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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

**THE NATION INVISIBLE:
AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION AND THE AMERICAN POLITICAL
TRADITION
1838-1925**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
Requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Political Science

by

Adam Joseph Gómez

Committee in charge:

Professor Tracy B. Strong, Chair
Professor Harvey S. Goldman, Co-Chair
Professor John Evans
Professor Richard Madsen
Professor Victor Magagna

2010

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Co-Chair

Chair

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

2010

DEDICATION

For Kate

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

**The Nation Invisible:
American Civil Religion and the American Political Tradition, 1835-1925**
by

Adam Joseph Gómez

Doctor of Philosophy in Political Science

University of California, San Diego, 2010

Professor Tracy B. Strong, Chair
Professor Harvey S. Goldman, Co-Chair

The tradition of American civil religion is core to American national identity and political thought. It has traditionally been studied in terms of how it works to integrate some groups into the American political community while excluding others. It has rarely been engaged with in a substantive fashion, taking into account the content and historical development of the civil religious tradition in America.

In this dissertation, I argue that American civil religion is a continuous rhetorical tradition with a defined set of symbols, rituals, and tropes. Moreover, it is a level of discourse in American politics at which the issues of political sin and virtue, perfectibility, national *telos*, and ultimate ideals are addressed. It depicts the United States as having a particular relationship with God, akin to that depicted in

the Old Testament between God and the ancient Israelites. An important difference between my work and the great majority of scholarship on American civil religion is the fact that it is more aligned with the legacy of Max Weber than it is with that of Emil Durkheim. Though I do not ignore questions of inclusion and exclusion in the American political community, my focus is on the ways in which a civil religious framework structures the way in which political figures act in the political sphere.

Taking into account social, political, and theological influences, I examine in detail the speech of four pivotal figures in the post-Jacksonian development of American civil religion: John L. O'Sullivan, Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, and William Jennings Bryan. I structure my examination of the civil religious framework of each of these men within three primary questions. One, does the individual prioritize liberty over equality, or vice versa? Two, where does he locate sin, and what is his understanding of that sin? Three, does he believe that the United States is obligated to model democracy to the world, or that the nation has a responsibility to actively proselytize democratic government? My dissertation is organized with a chapter on each of the above four men, except for Lincoln, the central figure in the American civil religious tradition. On Lincoln, I write two chapters, dividing his speech into priestly and prophetic strains, following the typology of Max Weber as adapted by Martin E. Marty.

INTRODUCTION

AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION: MISSION AND MODEL

Wee must consider that wee shall be as a citty upon a hill. The eies of all people are uppon us. Soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our God in this worke wee haue undertaken, and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.

John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity"
(1630)

Thou art an holy people unto the LORD thy God: the LORD thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth.
Deuteronomy 7:6

This dissertation examines the rhetorical tradition of American civil religion, tracing its development across its formative period, 1835-1925. It has long been common in American politics to describe the nation as having a particular, exceptional relationship with God, so much so that it often seems nothing more than empty platitudes. That being said, it is much more than merely a self-aggrandizing or meaningless cliché. Historically, Americans have not only invoked God's approval or authority, they have done so within a civil religious tradition that structures the nation's understanding of itself and its place in history. Civil religion is a level of discourse in American politics at which the issues of political sin and virtue, perfectibility, national *telos*, and ultimate ideals are addressed. It is a lexicon of symbols with widely understood (if mutable) meanings and with its own kind of

grammar and vocabulary. In order to understand the tensions and subtleties of American civil religion, it is necessary to consider its origins and development across time. A historical approach to the subject helps us to understand both the possibilities and limitations of this uniquely American form of political discourse.

This dissertation is an effort to do exactly that. In it, I avoid the Durkheimian emphasis on inclusion and exclusion that characterizes much of the research on American civil religion (as described in Section 2 of this introduction). Instead, my analysis focuses on the political aspects of civil religion, including its articulation of political ideals, its ability to generate popular compliance, and the source and location of authority that it describes.

In this dissertation, I understand American civil religion to be the rhetorical tradition that depicts the United States as having a particular relationship with God, akin to that depicted in the Old Testament between God and the ancient Israelites. American civil religion is thus an institutionalized collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals describing a sacred relationship between American citizens, their political institutions, and their God. Moreover, it describes the nation's world-historical *telos*, what Robert Bellah calls "a transcendental goal for the political process".¹ My aim here is to determine the religio-political content of this tradition, and the effect that it has had on American politics in the domestic and international spheres.

In the American civil religious tradition, the "transcendental goal" of American politics is described as being either liberty or equality. While it is all but

¹ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America." *Daedalus*, Winter 1967. Reprinted in the Fall 2005 issue, p. 42.

impossible to imagine a figure in American politics not professing his or her deep commitment to both liberty and equality, there exists a tension between these two political goods. The men examined in my dissertation navigate this tension by conceptualizing one of the two as a first order good, which is to say good in and of itself, and relegating the other to the position of a second order good, desirable because it helps to attain the first order good. For example, if liberty is a first order good, then equality may be valuable in that one is most free when one is not dominated by anyone else. Alternately, if equality is the first order good, then liberty is valuable insofar as it frees the individual from hierarchy. This difference has real political consequences, as a priority on equality tends to result in promotion of an interventionist role for the state in American society and economy. Giving priority to liberty, on the other hand, generally leads to a suspicion of government intervention in these spheres, in effect placing economy and society beyond the appropriate reach of government and thus making them politically unproblematic, or at least irrelevant.

In addition to this difference, I locate two distinct visions of the American political project within the tradition of American civil religion, one of which I label *model*, and the other, *missionary*. Both of these are ways of thinking about America's position and sense of purpose in the international arena. From the missionary perspective, America is charged to introduce, defend, and spread the "good news" of democracy in the world. The model perspective, on the other hand, conceives of the United States as being a model of democratic practice for the world to see and

emulate, acting as a kind of “City on a Hill” or “New Israel.”² Put another way, America’s mission from the missionary point of view is to perfect the world, while from the model perspective America is charged to perfect itself. These two visions of the American polity are not mutually exclusive, and can exist together in different proportions. Yet, they are clearly in tension with one another, and the dynamic interplay between the two has a significant influence on the way in which the United States views itself at any given moment in time.

Ultimately, both the model and missionary perspectives are ways of conceptualizing the American sense of purpose. This sense of special purpose has been well documented, and it is my claim that, at least in its civil religious variant, it presents a powerful source of political authority and legitimacy for those who are able to abide by (or to appear to abide by) its principles.³ Jeffrey Stout has written about the importance of piety in American democratic practice, describing it not as a feeling, “but rather as a *virtue*, a morally excellent aspect of character.”⁴ He argues

² Cynthia Toolin has written on a similar topic in “American Civil Religion from 1789 to 1981: A Content Analysis of Presidential Inaugural Addresses.” (*Review of Religious Research*, vol. 25, no. 1. September, 1983. pp. 39-48). In Toolin’s article, what I call the missionary perspective, she calls “Destiny Under God,” and what I term the model perspective she refers to as the theme of “International Example.” However, I specify the content of these two themes to a greater extent than does Toolin, who does not describe their content so much as she determines that the two themes exist in presidential inaugural addresses. Major L. Wilson, in his book *Space, Time and Freedom: The Quest for Nationality and the Irrepressible Conflict 1815-1861* (Greenwood Press. Westport, CT and London, 1974) makes the case that in the 19th century, party identity was strongly correlated with the holding of one of these views. Democrats, he argues, saw the need to expand democracy across space (missionary), while Whigs wanted to preserve and extend it across time (model).

³ For extensive discussions of the American sense of purpose, see Perry Miler’s seminal *Errand Into the Wilderness*. (Belknap Press, 1956); Reinhold Neibuhr & Alan Heimert’s *A Nation So Conceived* (Charles Scribner’s Sons. New York, 1963); and also Ernest Lee Tuveson’s *Redeemer Nation* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1968).

⁴ Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton University Press. Princeton & Oxford, 2004. P. 20. Italics in original.

that character is an important part of democratic practice, because while institutions may fail, be corrupted, or be co-opted by elite actors, the democratic character is “the spiritual wherewithal, the moral fiber, to act on behalf of democracy before democracy itself gives way.”⁵

Acknowledging that piety has often been conceived of in a way that makes it incompatible with or even antithetical to democratic practice, Stout argues that just as there may be democratic and antidemocratic conceptions of character, so can there be democratic and undemocratic conceptualizations of piety. Democratic piety, he says, is the “*just or fitting* acknowledgement of the sources of our existence and progress through life.”⁶ In these terms, then, to deploy the language of American civil religion is to announce oneself as possessed of a character that is strongly democratic, holding dear the tenets of democracy in a moral form. Moreover, it is to signal that one understands politics and American history to take place within a specific narrative, in which God and the American polity are acknowledged in a particular way as the source of one’s existence and life. As Stout puts it, piety is “a self-conscious identification, undertaken on the part of an individual who, thinking for him- or herself, acknowledges that on which his or her self-reliant judgment depends.”⁷ This acknowledgment is understood to produce certain duties and obligations, the performance of which again signals, with increased force, that one is possessed of a democratic character and that one is

⁵ Ibid, p. 23

⁶ Ibid, p. 31. Italics in original

⁷ Ibid, p. 38.

conversant in a particular strain of the American democratic tradition. This democratic tradition sees the American political project as being possessed of an authority with three roots: continuity with the (possibly mythic) past, loyalty to the ideals and institutions of American government, and a faith in a God whose hand created both. One of the most important characteristics that results from these roots is the emphasis on a sacred covenant at the heart of the American polity, such that the betrayal of its terms marks not only a failure to live up to a set of ideals or obligations, but is also an abandonment of political identity.⁸

For American political actors across time, this language and its symbols have proven useful in generating popular compliance. Its persuasive power, however, is not without cost. Indeed, it is because it is costly that it is persuasive. Describing practices of democratic piety, Stout writes that they are “discursive practices *designed* to permit and encourage reflection on their own merits and defects from a critical standpoint,”⁹ and the tradition of American civil religion acts similarly. However, it does not encourage criticism of itself so much as it provides a critical standpoint from which the deeds of political actors and institutions can be judged.

⁸ Tracy B. Strong, “Taking the Rank With What is Ours: American Political Thought, Foreign Policy, and Questions of Rights.” (In *The Politics of Human Rights*, Paula R. Newberg, ed. New York University Press. New York, 1980. p. 35). According to Strong, Americans “think their own integrity and activity to be something special and of world historical importance. For an American, not to be who one is is then not only a failure of republican virtue; it is also a failure to meet a transhistorical standard.” Within the tradition of American civil religion, the standards to which America is held are backed by the weight of religious faith, and this faith is a matter of both collective and individual identity, of the ‘I’ as well as the ‘we’. Patrick J. Deneen says of what he calls “democratic faith” that it is “commonly conceived as the ‘saving faith’ that will foster transcendence of individual identity within a more comprehensive human whole while simultaneously resisting the absorption of the ego into an undifferentiated collectivity, thereby allowing us to retain our claims to inviolable individuality”, and this can be said as well of the American civil religious tradition. (Patrick J. Deneen, *Democratic Faith*. Princeton, 2005. pp. 168)

⁹ Stout (2004) p. 36 Italics in original

For a political actor to speak in the language of American civil religion is to bind her own hands by setting out norms and criteria by which her words and actions can be judged, opening herself to criticism based on the very standards which she offers as justification. This constraint is in turn rewarded by increased compliance on the part of the citizenry. American civil religion thus provides a shared set of beliefs that both ties the hands of the state and serves to generate increased popular compliance with the demands of the American government. Ultimately, this dynamic interplay of elite constraint and popular compliance is a matter of the groundings for moral and political authority provided by American civil religion. The transcendental, explicitly religious elements of this political tradition work to determine what actions are authorized in light of the nature of the American political community and its relationship with its God. In this way, American politics is a matter not only of good and bad, of justice and injustice, but also of religious virtue and sin.

1. Previous Research on American Civil Religion

In many ways, Robert Bellah's 1967 article "Civil Religion in America" is the foundation for all subsequent discussions of the subject, including this one. There, Bellah argues that American civil religion is "a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity" that

provides a “transcendent goal for the political process.”¹⁰ Further, in a Durkheimian vein, he argues that it functionally serves to integrate disparate groups and individuals into the American political community, creating a kind of consensus within a diverse polity that has been described as a “property of social life itself.”¹¹ However, others have shown that this consensus is a qualified one, existing across only certain groups in American society. Robert C. Wimberly and James A. Christenson have shown that adherence to beliefs associated with civil religion varies across religious groups, with members of Christian denominations showing relatively high levels of civil religious belief, while members of other religious (or non-religious) groups are less likely to do so.¹² Similarly, Eric Woodrum and Arnold Bell have shown that civil religious beliefs do not exist at the same levels among African-Americans that they do among white Americans.¹³ Thus, while the existence

¹⁰ Bellah (1967/2005) p. 43, 46. Bellah’s emphasis on the pursuit of transcendent political truth has not been unchallenged. Richard Rorty, in *Achieving Our Country*, identifies himself as acting within a civil religion running from Walt Whitman to John Dewey to Rorty himself. This “emphatically secular” faith is one that, according to Rorty, eschews claims to moral knowledge, or any kind of transcendental ideals at all, in favor of a kind of progressive, experiential ethics and politics. However, even a cursory glance at the language American civil religion shows that Rorty does a considerable amount of violence to that tradition of political thought. In striking the language of transcendent moral claims from the language of American politics, Rorty removes a sizable chunk of the American political vocabulary from his own lexicon, and it is questionable to what extent it can be described as ‘civil’ if it is held by a only a small portion of the citizenry. Looking at the historical development of American civil religion, it is clear that Rorty describes a radically simplified, even denatured, form of American civil religion. (Richard Rorty. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in 20th Century America*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge & London, 1998. pp. 15-27)

¹¹ Philip Hammond, “Pluralism and the Law in the Foundation of American Civil Religion”, in Bellah & Hammond, *Varieties of Civil Religion*. Harper & Row. San Francisco, 1980. p. 138

¹² Robert C. Wimberly and James A. Christenson. “Civil Religion and Other Religious Identities.” *Sociological Analysis*, vol. 42, no. 2. Summer, 1981. pp. 91-100. It is not insignificant that Wimberly and Christenson find that American Catholics are as integrated into American civil religion as are protestant groups. In large portions of the 19th century, this would have been unthinkable.

¹³ Eric Woodrum and Arnold Bell. “Race, Politics, and Religion in Civil Religion Among Blacks.” *Sociological Analysis*, vol. 49, no.4. Winter, 1989. pp. 353-367

of a consensus across groups supports Bellah's Durkheimian approach, that consensus is qualified, being held by some groups and not others.

Based on these arguments, it might appear that American civil religion is nothing but a legitimation of the status of privileged groups in American society. However, upon closer examination, the situation is not so clear. Adam Gamoran has shown that civil religion is present in American schools, acting both to create an inclusive, overarching consensus and, at the same time, create and maintain outgroups.¹⁴ Gamoran, in contrast to Woodrum and Bell, finds that African-Americans are increasingly integrated into the American civil religion, pointing to Martin Luther King, Jr. Day as an example. The inclusion of Martin Luther King among other American 'saints' with holidays, he argues, may be indicative of the increasing integration of African-Americans into American civil religion.

Clearly, American civil religion is not a purely integrative factor, nor is it a mere "cloak of sacred values" behind which political actors hide.¹⁵ There is little doubt that it is a "potentially enduring form of overarching cultural legitimation" for

¹⁴ Adam Gamoran, "Civil Religion in American Schools." *Sociological Analysis*, vol. 51, no. 3. Autumn, 1990. Pp. 235-256. Gamoran summarizes the tenets of American civil religion as follows (p. 247):

- 1) All are members of a national community.
- 2) The nation is subordinate to God.
- 3) Loyalty is owed to the nation.
- 4) Our forefathers sacrificed so that we might live in freedom.
- 5) America is a "promised land" to immigrants.
- 6) Religious tolerance.
- 7) Concern for one's fellow man.

The minimal ideological and religious content present in this summation of the civil religious tradition underscores the extent to which its integrative function has been prioritized over its political influence.

¹⁵ Robert E. Goodin, "Civil Religion and Political Witch Hunts." *Comparative Politics*, vol. 14, no. 1. October, 1981. P. 12

at least some groups, but one that is also used to exclude others.¹⁶ Interestingly, however, the groups included or excluded are not static, but change over time in response to social and political shifts. Marcela Cristi notices the tendency of American civil religion to, on the one hand, create consensus across different groups and integrate them into the American political community, while on the other to serve to exclude subaltern groups and to legitimate the social and political status quo. This being the case, she proposes that civil religion should be conceived of as existing between two ideal types. The first, which she labels civil religion, is similar to Bellah's conceptualization, a Durkheimian consensus that arises organically to bind the political community through consensus. The second, which she calls political religion, is of the Rousseauian kind, built by the state and/or political actors and groups with the purpose of legitimating a particular political order, usually with the veneration of the state as one of its key components.¹⁷ Cristi admits that, in practice, civil religions always show elements of both her "civil" and "political" ideal types, but this tension between social and political elements has been little explored elsewhere in the civil religion literature.¹⁸

In this way, the Durkheimian approach to the study of American civil religion has been dominant, and its emphasis on integration and exclusion has eclipsed other concerns. Cristi begins to move away from that, but even she concerns herself

¹⁶ Gail Gehrig, "The American Civil Religion Debate: A Source for Theory Construction." *Journal For the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 20, no. 1. March, 1981. pp. 51-63

¹⁷ Marcela Cristi. *From Civil to Political Religion: The Intersection of Culture, Religion, and Politics*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press. Waterloo, Ontario, Canada, 2001. Pp. 1-15.

¹⁸ An exception is N.J. Demerath III and Rhys H. Williams. "Civil Religion in an Uncivil Society." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 1985. Vol. 480, pp. 154-6

mainly with which groups are included within and which are subordinated to the political community, and it is only with her examination of popular attitudes toward the state within “political” religions that she moves beyond these Durkheimian concerns. Thus, while her distinction between civil and political religion is analytically interesting, the fact is that civil religion always draws from both, and I do not maintain the division in my own work.

I am in partial agreement with those who argue that civil religion seems to have a kind of punctuated existence, arising primarily in response to times of national crisis.¹⁹ My agreement is partial because it seems to me unrealistic to say that even a semi-coherent system of belief could have a pattern of cyclical existence and non-existence. Rather, it seems more plausible to argue that American civil religion exists in active and latent states, present across time, but sometimes more visible and other times less so. Further, American civil religion is not only active at times of *national* crisis, but provides a language through which *groups* within the American political community can make demands on it in times of their own crises. One example of this is the Populist uprisings of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which used the terminology of civil religion at the same time that civil religion largely fell from prominence in the Northeastern states where it had originated.²⁰

¹⁹ See Martin E. Marty, “Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion.” (in *American Civil Religion*. Russel E. Richey & Donald G. Jones, eds. Harper & Row. New York, 1974); Susan S. Purdy. “The civil religion thesis as it applies to a pluralistic society: Pancasila Democracy in Indonesia 1945-1965” (*Journal of International Affairs* no. 36, 1982, pp. 307-16); and Daniel Regan. “Islam, intellectuals, and civil religion in Malaysia” (*Sociological Analysis* vol. 50, no. 37. 1976. pp. 95-110).

²⁰ See Joe Creech, *Righteous Indignation: Religion and the Populist Revolution*. University of Illinois Press, 2006.

