BEECHER, Henry Wadsworth (1813–1863), was a Congregational clergyman, journalist, and abolitionist. He was born in Newton, Conn., and educated at Middlebury College and Andover Theological Seminary. In 1835 he married Ellen Fitch, and in 1836 he became pastor of the Congregational Church in Milton, Mass. There he worked to bring about the union of Federalist and anti-Federalist Congregationalists. After he was ordained in 1836, he became editor of the religious magazine Christian Register, which he founded in 1837 and kept until 1860. In 1842 he became a coauthor of Life and Correspondence of Jediah Morse, the first biography of a Congregational minister. He was an active temperance reformer and was a leader in founding the American Anti-Slavery Society. He was one of the leaders of the Federalist party in Massachusetts, and in 1848 he ran for the presidential nomination, losing to Zachary Taylor. Beecher was an influential figure in American religious and political life of the 19th century. He was the older brother of Emily Beecher Smith, poet and writer; and the father of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of Uncle Tom’s Cabin. Beecher died on Oct. 8, 1863, in New York. See also Bibliography.

Best, Mary (1925–1999), was an American author known for her decision to become a nun and her writings on the Catholic Church and its women. At age 21 she entered the Ursuline convent in Charlotte, N.C., and became a nun. She wrote several books, including A Nun at the Center: A Memoir of Life in the Church (1986) and The Curious Case of the Catholic Nun (1988). She was a regular commentator on the PBS show News hour with Jim Lehrer. Best was known for her outspoken criticism of the Catholic Church and its role in society. She died on Jan. 14, 1999. See also Bibliography.

Bigotry, religious, is a form of discrimination or violence directed against a religious group or individual. It is often based on prejudice or fear, and it can take many forms, including harassment, intimidation, and violence. Religious bigotry can have serious consequences, including physical harm, emotional trauma, and social isolation. It is important to be aware of the ways in which religious bigotry can manifest and to take action to combat it. See also Bibliography.

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Updated by publisher 2005

BREAKDANCING

An elaborate social dance form originated by teenage African-American males in the South Bronx of New York City, breakdancing appeared during the early to mid-1970s. It began as a form of gang fighting, a mixture of physically demanding movements that exploited the daredevil prowess of performers and stylized punching and kicking movements directed at an opponent. A descendant of capoeira, the Brazilian form of martial arts disguised as dance, breakdancing developed as the movement aspect of rap music when breakdancers—"B-Boys"—filled the musical breaks between records mixed by disc jockeys at parties and discotheques. Breakdancing was part of a young urban culture built upon innovations in language, hip-hop dance, fashion (unlaced sneakers, hooded sweatshirts, nylon windbreakers), and visual arts (graffiti).

The elaborate spins, balances, flips, contortions, and freezes performed by breakdancers required extreme agility and coordination. Real physical danger surrounded movements such as the "windmill," in which dancers span wildly, supported only by the shoulders, or the "suicide," in which an erect dancer would throw himself forward to land flat on his back. The competitive roots of breakdancing encouraged sensational movements such as multiple spins while balanced on the head, back, or one hand. Dancing "crews" met on street corners, subway stations, or dance floors to battle other groups with virtuosity, style, and wit determining the winner. Breakdancing came to be divided into several classifications of movement, including "breaking" (acrobatic flips and spins with support by the head and arms, with the shoulders as a point of balance), "uprock" (fighting movements directed against an opponent), "webbo" (extravagant footwork that connected breakdancing movements), and "electric boogie" (robotlike dancing movements borrowed from mime). The electric boogie style, reminiscent of a long tradition of eccentric African-American dances, developed in Los Angeles concurrent with electronically produced disco music. In this style dancers typically appeared to be weightless and rubber limbed, performing baffling floating walks, precise body isolations, and pantomimed robotic sequences. This form includes the "moonwalk," popularized on national television by Michael Jackson, in which the dancer’s feet appear to be floating across the floor without touching it. Other boogie moves include the "wave," in which the body simulates an electric current passing through it, and "poplocking," a series of tightly contained staccato movements separated by freezes. An "Egyptian" style, which imitated ancient wall paintings, was also briefly popular.

