly. Despite interest among a handful of employees, extant records suggest that the company never saw a certification election or significant shop floor action in the decades surrounding World War II. Indeed, the company seems to have experienced a great deal of workplace harmony throughout much of the twentieth century. Many of Cook's employees shared the company's conviction that their work constituted a kind of religious service. As one typesetter put it when asked by the company newsletter what he valued most of his work, “Because only religion can make the peoples of the world remember love and brotherhood.”⁴¹ A secretary at the plant shared these sentiments upon her retirement decades later. After filing paperwork, taking notes, and writing correspondence for nearly fifty years, Mary Robben penned a note to her colleagues that described her time with the company more as a ministry than as a career. “I love you all, and will cherish your friendship always,” she wrote in a letter to the company on her last day on the job in 1977, “and also your cooperation as we worked together to spread the Good News to the world.” Robben's coworkers agreed, writing in a commemorative history of the company published in 1994 that views like hers underscored how the work of the David C. Cook Publishing Company “requires disciples with a commitment to something greater than the things of this world.”⁴²

Yet this shared ethic of service should not distract us from the fact that the Cook's employees remained just that: employees subject to the needs, demands, and whims of their employer. Regardless of the degree to which they shared the company's religious mission, Cook's employees did eventually feel the impact the firm's financial consideration as the religious and media landscape continued to evolve. The same year Cook III introduced his workers to “Multiple Management,” for instance, he also founded the David C. Cook Foundation in order to take the company into new markets. Transferring all of the company's assets to the new organization by 1953, Cook III used the foundation as the company's research and development arm. Staff with the foundation conducted research on the needs of local Sunday schools and then commissioned the press to turn out new products, effectively severing the relationship between the creation of the company's products and the conditions under which they were produce that Cook, Sr. had

established. The foundation also brought the Cook name to new media as well, developing a catalog of radio and television programming. By the time of Cook III's retirement in 1989, the company was aggressively acquiring other presses and media companies to support its expanded footprint. In 1994, the same year the company's Elgin employees celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of a club for Cook employees with at least twenty-five years of experience, the company changed its name to Cook Communication Ministries and moved all executive and editorial staff to the emerging evangelical mecca of Colorado Springs, Colorado. Within ten years time, as the company began to add digital and web-based publications to its catalog, the company shuttered the Elgin plant entirely, laying off the hundred or so workers that remained.⁴³

Scholars of religion interested in the study of work, labor, or employment should not stop at exploring the corporate policies of evangelical executives or the faith-based arguments of labor organizers. They should also turn their sights inward toward the labor histories of ecclesiastical institutions and other religious organizations. Attending to the remunerative activities of sacred sites not only adds to the narrative of American religious history, it deepens our understanding of the category of religion itself as well. For it is at companies like Cook where religion is, in many ways, made. It is at workplaces like the David C. Cook Publishing Company where the materials of religious life are first manufactured—the texts, images, or objects that religious subjects consume. But it is also a place where the contractual relationships between religious employers and their employees also become the crucibles in which the religious is forged and reinforced into law and social practice. As scholars seek to understand the ongoing battles for religious accommodations and exemptions in today's economic landscape, they might want to consider the workplace cultures of religious institutions as a site where work's religious qualities and implications are first articulated.

NOTES

1 "Temple Meeting Huge Success," *What's Cooking?* 3, no. 4 (Mar. 1944): 1. All issues of the *What's Cooking?* newsletter cited here come from the David C. Cook Publishing Company Papers, Reber Research Library, Elgin Historical Museum [hereafter DCPC Papers]. The company published the newsletter sporadically throughout the decades surrounding World War II, which accounts for the incongruous volume numbers.

I would like to thank Darren Grem, Elizabeth and Ken Fones-Wolf, Kevin Kruse, and Kathryn Olmsted for their insightful feedback on this paper at the 2016 Policy History Conference Meeting. I would also like to thank the journal's peer reviewer for their close and helpful reading of the piece.

2 "President Cook Links Multiple Management with Post-War Plans," and "Multiple Management – What It Is – How it Works," *What's Cooking* 3, no. 4 (Mar. 1944): 4.

3 "Religion in War," *What's Cooking* 1, no. 7 (Jun. 1942): 1.

4 On class and the creation of religious studies, see Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 182-189; Sean McCloud, *Divine Hierarchies: Class in American Religion and Religious Studies* (Chapel Hill: University of

North Carolina Press, 2007), 35-42.