Civil religion in the Populist movement is clearly continuous with that developed in the Northeast, but key differences, for example the emphasis on economic equality, reflected the needs and desires of its new adherents. In this way, while there exists a clear continuity of terms and ideas in American civil religion, its tropes and ideals are often applied in different ways depending on context. While different moral and political demands may be expressed, for example, by a Populist Midwestern preacher in the late 19th century and in Gamoran's late-20th century public schools, these two versions share enough in common that they are clearly of one tradition, and the differences between the two are informative of the contexts in which each is articulated.

Drawing out these differences and commonalities, with an eye on the environment in which they occur, is one advantage of taking a historical approach to the analysis of American civil religion. Survey-based analysis, like that of Wimberly and Christenson (1981) and Woodrum and Bell (1989), while certainly of use and interest, provides a snapshot of a specific moment in time, which may or may not accurately depict the tradition of American civil religion. Survey data of necessity oversimplifies matters, and may be subject to distortion based on contemporary trends or concerns. Likewise, while sweeping historical analysis, such as that found in Bellah's *The Broken Covenant*, brings to the fore important continuities and

differences, it does so without a clear idea of the relationship of these things to the historical contexts in which they occur.²¹

Thus, my analysis is historical in nature, though not archival, and places the development of American civil religion within its historical context. I rely primarily on textual sources, providing a new interpretation of civil religious thought by engaging with the traditions of theology and political theory within which it is embedded. If American civil religion is indeed anything more than “American Shinto”, a sacralization of the American way of life, then it must be at least on some level a system of ethical and political ideals, a system of beliefs.²² This being the case, what do these beliefs do in political terms? What effects do they have beyond their influence on inclusion and exclusion of groups?²³ In addressing these questions, I move away from the Durkheimian approach that has typified research on American civil religion. Instead, I align myself with Max Weber in arguing that religious beliefs are about more than policing the boundaries of the community: they influence the actions and thought of those who hold them, at the level of their basic moral and even ontological assumptions. In uncovering the political and religious content of the civil religion, To hold a truth to be self-evident is to do more than belong to a group, it is to inhabit a world.

²¹ Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial*. Seabury Press. New York, 1975.

²² Bellah (1967/2005)

²³ Some recent scholarship on American civil religion is similarly focused. See for example Todd Gitlin & Liel Leibovitz' *The Chosen Peoples: America, Israel, and the Ordeals of Divine Election* (Simon & Schuster. New York, 2010); Andrew R. Murphy's *Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11* (Oxford. Oxford & New York, 2009), and Bruce T. Murray's *Civil Religious Liberty in America* (University of Massachusetts. Amherst, 2008. Pp. 41-76)

2. Dissertation Outline

This project traces the development of the civil religious tradition by examining the civil religious speech and thought of four pivotal figures. Two of these, John L. O'Sullivan and Abraham Lincoln, are foundational in the American civil religious tradition, with O'Sullivan as the root of the missionary civil religious perspective and Lincoln the definitive case for the model point of view. The other two figures considered, Woodrow Wilson and William Jennings Bryan, illustrate the degree to which the civil religious frameworks put forth by Lincoln and O'Sullivan became integrated into a single religio-political tradition. The focus of this dissertation is on the development of the civil religious discourse and its tropes, and the continuity that exists between speakers in that tradition.

I organize my examination of the civil religious framework of each of these men within three primary questions. One, does the individual prioritize liberty over equality, or vice versa? Two, where does he locate civil religious sin, and what is his understanding of that sin? Three, does he believe that the United States is obligated to model democracy to the world, or that the nation has a responsibility to actively proselytize democratic government?

The first figure considered, John L. O'Sullivan, has been little studied, though he was the literary editor and Democratic activist who gave Manifest Destiny its name. His work invests the Jacksonian tropes of nationalism, expansionism, libertarian democracy, and white supremacy with the force of God's will. He sees in

democracy a sacred faith, though one that not all peoples are able to hold. As the only bearer of this faith in a nondemocratic world, the United States for him is a direct agent of God's will, obligated to spread the gospel of democratic government to all lands and peoples by any means necessary, the surest means of this being to bring new territories under the democratic government of the United States. While other nations do not embrace the new faith of democracy and are thus by definition mired in religious evil, the United States as an agent of the divine will is for O'Sullivan by definition sinless. For him, America's democratic ideals and embrace of personal liberty mark a discontinuous break with world history so that it is untainted by the sins of the past, and its future work in the service of a holy cause means that it cannot stray into sin. Thus, the future flourishing of the United States is guaranteed, as it is impossible that the hand of God in the world should fail.

The advent of the Civil War shattered O'Sullivan's civil religious framework and its certainty of American virtue and flourishing. If America warred against itself, how could it be by definition without moral flaw, and how could its success be promised? The civil religious framework put forward by Abraham Lincoln during his presidency, being based in Puritan covenant theology, did not have these vulnerabilities. For Lincoln, who has become the central figure in the American civil religious tradition, the United States is a community of belief that has contracted with God to demonstrate the possibility of political equality to the world. In this way, then, the United States is not exceptional because of any providential guarantee, but because it is especially accountable before the will of God. For

Lincoln, who is the focus of my second and third chapters, only God is perfect, while humans and their works are by definition flawed. In this way he locates sin within the nation itself. The Civil War thus becomes a divine scourge for the nation's sin of slavery, which made a mockery of its charge to recognize human equality. Following Martin E. Marty in using Weber's typology, I locate priestly and prophetic modes of civil religious thought in Lincoln's speech: in his priestly mode, considered in Chapter 2, he affirms and codifies the American community of belief, urging them to strive on in the unfinished work of realizing human equality. Chapter 3 demonstrates that in his prophetic mode, Lincoln chastises the nation for its failure in its responsibilities before God, before whose will all humans are rendered equally impotent, and admonishes America to pray for its forgiveness.

In Chapter 4, I argue that Woodrow Wilson's civil religious framework incorporates elements of both O'Sullivan and Lincoln's thought (especially in its priestly mode), illustrating the way that civil religion emerges as a coherent tradition with a unified set of tropes, symbols, and beliefs. Like O'Sullivan, Wilson prioritizes liberty, and locates sin in nondemocratic foreign governments, believing that the United States is obligated to spread and defend democratic liberty, a belief that leads Wilson to characterize the First World War as a holy crusade. Yet like Lincoln, Wilson also bases his civil religious framework in covenant theology and believes that the US can fail in its charge. Both Wilson and Lincoln see the nation as having a moral and religious character separate from the individuals that compose

it, and believe that the state can thus legitimately coerce individuals into acting in accordance with the nation's religious obligations.

William Jennings Bryan, discussed in Chapter 5, like Wilson combines the already existent tropes of American civil religion in innovative ways. Similarly to O'Sullivan and Wilson, Bryan sees the United States as having a responsibility to promote democracy in the world at large. However, he does so from an evangelical point of view that prioritizes the political good of equality as stemming from Christian brotherly love, with which he believes only democracy is a compatible form of government. His location of sin likewise stems from his emphasis on equality: he identifies the white, rural workers of the South and Midwest as the people, whom he describes as morally pure, religiously pious, and politically infallible due to the sincerity of their faith, and thus believes that government should work always to their benefit. As he identifies these groups as sinless, he characterizes those that oppose them as being intrinsically evil, even satanic, and thus divides the nation into parts of pure virtue and pure vice, completing the fusion of Jacksonian democracy with religious belief.

Bryan's concern for the purity and infallibility of the people explains his appearance at the Scopes trial, as he feared Darwinism would separate the people from their religious faith and thus spell catastrophe for democratic fraternity, replacing it with a value on ruthless competition and leading Americans astray from their providentially mandated political mission. The Scopes trial marks a time at which the American religious landscape fractured, leaving the civil religious

tradition fragmented so that different versions would be appealed to, for example, by rural whites than by African Americans agitating for civil rights. Nonetheless this tradition is with us still: it is no accident that Martin Luther King invoked Lincoln's prophetic speech in his "I Have a Dream" speech, which called the nation to account for its failures and hypocrisies. Nor is it coincidental that George W. Bush, in his 2003 State of the Union, justified the invasion of Iraq by saying that "Americans are a free people, who know that freedom is the right of every person and the future of every nation. The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world, it is God's gift to humanity", all but quoting Wilson's justification for American involvement in World War I. Though this dissertation looks to the 19th and early 20th centuries, my intent is to provide the resources for us to understand the America of today, as the tropes and categories explored in this dissertation even now shape the way that Americans think about themselves and their place in the world.

1. DEUS VULT!

JOHN L. O’SULLIVAN AND THE NATION AS CRUSADE

Unto thee will I give the land of Canaan, the lot of your inheritance; When ye were but few, even a few, and strangers in it. And when they went from nation to nation, and from one kingdom to another people; He suffered no man to do them wrong: yea, he reproveth kings for their sakes, Saying, Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm.
1 Chronicles 16:18-22

John L. O’Sullivan, editor, literary critic, and the man who coined the label “manifest destiny” for the belief that God had revealed that it was his will for the United States to spread across all of North America, was among the first to speak in terms of civil religion at the national level. His work, especially in his “politico-literary” journal the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, was widely read within the Democracy (as the Democratic Party was then often called) from the late 1830s through the 1840s, after which O’Sullivan continued to be influential in the Van Buren and Pierce administrations before fading into obscurity after the Civil War. In this chapter, I argue that O’Sullivan popularized a number of civil religious tropes that become influential within the civil religious tradition, most importantly the notion that America has a religious obligation to spread its political institutions. As this dissertation is focused on the role of civil religious themes in public speech,

the majority of my focus here will be on his time with the *Review*, which was the high water mark of O'Sullivan's influence on the national level.¹

Though it is not possible to say exactly who was the first to speak in the language of American civil religion, it appears to be a creation of the second generation of American politicians, born in the years after the Revolution and coming to power in the 1830s. One explanation of the advent of American civil religion at this time is that it was made possible the transformative presidency of Andrew Jackson. The civil religious tradition in America is one that emphasizes *national* rather than regional identity, and a heightened, romantic nationalism is one of the most important legacies of the Jacksonian era.²

¹ There is relatively little written about O'Sullivan. The most informative source is probably Robert D. Sampson's largely sympathetic biography, *John L. O'Sullivan and His Times* (Kent State. Kent, Ohio, 2003). Julius W. Pratt's "The Origin of Manifest Destiny" (*The American Historical Review*, Vol. 32, No. 4 (Jul., 1927), pp. 795-798) and "John L. O'Sullivan and Manifest Destiny" (*New York History* no. 14 (July 1933) pp. 213-234), which attribute to O'Sullivan the term Manifest Destiny, are probably the reason that he is remembered at all in scholarly discourse, and he is most often written about in works on either the Young America movement or Manifest Destiny. In writing on the former, useful information on O'Sullivan and the *Democratic Review* can be found in Edward L. Widmer's *Young America: The Flowering of Democracy in New York City* (Oxford. New York & Oxford, 1999), Yonatan Eyal's *The Young America Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828-1861* (Cambridge. Cambridge & New York, 2007) and M.E. Curti's "Young America" (*The American Historical Review*, vol. 32, no. 1, October 1926, pgs. 34-55). In scholarship on Manifest Destiny, Frederick Merk's classic *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* (Alfred A. Knopf. New York, 1970) contains a good deal of information about O'Sullivan, as do Albert K. Weinberg's *Manifest Destiny* (Johns Hopkins. Baltimore, 1935; Reprint: Quadrangle Paperbacks. Chicago, 1963) and Sean Wilentz' *The Rise of American Democracy* (W.W. Norton & Co. New York & London, 2005). Other useful histories of Manifest Destiny that include O'Sullivan and the *Democratic Review* are more concerned with the justice of Manifest Destiny, and thus harsher in tone. Among these are Thomas R. Hietala's *Manifest Design: Anxious Aggrandizement in Late Jacksonian America* (Cornell. Ithaca & London, 1985) and Anders Stephanson's *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (Hill & Wang, 1995).

² See Daniel Walker Howe's *What Hath God Wrought* (Oxford, 2007) for a thorough history of the Jacksonian period. Howe makes the case that the heightened nationalism of the era was due not only to changes in politics per se, but also to a revolution in communications and transportation that connected diverse locales into a cohesive whole.

Another reason for the emergence of American civil religion in the 1830s may be that it is difficult to revere the creation of one's own hands (reverence being appropriate only to something superior to oneself), but rather easier to venerate that of one's forefathers. Walt Whitman's "The Last of the Sacred Army," a short story appearing in the *Democratic Review* in 1842, expresses such a sentiment. In it, Whitman presents a fable, in the form of a dream, describing an encounter with the last living veteran of the Revolution. He is the last man alive to have served under George Washington, and "the Last of *His* Witnesses."³ After handling a "relic" once handled by Washington and bearing his initials, Whitman asks a philosopher, who had also come to see the Last Witness whether it is well that "such reverance [*sic*] be bestowed by a great people on a creature like themselves. The self-respect each one has for his own nature might run the risk of effacement, were such things often seen. Besides, it is not allowed that man pay worship to his fellow."⁴ Whitman's concerns here are religious: his worry is that the people have fallen into idolatry by the veneration of one who is only a man, and that this idolatry will corrupt the self-respect that is at the foundation of democratic government. Moreover, the language of *witness* calls to mind the individuals of both Old and New Testaments who attest to the acts of God.⁵

³ *Democratic Review*, Vol. 10, no. 45 (March 1842), pp. 262

⁴ *ibid.* pp. 263

⁵ The biblical emphasis on witnessing is pervasive. See, for example, Proverbs 14:25, Luke 4:22, John 5:31 and 15:27, Romans 9:1, and in particular Revelation 11:1-12, which describes the coming and destiny of two "witnesses" who signal the arrival of the end times.

The philosopher, though, assures Whitman that all is well, telling him to “Fear not,” because “the occurrences that you have just witnessed stem from the fairest and manliest traits in the soul.”⁶ The philosopher is able to persuade Whitman that

it is well that the benefactors of a state be so kept alive in memory and song, when their bodies are mouldering. Then it will become impossible for a people to become enslaved, for though the strong arm of their defender come not as readily to the battle, his spirit is there, through the power of remembrance, and wields a better sway even than if it were of fleshly substance.⁷

The problems that faced the first generation of Americans born after the Revolution is here, as in Abraham Lincoln’s 1838 address “On the Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions”, how the Republic can be preserved once the generation that founded it passes away into death. Whitman, like O’Sullivan, believes that this is a task that can best be accomplished by using the Revolutionaries as a model, and continuing their struggle in the days to come. The medium of religion is capable of preserving and elevating this model as no other can.

To my knowledge, O’Sullivan’s civil religious language has received no extended treatment. Though the themes of civil religion are explicitly present in relatively few of his writings, his thoughts on the subject were and remain highly influential on the rhetoric of politicians even in the 21st century. I begin my analysis by laying out the context within which O’Sullivan writes. From there, I move to an analysis of his introduction to the first issue of the *Democratic Review*. There,

⁶ *Democratic Review*, Vol. 10, no. 45 (March 1842), pp. 263

⁷ *ibid*, pp. 264

O'Sullivan presents arguments in favor of two elements that form the foundation of his civil religious framework: first, what he calls the voluntary or democratic principle, and second, the special moral status accorded to the United States by virtue of its sinlessness.

I further argue that these two factors in O'Sullivan's subsequent writing serve both to define the membership of the American polity and to endow the United States with a providential mission to expand the global reach of liberty, something that O'Sullivan often equates to the expansion of American political rule. I conclude this chapter with an analysis of his Civil War era pamphlet, *Union, Disunion, and Reunion*, in which O'Sullivan, by then allied with the Confederacy, attempts with mixed success to adapt his civil religious framework to the shock of a war between the states. Though this pamphlet is from an era in which O'Sullivan had lost much, if not all, of his political salience, the difficulties that he faces in writing *Union, Disunion, and Reunion* serve to underscore the extent to which O'Sullivan had before the war crafted a largely coherent framework of political-theological thought, a coherency illustrated by its inability to adapt to a radically altered world of American politics.

For O'Sullivan, the flourishing of the United States is guaranteed by the fact that it acts as the agent of God's will on earth. A certain confidence in the human ability to determine the workings of providence was characteristic of American theological thought in the first half of the 19th century, as was a confidence in the

greatness of the American future in much political thought of the same period.⁸ O'Sullivan's formulation, however, expresses both in an extreme form. In his civil religious framework, the will of God is identical with the American interest, which is in turn identified with the universal human interest. It is thus that manifest destiny is destined, as God is the guarantor of American fortunes. Moreover, he argues that because they act collectively as a direct agent of Providence, Americans as a people have by definition transcended sin, as whatever Americans do in their own national interest is both divinely sanctioned and for the greater good of all mankind. That being said, however, not all individuals are capable of the democratic faith, with those not so able holding a lower moral status than those who do. O'Sullivan saw himself as the heir of the Revolution, which he described as "unconsummated," and his was very much a fighting faith, a kind of militant, quasi-secular religiosity.⁹

O'Sullivan was a loyal member of the Democracy, and supported the party's expansionist, (white) egalitarian, and free-trade oriented radical wing, known variously as the Locofocos or Young America. Party loyalty and enthusiasm were two qualities that would define O'Sullivan's personal and private life, leading him on the one hand to remain loyal to Van Buren in the face of numerous disappointments, and on the other to a number of failed business schemes and an embrace of spiritualism and the dubious science of 'animal magnetism.'¹⁰ Even so, for a time in

⁸ Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as Theological Crisis*. University of North Carolina. Chapel Hill, 2006. p. 75

⁹ Widmer (1999) pp. 8 & 40

¹⁰ Sampson (2003) pp. 106-107. In 1859, Lincoln wrote what is usually referred to as his Second Lecture on Discoveries and Inventions, in which he argues that the advances of the future are made

the mid-19th Century, his energetic, idealistic political writing shaped the agenda of the Democratic Party at a national level, committing it to a program of states' rights, free trade, and expansion. In doing so, he depicted the United States in the national imaginary as the agent of God's will on earth, destined by that will to spread and defend democracy anywhere and everywhere on earth by any means necessary. Clearly, the image that he created retains some force today.

1. Piracy, Early Burial, and Old Hickory

Born at sea in November of 1813, John L. O'Sullivan's family environment was saturated with romantic drama. His father, also named John, had studied for the priesthood before abandoning the seminary for a life as a sea captain with a probable sideline in piracy. His mother, nee Mary Rowly, had once been pronounced dead of fever and physically lowered into her grave when her husband noticed signs of life. John senior drowned off the coast of South America in 1825, when his ship foundered and he attempted in vain to swim ashore with a rope in

possible only by the gifts of the past. (Stewart Winger has argued that the First and Second Lectures on Discoveries and Inventions were probably composed as a single text. *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics*. Northern Illinois University Press. DeKalb, 2003. p 15) There, he heaps scorn on the members of the Young America political movement, attacking their ideas about expansion and intervention in the name of liberty, their callow attitudes toward slavery, and their disdain for all things of the past. Oddly, he also says of the Young American that

He knows all that can possibly be known; inclines to believe in spiritual rappings, and is the unquestioned inventor of "Manifest Destiny." His horror is for all that is old, particularly "Old Foggy"; and if there be any thing old which he can endure, it is only old whiskey and old tobacco." (In *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. Roy P. Basler, ed. Rutgers. New Brunswick, NJ, 1953-1954. Volume 3, p. 357.)