Breakdancing found a mainstream audience through several films that cashed in on its sensational aspects and minimized its competitive format. Charlie Ahearn’s Wild Style (1982), the first film to document emergent hip-hop culture, was eclipsed by a thirty-second breaking sequence in Flashdance (1983), which brought the form to international attention; Breakin’ (1984), which starred Shabba Doo (Adolfo Quinones), an important breakdance choreographer from Chicago, and Harry Belafonte’s Beat Street (1984), which featured the New York City Breakers. Breakdancing dropped out of the public limelight in the late 1980s, only to reemerge as a social dance form practiced by teenagers in nightclubs during the 1990s. By 2004 the form had become a component aspect of codified hip-hop dance, practiced by teams in international competitions, popular in music videos, and once again featured in Hollywood films, including Chris Stokes’s You Got Served (2004).

See also Capoeira; Hip Hop; Rap; Social Dance

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Breedlove, Sarah

See Walker, Madam C. J.

Briggs, Cyril

1888

October 18, 1966

Cyril Valentine Briggs was a radical publicist of the New Negro movement and one of the black charter members of the Communist Party USA (CPUSA). As the political organizer of the African Blood Brotherhood for African Liberation and Redemption—better known as the African Blood Brotherhood (ABB)—a semisecret propaganda organization founded in September 1919 in reaction to the unprecedented racial violence of the Red Summer of 1919, Briggs was the first to enunciate in the United States the political principle of armed black self-defense.

A native of the tiny island of Nevis in the Leeward Islands chain of the British West Indies, Briggs was the son of a planter-manager for one of the island’s absentee landlords. Of an extremely light complexion, he was later dubbed the “Angry Blond Negro” by George W. Harris of the New York Daily Express.

Briggs received his early start in journalism working after school with the Saint Kitts Daily Express and the Saint Christopher Advertiser. As a young man in Saint Kitts, he was influenced by the published lectures of the great American orator Robert Green Ingersoll, whose irreverent wit and questioning of the tenets of Christian belief earned him the sobriquet “the great agnostic.”

Briggs came to the United States in July 1905. His involvement in the fight for African-American rights began in earnest in October 1915 when he was appointed editor of the Colored American Review, mouthpiece of the Harlem black business community, which stressed black economic success and racial pride. When his editorship came to an abrupt end with the second issue, Briggs joined such black radical figures as Hubert H. Harrison, Marcus Garvey, A. Philip Randolph, Chandler Owen, William Bridges, and W. A. Domingo in giving voice to the era’s black militancy.

Initially emphasizing the racial theme of “self-government for the Negro and Africa for the Africans,” the Crusader proclaimed itself in its early issues as the public organ of the Hamitic League of the World, which had been started by the brilliant young racial vindicationist author George Wells Parker in Omaha, Nebraska. By the first anniversary of its publication, however, the editorial line of the Crusader had changed radically. Whereas its original focus had been on postwar African issues, it now espoused the revolutionary ideology of Bolshevism.

Starting with the October 1919 issue, the Crusader became the official mouthpiece of the ABB, which at the time functioned clandestinely as the CPUSA’s first black auxiliary. In keeping with the group’s ideological position, Briggs emerged during 1921 and 1922 as the most outspoken critic of the leadership of Marcus Garvey, against whom he supplied some of the critical evidence that would lead eventually to the federal government’s successful prosecution of Garvey for mail fraud.

When the Crusader ceased publication in early 1922, Briggs set about organizing the Crusader News Agency. During and after World War I, Briggs’s outspoken Amsterdam News editorials, directed against what he perceived to be the hypocrisy of U.S. war aims in view of U.S. mistreatment of black soldiers and the continuing denial of democracy to African Americans at home, came under increasing official censorship. It culminated in the detention by the U.S. Post Office of the March 12, 1919, issue containing Briggs’s editorial denouncing the League of Nations as a “League of Thieves.” Two months later, Briggs finally severed his ties with the newspaper for which he had been not only editorial writer but also city editor, sports editor, and theater critic.

His resignation from the Amsterdam News enabled Briggs to devote his entire time to the Crusader, which he had begun publishing in September 1918. With a free hand to promote the postwar movement through the Crusader, Briggs joined such black radical figures as Hubert H. Harrison, Marcus Garvey, A. Philip Randolph, Chandler Owen, William Bridges, and W. A. Domingo in giving voice to the era’s black militancy.

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