5 Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Unknown God: Myth in History," in *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 89. I thank Richard J. Callahan, Jr. for calling my attention to this quote. As to the broader trend toward seeing religion as a product born of creative human effort, see David D. Hall, ed., *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); Robert Wuthnow, *Producing the Sacred: An Essay on Public Religion* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); and Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions; or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

6 The literature here is also rich and constantly increasing. But the examples cited here come from, respectively, Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Heath W. Carter, *Union Made: Working People and the Rise of Social Christianity in Chicago* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Kevin M. Kruse, *One Nation Under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (New York: Basic Books, 2015).

7 My thinking on the issue of religious work has been shaped by Richard J. Callahan *Work and Faith in the Kentucky Coal Fields: Subject to Dust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 3-6; idem., in *Proceedings, Fourth Biennial Conference on Religion and American Culture*, Philip Goff and Rebecca Vasko, eds. Indianapolis, Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, June 4-7, 2015, pp. 51-53, available at <http://raac.iupui.edu/files/3314/5382/3460/Proceedings2015.pdf>; Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 167-173, 229-246; Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009), 186-224; Shari Rabin, "Working Jews: *Hazaim* and the Labor of Religion in Nineteenth-Century America," *Religion & American Culture* 25, no. 2 (2015): 178-217; Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *A Ministry of Presence: Chaplaincy, Spiritual Care, and the Law* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014); Isaac Weiner, "The Corporately Produced Conscience: Emergency Contraception and the Politics of Workplace Accommodations," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* Advance Access published July 11, 2016; Wuthnow, *Producing the Sacred*, 150-155; and Carter, *Union Made*, 176-179. On this issue see also Christopher D. Cantwell, Heath W. Carter, and Janine Giordano Drake, "Introduction: Between the Pew and the Picket Line," in *The Pew and the Picket Line: Christianity and the American Working Class*, eds. Cantwell, Carter, and Drake (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 18-21.

8 *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States* 143 U.S. 547 (1892). For more on debates surrounding legal definitions of religion see Sarah Barringer Gordon, *The Spirit of the Law: Religious Voices and the Constitution in Modern America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Tisa Wenger, *We Have a Religion: The 1920s Pueblo Dance Controversy and American Religious Freedom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Sullivan, *Ministry of Presence*.

9 As with most Supreme Court cases, the details are more complex than can be provided in a brief synopsis. The school claimed they had fired the teacher not for her illness but for "insubordination and disruptive behavior" after she threatened to sue for reinstatement into her classroom. The threat, the church argued, constituted a breach of the

congregation's trust by threatening to adjudicate a church matter in a secular court. The distinction proved important in Chief Justice John Robert's decision. For a summary and criticism of the *Hosanna-Tabor* ruling see Leslie C. Griffin, "The Sins of *Hosanna-Tabor*," *Indiana Law Journal* 88 (2013): 918-1020.

10 My information on the invocation of *Hosanna-Tabor* at Loyola University comes from personal conversations with faculty and staff who are engaged in this ongoing conversation there. For more on the ministerial exception see Jennifer McLain, "Discrimination in the Religious Workplace - Should It Be Permitted to Continue?" *Labor Lawyer* 17, no. 3 (2002): 517-540; Kathleen A. Brady, "Religious Group Autonomy: Further Reflections about What is at Stake," *Journal of Law and Religion* 22, no. 1 (2006): 153-213; and Sullivan, *A Ministry of Presence*, 107-108, 200.

11 This summary of the Cook company's rise comes from David C. Cook, *Memoirs: David C. Cook, The Friend of the Sunday School* (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook Publishing Company, 1929); "The New Plant of the David C. Cook Publishing Company, Elgin, Ill.," *Inland Printer* 29, no. 1 (1902): 106-109; "Cook Publications are Known the World Over in S. S. Work," *Elgin Daily Courier*, 6 Jan. 1922.

12 Cook, *Memoirs*, 68, 71.

13 P. J. Maas in *Report of the Proceedings of the International Typographical Union, Forty-Third Session, Colorado Springs, Colorado, October 12 to 20, 1896*, supplement to *Typographical Journal* IX, no. 10 (16 Nov. 1896): 37; "The New Plant of the David C. Cook Publishing Company," 109.

14 Cook, *Memoirs*, 182.

15 "Cook Publications are Known the World Over in S. S. Work."

16 Cook, *Memoirs*, 73.

17 *A Glimpse Inside the Sunday School Workshop of the David C. Cook Publishing Co.* (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook Publishing Company, n.d., c. 1940), unpaginated.

18 Ibid. See also *Quarter Century Club 50th Anniversary Commemorative Booklet, 1942-1992* (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook Publishing Company, 1993), 16-18.

19 Quote from David C. Cook III to Employees, 14 Jul. 1941. See also David C. Cook III to Salaried employees, 26 Sep. 1941, DCPC Papers.