Here, he may be speaking specifically of John L. O'Sullivan.

order to rescue the ship's passengers, a romantic gesture that left an impression on his young son.¹¹

In 1827, Mary O'Sullivan, called by her son Madame, moved the family to New York City, where John, now fourteen, enrolled at Columbia, graduating with distinction four years later. In 1835, he was admitted to the bar, and moved with his family to the District of Columbia, where Mary hoped to pursue her case against the federal government for goods seized on suspicion of piracy from her husband's ship before his death. In 1836, the family was reimbursed to the tune of \$20,210, a move personally approved by President Andrew Jackson, likely at the urging of Martin Van Buren, which could explain O'Sullivan's staunch loyalty to the latter across the whole of both of their political careers.¹² This loyalty was demonstrated in O'Sullivan's first publication, the Georgetown-based *Metropolitan*, which he bought with his friend Dr. Samuel D. Langtree in 1835 and which supported the Democracy with such enthusiasm as to be considered a party organ.¹³

In 1837, O'Sullivan moved to New York City, immersing himself in the city's Democratic political circles and founding the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* (henceforth the *Democratic Review*), which he edited from then until he sold it in 1845. He was again hired on as an editor in 1851 and served in that capacity until 1854. He described himself as a literary nationalist, and due to his pursuit of

¹¹ Sampson (2003) pp. 2-4. John L. O'Sullivan would later claim that his father's ship had taken with it documents substantiating the family's claim to nobility, which is ironic, given that much of the younger O'Sullivan's career was dedicated to inveighing against the privileges claimed by would-be aristocrats in America.

¹² Ibid, pp. 6-7

¹³ ibid, p. 13

uniquely American literature he was at the forefront of the Young America ‘politico-literary’ movement, and provided a launching point for the careers of Herman Melville, Walt Whitman, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, with whom O’Sullivan had a friendship that spanned decades.¹⁴ The “Democratic” in *Democratic Review* very much referred to the Democratic Party, and the *Review*, like the *Metropolitan*, was often considered something of an organ for the party as a whole and in particular for the administrations of Polk, Pierce, and especially van Buren, and was later tightly allied with Stephen Douglas.¹⁵

His combative, strongly ideological position was one that befit his era: the year of the *Democratic Review’s* founding saw the economic Panic of 1837, which initiated a five year-long depression, the murder of abolitionist newspaper editor Elijah Lovejoy by a pro-slavery mob, and the end of the transformative Jackson presidency. It is difficult to overstate the degree to which Jackson influenced the Democratic Party of his era and O’Sullivan himself. A bellicose, proud man from humble origins, Jackson’s deep racism was ironically combined with equally deep egalitarian instincts, as demonstrated at his inauguration, when he bowed to the

¹⁴ Widmer (1999). pp. 7, 13. It is from Hawthorne’s correspondence that some of the more colorful details of O’Sullivan’s life emerge, such as that in 1838 Hawthorne had nearly challenged O’Sullivan to a duel over the affections of one Mary Crowninshield Silsbee, daughter of Senator Nathan Silsbee. (Hawthorne, *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne: The Letters*, vol. XV. Thomas Woodson, L. Neal Smith, Norman Holmes Pearson, eds. Ohio State University Press, 1984. pp. 263, letter dated Feb. 8, 1838) The friendship between the two men resumed, and they assisted each other in political maneuverings for office across the years, with O’Sullivan working to get Hawthorne a position in the federal offices of the Post Office in 1845, and Hawthorne using his connections to buy O’Sullivan time before being dismissed from his position as the US envoy to Portugal in 1857. (*The Letters*, vol. XVI, pp. 87, letter dated April 7, 1845, vol. XVIII, p. 20, letter dated Feb. 13, 1857)

¹⁵ Widmer (1999) p. 12.

crowd in a gesture of respect for popular sovereignty.¹⁶ Aspects of Jackson's biography, personal and political, lent support to what would become dominant aspects of the Democratic platform: his support for the principles of free trade, bolstered by his own rise from a log cabin to the Presidency, was embraced by the Democracy for the next half century, while his admiration for the common man and egalitarian instincts contributed to the Democratic reticence to legislate moral issues, in stark contrast to the Whigs.¹⁷

2. The Nation as Crusade

Very much a product of the Jacksonian era, O'Sullivan's *Democratic Review* advances a dynamic vision of the American polity and its mission in world history, combining a romantic image of an epic struggle for liberation with the Enlightenment emphasis on political rights. Although this was not an idea new to American politics, Democrats such as O'Sullivan were the first to suggest that

¹⁶ Howe (2007) pp. 328-330

¹⁷ These qualities of party character have partly structural causes. The Democratic core constituency was composed of a coalition of groups that felt their communities in some way threatened by federal power, including Catholics, workers, immigrants, and Southern slaveholders. The Democratic emphasis on strict constitutional interpretation, the separation between Church and State, and states' rights, as well as their opposition to an expanded federal government, and even to local government's involvement with social institutions such as schools and mental asylums, can be understood in this light. Whigs, on the other hand, had a much more homogenous base of voters, who were more ready to see government intervention in society, for example of education or treatment of the mentally ill, as a matter of instilling the correct values of self-control and moral discipline, in many ways compatible with Weber's description of the Protestant work ethic. Perhaps ironically, this homogeneity may also have led them to be more comfortable in conceiving of rights as applicable to individuals rather than communities, and Whigs also tended to have a stronger sense of the national polity's priority over local powers. For a fuller treatment of Whig and Democratic positions, see Lawrence Frederick Kohl, *The Politics of Individualism* (Oxford. New York & Oxford, 1989. pp. 19-100) and Major L. Wilson, *Space, Time and Freedom*. Greenwood Press. Westport, CT and London, 1974))

leading by moral example was not enough, and that the United States should fulfill its destiny to democratize the world by any means necessary.¹⁸ The sense of American exceptionalism in O’Sullivan’s writing is robust, even as he advocates for a universal set of political ideals: In the introduction to the first issue of the *Democratic Review*, which O’Sullivan describes as a “full and free profession of the cardinal principles of political faith on which we take our stand,” the advent of the United States is depicted as a discontinuous break from the whole of human history.¹⁹ He writes that,

All history has to be re-written; political science and the whole scope of all moral truth have to be considered and illustrated in the light of the democratic principle. All old subjects of thought and all new questions arising, connected more or less directly with human existence, have to be taken up again and re-examined in this point of view.²⁰

For O’Sullivan, then, the birth of the United States, which has the democratic principle as the “fundamental element of [its] new social and political system,” is an event at least on par with that of Christ, marking not only a new era of human history, but actually forcing the re-evaluation and re-conceptualization of everything that has come before.²¹ O’Sullivan describes the democratic principle,

¹⁸ Eyal (2007) 95-96

¹⁹ *Democratic Review* #1, October 1837, p. 2

²⁰ *ibid.*, p. 14

²¹ This understanding of the American role in history was not original to O’Sullivan. Indeed, the motto on the reverse of the American national seal, *Novus Ordo Seclorum* (New Order of the Ages), bears a similar implication, announcing the beginning of an American era. Charles Thomson, Latinist and secretary to the Continental Congress, designed the seal with William Barton, drawing the Latin inscription from Virgil’s *Eclogue IV*, lines 5-8: *Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas; / Magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo. / iam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna, / iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto.* (“Now is come the last age of Cumean song; the great line of the centuries begins

which he refers to interchangeably as the voluntary principle, as being “the best government is that which governs least,” or, more poetically, “Let man be fettered by no duty, save/His brother’s right—like his, inviolable.”²²

Two things about O’Sullivan’s “high and holy democratic principle” are important to note: first, that the United States, which embodies it, is identified with democracy, which in turn “is the cause of Humanity.”²³ This means that the interest of the United States is ultimately the interest of all humanity, an idea of the highest importance in his vision of America’s providential and global mission. Second, O’Sullivan argues that to oppose this view of American destiny or the Democratic agenda with which it is identified (as he explicitly describes the Whigs doing) is to demonstrate ignorance, madness, or moral failure.²⁴ The reason for this is that the embrace of a broader need for government is to impute “a radical deficiency in the moral elements implanted by its Creator in human society, that no other alternative can be devised,” and indeed it is “scarcely consistent with a true and living faith in the existence and attributes of that Creator, so to believe; and such is not the

anew. Now the Virgin returns, the reign of Saturn returns; now a new generation descends from heaven on high.” Translation by H. Rushton Fairclough, revised by G.P. Goold, in *Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid I-VI*. Harvard. Cambridge & London, 1999. pp. 49) Significantly, this passage and the lines following were understood in medieval thought to prophesy the coming of Christ. An alternate way to look at this is to see the *Novus Ordo Seclorum* of the founding as apocalyptic in content, as Charles Taylor argues (*A Secular Age*. Belknap. Cambridge, MA, 2007) p. 208). The language of messianism is I think here more apt: though O’Sullivan sees the birth of the United States as being very much the beginning of a new age, it is only the beginning. The apocalyptic element of his thought, discussed below, is seen in his belief that, ultimately, all politics across the globe will be remade in the American image.

²² *Democratic Review* #1, October 1837, p. 6, 7. The formulation that the best government governs least is of uncertain origins, usually being attributed to Thomas Jefferson or Thomas Paine. O’Sullivan draws the second quotation from the famous speech by the Marquis of Posa in Schiller’s *Don Carlos*.

²³ *ibid*, p. 11

²⁴ *ibid*, p. 1-2

democratic belief.”²⁵ Thus, the political opponents of the Democrats, at least as envisioned by O’Sullivan, act in bad faith to the point that they renounce their Creator.

Further, his “true and living faith” is one in which human beings bear no evident trace of original sin, thus breaking from orthodox Christian belief. Moreover, though the democratic principle embodied by America is “essentially involved in Christianity,” it is this principle that marks Christianity as being of divine origin rather than the reverse, as it is the “pervading democratic equality among men” that is Christianity’s “highest fact, and one of its most radiant internal evidences of the divinity of its origin.”²⁶ In *Democratic Review* #1, O’Sullivan signals that a belief in the God of America, who is the God of democracy and thus of all mankind, needs not necessarily refer to anything outside of American political thought and history, and he moves to access religious fervor without the constraints of orthodoxy.²⁷

Despite the Christian tropes and form of O’Sullivan’s civil religious framework, its concern with republican virtue and the general will lend a Rousseauian quality to it. For O’Sullivan, however, the general will is not that of the united American republics, but rather *that of all mankind*. The United States forms the vanguard of universal democracy, a minority that “embodies the general will,

²⁵ *ibid*, p. 5

²⁶ *ibid*, p. 7

²⁷ Though O’Sullivan was an Episcopalian, and later a convert to his ancestral Catholicism, this fits with his lifelong skepticism toward organized religion. (Widmer (1999) p. 46)

and is the only place where this is embodied.”²⁸ In turn, this special status as divine agent and vanguard of universal futurity effects what Kierkegaard calls the teleological suspension of the ethical, exempting America from the ethical and legal standards that bind other nations, something that would become strongly apparent as he argued in favor of American expansion to the west. For O’Sullivan, the moral claims of the voluntary principle trump all others.

3. Narrowing the Boundaries of Citizenship...

For O’Sullivan, the voluntary principle determines the boundaries of the American polity, grounding and structuring the whole of American government on the principle of liberty. This belief frames both his somewhat anemic opposition to slavery and his rather more vigorous support of states’ rights. It also serves to exclude certain racial and ethnic groups from his vision of the American political community, an argument that he bases in the alleged inability of some groups to practice democracy as well as in the relationship of the voluntary principle to history in America and in the world. Further, it serves to highlight the exceptionality of the American government, such that time has different functions within and without the American polity.

Though vaguely committed to the gradual end of slavery, O’Sullivan seems to have wanted the debate on the subject to be excluded from the political sphere

²⁸ Taylor (2007) p. 206. Taylor goes on to say that such “is part of the theory of Revolution; it has no place in the theory of government.” O’Sullivan’s vision of the American polity was one in which the Revolution continued indefinitely.

altogether, even at the state level. Though the Democrats were strongly in favor of preserving slavery in its extant form, the sentiment in favor of its expansion was not nearly so reliable, and party voices like O'Sullivan had to navigate this tension.²⁹ For him, slavery was "not a political" problem, "but a moral and economic one, the decision of which must rest, voluntarily, with the slave states themselves."³⁰ It is then for O'Sullivan a question of intrastate commerce, not of rights, and his conception of the American polity is one in which it is a community of belief formed by equal and sovereign states, each of which retains its sovereignty. That the legal status of individuals, even to the point of enslavement, is for him a matter of state commerce is reflective of O'Sullivan's belief that America was composed not of individuals, but of independent states bound together for the advancement of a shared belief in democratic government, not to surrender their own liberties and self-determination.³¹ Given that slavery was recognized in the Constitution, which bound the states under a single government, he believed it illegitimate to compel a change to the status quo, which would (ironically) violate the spirit of the voluntary principle.

The resistance to abolitionism on the grounds that the right of a state to allow slavery is included in the Constitution highlights the complex role of time within O'Sullivan's civil religious framework. As it was for Jackson before him, for O'Sullivan the Union was perfect at its birth, and it is necessary to make an eternal

²⁹ Howe (2007), p. 512; James Mcpherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom* (Oxford. New York, 1988) p. 125

³⁰ *Democratic Review* 14, 4/44, p. 429

³¹ Merk (1970) pp. 26-27, *Democratic Review* 15, 9/44, "True Theory and Philosophy of Our System of Government" p. 219-233

return to the unchanging designs of the founders, scraping away the corrupting accretions of time.³² This underscores the extent to which O’Sullivan depicts the political as being also the religious: though a firm supporter of economic, industrial, and social progress, for him American politics must always be brought back to the time of origin. Though profane history may be linear, the sacred history of American government is thus circular in form.³³

That being said, there is also present a sacralized vision of linear time, as there is in Christianity:³⁴ both the founding of the United States (a divine intervention in historical time) and the democratic transfiguration of the globe take place within linear history. For those within the American polity, sacred time is circular, as they act to preserve the perfect liberty achieved in the Constitution, but as America spreads the voluntary principle to world beyond its present borders, it acts within linear history. The relationship between these two forms of sacred time is complex, and rests on O’Sullivan’s belief in the perfection of the American polity, on the one hand, and on the corruption of the world beyond its borders, on the other. Thus, the preservation of American purity by an eternal return to the

³² Wilson (1974) p. 86

³³ Historian of religion Mircea Eliade describes this contrast between linear profane time and circular sacred time, which is “always the same” and “composed of an *eternal present*, which is infinitely recoverable,” as the essential quality of religious thought. (*The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion*. Tr. Willard R. Trask. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959. p. 70, 88) It is interesting to note that for O’Sullivan, this circularity would ideally be reduced to a kind of eternal revolutionary moment, as the nation lived out the tenets set forth at its founding in perfect fidelity. Taken together with O’Sullivan’s belief in the ongoing and “unconsummated” nature of the Revolution, this supports Major Wilson’s (1974) that the Democrats tended to be interested in the quantitative expansion of American society through space, while the Whigs were concerned with its qualitative development across time. This contrast should become clearer with the examination of Abraham Lincoln’s civil religious thought across the next two chapters.

³⁴ Eliade (1959) p. 111

founding is an attempt to combat the corroding effects of time's passage, in effect preserving the present indefinitely. Nonetheless, the world outside the borders of the United States is in need of conversion to its political faith, and for this change to occur, it is necessary that the relationship between the United States and the outside world be understood in terms of linear time. The teleological endpoint of this linear time, which is to say of history itself, is a kind of democratic millennium. J.G.A. Pocock says of this impulse in the American political mind that, if as Locke says in the beginning all the world was America, then "if in the end all the world should be America again, the mission of a chosen people would have been fulfilled."³⁵ According to Pocock, the political apocalyptic is a means of drawing the redemptive process out of a purely spiritual realm and squarely into the realm of political history.³⁶

In O'Sullivan's telling, this history, guided by the hand of God, has prepared the American people to redeem the world, bringing the historical process to its culmination in a democratic apocalypse, followed by a 'millennium' in which peace and freedom endure across the globe. This apocalyptic concern imbues American politics with religious force. Pocock says of the political function of apocalypse that "Prophecy and eschatology formed a device for drawing the process of salvation more fully within the world of time, and so subjecting its outward organization to temporal authority; history (and especially sacred history) was the instrument of

³⁵ J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment*. Princeton University Press. Princeton & London, 1975. p. 542

³⁶ *Ibid*, p.46

secular power.”³⁷ In this way, O’Sullivan’s investment of American politics with religious force serves to draw what are essentially religious questions (of the redemption of the world from evil, of the ultimate purpose of history) into the sphere of the political. For him, the functions of the church have been subsumed within the authority of the state, and religion is folded into politics.

For O’Sullivan, the *telos* of politics, and thus of history, is human liberation. Liberty is for O’Sullivan the primary political good, being both the will of God and the universal human interest. Despite his occasional claims to the contrary, for him equality is a second order political virtue, in that it is valuable because the leveling of hierarchy makes human freedom possible. As will be seen in the following chapters, this is exactly the reverse of Lincoln’s emphasis in his own civil religious speech. O’Sullivan’s commitment to equality, based as it is in the practice of political and economic freedom, only extends so far because for one to have the right to self-rule one must be able to claim it. For O’Sullivan, however, some groups possess this ability and others do not. Regarding the individual’s practice of freedom, he wrote, “According to their knowledge of, and respect for, the rights of a citizen, shall their freedom from governmental restraints be measured out to them, and every privilege which they learn to exercise wisely, government will be forced to relinquish, until each man becomes a law unto himself.”³⁸ Thus, individuals are to be politically free only insofar as they are believed to be capable of self-legislation.

³⁷ *Politics, Language, and Time*. Atheneum. New York, 1973. pp. 179

³⁸ “Territorial Aggrandizement” *Democratic Review* 17, 10/1845

For O’Sullivan this is true on a global scale, not only within American borders: this is evidenced by his enthusiastic attitude toward westward expansion and in his equally enthusiastic support for the European democratic radicals of 1848. This extended even to the point of calling for military intervention in support of all who fought for the “holy” cause of democracy abroad as a part of the American world-historical mission.³⁹ This legitimate ability of groups outside of the American continent to invoke the American state’s capacity for violence on their own behalf indicates that for O’Sullivan the identification of American interests with those of humanity at large works both ways, as he argues that the mere presence of democratic struggle should prove by itself decisive for American politics in the international arena. O’Sullivan’s attitude is essentially millenarian, seeing the American mission to remake the world in its own image in apocalyptic terms, as the end goal is the complete and permanent transfiguration of politics on a global level.⁴⁰

However, O’Sullivan, like Jackson, did not believe all groups to be capable of credibly embracing the democratic principle, and it is for this reason that he opposed the annexation of Mexico to the United States, which had been advocated among the more enthusiastic of the Democratic politicians associated with Young

³⁹ Eyal (2007) p. 95. Cause described as “holy” *Democratic Review* vol. 9, no. 39 September 1841, p. 260-76

⁴⁰ *Democratic Review* 8, p. 179-193, “Why should England not be Democratic?”; Wilentz, (2005) p. 563. Implicit in much of O’Sullivan’s writing is the sense that democracy and American rule are essentially identical, such that where there is one there must also be the other. This implication was sometimes made explicit by Democratic politicians such as Rep. Felix McConnell of Alabama, who in 1846 called for the annexation of Ireland, which, like Mexico, Oregon, the Yucatan, and Texas was a downtrodden area that should feel lucky to reap the blessings of liberty under American government. (Eyal (2007) p. 97)

America.⁴¹ Mexicans for him were “semi-barbarous” and “substantially below our national average in both purity and intelligence.”⁴² The upshot of this is that “To enfranchise them, therefore, and give their representatives a voice in our legislature, would doubtless have the double effect of producing anarchy within their own borders, and of embarrassing our own interests to a most disastrous extent.” Indeed, it could take as long as a century of education through the intercourse of free trade, the agents of which he describes as “missionaries of democracy,” before Mexicans could be admitted to the Union.⁴³ For O’Sullivan at this point, the annexation of Mexico would contaminate the United States, either causing chaos in American politics or causing Americans to make a mockery of their own democratic principles by ruling Mexico tyrannically.

Thus, individuals are to be politically free only insofar as they are capable of self-legislation, which means that the democratic principle does *not* apply equally to

⁴¹ O’Sullivan’s suspicions of the Mexican War cost him the editorship of the *New York Daily News* in 1845, and he sold the *Democratic Review* soon after. Sampson (2003) pp. 206-207 Widmer (1999) argues that there exist two distinct periods of the Young America movement, with an idealistic, egalitarian Young America I existing in the 1830s and ‘40s, and a belligerent, racist Young America II present in the 1850s. Given the way that what he calls Young America II seems to my mind to be a more or less natural evolution of the arguments and tropes presented by Young America I, and the fact that there were many individuals, including O’Sullivan, associated with both eras, I have not preserved this differentiation.

⁴² The extent to which O’Sullivan was at this point precisely what one might call a racist is a subject of some debate. Given the absolute supremacy of Western European culture that he posits, scholars such as Thomas R. Hietala (1985) have felt comfortable depicting him as such (pgs. 255-257). Some, including Edward L. Widmer (1999), have pointed out that O’Sullivan explicitly wrote against attributing inherent inferiority to racial groups, and was careful to advocate only the superiority of European thought, culture, and politics. (p. 51). Interestingly, this species of white supremacy was much more typical of the Whigs than of the Democrats, who typically saw it as being a matter of inherent difference between races (Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs*. University of Chicago. Chicago, 1984. p. 39). Given the high-perfect correlation between the two, however, I’m not convinced that there would be any meaningful difference either way in whether or not an individual such as O’Sullivan should be considered a racist.

⁴³ “Territorial Aggrandizement” *Democratic Review* 17, 10/1845, p. 243-248

all groups and individuals. Though all men may have been created equal, they do not have an equal right to self-government. Equality depends here on the ability to be free, and so is for O’Sullivan something to be decided within the sphere of politics, with some being more equal than others. This may explain the rather callous attitudes toward slavery and the treatment of indigenous populations across the course of O’Sullivan’s career. This is borne out in his “Report in Favor of the Abolition of the Punishment of Death by Law”.⁴⁴ There, he describes the laws of the Mosaic code as being in the “barbarian spirit of revenge,” saying that the Israelites’ barbarism and inherent wickedness, which made a system of draconian punishments necessary, had been instilled in them by their mistreatment as slaves, which in turn rendered them unfit for a more refined system of government.⁴⁵ Slavery, for O’Sullivan, rendered slaves permanently incapable self-legislation, and thus they could never be free.

4. ...And Expanding the Borders of Liberty

Ironically, though O’Sullivan’s development of the voluntary principle excludes slaves and Native Americans from the American polity, it also forms the

⁴⁴ J&HG, Langley, NY 1841. O’Sullivan’s dedication to the end of capital punishment was sincere, and he spent a significant portion of his time in the New York legislature in an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to bring it about. Perhaps significantly, his primary opponents in this struggle were Protestant clerics. O’Sullivan’s opposition to the death penalty is based in a perception of it as an illegitimate exercise of state power over the individual. He quotes approvingly a Mr. Rantoul, who argues that there exists no evidence for supposing that “any sane man has, of his own accord, bartered away his original right to his own existence that his government may tyrannize more heavily over him and his fellows,” and that until such a thing has been “undeniably established, *the right of life remains among those reserved rights which we have not yielded up to society.*” (“Report,” p. 44. Emphasis in original.)

⁴⁵ O’Sullivan (1841) pp. 9-12

rhetorical basis of his case supporting American territorial expansion, combined with what he believed was America's exceptional moral status. He viewed the annexation of Texas, which he enthusiastically supported, as a paradigmatic case for expansion westward.⁴⁶ It is paradigmatic because, on the one hand, it was from the perspective of many Americans non-coercive: a mass of plucky settlers had migrated West, revolted against the corrupt, aristocratic Mexican government, and set up an independent republic which was able to petition as a peer for entry into the Union. In an editorial in the October 13th, 1845 edition of his short-lived newspaper the *New York Morning News*, O'Sullivan argues that it would be self-contradictory for the United States to force annexation on Texas, thus violating the freedom that it itself embodied (that being said, he also argued that it would be selfish for the United States to withhold the blessings of liberty from the world by *not* expanding).⁴⁷

On the other hand, Texas was an ideal instance of annexation because that band of plucky settlers was more or less culturally and racially homogenous, and O'Sullivan believed this homogeneity to be an advantage that would allow the empire of the United States to exist for a longer period than any previous empire.⁴⁸ Texas could in fact help to increase the homogeneity even of slave states, as slave populations would be diffused throughout the vastness of the new state.⁴⁹ The United States could thus simultaneously extend westward without the use of

⁴⁶ Hietala (1985) p. 193

⁴⁷ Merk (1970) p. 25; editorial, *New York Morning News*, November 15 & December 1, 1845.

⁴⁸ Hietala (1985) p. 192, *Democratic Review* 17, August 1845, p. 9

⁴⁹ Hietala (1985) pp. 32-33

coercion while at the same time purifying its uniform commitment to the voluntary principle, retaining and even increasing its moral purity as it grew.

Interestingly, this point of view is in some ways counter to that of the era's Democrats. As has been shown, O'Sullivan relies heavily on a corporate and teleological concept of American mission, which in turn often leads him to conceive of the American populace as being in important ways more homogenous than did other Democratic figures of his time. From the time of the Revolution onward, the fullness of the continent beckoned for expansion, but Americans were of two minds on the subject. Democrats, for the most part, tended to see expansion in terms much like those that O'Sullivan lays out, while Whigs tended to see a value in preserving set limits for the new nation's boundaries, prizing homogeneity and perceiving a positive good in a manageable size. Democratic party orthodoxy, held by his patron Van Buren among others, was to avoid emphasis on corporate, teleological goals. Their focus on the immediate political objective of bringing together enough minority groups to displace the more homogenous Whigs made it important for them to highlight their opposition to incorporating minorities into a single way of thought or belief.⁵⁰ Though committed to the states' rights and the freedom of conscience, O'Sullivan nonetheless conceives of the American people as sharing a common world historical project.

The most robust solution to the slavery question present in O'Sullivan's antebellum writing on slavery is to promote the theory that slaves would be

⁵⁰ Wilson (1974) p. 71

beneficially dispersed throughout the newly annexed Texas; given this, it seems reasonable to suspect that his relative silence on the issue may not have been solely due to sensitivity to the issue's divisiveness within the Democratic Party. Rather, he may not have known how to deal with it: though slavery made a mockery of the voluntary principle, he believed that the slave, like the Native American, could not be integrated into the American polity because his capacity for self-legislation was underdeveloped.

For O'Sullivan, the central idea of American politics, to which all others are secondary, is freedom. He contrasts the Mosaic law with the faith of Christ, who rather than directly attacking despotic institutions, "sowed the seeds" that would "wipe them from the face of the earth" in a "great tide of republican reform."⁵¹ For O'Sullivan, democracy is like Christianity in that it is a tenet of faith that must be actively held, and by being it held transfigures the individual into one fit for self-government. That being said, groups existing in conditions of either barbarism or brutality lack the capacity to hold such a belief. These groups, unable to be free, could never be equal. To hold the democratic principle bestows equality with those who can grasp it while granting superiority, moral or otherwise, over those who can or will not, and it is in this way transformative of the individual. At the same time, however, it also engenders a transformation of the polity such that the collective

⁵¹ O'Sullivan (1841) pp. 21-22

attains a new priority as a community of belief, with an unsullied moral standing of its own.⁵²

O'Sullivan's belief in American sinlessness is a direct consequence of his understanding of the American relationship to history described in the introduction to the first issue of the *Democratic Review*. Two years later, in his editorial "The Great Nation of Futurity", he writes that "we have, in reality, but little connection with the past history of any [other nations], and still less with antiquity, its glories, or its crimes. On the contrary, our national birth was the beginning of a new history."⁵³ This radical break from world history then makes inevitable a bright new era in human endeavor, one beyond the contaminating power of historical guilt. O'Sullivan continues that "America is destined for better deeds. It is our unparalleled glory that we have no reminiscences of battle fields, but in defence of humanity, of the oppressed of all nations, of the rights of personal conscience, the rights of personal enfranchisement." He then describes American destiny in the terms of religious revelation, saying that

We have no interest in the scenes of antiquity, only as lessons of avoidance of nearly all their examples. The expansive future is our arena, and for our history. We are entering on its untrodden space, with the truths of God in our minds, beneficent objects in our hearts, and with a clear conscience unsullied by the past. We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? Providence is with us, and no earthly power can. We point to the everlasting truth on the first page of our national declaration, and

⁵² Hietala (1985) p. 193

⁵³ *Democratic Review* #6, November, 1839, P. 426

we proclaim to the millions of other lands, that “the gates of hell—the powers of aristocracy and monarchy—” shall not prevail against it.⁵⁴

Here, the past is not only something to be broken from, but to be repudiated in favor of an unreserved embrace of the new and the yet-to-be, which alone is without moral stain. Relatedly, democratic government is here identified with the divine will, while the forces of aristocracy and monarchy, the government of the past, are explicitly identified with the forces of evil.⁵⁵ Further, O’Sullivan portrays Providence as both blessing and motivating the continued success of the American nation. Indeed, the nation is characterized as the agent of God’s will, such that it is the primary embodiment thereof and the greatest opponent of his enemies. In this way, the forces of democracy are depicted as being *inherently* just and *inevitably* triumphant. The truths of America are eternal, and its enemies are the agents of satanic power. Because of this, Americans can act with consciences perfectly clear, knowing that they themselves are without moral stain and that their enemies are utterly corrupt, seeking to return the world to a pre-American era characterized primarily by darkness, tyranny, and moral evil.

⁵⁴ *ibid*, p. 427. Major Wilson (1974) notes that even when explicitly addressing the dimension of time, O’Sullivan thinks in spatial terms, as the “expansive” future in not a *when* but a *where*, an “untrodden space.” For O’Sullivan, the United States is without flaw, and no effort thus need be spent on its improvement, only its expansion through space, which is identical with the expansion of political liberty. (p. 108)

⁵⁵ It’s also notable for being a direct quote from the Bible (Matthew 16:18), something that O’Sullivan does infrequently. In fact, he tends to be averse to direct quotations of any kind, using them only when absolutely necessary. Interestingly, Lincoln had two years earlier concluded his Lyceum address (covered in the next chapter) with the same quotation. The difference in use, however, is illustrative of the two men’s different approaches to the American future: O’Sullivan presents the United States as being invincible, while Lincoln argues that will flourish only so long as Americans exercise correct thought and action.

The importance of America's sinlessness, as well as its radical reordering of history and universal mission, becomes immediately apparent when O'Sullivan applies it to practical politics during America's westward expansion. In late 1845, O'Sullivan boasted that "no lust for territory has stained our annals. No nation has been despoiled by us, no country laid desolate, no people overrun."⁵⁶ One imagines that certain groups of indigenous peoples may have argued otherwise, but as described above, O'Sullivan in his civil religious framework neatly removes them from consideration. In the December 27th, 1845 edition of the *New York Morning News*, O'Sullivan published an editorial that appears to have launched the phrase "manifest destiny" to national use, called "The True Title."⁵⁷ Regarding the legal disputes between the United States and Britain over the ownership of Oregon, he writes that,

To state the truth at once in its neglected simplicity, we are free to say that were the respective arguments and cases of the two parties, as to all these points of history and law, reversed—had England all ours, and we nothing but hers—our claim to Oregon would still be best and strongest. And that claim is by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread and to possess the whole of the continent which Providence has given us for the development of the great experiment of liberty and federated self-government entrusted to us.

Ultimately, these ideas boil down to two propositions: that the Providential mission to spread democracy across the continent not only reinforces America's legal claim

⁵⁶ Hietala (1985) p. 193

⁵⁷ He had actually used the phrase previously, in the July-August issue of the *Democratic Review* (#17), but it had not caught on, but days after the phrase's publication in the *Morning News*, on January 3 1846, Representative Robert Winthrop referred to it critically, which led to its adoption by expansionist members of Congress. (Weinberg (1935) 143); see also Pratt (fn. 1).

to Oregon, but is by itself sufficient to trump any possible legal claim to the territory; and, more generally, that a claim to moral right must take precedence over any legal one.⁵⁸

This approach to politics, both domestic and international, is characteristic of O'Sullivan (and of the Young America movement as a whole), and its rhetorical foundation rests on the identity of the United States with the divine mandate to democratize the world in accordance with the universal general will. Put another way, America for O'Sullivan does not *have* a mission, it *is* a mission, and the spread of American government is always the spread of human liberty and thus by definition to the benefit of annexed populations. In this way, it is for him legitimate to say that his homeland has never for a moment harbored a lust for conquest: America does not conquer, she liberates. This attitude is, again, directly linked to O'Sullivan's view of America's relationship to history and to God. Writing of the eventual global reach of democracy, he says that

All this will be our future history, to establish on earth the moral dignity and salvation of man—the immutable truth and beneficence of God. For this blessed mission to the nations of the world, which are shut out from the life-giving light of truth, has America been chosen; and her high example shall smite unto death the tyranny of kings, hierarchs, and oligarchs, and carry the glad tidings of peace and good will where myriads now endure an existence scarcely more enviable than that of beasts of the field. Who, then, can doubt that our country is destined to be the great nation of futurity?⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Weinberg (1935) p. 145

⁵⁹ *Democratic Review* #6, 11/1839, P. 430

The only history of relevance to Americans then is *future history*. The relationships, institutions, and beliefs which for other nations flow forward from the past for Americans run back from the future, and it is not who they have been that is of importance, but rather it is who they will be that must shape their actions. America is here some combination of Israel and Christ, as Americans become a chosen people who live under a system of government identical with “the immutable truth and beneficence of God” and through whom all the peoples of the world will be redeemed from darkness and bestiality. Thus, for Americans to refuse expansion is not only to betray their heavenly mandate, but fundamentally to cease being Americans. In order to realize the “Great Nation of Futurity” latent within them, they had to spread democracy westward and wherever else they were able, or else violate their sacred mission.⁶⁰

The irony in the civil religious framework that O’Sullivan crafts around the manifest destiny project is that, for all his talk of the future, the political structure of

⁶⁰ O’Sullivan saw this mission as applying to Cuba as much as it did to Texas or Arizona, and the “liberation” of the island became something of an *idée fixe* for the rest of his politically active life, as the annexation of a territory held by the Spanish crown spoke to his democratic romanticism. Another reason was more material: he stood to benefit financially from expropriation of Spanish lands through his sister’s marriage. She married Cristobal Madan y Madan, a wealthy Cuban plantation owner and leader of the Havana Club, a group pushing for the overthrow of the Spanish and annexation by the United States. (Sampson (2003) pp. 212-213) Finally, if annexed, Cuba would *already* be a slave state, adding strength to the Southern section with which the Democracy became more identified as the 19th Century approached its midpoint. (Merk (1970) p. 209) The status of O’Sullivan’s efforts to provoke the annexation of Cuba provides a handy barometer of his political fortunes at the time: in 1848, he teamed with Sen. Stephen Douglas to make an argument that strongly influenced Polk’s effort to acquire the island by purchase. In 1851, however, O’Sullivan’s persistent (and decreasingly competent) efforts to trigger a rebellion by the plantation owners against the Spanish crown saw him tried by the Whiggish Filmore administration for violating the Neutrality Act. (Merk (1970) p. 167, Sampson (2003) pp. 217. For a full description of O’Sullivan’s often tragicomic misadventures in attempting to provoke rebellion in Cuba, see Sampson (2003) pp. 213-218.)

the United States is to remain unchanged in all ways save for its geographical area. For him, freedom is a good to be enjoyed in an eternal present, and in the United States is present from the moment of the nation's founding.⁶¹ An element of American sinlessness is the perfection of its political system, so that it is by definition impossible for the United States to become *more* democratic, as its democratic standing is perfected from the very beginning. It is this moral and political perfection that gives Americans the right and duty to spread their system of government first across the continent, and then the globe.

5. Democratic Sacrament

Rising sectional tensions and the crisis of the Civil War would test O'Sullivan's civil religious framework to the breaking point, but in so doing would ironically point to the extent to which he had developed a coherent political and religious worldview. In order to preserve any part of this worldview, he would be forced to renounce his vision of the United States as being either perfect or destined for victory. In doing so, he embraced a distinctly Catholic vision of American civil religion, complete with sacraments to purify the nation from sin and return it to what he saw as the path of righteousness, which would require a radical decentralization of American government.

Before the war, however, O'Sullivan's vision of American liberty and mission spread throughout the expansionist and pro-slavery wing of the Democratic Party.

⁶¹ Wilson (1974) p. 108.

It was embraced by his friend and political ally Stephen Douglas, who repeated O'Sullivan's arguments about America's divinely-appointed destiny almost verbatim in the famous Lincoln-Douglas debates. Like Douglas, O'Sullivan was a vocal proponent of the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which would undo the Missouri Compromise of 1820 by allowing the expansion of slavery into newly acquired territories.⁶²

Writing in 1854, he bases his argument for this in the familiar rhetoric of manifest destiny and the voluntary principle. O'Sullivan urges Americans to rise above the "petty prejudices which may grow out of the partisan antecedents of yesterday" to once more embrace the nation's providential mission. Though he had supported Free Soil in 1848, in 1854 he thanked God for the failure of the party, now believing that its success would have led to disunion. In line with his previous writing on the voluntary principle, he with Douglas argues that federal intervention on the slavery question is illegitimate, writing "that the old policy of congressional intervention in this matter of slavery in new Territories ought to and must be abandoned, no sane and candid man who is not a *disunionist for the sake of abolitionism* can now deny."⁶³ Here, O'Sullivan posits that the voluntary principle, or in Douglas' terms 'popular sovereignty,' is the only universal (to whites, anyway)

⁶² Elton Trueblood, *Abraham Lincoln: Theologian of American Anguish*. Harper & Row. New York, 1973. p. 70. For his part, Lincoln thought of such ideas as being borderline idolatrous, and in response expressed his doubt that God would so favor the United States as to overlook the manifestly immoral nature of slavery. For him, neither God's blessing nor the moral purity of America or her citizens was ever to be assumed. (John Channing Briggs, *Lincoln's Speeches Reconsidered*. Johns Hopkins. Baltimore & London, 2005. pgs. 271-272)

⁶³ O'Sullivan, "The Duty of the North on the Nebraska Question" in the *Washington Daily Union*, March 10, 1854. Quoted in Sampson (2003) p. 223.

standard to which American politics should be held. For him, the problem is twofold: first, federal intervention in local rule has the necessary effect of diminishing the presence of the voluntary principle, as another political-ethical standard, for example equality, is given priority over the essentially American voluntary principle. Second, given that the function of the federal government is to protect and expand the application of the voluntary principle, for it to act in the name of any other principle is by definition for it to act illegitimately, something that would become more rigid in O'Sullivan's thought as the sectional conflict over slavery intensified.