20 "New Plant Equipment," *What's Cooking*, 1, no. 8 (July 1942): 2.

21 "New Plant Equipment"; "Typing Pool System Set Up in Editorial Department," *What's Cooking?* 1, no. 7 (Dec. 1945): 2; "They Love that Elgin Whistle," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 17 Aug. 1947; "Elgin Whistle Will Be Spared," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 18 Aug. 1947.

22 See Timothy E. W. Gloege, *Guaranteed Pure: The Moody Bible Institute, Business, and the Making of Modern Evangelicalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Matthew Hedstrom, *The Rise of Liberal Religion: Book Culture and American Spirituality in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University

Press, 2013); Elesha J. Coffman, *The Christian Century and the Rise of the Protestant Mainline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); Daniel Vaca, "Book People: Commercial Media and the Spirit of Evangelicalism" (Ph.D. diss.: Columbia University Press, 2012).

23 *A Glimpse Inside the Sunday School Workshop of the David C. Cook Publishing Co.*, unpaginated.

24 "Wave of Minor Accidents Gives Composing Rooms the Jitters," *What's Cooking?* 1, no. 7 (Dec. 1945): 2.

25 *You...And Your Company* (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook Publishing Company, n.d.), 43.

26 My assessment of the ITU's success at gaining Cook employees as members comes from comparing names in the *Typographical Journal's* regular listings for "Applications for Membership" with names that appear in Cook company records. On Rasmussen in particular see "Applications for Members," *Typographical Journal* 90, no. 3 (Mar. 1937): 277 and *Quarter Century Club 50th Anniversary Commemorative Booklet*, 62-63.

27 "Elgin, IL," *Typographical Journal* 31, no.12 (Dec. 1907): 673-674.

28 On the ITU's 1937 campaign see "Eglin, ILL, no.171," *Typographical Journal* 91, no. 5 (Nov. 1937): 509. On the CIO and the ITU see Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO: 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 23, 279.

29 "Poplar Bluff, no. 635," *Typographical Journal* 92, no. 4 (Mar. 1938): 565. As locals with what appears to be largely Protestant members, Local 635's argument and the case at Cook's may not have been reflective of the union's religious sentiments more broadly. As Seymour Martin Lipset, Martin A. Trow, and James S. Coleman showed in their classic study of the ITU, the union was religiously segregated both internally and by region. What kinds of religious arguments might have been made by the union's many Catholic and Jewish members in locals where they predominated is deserving of its own inquiry. See Lipset, Trow, and Coleman, *Union Democracy: The Internal Politics of the International Typographical Union* (New York: The Free Press, 1956), 114-120.

30 E. C. "Mike" Alft, "125 Years in Elgin," research notes, E. C. Alft Research Files, Reber Research Library, Elgin Historical Museum [herafter Alft Files]; John Fay to Sigrid Carlson, 9 Oct. 1941, DCPC Papers.

31 *Your Company...and You*, 36-37.

32 *Ibid.*, 3 and 6-7.

33 "You May Earn One of these Big Prizes," *What's Cooking?* 2, no. 12 (Nov. 1943): 2.

34 "Religion in War," *What's Cooking* 1:7 (Jun. 1942): 1 and 4.

35 "Our Christmas Pledge," *What's Cooking?* 2, no. 1 (Dec. 1942): 1.

36 "Our Job is Morale," *What's Cooking?* 1, no. 5 (Apr. 1942): 1.

37 "Our Christmas Pledge."

38 "Cook's Declared Essential to War Effort," *What's Cooking* 2, no. 8 (Juy. 1943): 1.

39 On essential industries and the War Labor Board see Leonard B. Boudin, "The Authority of the National War Labor Board over Labor Disputes," *Michigan Law Review* 43, no. 2 (1944): 329-362; George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 100-102, 110-114, 121-129.

40 "Elgin, ILL., No. 171," *Typographical Journal* 100, no. 3 (Mar. 1942): 431. On the ITU's decline more generally see *A Study of the History of the International Typographical Union, 1852-1963* (Colorado Springs: International Typographical Union, 1964), 357-372; and

41 "The Inquiring Photographer," *What's Cooking?* 1:10 (Oct. 1942): 4.

42 Quoted in *Quarter Century Club 50th Anniversary Commemorative Booklet, 1942-1992* (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook Publishing Company, 1993), 51.

43 On the Cook Company's development throughout the second half of the twentieth century, see *Quarter Century Club 50th Anniversary Commemorative Booklet*, 20-32; "Cook Plant to Stop Printing in Elgin," uncited and undated newspaper clipping, and "Cook Name Change Reflects its Diversity," uncited newspaper clipping dated 1 Dec. 1994, Alft files.