The outbreak of the Civil War found O'Sullivan in Lisbon, having lived in Europe since being made a diplomatic envoy to Portugal for the Pierce administration after leaving the *Democratic Review* in 1854, using this position to further his dream of an American annexation of Cuba.⁶⁴ In Europe, he found himself once more in financial trouble, which deepened with the loss of his position in 1858 and prevented his return to America.⁶⁵ Since his departure from the *Democratic*

⁶⁴ Nathaniel Hawthorne's wife Sophia, as well as their children, visited O'Sullivan in Portugal in 1856, as they were travelling abroad in Europe. Their letters reveal a level of jealousy on Nathaniel's part about the level of intimacy existing between his wife and O'Sullivan, especially after her letters home began referring to O'Sullivan as "John", asking "Did we not entirely agree in thinking 'John' an undue and undesirable familiarity?" Though he writes of O'Sullivan that "I had rather thou should takest *him* for a friend than any other man I ever knew," and describes him as "miraculously pure and true, considering what his life has been," he also writes that he is possessed of "a quick, womanish sensibility," and says that "he is not the man in whom I see my ideal of a friend," for the reason that "he never stirs me to any depth beneath my surface". (XVII:437-438, Feb, 7, 1856) Nonetheless, he would later recommend O'Sullivan as "an excellent fellow, and a very dear friend of mine." (XVIII:39, Mar. 17, 1857)

⁶⁵ Sampson (2003) pp. 224-225. Sampson notes that this may well have been the last time that O'Sullivan held a steady job. His debts and financial difficulties had been persistent, as evidenced by the numerous occasions on which his friend Hawthorne had forgiven him debts, payment, or even loaned him money with no expectation of payment. (*Letters*, XV:447, XVI:188, XVIII:19-20)

Review, O'Sullivan's party loyalty and sectional allegiances, like his previously mild racism, had hardened. In 1860, he declared himself a "pro-Slavery man," elaborating this new position with his customary enthusiasm by proclaiming that American blacks should erect a statue to the first slave trader.⁶⁶ O'Sullivan, always a reliable party man, was taking on the attitudes of the South.

Predictably, the division of the Union and armed conflict between its member parts forced a radical revision of his understanding of the nature and character of the United States, though interestingly not its historical mission. Though he was compelled to abandon his view of predestined American glory, he was able to retain a heavily modified concept of the American innocence that was foundational to his earlier civil religious thought. The difficulty with which he did so, however, serves to illustrate the fact that his civil religious speech was not crude propaganda designed to motivate support through the use of key terms, but was instead a well-developed ideological framework that had difficulty accommodating the cataclysmic political shifts of the time. If it was propaganda, it was propaganda of a sophisticated sort, presenting an exemplary instance of the missionary strain that recurs persistently throughout American civil religious thought.

Hawthorne's 1861 comment on O'Sullivan's confidence in business could stand as a remark on the entirety of the latter's career. Hawthorne wrote that O'Sullivan was certain of his success in a new business venture, but "I shall hardly share his hopes at present, after knowing him so many years, and seeing him always on the verge of making a fortune, and always disappointed." (*Letters*, XVII:425)

⁶⁶ Widmer (1999) 206

In his 1862 pamphlet *Union, Disunion, and Reunion*,⁶⁷ O'Sullivan in an open letter to former President Franklin Pierce lays out the factors that he believes have brought the Union to the point of fracture and the terms on which it can be repaired.⁶⁸ He does not argue for the existence of a separate Confederate nation, but says rather that both sides have valid complaints, and that fundamental institutional reform will be necessary before the Union can be restored. Interestingly, despite his own allegiance to the South, the language of civil religion is deployed only in reference to the Union, as when the "Federal soldier" is said to view the secession of the Southern states as a treason "unparalleled since that of the rebel angels."⁶⁹ As the title of the pamphlet suggests, O'Sullivan's ultimate goal is the restoration of the Union, which will once again be able to fulfill the global destiny that once looked manifest, but now appeared strongly contingent.

The form that the restored Union would take, however, would be very different from that before the war. For one, it would be on Southern terms. The language of race is strongly present in *Union, Disunion, and Reunion*. For example, the secessionist is said to be fighting in the spirit of the Revolution not only "for freedom from a hated yoke, for the protection of home, hearth, and country, for the

⁶⁷ Published in London in 1862 by Richard Bentley, "publisher in ordinary to Her Majesty." It is ironic that a fierce enemy of aristocratic privilege and monarchical government should be based in England.

⁶⁸ He argues that there are four primary factors that have contributed to the nation's political crisis: An over-strong sense of party loyalty stemming from the abuses of the patronage system (there's a further irony that such an enthusiastic party agent and seeker of patronage should make this point), the undue strength of the executive branch, insufficient delineation between the powers of the state and federal government, and finally that the abolitionist North used the machinery of government to oppress the South. (p. 16ff)

⁶⁹ *ibid*, p. 88

dignity of humanity,” but also “for the existence of his race.”⁷⁰ Moreover, his position remains that blacks and whites can live together only in slavery or not at all. Because the removal of blacks from the South is unfeasible, emancipation is thus flatly impossible. Slavery, he says, will “work itself out in nature’s own way,” and until then, the North “must be content to rule, in the fear of God, *their own* household, without intermeddling with those of their neighbors.” Slavery was integral to antebellum Southern society, and the Northern attack on one of the pillars of their way of life is for O’Sullivan an illegitimate use of federal power against a local population, and a violation of the liberties integral to the American polity.⁷¹

In this way, O’Sullivan frames the war as “a conflict of ideas,” but it is clear that he views the Confederacy as ultimately being the truest representation of American ideals.⁷² There are, he admits, flaws and virtues on both sides of the conflict, but he can no longer give credence to the sinlessness of the American polity, a quality that was foundational for his earlier civil religious understanding of his country. After the war had begun, he was forced to reevaluate his position, arguing that “we are forced to admit, with astonishment, grief, and shame, that [the failures of American government] point to the existence, in our political system, of some profound and before unsuspected defects, which have brought it to *such a result in*

⁷⁰ *ibid*, 14

⁷¹ *ibid*, 108-112

⁷² In 1863, O’Sullivan would write to Jefferson Davis, requesting citizenship in the Confederate States of America. He wrote, “Where else am I to find now anything left of all that constituted the reasons for my Americanism or patriotism?” (quoted in Sampson (2003) pp. 231-232)

its practical working; some latent germs of evil co-existing with all its great elements of good.”⁷³ Dramatically abandoning his earlier position that America’s actions are righteous by definition due to its morally untainted national character, O’Sullivan now argues that it is subject to a political form of original sin, an inborn flaw that has tainted even its best efforts. Importantly, he conceives of these flaws not in terms of efficiency but of moral evil, as being in direct opposition to the righteous cause of democracy. This is not for him a matter of some individuals falling into error, but of a basic flaw in the thought and institutions of the United States as a whole. It was for O’Sullivan the nation’s flawlessness, indeed its sinlessness, that legitimated its expansion “with the truths of God in our minds, beneficent objects in our hearts, and with a clear conscience unsullied by the past.” It was this politico-religious perfection that for him made America’s moral right to the continent prior to any possible legal claim on it by other nations, and that destined America for flourishing. The Civil War’s advent meant for him not only that this flourishing was not guaranteed, but that the nation had held within it germs of evil since its very birth.

The exact location of these germs of evil, however, is not immediately clear. It is not in the democratic project as such, as O’Sullivan makes clear when he professes “undiminished faith” in the “broad fundamental principles of American government”: republican liberty, popular self-government, separation of powers,

⁷³ O’Sullivan (1862) p. 5. O’Sullivan’s emphasis.

and harmony between local and national government.⁷⁴ Neither is the evil that has brought about the war located in the American people, for the reason that “guilt and crime are individual; millions are never wicked.”⁷⁵ Thus, while *America* may be tainted by original sin, *Americans* as a whole remain morally pure. This is reinforced when, arguing for a radically diminished executive, O’Sullivan argues that the nation should be governed “not by any man, but by the general mind, working *its* ‘policy’ and *its* will, through the appointed machinery of legislation, with constant, popular intervention.”⁷⁶ Thus, O’Sullivan looks to purify the American polity of its original sin by refounding it on the popular will, the only element thereof that remains morally pure. Further, he maintains his vision of the American Revolution as an ongoing event, with perpetual “intervention” by the people in the working of their government. The implication of the word “intervention” is such that it suggests a disruption of the usual sequence of events, suggesting that the people can and should intervene in the workings of their government through methods other than the legal and procedural. This is in keeping with O’Sullivan’s strong prioritizing of moral claims over those of law, as evidenced by his earlier position on the annexation of Oregon.

Though the people may retain their sinlessness, it is clear that The United States has for the moment failed in its providential mission to democratize the world. Ultimately, he locates the germs of evil present in American government in

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 6

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 6

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 35 O’Sullivan’s emphasis.

the institutions thereof, which he now views as fundamentally flawed. He writes that “the Constitution was the ark of the covenant, but, unfortunately, no man could ever say what the Constitution was.”⁷⁷ It is this confusion at the foundation of American government that has in his mind allowed the Federal government to encroach so dangerously on the rights of its member republics. Note here that O’Sullivan describes the Constitution not as the covenant itself, but only as the *container* thereof. This means that the foundations of American democracy are valuable not in themselves, but only in terms of what they contain. Moreover, it is not the Constitution that is the charge of God to His chosen people, but democracy and the cause of liberty itself, which for O’Sullivan is now represented by the four “fundamental principles of American government”: republican liberty, popular sovereignty, separation of powers, and an appropriate balance between local and national government. The Constitution contains but does not embody this charge, and consequently neither does any institution derived from it.

Thus, for O’Sullivan it is the American people, and not their government, which will be instrumental in restoring the Union. In this vein, he suggests of the nation’s internecine conflict that

Perhaps, in the career of nations, such passages are, from time to time, necessary to spiritualize, to ennoble and to purify the national life, too long stagnant in the tranquility of peace and of excessive material prosperity. We could not get it in foreign wars—geography and the pacific industrial character of our system combined to forbid it; perhaps civil war was necessary as the only form in which it was possible to us. Baptized at our birth in holy blood, perhaps we had

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 38. The view of the Constitution as the Ark of the Covenant, rather than a covenant itself, was one commonly held by southern expansionists. (Wilson (1974) p. 30)

reached the age at which a second sacramental confirmation was needed for our national salvation.⁷⁸

O'Sullivan here casts his civil religious understanding of the United States in Roman Catholic terms. War, for him, makes possible spiritual regeneration on a national scale, purging the American character of the corrupting influences of worldly existence. The mode of this purgation is that of the Catholic sacraments: the nation was brought into the democratic faith in the days of its infancy, baptized not in water but in the blood of the Revolutionary War. Now, however, the nation stands on the precipice of its majority, and must be confirmed in the name of its faith.

According to the Catholic catechism, the functions of the sacrament of confirmation include rooting individuals more deeply in "divine filiation;" uniting them more firmly in Christ, increasing the gifts of the Holy Spirit in them; rendering their bond with the Church more perfect, and giving them "a special strength of the Holy Spirit to spread and defend the faith by word and action".⁷⁹ In this way, then, O'Sullivan sees the trial of the Civil War as something that can wed Americans more closely to their divine mandate and strengthen them in its defense. It is for this reason that he calls for a new constitutional convention, one that will purge the political order of its germs of evil and render the bonds of Union more perfect.⁸⁰

His perception of the nation as incorporating a kind of original sin is here grounds for a reevaluation of his understanding of the relationship between the

⁷⁸ *ibid*, p. 89

⁷⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* ¶ 1303, <http://www.va/archive/catechism/p2s2c1a2.htm>

⁸⁰ O'Sullivan (1862) p. 121

nation and time. Previously, he had argued that it was necessary only to remain faithful to the Founders' intent, scraping away the evil accumulations of time to preserve the nation's original innocence, resulting in a circular view of American sacred time, as the nation returned over and over to its foundation. The confirmation that O'Sullivan describes in *Union, Disunion, and Reunion*, however, locates America entirely within linear time. It depicts a nation still maturing, and one that serves the sacred democratic project rather than embodies it. Where once he had likened America to the Church, quoting Matthew 16:18 to say that "the gates of hell shall not stand against it," the nation is for him no longer the embodiment of the true faith on earth, but only a worshipper, and one fallen into error at that.

Given that the nation had been contaminated from its earliest days, what is called for is not a repetition of the Founders' cosmogonic act, but its surpassing, meaning that what is needed is not a re-founding, but a *new* founding. Though O'Sullivan claims to make an effort to preserve the "fundamental principles" of American government, his argument is fundamentally that the United States no longer truly represents the voluntary principle, and that it perhaps never really has. He looks not to the Founders themselves, but to the American Revolution itself, which he had always viewed as a divine event occurring in linear time. His posture here is similar to that of Christian radicals, who, according to Pocock, meant to use their recoveries of the past

to prove that the historical church had failed to transmit authority and had consequently lost it; and like other exponents of the strategy of return, they faced the question of how to define the authority which had once existed and the authority by which they themselves claimed

to know it. Since what was in dispute was an action of the sacred upon the world of time, the reformers claimed the authority of the sacred acting on and through themselves, their acts being conceived as opposed to tradition; they claimed both to interpret the past and to reform the present by personal authority and charisma, and the strategy of return proved, in a number of cases, self-abolishing.⁸¹

O'Sullivan confronts a similar problem to that of Pocock's radicals: looking back to the spirit of the Revolution, he repudiates the history of America much as he once argued that America could repudiate all that had happened before its advent, and he instead looks to preserve the original spirit of American politics by beginning anew. O'Sullivan's sacramental language is important, the confirmation that he describes is in reality a new birth, but with this new birth comes a crisis of authority. Attempting to disregard the institutions of American government in favor of their animating spirit, O'Sullivan (never the most nuanced of political thinkers) is unable to articulate persuasively the way in which this spirit could be brought to earth, relying on the virtue of the people to preserve liberty in what amounts to an institutional void.⁸² O'Sullivan's civil religious framework was badly shaken by the coming of the War, even to the point of forcing change in its ontological underpinnings.

⁸¹ Pocock (1973) pp. 258

⁸² His four major institutional proposals are transparently sympathetic to the Confederacy, and are entirely aimed at reducing the power of national government, being the suppression of patronage, the reduction of the presidency to a single-year term, increasing state power (by preventing the taxation of any group not directly benefitting from its expenditure, recognizing property rights valid in one locale (i.e. slavery) nationwide, and forcing spending on transportation improvements to be paid for at local expense) and that a "High Tribunal of the States more solemn and extraordinary than the Supreme Court" be created to decide any questions of interstate dispute. O'Sullivan in this way looked to make all questions of law become ultimately political questions, in keeping with his new suspicion of political institutions. pp. 76-77

The modifications made by O'Sullivan to his civil religious framework serve to rob it of much of its rhetorical force. It is no longer possible for sacred time within the borders of the United States to be understood as a cyclical return to the vision of the Founders, as the institutions of their vision failed to head off the crisis of disunion. Instead, time, which is to say change, has invaded the cycle of eternal return. In this way, cyclical time is collapsed into linear, and the purification that he describes is not a return to the old, but a new beginning. Though he has preserved a kind of American sinlessness in describing the people, if not their government, as without flaw, it comes at the cost of undercutting his arguments for the right of the (Re-)United States to expand, as well as its destiny to do so. Though the "fundamental principles" may be preserved, they are embodied in no legal code, no institutions of government whatsoever. If these principles were not sufficient to grant success to the sole polity that attempted to embody them, what right can that polity claim to export its institutions to other peoples? Lacking this right, and confronted by a cataclysmic internal political failure, it would be difficult to believe that Providence has guaranteed American flourishing within its current borders, much less across the whole of the continent. Ultimately, from within the point of view that O'Sullivan presents in his civil religious framework, the lack of a divinely-mandated destiny is akin to the United States being abandoned by God altogether. Ironically, the failure of O'Sullivan's civil religious framework serves to underscore the extent to which it had previously provided a relatively coherent political worldview. He had previously been able to marshal the force of religion in support

of American expansion, providing a religious and ethical justification for the necessities of such a project. The advent of the Civil War, however, demonstrated the hubris of the claims upon which his ideological framework was constructed, and proved the identification of endless American flourishing with the will of God a folly.

6. Conclusion

Union, Disunion, and Reunion was among the last of O'Sullivan's writings to have any kind of popular readership.⁸³ Thereafter, he would find himself first rejected as a traitor to the Union, to the extent that the federal government issued a \$25,000 reward for him immediately after Lincoln's assassination, and then ignored.⁸⁴ He would return to New York later in his life, though his financial troubles never abated, and he vanished into obscurity. He rejected futurity for nostalgia, using séances to communicate with dead dignitaries and former admirers. Ironically for a man who once identified aristocrats with the forces of Satan, he appeared in print for the last time in *The Royalist*, a magazine devoted to tracing aristocratic lineages, writing on the alleged aristocratic heritage of the O'Sullivan family.⁸⁵ At the time of his death, only three of the New York dailies printed his obituary, each omitting any political involvement beyond his opposition to capital

⁸³ Sampson (2003) p. 233

⁸⁴ Widmer (1999) p. 208

⁸⁵ Widmer (1999) p. 209

punishment.⁸⁶ Having once been the voice of the radical Democrats, O'Sullivan at his death was less than an embarrassment, and barely a memory.

That he should be so forgotten is ironic, because his writing and ideas continued to exert a strong influence over the American civil religious self-concept, especially in its Democratic iteration, through 19th and early 20th centuries. As will be seen in Chapter 4, Woodrow Wilson speaks defends American involvement in the First World War using tropes and themes very similar to O'Sullivan's. Indeed, this same language was deployed by the administration of George W. Bush as justification for the invasion of Iraq. In his 2003 State of the Union address, President Bush said in reference to the war in Iraq that "Americans are a free people, who know that freedom is the right of every person and the future of every nation. The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world, it is God's gift to humanity."⁸⁷ Implicit in these words is a kind of millennial vision in which the United States serves as an instrument of divine will to bring about a global era of political freedom, and where existing regimes may justly be toppled in order to bring about the promised golden age of democracy. Clearly, this way of thought owes a great deal to O'Sullivan. His civil religious framework retains its influence, depicting the United States as a nation that possesses a special ethical and religious status, exempting it from certain of the norms that bind other nations in the service of its democratizing destiny.

⁸⁶ Sampson (2003) p. xiv

⁸⁷ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030128-19.html>

The strength of O'Sullivan's vision, with all its rhetorical uplift and ethical blind spots, can be measured not only by its enduring influence but also by the extent to which it produced a vigorous response from the opposition. In the next chapters, I will describe the competing civil religious framework presented by Abraham Lincoln, which aside from being obviously significant in its own right is also interesting for being almost a point-by-point refutation of O'Sullivan's thought. Where O'Sullivan saw American flourishing as being already destined, Lincoln saw it as all too contingent; where O'Sullivan saw a nation without sin, Lincoln saw one in danger of fatal corruption; where O'Sullivan saw the nation as composed of independent republics united by a common mission, Lincoln saw a single people with an obligation to demonstrate the possibility of genuinely democratic government before the world. Both men, however, agreed on one important point: more than any other nation, the eyes of God were on the United States.

2. BOUND BY MYSTIC CHORDS

ABRAHAM LINCOLN AS PRIEST

*Behold! How good and how pleasant it is
for brethren to dwell together in unity!*
Psalm 133:1

There is no more influential figure in the tradition of American civil religion than that of Abraham Lincoln. Reinhold Niebuhr describes his religious convictions as “superior in depth and purity to those held by the religious as well as the political leaders of his day.”¹ This and the following chapter focus on his five years in the presidency, during which he altered the way that Americans perceived the nature and *telos* of their nation. He refounded the Republic in the ideal of universal political equality and definitively reconceptualized it as a single polity, rather than as an alliance of independent states. Isaiah Berlin describes Lincoln as being of a class of men who are “acutely aware of which way the thoughts and feelings of human beings are flowing, and where life presses on them most heavily, and they convey to these human beings a sense of understanding their inner needs, of responding to their own deepest impulses, above all of being alone capable of organising the world along lines which the masses are instinctively groping for.”²

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Religion of Abraham Lincoln” in *The Christian Century*, February 10, 1966, p. 172

² Isaiah Berlin, “President Franklin Delano Roosevelt,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*. Henry Hardy & Roger Hausheer, eds. Chatto & Windus. London, 1997. p. 633. This is remarkably similar to Jason Frank’s understanding of Walt Whitman’s democratic aesthetic. See next chapter for more on this subject.

Lincoln relied perhaps more than any other president on the language of civil religion as a mode of persuasion.³ Like O’Sullivan, he describes the United States as a community of belief, but unlike O’Sullivan describes this community as being beholden to the divinely-sanctioned principle of political equality. Also unlike O’Sullivan, or indeed any other figure considered in this dissertation, Lincoln locates sin *within* this community. As was shown in the previous chapter, O’Sullivan defines the United States as being incapable of sin, describing the forces of monarchy and aristocracy in the rest of the world as agents of satanic forces. Subsequent chapters

³ It is an understatement to say that much has been written on Abraham Lincoln. No research on Lincoln can go far with Roy P. Basler’s eight-volume *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. (Roy P. Basler, ed. Rutgers. New Brunswick, NJ, 1953-1955). Among biographies, the most thorough is likely Michael Burlingame’s two-volume *Abraham Lincoln: A Life* (Johns Hopkins. Baltimore, 2008). Another biography, notable for its sensitivity to the effects of Lincoln’s life and presidency on the development of his thought, is Allen C. Guelzo’s *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids, MI, 1999). Herbert Mitgang’s *Abraham Lincoln, A Press Portrait: His Life and Times From the Original Newspaper Documents of the Union, the Confederacy, and Europe* (Quadrangle Books. Chicago, 1971) is a very useful work for seeing Lincoln through the eyes of his constituents, while Harold Holzer’s *The Lincoln Mailbag: America Writes to the President, 1861-1865* (Southern Illinois University Press. Carbondale, 1998.) presents a diverse range of viewpoints on him by collecting letters from his constituents. Analyses of Lincoln’s speech and religion are only slightly less common than biographies and histories. Reinhold Niebuhr has several times written insightfully on the place of Lincoln’s religious thought in the trajectory of American politics (in his short but influential “The Religion of Abraham Lincoln” in *The Christian Century*, February 10, 1966. p. 172-175; in *The Irony of American History*, University of Chicago, 1952/2008; and with Alan Heimert in *A Nation So Conceived*, Charles Scribners’ Sons, 1963). Stewart Winger’s *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics* (Northern Illinois University. Dekalb, 2003) usefully locates Lincoln’s political speech within its cultural and aesthetic context, while both Glen E. Thurow’s *Abraham Lincoln and American Political Religion* (State University of New York. Albany, 1976) and Harry V. Jaffa’s *Crisis of the House Divided* (University of Chicago, 1959) are very thoughtful considerations of Lincoln’s civil religious thought taken as a whole, as is Elton Trueblood’s *Abraham Lincoln: Theologian of American Anguish* (Harper & Row. New York, 1973) Gary Wills’ *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (Simon & Schuster. New York, 1992) and Ronald C. White’s *Lincoln’s Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (Simon & Schuster. New York, 2002) each present useful and sometimes provocative analyses of one of Lincoln’s most famous two speeches. The best single-volume history of the Civil War is no doubt James McPherson’s *Battle Cry of Freedom* (Oxford. New York, 1988). Two books that insightfully explore the complex relationship between religion and politics in the Civil War, which Lincoln both shaped and inhabited, are Drew Gilpin Faust’s *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the Civil War* (Alfred A. Knopf. New York, 2008) and Mark A. Noll’s *The Civil War as Theological Crisis* (University of North Carolina. Chapel Hill, 2006)

will show that Woodrow Wilson, like O'Sullivan, finds it within the authoritarian regimes of Europe, while William Jennings Bryan locates sin within the corrupt urban and economic elites opposed to the virtuous rural communities that he represents. By contrast, Lincoln speaks of sin as being a universal and equalizing factor in politics, the recognition of which forces the embrace of equality and humility as a political and ethical response.

Lincoln deploys the language of civil religion to define and defend American national identity, based in his understanding of a divinely mandated equality as the foundational value of just democratic rule. His definition of the polity as being based in equality sets clear limits on the boundaries within which legitimate political action may take place, implicitly casting practices and institutions that violate the principle of equality, such as slavery, as being outside the polity and thus un-American. Moreover, Lincoln's depiction of a national identity with a distinct world historical charge constitutes an important part in legitimating the use of force against the seceding states, in his civil religious framework their fracturing of the Union becomes a hostile act against not only the federal government of the United States, but against the very possibility of democratic government and even the will of God himself.

At the same time, though, Lincoln emphasizes that the burdens of sin are shared across all Americans, North and South. Unlike O'Sullivan, the critical focus of Lincoln's civil religious framework is directed inward, on the nation itself rather than the world beyond it. In this way, while Lincoln identifies the bedrock principles

of democracy with divine justice, his vision of American identity is one chastened by the awareness of its own moral imperfection and the awareness that “a too confident sense of justice always leads to injustice.”⁴ The humility consequent from the awareness of shared moral imperfection provides a means for the reconciliation of difference within the limits of the American polity, preventing any one group from identifying itself too closely with the will of God or with human perfection.⁵ The chastened democracy that Lincoln describes is one that sets clear limits for acceptable practice and provides a method for reconciliation of difference within those limits, thus articulating a strong vision of American political identity that is nonetheless guarded against intolerance and fanaticism.

Lincoln’s location of sin within the American polity has three general consequences, to be discussed across the breadth of this chapter and the next. The first and most important of these is that it serves to render all individuals equal in their sinfulness before a perfect God.⁶ Lincoln locates the origin and fundamental

⁴ Niebuhr (1952/2008) p. 138

⁵ As Niebuhr (1952/2008) puts it, “Above the level of idealism the most effective force of community is religious humility.” (p. 139)

⁶ This is a key point on which Lincoln differs from abolitionists of the Garrisonian type, who also saw the United States as being a moral unity, accountable before God for its sins. Describing the Constitution as a “covenant with death” and an “agreement with hell”, Garrison argued that the free states must break from the slave states if the righteous would evade the coming divine chastisement. To say otherwise was for him “to hurl defiance at the eternal throne, and to give the lie to Him who sits thereon. It is an attempt, alike monstrous and impracticable, to blend the light of heaven with the darkness of the bottomless pit ... to associate the Son of God with the prince of evil.” (“The American Union”, in *The Liberator*, Jan. 10, 1845) Thus, though the Union was a moral unity, this was only because it was an unholy attempt to mix the pure with the corrupt. Thus, a new, pure republic could be created through an act of *disunion*, purging the nation of its corrupt elements while retaining the virtuous, a belief which led Garrison to adopt “NO UNION WITH SLAVEHOLDERS” as the motto of *The Liberator*. Thus, the Garrisonian vision of sin was very much one of a conflict between the righteous and the sinful, though the two elements had been diabolically bound by the Constitution. For Garrison, unlike Lincoln, the Union had no intrinsic value whatsoever, as he wrote that “We cannot

principles of American democracy in the Declaration of Independence rather than the Constitution, and for him equality has priority over other democratic ideals, and being a precondition for their realization.⁷ In locating the origin of the union, Lincoln follows James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, both of whom saw the Declaration as the first utterance of the Union, and saw the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution as only its further refinement and institutionalization.⁸ Lincoln wrote on the subject in early 1861, following a letter from his friend Alexander Stephens, who had quoted to Lincoln Proverbs 25:11, which asserts, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.” Lincoln wrote: “The expression of that principle [that all men are created equal] in our Declaration of Independence was the word ‘fitly spoken’ which has proved an ‘apple of gold’ to us. The Union and the Constitution are the picture of silver subsequently framed around it. The picture was made not to conceal or destroy the apple; but to adorn and preserve it. The picture was made for the apple, not the apple for the picture. So let us act, that neither picture nor apple shall ever be blurred, bruised or broken.”⁹

The second consequence of Lincoln’s location of sin within the American polity is that the sinfulness of the nation serves in his political rhetoric to depict the

acknowledge allegiance to any human government; neither can we oppose any such government by a resort to physical force. We recognize but one *King* and *Lawgiver*, one *Judge* and *Ruler* of mankind.” (“Declaration of Sentiments Adopted by the Peace Convention,” prepared for the Peace Convention that met in Boston on September 18, 1838 to establish a Non-Resistance Society. Reprinted in *The Liberator*, September 28, 1838)

⁷ Joseph R. Fornieri, *Abraham Lincoln’s Political Faith*. Northern Illinois University Press. Dekalb, IL, 2003. p. 158.

⁸ Jaffa (1959) p. 270

⁹ “Fragment on the Constitution and the Union”, CW 4:169-70, quoted in Gary Wills, *Under God: Religion and American Politics*. Simon & Schuster. New York, 1990. p. 213

United States as always in moral and spiritual unity, despite its political division. For him, the sins and failures that result in the divine chastisement that is the Civil War are shared across both sections, and this becomes a key element in his later arguments for reconciliation between the two. The third consequence of the awareness of sin within the American polity is to make legitimate the use of coercion against Americans in the name of positive liberty. As his civil religious thought develops across the course of the war, Lincoln comes to describe the existence of slavery as a kind of religious pollution in the moral character of the nation, and as such the abolition of slavery is of ultimate spiritual benefit to the United States, of which he never ceased to consider the rebel states a part.¹⁰ Lincoln makes the case that by emancipating the slaves, the Union makes possible the nation's reconciliation with God, and thus the Union's survival, without which democratic governance would surely perish from the earth. Thus, the war against the Confederate armies was in the longest term to defend the democratic freedoms of Southerners as much as those of anyone else.

I identify two parallel and complimentary modes of expression within Lincoln's civil religious speech during his presidency, which I will refer to using terms borrowed from Martin E. Marty (who in turn draws them from the first volume of Weber's *Economy and Society*) as being "priestly" on the one hand, and "prophetic" on the other. It has been argued that Lincoln in speaking both as priest

¹⁰ Isaiah Berlin says of positive liberty that "we recognize that it is possible, and at times justifiable, to coerce men in the name of some goal (let us say, justice or public health) which they would, if they were more enlightened, themselves pursue, because they are blind or ignorant or corrupt." ("Two Concepts of Liberty," in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, Chatto & Windus, London 1997, p. 204)

and prophet somehow undermines his civil religious framework, but this fails to recognize that the priestly and prophetic modes of his speech are deployed to different political ends.¹¹ While both depict the United States as existing “under God,” the priestly strand tends to be relatively “celebrative, affirmative, culture-building”, and depicts a personal God who “created, guided and led [the] nation toward its destiny. This God mandated a mission” and “demanded loyalty that went beyond the loyalty extended to the state”.¹² Lincoln’s priestly speech finds its fullest expression in the Gettysburg address.

Lincoln’s prophetic mode of civil religious speech has “a tendency toward the judgmental”, being critical rather than affirmative, and describes God’s relationship with the United States as being essentially dialectical, as God “both shapes [the] nation and judges it, because he is transcendent in both circumstances.”¹³ This mode of Lincoln’s civil religious speech integrates the United States into a larger cosmic order and places it firmly under the judgment of God, and has the Second Inaugural Address as its crowning achievement. Slavery in the prophetic strand of his speech is depicted less as retarding the nation’s progress along its historical trajectory (as it is in his priestly speech) than as an affront to God on the part of a people providentially mandated to recognize the political good of equality, and the

¹¹ This is asserted in Melvin B. Endy, Jr.’s “Abraham Lincoln and American Civil Religion: A Reinterpretation” (*Church History*, v. 44, No. 2, June 1975, pp. 229-241)

¹² Martin E. Marty, “Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion,” in *American Civil Religion*, Russell E. Richey & Donald Jones, eds. Harper & Row, New York, 1974. Pgs 145-146. Marty describes civil religion as existing within a four-cell conceptual matrix, being either priestly or prophetic and depicting the nation as either under God or as self-transcending. Though it is my argument that Lincoln speaks in both priestly and prophetic modes, his civil religious speech always remains firmly within the “under God” category.

¹³ *Ibid*, 147, 149

war thus becomes their just punishment. This civil religious insight on Lincoln's part constitutes a new religious revelation, a new doctrine looking to transform the nation's self-understanding.¹⁴

There are other important differences between the two modes of speech: the priestly mode of Lincoln's speech emphasizes the exceptional status of the American polity and its possibilities for a transformational form of politics. Lincoln looks to explain the will of God to his constituents so that they might think, act, and believe in a way appropriate to Americans. In this mode, Lincoln emphasizes the efficacy of human effort, and the ability of humans, with God's help, to move the nation along its teleological path toward equality. Though the mode of thinking is religious, its terms are political, with issues of citizenship, republican virtue, and, most importantly, equality as its primary concerns.

The prophetic strand, on the other hand, is expressed largely in the genre of the jeremiad. This aspect of his thought is marked by a firm placement of the United States under the authority of an inscrutable and omnipotent God, who directly intervenes in American history in order to favor or punish his "almost chosen people". Here, Lincoln's thinking is strongly presdestinarian, even deterministic, depicting humans as impotent before the overwhelming power of God, powerless to either advance or hinder the workings of the divine will, which is to be obeyed more

¹⁴ While for Marty prophetic speech is in some ways a matter of tone as much as content, Lincoln's prophetic speech in this way also meets Max Weber's standard of containing a new revelation of religious doctrine. (*Economy & Society*, vol. 1. Guether Roth & Claus Wittich, eds. Ephraim Fischhoff, Hans Gerth, A.M. Henderson, Ferdinand Kolegar, C. Wright Mills, Talcott Parsons, Max Rheinstein, Guenther Roth, Edward Schills, & Claus Wittich, trans. University of Claifornia Press. Berkeley, Los Angeles, & London, 1978 (1968). p. 440)

than it is to be understood. As befits its content, the terminology here tends to be explicitly religious, with a strong emphasis on sin, redemption, and humility before God.

These two strands, despite their differences, are complementary. Each places an overriding emphasis on the transcendental wisdom and inscrutable mystery of God; each shares the notion that nations exist, like individuals, as moral units with moral obligations; and each describes the United States as exceptional in that God has tasked it with the responsibility to be an agent of moral and political change, acting as a model for the rest of the world to see and emulate.¹⁵ Most importantly, each describes the principle of equality as being the core value, indeed the *telos*, of the United States. In the priestly strain of his civil religious thought, Lincoln emphasizes the moral and religious importance of political equality. In the prophetic mode, on the other hand, he emphasizes the importance of equality through an emphasis on the religious good of humility, based in the recognition of a shared human insufficiency in the face of God. While the priestly strand of his speech emphasizes the need for the institutionalization of political equality, the prophetic strand demands the recognition of an already extant spiritual equality.

The location of sin within the American polity, combined with the emphasis on equality as the core value of the United States, serves to lend Lincoln's iteration of American civil religion unique possibilities for reinforcing democratic praxis. Unlike those versions that locate sin as external to the community of belief, Lincoln's

¹⁵ Richard Carwardine, "Lincoln's Religion" in *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World*. Mark A. Noll, ed. W.W. Norton & Co., 2009. p. 239

civil religious framework possesses a chastened quality that works as a check on the strong tendency toward self-righteousness present in the American civil religious tradition, and forces recognition of humans as being equal despite difference. Whereas each of the other formulations of civil religion considered in this dissertation effectively divides the world into sinners and saints, Lincoln's formulation thereof demands the acknowledgment that sin is present within one's own person and/or political group. This, in combination with the recognition of equality despite difference, presents possibilities for negotiation and reconciliation between competing actors within the boundaries of democratic practice and American national identity.

1. Religious Background

The personal beliefs of Abraham Lincoln have been intensely studied and debated since his assassination, often with perhaps more vigor than accuracy. In his youth, Lincoln was reputed to have published an anonymous pamphlet against revealed religion, and to have embraced an atheistic "doctrine of necessity" that conceived of human action as being irresistibly shaped by impersonal physical, chemical, and historical forces.¹⁶ Men who knew him well thought him an unbeliever, including his friend and law partner William Herndon, who quoted Mary Todd Lincoln as saying "Mr. Lincoln never joined any church. He was a religious man always, as I think. He *first thought*—to say think—about this subject was when

¹⁶ Allen C. Guelzo, "Abraham Lincoln and the Doctrine of Necessity", *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, vol. 18, no. 1. Winter 1997, pp. 57-81

Willie died—*never before*; he read the Bible a good deal about 1864. He felt religious, more than ever before, about the time he went to Gettysburg. Mr. Lincoln was not a technical Christian.”¹⁷ For her part, though, Mary would claim to never have said any such thing, writing to her cousin John T. Stuart on December 15, 1873, that “With very great sorrow & natural indignation have I read of Mr. Herndon, placing words in my mouth—*never once* uttered.”¹⁸ Given the ease with which Lincoln quoted the Scriptures (Stephen Douglas had accused him of being overly fond of doing exactly that)¹⁹ it does indeed seem unlikely that Lincoln had never thought seriously about the Bible or revealed religion before the death of his son, though it is certainly possible that the event may have fundamentally changed his thinking on the subject.

Lincoln’s religious thought appears to have been in flux across his life. He was born in February, 1809 to farmers Thomas Lincoln and Nancy Hanks in Hardin County, Kentucky. The family belonged to the Little Mount Separatist Baptist Church, which was involved in the revivals of the Second Great Awakening. In 1816, the family moved to Perry County, Indiana, where Nancy would die in 1818 after being poisoned by tainted milk.²⁰ Soon after, Thomas Lincoln married his second wife, Sarah Bush, with whom he joined the Little Pigeon Creek Baptist Church. This church was among the “hardshell” Baptist churches, embracing a

¹⁷ Herndon, “Lincoln’s Religion,” *Illinois State Register*, Dec. 1873.

¹⁸ In *Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters*, Justin G. Turner and Linda Leavitt Turner, eds. Alfred A. Knopf. New York, 1972. pp. 60

¹⁹ Lincoln refers to this accusation in a July 17, 1858 speech in Springfield. CW 2:511

²⁰ Guelzo (1999) p. 31

severe form of predestinarianism which led them to reject missionary work and other outreach efforts. Hardshell Baptists believed it futile for humans to attempt to effect their own salvation, the elect being of necessity saved, with salvation inaccessible to those not so favored.²¹ As a teenager, Lincoln would sometimes attend church services, though he never became a registered member of that congregation or any other.²² He was fond of performing mocking impressions of the more fire-and-brimstone preachers for local youths, and his step-mother said of him that he “had no particular religion.”²³ Whether or not her evaluation is accurate, Lincoln’s youth was one in which “biblical teaching, morality, and predestinarianism predominated,” and each of these played a vital role in his civil religious speech.²⁴

In 1830, the Lincoln family relocated to Macon County, Illinois due to economic hardship, and the following year Abraham Lincoln set out on his own, settling in New Salem, Sangamon County where he found employment on a riverboat. While there, he fell in with a group of freethinkers, who were skeptical of church traditions and sought to test biblical teachings against scientific developments.²⁵ Lincoln’s political speech in the earliest days of his political career indicates no particular religious belief, and the description of active intervention by a personal deity that would characterize his speech as president is absent. For

²¹ Guelzo (1999) p. 36

²² Though this fact is almost always mentioned in descriptions of Lincoln’s religious history, it does not make Lincoln exceptional: in 1860, only 23% of Americans were registered members of any church. (Trueblood (1973) p. 96)

²³ Guelzo (1999), p. 38.

²⁴ Gary Scott Smith, *Faith and the Presidency*. Oxford. New York, 2006. p. 92

²⁵ Guelzo (1999) p. 36

example, in his 1838 speech before the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield, titled "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions", Lincoln describes a civil religious framework dramatically different from that present in his presidential speech. Though it calls for "reverence for the laws", good or bad, to become the "political religion of the nation", there is no mention of God, and the founders are depicted as heroic beings qualitatively different from subsequent generations of Americans. The founders had erected a "temple of liberty" that later generations of Americans were obliged to preserve. These later generations, Lincoln argued in 1838, should not strive to emulate the founders (indeed he conceives of those who would as a threat to the Republic), and should instead only work to maintain the "temple of liberty" erected by the founders using the materials of "Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason". Lincoln here can be read as in opposition to O'Sullivan's Young Americans, who looked to emulate the Revolutionary generation through passionate service to the perpetuation of the Revolution itself. The themes of biblical religion are absent from the address at the Lyceum, and in place of God there is the sacralized political ideal of liberty. Nonetheless, the thematic emphasis on the traditionally Whigish values of self-restraint, prudence, and the political responsibility to both past and future prefigures much of his presidential speech.

Rumors of a skeptical attitude toward religion cost Lincoln the Whig nomination to the state legislature in 1843,²⁶ and his friend and law partner William

²⁶ "To Martin S. Morris" (March 26, 1843) in *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. Roy P. Basler, ed. Rutgers. New Brunswick, NJ, 1953-1954. Volume 1, p. 320. In future references to the *Collected Works*, I will abbreviate as CW Volume:Page, (for example, this reference would appear as CW 1:320).

Herndon maintained that Lincoln was an unbeliever all his life.²⁷ It is true that he never publically declared himself a Christian, though he spoke respectfully of Christianity. It may be that his reluctance to declare his faith, as well as his unwillingness to accept official membership within a church, were due more to respect than to contempt for religion: Lincoln had a “keen sense of intellectual honesty” that prevented him from undertaking responsibilities that he did not think he could completely fulfill.²⁸ Lincoln was by nature a doubtful, tentative man, but nevertheless was not an utter skeptic towards religion, as shown by his October 1863 letter to the Baltimore Presbyterian Synod. There, he shows both a tentative reaching for faith and his typical fatalism, writing, “I have often wished that I was a more devout man than I am. Nevertheless, amid the greatest difficulties of my Administration, when I could not see any other resort, I would place my whole reliance on God, knowing that all would go well, and that He would decide for the right.”²⁹ Similarly, though Lincoln often refers to the Christian God, he almost never refers to him in the custom of contemporary Evangelicals as “our Savior” or “our Lord,” preferring for the most part to say *the* Savior or *the* Lord.³⁰

In his private letters and journals, however, Lincoln wrote on God and religious themes at length, as in the remarkable fragment referred to by his biographers as the Meditation on the Divine Will (for more on which, see section 4

²⁷ William H. Herndon & Jesse W. Weik, *Herndon's Life of Lincoln*, p. 466. Paul M. Angle, ed. Da Capo Press. New York, 1942, 1986.

²⁸ Trueblood, (1973) p. 97

²⁹ CW 6:536

³⁰ Guelzo (1999) 313

of the next chapter). Given this, it seems impossible to deny that Lincoln thought deeply on religious matters, or to say that his religious speech was not sincere in some sense of the word.³¹ At any rate, to do so would be to portray the man as nothing less than a hypocrite and a liar. Nonetheless, there is nothing besides occasional anecdotal evidence, often from sources who stand to gain from depicting him one way or the other, that serves to indicate that Lincoln was religious in a conventional sense.³²

It seems to me that there are two useful perspectives from which to think about Lincoln's religious belief, and my analysis draws from each. One, presented by Stewart Winger in his book *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics*, advances an interpretation that neatly navigates these tensions by placing Lincoln within the intellectual context of his time. Winger argues that it is mistaken to view Lincoln either as being either a believer or an infidel. Instead, he contends, "Lincoln's use of religious language reflected a Romantic and poetic understanding of religion."³³ This understanding provided grounds for a challenge to "Enlightenment thinking that had long been mired in lazy and conventional intellectual compromises" while at the same time presenting a challenge to conventional religiosity.³⁴ Finding in biblical religion a way to express allegiance to something higher than the calculus of self-interest, Lincoln used its language to

³¹ Despite this, it was once emphatically asserted to me that it was well known that "Abraham Lincoln hated religion" when I presented excerpts from this dissertation at a conference.

³² Guelzo (1999) p. 441-443

³³ Winger (2003) p. 4. Northern Illinois Press, DeKalb, Ill. 2003

³⁴ Winger (2003) p. 11, 79

depict a vision of America as being beholden to the realization of democratic ideals. He thus described a common project and a shared obligation to create a nation in which, ultimately, freedom and equality would be available to all members of the American polity. While it may be impossible to be certain exactly what Lincoln's beliefs may have been, Winger's approach works to decrease the relevance of the question, directing attention instead to the ways that he utilized the language of religion and the ends to which he deployed it.

Winger's approach has much to recommend it, as it looks to explain what Lincoln's civil religious speech *means*, asserting that his message is sincere regardless of what his religious beliefs might be. That being said, it seems to me that it is impossible to fully avoid the question of *how* Lincoln believed, as the events of his presidency and his personal life while in office are deeply intertwined. Thus, a second useful approach to thinking about Lincoln's religious beliefs is presented by historian Allen C. Guelzo. In his biography, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*, Guelzo describes Lincoln's presidency as transformative, moving him from the skepticism of his youth to embracing what Guelzo describes as Lincoln's "own peculiar providentialism, his Calvinized Deism." Guelzo depicts Lincoln as feeling compelled by the events of the war to acknowledge not only the limits of human action, which he had always felt, but that whatever laws ordered the universe were beyond the realm of human comprehension and under the power of some providential intelligence. For Guelzo, "providence was what allowed [Lincoln] to overrule the moral limitations of liberalism. To do liberalism's grayest deed—the

emancipation of the slaves—Lincoln had to step outside liberalism and surrender himself to the direction of an overruling divine providence whose conclusions he had by no means prejudged.”³⁵

2. Minister of Union

In what I am terming his priestly mode of civil religious speech, Lincoln on the whole celebrates and affirms American history and political thought. At the same time, though, every affirmation is in a sense an exclusion, rejection, or condemnation of that which is not affirmed. A priest, in affirming the values and beliefs of his congregation, also works to exclude or condemn those not a part of his community of belief. This is especially true when the fundamental values of that community are contested: as at such points, an established religious institution must work to set itself apart from alien, competing doctrines, working to maintain its own identity and supremacy in the minds of its adherents and of potential converts. This in turn compels the generation of a canon, which is a definitive judgment on the content and interpretation of doctrine.³⁶ Thus, the central task of the priesthood is, according to Max Weber, the codification of doctrine, “to delimit what must and what must not be regarded as sacred” and “to infuse its views into the religion of the laity.”³⁷

³⁵ Guelzo (1999) p. 447

³⁶ Weber (1978) v. 1, 460

³⁷ *ibid*, 457

The religious authority of the priest is not, as it is for the prophet, the charismatic preaching of new revelation or doctrine, but rather derives from his service within an existing sacred tradition and exercises his powers by virtue of his office rather than of personal charisma.³⁸ Thus, the central tasks of priestly civil speech and thought are the interpretation and codification of an inherited tradition, and the dissemination of the subsequent conclusions among the laity. Lincoln's "priestly" speech functions in exactly this way. Speaking in his office as president, his project is one of defining and interpreting the nature of the American polity, grounding it definitively in the principle of a divinely mandated equality. As he does so, he moves the primary aim of the war over time from the preservation of the union to the extermination of slavery, which exists as an affront to the Providence that has given America the historical *telos* of institutionalizing a universal form of human political equality. In this way, Lincoln's attitude toward American history and political development when speaking in the priestly mode is almost entirely celebratory, affirming always its essential goodness. His criticisms of specific actors and political doctrines thus remain largely implicit, as he leaves them outside of the definition of the American community of belief that he looks to render definitive.

Especially as Lincoln attempts to prevent Southern secession early in his presidency, it is an emphasis on the value of Union and a shared American political identity that tends to be emphasized in his priestly speech. Across his presidency, however, the role of God's will comes to the forefront, until that will and the nation's

³⁸ *ibid*, 440

telos of political equality come to be almost interchangeable. In both cases, however, there is a strong emphasis on the efficacy of human action, as humans are able to choose whether or not to obey the will of God, and it is up to them to demonstrate sufficient republican, moral, and religious virtue in order to preserve the Union intact and uncorrupted. This is in striking contrast to the human impotence portrayed within his prophetic speech, and serves to illustrate the different aims of the two projects. While his prophetic speech aims to chasten and humble the American people, Lincoln in his priestly speech looks to persuade Americans to embrace his portrayal of their inherited beliefs and political institution, urging Americans to work faithfully within the task presented them by their God.

3. The God of Abraham

The disintegration of the Union began even before Lincoln took office. Despite his own words to the contrary and the disdain in which he was held by the more radical abolitionists, Lincoln was seen by the slave states as an implacable enemy of their peculiar institution.³⁹ South Carolina announced its secession from the United States on December 20, 1860, more than two months before Lincoln was

³⁹ The November 14, 1860 Dallas *Herald* illustrates the position of the first secessionists: "To those submissionists who ask if the mere election of Lincoln would be just grounds for resistance *now*, we would say, the evil that can be remedied to-day, should not be suffered to increase for years, until the whole body politic becomes diseased. If we honestly believe and fully understand the principles of the Republican party to be aggressive upon the South, and subversive of the intent and meaning of the Constitution, why should we wait until the party is safely entrenched in power and fortified with all the appliances of governmental patronage before a blow is struck. (in Mitgang (1971) p. 220)

inaugurated. In at least one sense, the defenders of slavery were correct, in that Lincoln increasingly saw slavery as anathema to the *telos* of the American polity. In his public speech between his departure from Springfield and his inauguration, Lincoln grew more vehement on this point. Even as he attempted to preserve the Union in the face of an immediate threat to its survival, he began to describe a narrative in which a personal God intervened at various points in American history, using human beings as his tools in order to better realize political equality. In so doing, Lincoln's reading of American history is modally similar to Protestant readings of the Scriptures: just as Protestants believe that the Holy Spirit is necessary to understand the Bible, Lincoln argues that it is the spirit of equality alone that makes sense of not only the nation's founding documents, but also the whole of its history.

Between the time of his election and his departure from Springfield for the capital, Lincoln was publically silent, believing that whatever he said would only present the appearance of weakness without in any way inducing Southern states to remain within the Union.⁴⁰ By the time that Lincoln departed Springfield for the

⁴⁰ In an October 27, 1860 letter to his friend George T.M. Davis, Lincoln asked "What is it I could say which would quiet alarm? Is it that no interference by the government, with slaves or slavery within the states, is intended? I have said this so often already, that a repetition of it is but mockery, bearing an appearance of weakness, and cowardice, which perhaps should be avoided. Why do not uneasy men read what I have already said? and what our platform says? If they will not read, or heed, [these?], then would they read, or heed, a repetition of them? Of course the declaration that there is no intention to interfere with slaves or slavery, in the states, with all that is fairly implied in such declaration, is true; and I should have no objection to make, and repeat the declaration a thousand times, if there were no danger of encouraging bold bad men to believe they are dealing with one who can be scared into anything." (CW 4:132-133, word in brackets is illegible, and Basler's best guess is interposed here) Jaffa (1959) has noted the rarity in politicians of the insight that that silence might be preferable to speech. (p. 245)

White House in February of 1861, the secession crisis had deteriorated, with Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas joining with South Carolina in the Confederacy, formed on the ninth day of that month with Jefferson Davis as president. It was at this point that Lincoln made his farewell address in Springfield on February 11, in a speech that is often neglected by students of Lincoln's rhetoric. There is some good cause for this, as there exist at least three different transcripts of the speech, which differ from one another in substantial ways, complicating analysis. Though I will rely primarily on what Basler in his *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* terms the "A" transcript, I will also occasionally draw on the "C" transcript for comparison, on the premise that a mistranscription can be read not only as an error, but also as an interpretation.⁴¹

Saying goodbye to the place in which he had spent twenty-five years and where he had begun a family and buried a son, Lincoln said

⁴¹ The original transcript from which the speech was delivered has been lost to time, but Lincoln and his personal secretary John G. Nicolay wrote down the text of the speech afterwards on the train leaving Springfield, and this seems good enough authority to use it here. There are, however, two potential problems with doing so: first, it was not uncommon for Nicolay's hand to put to paper the final version of Lincoln's speeches, and he may well have done so here. It is possible that the A transcript, which is about half in Nicolay's handwriting (including all but one reference to the Divinity, "To His care commending you"), may have been an attempt to recreate that original transcript from memory. The difficulty presented by this possibility is that Lincoln was not averse to going off-script in substantive ways when speaking, as he did when he inserted the words "under God" into the Gettysburg Address. The C transcript is quoted from the *Illinois State Journal* of the next day, and may have been recorded verbatim as the speech was being delivered, though it is not possible to say for sure. The B version is taken from a broadsheet distributed in 1865, contains elements of both the A and C, and is very close to that found in the *Harper's Weekly* of February 12. According to Basler, Herndon, Lincoln's friend and law partner, regarded this one as the most accurate, as do others. Briggs sees the A version as the best, seeing in it elements of what he perceives as typical of Lincoln's relation to providence, specifically that the events of history are a product of joint effort between man and God (John Channing Briggs, *Lincoln's Speeches Reconsidered*. Johns Hopkins. Baltimore, 2005. p. 283). As should be apparent from this and the preceding chapter, I think that Briggs in this way greatly oversimplifies Lincoln's understanding of the relationship between God and man, but am persuaded to rely on A by it being recorded partly in Lincoln's own handwriting. See fn. 1-5, CW 4:191.

I now⁴² leave, not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return, with a task before me greater than that which rested upon Washington. Without the assistance of that Divine Being, who ever attended him, I cannot succeed. With that assistance I cannot fail. Trusting in Him, who can go with me, and remain with you and be every where for good,⁴³ let us confidently hope that all will yet be well. To His care commending you, as I hope in your prayers you will commend me, I bid you an affectionate farewell.⁴⁴

The means of the Union's preservation here are very different from those Lincoln described in his earlier career. In his 1838 Lyceum Address, Lincoln had extolled the Whiggish virtues of self-restraint, reason, and responsibility to both past and future, but he here says that nothing less than divine intervention, to which he attributes the nation's birth, will enable him to overcome the difficulties facing him. Though it would be possible to dismiss this as pandering, the content of Lincoln's later civil religious speech motivates against this.

For Lincoln, George Washington (and implicitly, the founding generation as a whole) acted as the instruments of God's will, which cannot be opposed. Though they are "assisted" by the Divine Being, that assistance is a necessary and sufficient criterion for success, as the aid of God guarantees success and its absence failure.⁴⁵ This, combined with Lincoln's emphasis on the limits of human knowledge, serves to foreshadow the emphasis on the inscrutability of God's mind that characterizes his later civil religious speech. For Lincoln, humans exist always in a state of

⁴² Lincoln's handwriting ends and Nicolay's begins.

⁴³ Nicolay's handwriting ends, remainder is in Lincoln's.

⁴⁴ CW 4:237

⁴⁵ Lincoln, typically of his style, describes success in the double negative of "not fail".

insufficiency before God, and even the greatest (among whom Lincoln surely numbered Washington) serve only as his tools.

That being said, while Lincoln here believes that the American people have reason to confidently hope that the Almighty will once more intercede on their behalf, they cannot be certain. Unlike O'Sullivan, for Lincoln there is always an element of uncertainty and contingency in God's relationship with the United States. Moreover, the nature of that God is not entirely clear. Lincoln's description of God is in the distant and abstract terms of a deist, though this occasion is among the last times that he would speak so in public. Though the terms are deistic, the divinity that they describe is personal and active; though he is omnipresent (and the C transcript adds, omniscient and omnipotent), the need for and utility of prayer indicates that he opts to assist or not assist, to care for or not to care for individuals or for polities.

At no point in this speech does Lincoln explicitly identify the Divine Being with the Christian tradition. It is ironic, then, that he makes use of a familiar biblical mode of identifying God to avoid doing so, marking God as the God of Washington. This mode of identification is characteristic of the God of the Old Testament, who identifies himself to Moses as "the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."⁴⁶ In this way, Lincoln emphasizes the historical relationship between America and its God, by whose will they achieved independence and with whom they were engaged in a binding covenant. The writer

⁴⁶ Exodus 3:6.

of the C transcript (which Herndon, Lincoln's friend and partner at law, interestingly believed to be the most accurate) emphasizes this. Not only does he revise Lincoln's terminology to refer repeatedly to the familiar "God," but has Lincoln describe him as "the God of our fathers." As the Israelites remained indebted to the God who led them out of slavery in Egypt (as he often reminded them) so are the Americans accountable to their God, who may or may not be the God of Israel, but is without doubt the God of America.

The theme of human beings as instruments in the hands of God is made explicit in a speech that Lincoln delivered ten days later before the New Jersey Senate. Speaking of the Revolutionary generation as a whole, he says,

I am exceedingly anxious that this thing which they struggled for; that something even more than National Independence; that something that held out a great promise to all the people of the world to all time to come; I am exceedingly anxious that this Union, the Constitution, and the liberties of the people shall be perpetuated in accordance with the original idea for which that struggle was made, and I shall be most happy indeed if I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty, and of this his almost chosen people, for perpetuating the object of that great struggle.⁴⁷

"That something" is equality, the central ideal of the Declaration of Independence and thus the original idea for which the American political struggle was undertaken. Lincoln, demonstrating a priestly concern with codifying the ideals of the community of belief, posits it as the animating spirit of all other American political institutions and even the liberties of the American people, which must be

⁴⁷ CW 4:237

perpetuated across time in accordance with the principle of equality.⁴⁸ Unlike O'Sullivan, Lincoln here does not propose that the United States is inherently good, or that it embodies in itself the good, but rather that it is particularly accountable before the good, in this case a divinely-sanctioned political equality. He here describes the God who personally initiated and perpetuated the history of America to be using him as a tool, depicting himself as acting ultimately not on his own discretion, but under the will of God.

That being said, however, the self-image that Lincoln here lays out is not that of the prophet leading the people of God. For one thing, it is important that Lincoln describes himself as an instrument of two actors: the Almighty on the one hand, and "his almost chosen people" on the other. Lincoln describes the status of the American people in a very particular way. Though one commentator has said that the qualifier "almost" is present only to avoid a direct contradiction with Scripture, this ignores the tentativeness and contingency characteristic of Lincoln's speech, as when in the A transcript of his farewell to Springfield he promises not success, but only 'not failure.' To say that they are almost chosen is to say that they were nearly chosen, could have been chosen, *but were not*. In a rebuke to the supporters of

⁴⁸ This rhetorical emphasis on the centrality of equality to American thought and identity is a co-optation of one of the Jacksonian Democrats' central themes. Though O'Sullivan himself was primarily focused on the language of liberty, Jackson and his followers had spoken passionately of (white, male) equality. This cooptation was intentional, a political tactic of the early Republicans and especially Lincoln himself. He believed that the electoral gains made by poaching Democratic voters were worth the losses among old school, aristocratic Whigs. Lincoln had a rare gift for converting his ideals into political gain. (Daniel Walker Howe, *Political Culture of the American Whigs*. University of Chicago. Chicago, 1979. p. 290)

manifest destiny, Lincoln suggests that no future is promised to the United States, and that everything remains both contingent and conditional.

Speaking in this way, he emphasizes the efficacy of human agency in a way typical of his priestly speech: Americans may either heed the will of their God, thus progressing teleologically toward equality, or they may fail to do so, and in so doing fail in their world-historical mission. Lincoln does not say, it is worth noting, that equality has been or even will be attained, only that the story of America is the story of the struggle toward it. Thus, the thing on which the nation is based is not yet, and may never be fully achieved. This theme of asymptotic perfectibility was seen when in 1858 Lincoln said that “in relation to the principle that all men are created equal, let it be as nearly reached as we can.”⁴⁹ Though the political signal here is subtle, Lincoln asserts equality as the basis of American identity, and in so doing depicts the fledgling Confederacy (and thus slavery) as being in rebellion against the United States, the political good for which it is founded, and against the God by whose will the struggle was begun. Though later in the same speech he emphasized the need for unity, expressing his gratitude to the Democrats of the New Jersey legislature who accord him the respect of his office, Lincoln makes clear that there will not be an extension of slavery in his presidency.

⁴⁹ The full text of the quotation is illuminating, as Lincoln alludes to Matthew 5:48: “The Savior, I suppose, did not expect that any human creature could be as perfect as the Father in Heaven; but He said, ‘As your Father in Heaven is perfect, be ye also perfect.’ He set that up as a standard, and he who did most towards reaching that standard attained the highest degree of moral perfection. So I say in relation to the principle that all men are created equal, let it be as nearly reached as we can. If we cannot give freedom to every creature, let us do nothing that will impose slavery upon any other creature.”

The centrality of the political good of equality for Lincoln's civil religious framework is difficult to overstate. In a speech that he gave in Philadelphia at Independence Hall on February 22, Lincoln states flatly that "I have never had a feeling politically that did not spring from the sentiments embodied in the Declaration of Independence."⁵⁰ In this, he believes himself in harmony with the founders and with the spirit of his nation, a harmony produced by his inherited faith. More than "the mere matter of the separation of the colonies from the mother land," the value of the United States is the promise "that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that *all* should have an equal chance," a promise that gave "hope to the world for all time." In a world of aristocracy and oppression, Lincoln believed that America alone showed that a better world was possible. This, for him, "is the sentiment embodied in that Declaration of Independence", and it is this sentiment that makes the very existence of the United States worthwhile.

Though he is at pains to say that "there is no need of bloodshed and war," he also makes clear his willingness to use force, though "the Government will not use force unless force is used against it." The lengths to which he is willing to go to preserve the country in the form that he imagines it become clear, however, when he asks rhetorically whether the nation can be saved upon the basis of the Declaration. If it can, "I will consider myself one of the happiest men in the world." Remarkably, he continues that "if this country cannot be saved without giving up

⁵⁰ CW 4:240-241. The reason for his presence was to raise the new flag, with a star representing the recently-admitted Kansas, over Independence Hall.

that principle—I was about to say that I would rather be assassinated on this spot than to surrender it.” This is important for two reasons: first, Lincoln here invokes the theme of corruption, a major concern of his civil religious speech. Unlike O’Sullivan, Lincoln never saw American flourishing, or the flourishing of democracy, as destined, nor did he believe the United States to have an intrinsically good moral character. Here, he voices his fear that the nation could be corrupted beyond recognition, still existing physically though its animating spirit had fled.

Second, Lincoln here contributes to the narrative that would receive him at his death as a holy martyr. He had been warned of a plot to assassinate him as he had passed through Baltimore days before, making this for all intents and purposes a confession of political faith in the face of death, and Lincoln says clearly that he will die before abandoning these beliefs or seeing his country corrupted. Lest this seem too self-conscious a work of self-mythologizing, he concludes his brief speech by saying “My friends, this is a wholly unprepared speech. I did not expect to be called upon to say a word when I came here—I supposed I was merely to do something towards raising a flag. I may, therefore, have said something indiscreet, but I have said nothing but what I am willing to live by, and, in the pleasure of Almighty God, die by.” Lincoln here distances himself from heroic posturing, saying that he thought himself called upon “merely to do something towards raising a flag” and pointedly describes himself as subject to the overriding will of God, which is again described as setting the course of history. In doing so, he looks to add weight

to his claims of sincerity, saying that this is nothing more or less than a spontaneous, unguarded confession of his faith.

The overwhelming emphasis on the principle of equality here marks a dramatic change in tone from Lincoln's earlier public speech, as when in the Lyceum Address he urged a sober reverence for the laws, whatever they might be. Indeed, he seems almost prepared to turn aside the laws of the Republic in favor of the higher law of equality, but to say this would be to miss the complexity of Lincoln's understanding of the relationship between divinely-mandated equality and earthly law. More, it is important to remember that despite his increasingly fervent rhetoric, Lincoln was calling only for slavery's containment, not its abolition. For him, American law remains always valid, but the laws are best, indeed most valid, when read in the spirit of equality, and his legal reading in this way is modally similar to Protestant scriptural epistemology, as when Martin Luther wrote that, "The Spirit is needed for the understanding of all Scripture and every part of Scripture."⁵¹ In Lincoln's priestly speech, which works to codify and delimit the American community of belief, the United States, its institutions, and especially its founding documents are all to be understood in the spirit of equality. He depicts a history in which the Fathers set in motion a plan that would eventually abolish slavery by restricting its growth, eventually causing it to collapse of its own accord.⁵² In this light, then, the demand to expand the geographical space of slavery

⁵¹ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, J.I. Packer & A.R. Johnston, trans. James Clark & Co. Ltd London, 1957. p. 73

⁵² He had done this in his debates with Douglas and in an 1854 speech at Peoria.

is in fact to negate the divinely inspired plan of the founders in time, making the slave power not one faction among many in the American polity, but a fundamentally alien and hostile force opposed to the very purpose for which the United States had been founded.⁵³

This is a process of internal ordering characteristic of Protestant, Whiggish thought. It was characteristic of the Whigs to conceive of the good life as consisting of a kind of double self-mastery, in that the passions were to be mastered by the rational will, but not for the sake of mastery itself.⁵⁴ Rather than making the will a law unto itself, adherents to this point of view believed that after the will had mastered the passions, it should in turn be made to submit to the commandments of God. Likewise, for Lincoln, the United States is not an end in itself, but a nation chosen by the Almighty to demonstrate the possibility of human equality on the earth. This project, however, is to be undertaken by human agents and is thus not guaranteed to succeed, as “a covenanted or chosen people may apostasize many times, and the record of the struggle with the Adversary may be the record of its apostasies and regenerations.”⁵⁵ This sense of contingency in Lincoln’s priestly speech serves to emphasize the efficacy of human thought and deed, as it is a matter of choice whether or not individuals or the nation as a whole will pursue their sacralized world-historical political project.

⁵³ Wilson, *Space, Time and Freedom: The Quest for Nationality and the Irrepressible Conflict*. Greenwood Press. Westport, CT, 1974. p. 210

⁵⁴ Lawrence Frederick Kohl, *The Politics of Individualism: Parties and the American Character in the Jacksonian Era*. Oxford. New York, 1989. p. 79

⁵⁵ J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition, Revised Edition*. Princeton, 2003. p. 512

Thus, Lincoln describes a working of time that is both circular and progressive. In his interpretation of American history, the founding generation set the nation on the path to equality, but ironically this progress can only be achieved by a constant reaffirmation of that equality, which is the nation's most primitive political value.⁵⁶ In one sense, this is a linear view of time, as the nation carries out the sacred plan of its founders, moving closer to or further from success across time. On the other hand, for Lincoln this progress can only be achieved and the Union "saved by reaffirming the archetype of freedom with which the Founders had originally informed it" in the Declaration of Independence.⁵⁷ In this latter sense, American political virtue consists of an endless repetition of what, in Eliade's terms, is the Founders' "cosmogonic act," insisting always that all men are, in fact, created equal.⁵⁸

4. Union and Liberty

The political context for Lincoln's first inaugural address was shot through with tension, and in it he had to navigate a number of political obstacles. The seceding states were, by virtue of their secession, a united front. Among the loyal states, by contrast, no such unity could be supposed. The slave states that remained were themselves on the edge of secession (four of them, Virginia, Arkansas, North Carolina, and Tennessee, would in fact join the Confederacy), and even among the

⁵⁶ Kohl (1989) p. 174

⁵⁷ Wilson (1974) p. 206

⁵⁸ Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or, Cosmos and History*. Willard R. Trask, trans. Princeton, 1954. p. 19

northern states there could be no certainty of the political will for a war against the South. Moreover, the District of Columbia itself was dramatically vulnerable to attack, and the governor of Maryland made no secret of his Confederate sympathies.⁵⁹ For these reasons, to say nothing of his deep desire to preserve the Union intact, Lincoln hoped to avoid war and draw the seceding states back to the Union while preventing the secession of the remaining, loyal slave states. To do this, he had to avoid at all costs appearing belligerent, but, knowing full well that war was all but certain, he had at the same time to signal a willingness to fight in the Union's defense, which meant in turn that he had to depict the Confederacy as aggressors, thus legitimating violence against them.

His method for doing so was to perform an exegetical reading of American history and the Constitution in a Protestant mode, arguing that its message can only be understood through a reading inspired by the spirit of equality. Though there is comparatively little language of American civil religion explicitly present in the text of Lincoln's first inaugural address, Lincoln's modally Protestant reading is illustrative of the civic-theological framework that informs his public speech, especially the concern in his priestly speech with the codification of the beliefs undergirding the United States. This speech also demonstrates a Calvinist concern with the forming of covenants, as he here looks to subordinate state loyalty to national identity by emphasizing the irrevocability of the national covenant.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Guelzo (1999) p. 272

⁶⁰ Niebuhr (1966) p. 174

It is precisely this concern with the maintenance of covenant that frames the issue, as Lincoln begins his first inaugural address by assuring the Southern states, both loyal and rebellious, that they need fear no extra-constitutional action from his administration. He knew, however, that the crux of the issue was not whether or not the new administration would abide by the Constitution's black letter law, but that it was a conflict between two differing interpretations of the text. He notes that "All profess to be content in the Union, if all constitutional rights be maintained," and challenges his opponents to think "of a single instance in which a plainly written provision of the Constitution has ever been denied." It is an issue not of what is explicit in the Constitution, but of what is implicit in its interpretation. He notes this directly, asking "*May* Congress prohibit slavery in the territories? The Constitution does not expressly say. *Must* Congress protect slavery in the territories? The Constitution does not expressly say."⁶¹ Likewise, the Constitution is silent on "the only substantial dispute" facing the country; that "One section of the country believes slavery is *right*, and ought to be extended, while the other believes that it is *wrong*, and ought not to be extended."⁶²

In Jefferson Davis' reading of the Constitution, inspired by the arguments of John C. Calhoun, it was only a contractual alliance between thirteen states, each of which retained its sovereign independence.⁶³ Against this, Lincoln argues that even

⁶¹ CW 4:267

⁶² CW 4:268-269

⁶³ Jaffa (1959) p. 256. Despite his death eleven years before the Civil War, Calhoun both expressed and shaped the secessionist thought of the Confederacy. Taking the side of his native South Carolina during the nullification crisis of 1832, he differed from other states' rights politicians in his explicit

if this were the case, surely it was not legitimate for a contract to be dissolved without the consent of all parties. Further, he directly counters Davis' claim that the Union is the creature of the Constitution, noting that

The Union is much older than the Constitution. It was formed in fact by the Articles of Association in 1774. It was matured and continued by the Declaration of Independence in 1776. It was further matured and the faith of all the thirteen States expressly plighted and engaged that it should be perpetual, by the Articles of Confederation in 1778. And finally, in 1787, one of the declared objects for ordaining and establishing the Constitution, was "*to form a more perfect union.*" But if the destruction of the Union, by one, or by a part only, of the States, be lawfully possible, the Union is *less* perfect than before the Constitution, having lost the vital element of perpetuity.

affirmation of the right of a state to secede from the Union. In his 1832 "South Carolina Exposition and Protest," Calhoun lays out his thesis that the national government had been captured by the northern sectional faction, and thus been made a weapon of particular interests against the public. Thus, the secessionist argument was essentially that any meaningful Union had already been corrupted by a Northern faction of interest and been replaced with systematic sectional exploitation. In this way, secession becomes a defensive rather than aggressive action.

Daniel Webster famously argued for "Liberty *and* Union, now and for ever, one and inseparable!" Against Webster's understanding of the Union as instantiating and defending political liberty, Calhoun saw the two as necessarily existing in tension, as when in 1830 he toasted "the Union, next to our liberty, the most dear." Southerners, he argued, "are the serfs of the system," whose labor was exploited without compensation for the benefit of the Northern section.

That Calhoun did not see any tension between his claims regarding the injustice of Southern "serfdom" and his own defense of slavery as a positive good is illustrative of how central a supposed qualitative difference between blacks and whites was to Southern political thought. In his famous February 6, 1837 address on the Senate floor, titled "Slavery a Positive Good," Calhoun argued that the exact relationship of hierarchy and exploitation which so irritated him when existing between sections was in fact of benefit to all concerned when practiced between blacks and whites. For whites, a freedom from manual labor made possible ever greater achievements of wealth and civilization, and worked to insulate the South from the spasmodic conflicts between labor and capital that he saw in the North. For blacks themselves, on the other hand, Calhoun argued that slavery had paternalistic moral, cultural, and physical benefits, the latter no doubt deriving from vigorous exercise.

While Calhoun understood this to be a legitimate arrangement between races due to the unquestionable supremacy of the white race, the "serfdom" of the South was something else altogether. Effectively, Calhoun understood the North to be treating Southern whites as Southern whites treated enslaved blacks. Moreover, slavery, for him, was both the pillar of Southern society and its shield, and he saw the threat posed by the abolitionist faction that he believed to have captured Northern politics as an existential threat to Southern culture.

For Lincoln, the Union is not an alliance of independent states, but a single nation, which has set over itself a range of laws and institutions. Moreover, it is notable that Lincoln here abandons his habit of dating the Declaration of Independence as the moment of the Union's birth, locating it rather in the Articles of Association. Here, he follows Daniel Webster, one of his heroes, who said in an 1830 Senate debate with Calhoun that all of these documents were authored by the American people, who existed as a single nation prior to any of them.⁶⁴ Lincoln's reasons for doing so become clear when he continues, saying that

It follows from these views that no State, upon its own mere motion, can lawfully get out of the Union,—that *resolves* and *ordinances* to that effect are legally void; and that acts of violence, within any State or States, against the authority of the United States are insurrectionary or revolutionary, according to circumstances.⁶⁵

It is precisely the right to revolution embodied by the Declaration that is at issue. By locating the birth of the United States as being prior even to that document, he looks to demonstrate not only its permanence, but also the way in which it is the Union that authorizes its component states, rather than the reverse.

⁶⁴ Wills (1992) p. 129 Webster's position was also adopted by the anti-slavery Free Soil party, though like Lincoln and unlike Webster, the Free Soilers felt comfortable speaking from a position of moral absolutism. (Wilson (1974) p. 125)

⁶⁵ CW 4:265. Even here, Lincoln strove to be as conciliatory as was possible. A note in his handwriting here changes "treasonous" to the less inflammatory "revolutionary." In fact, Seward had seriously edited the text of Lincoln's first inaugural address in order to make it less overtly confrontational. Sharing Seward's frequently pragmatic political instincts, Lincoln accepted many of the changes. (Sean Wilentz, "Abraham Lincoln and Jacksonian Democracy" in *Our Lincoln: New Perspectives on Lincoln and His World*. Mark A. Noll, ed. W.W. Norton & Co., 2009. p. 205)

For Lincoln, equality and liberty cannot be divorced from the Union.⁶⁶ He notes that “if the minority will not acquiesce, the majority must, or the government must cease. There is no other alternative”. Moreover, “If a minority, in such a case, will secede rather than acquiesce, they make a precedent which, in turn, will divide and ruin them; for a minority of their own will secede from them.”⁶⁷ It is then this element of political unraveling that leads Lincoln to say that “Plainly, the central idea of secession, is the essence of anarchy.”⁶⁸ Compare this with his words at a December, 1856 Republican banquet, where he described equality as the “central idea” of the Republic, “from which all other thoughts radiate.”⁶⁹ Lincoln in the first inaugural says that “Unanimity is impossible; the rule of a minority, as a permanent arrangement, is wholly inadmissible; so that, rejecting the majority principle, anarchy, or despotism in some form, is all that is left.”⁷⁰ The essence of Lincoln’s argument is that the rule of a democratic majority, “held in restraint by constitutional checks and limitation, and always changing easily” is the only form of government compatible with human equality. To allow the rule of a minority is despotism, while to refuse the rule of the majority is to court chaos.⁷¹

⁶⁶ Garrisonian abolitionists saw union and liberty as separable concepts, called for the end of the former to preserve the latter.

⁶⁷ CW 4:267

⁶⁸ Karl Marx’ evaluation of the difficulties facing the Confederacy in a November 1862 letter to Engels concurs with Lincoln’s prediction, as he argues that the Confederacy faces widespread resistance to its draft order, based in the same principals that led to secession in the first place. (http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1862/letters/62_11_17.htm)

⁶⁹ CW 2:385

⁷⁰ CW 4:268

⁷¹ He would return to this theme after the war began in his July 4, 1861 address to Congress, arguing there also that case of the United States was determinative for the practice of democratic government anywhere in the world. “This issue,” he says, “embraces more than the fate of these United States. It

Thus, for Lincoln, equality and liberty are not only promoted by the Union, but *inseparable* from it. The secessionists are not, as they claim, fighting to continue the legacy of the Founders, but to demolish it. Addressing the secessionists, he makes this explicit while emphasizing the power and duties of his office, saying that “You can have no conflict, without yourselves being the aggressors. *You* have no oath registered in Heaven to destroy the government, while *I* shall have the most solemn one to ‘preserve, protect, and defend’ it.”⁷² Unlike those following Calhoun’s legacy, who saw the principle of equality as being applicable to states rather than persons, Lincoln has in mind individuals whose equality is protected by the national government.⁷³

This is in fact one of only two direct references to the Divinity in the First Inaugural, and here “Heaven” serves merely as the guarantor of oaths. The other is a routine invocation of heavenly authority for the people’s judgment, as he expresses confidence that “If the Almighty Ruler of nations, with his eternal truth and justice, be on your side of the North, or on yours of the South, that truth, and

presents the whole family of man the question whether a constitutional republic, or a democracy—a government of the people, by the same people—can, or cannot, maintain its territorial integrity against its own domestic foes.” Foreshadowing the language and themes of the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln asserts that the outcome of the civil war is of universal, almost cosmic significance. In his telling, the eyes of all mankind are on the current conflict, anxious to discover the possibility of a government devoted to the idea of universal human equality. The question, he continues, is whether a government must “of necessity, be too *strong* for the liberties of its own people, or too *weak* to maintain its own existence?” (CW 4:421-441) As he does in his first inaugural address, Lincoln puts forth the proposition that the only alternatives to democratic government must be anarchy or tyranny.

⁷² CW 4:271

⁷³ Jaffa (1959) p. 276. Lincoln makes this explicit in his August 24, 1855 letter to Joshua F. Speed, in which he says that if all individual humans are not to be considered equal in America by virtue of the declaration that “All men are created equal,” then he “should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretence of loving liberty—to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy [sic].” CW 2:323.

that justice, will surely prevail, by the judgment of this great tribunal of the American people.”⁷⁴ Given the content of his civil religious speech later in his presidency, it is worth noting the confidence that Lincoln here has regarding his knowledge of the mind of God, as he appears certain that the judgment of God and of the American people will be in agreement. Otherwise, the explicit themes of American civil religion that characterize Lincoln’s other major speeches are largely absent from this speech.

Interestingly, in urging patience and deliberation on his countrymen, Lincoln also differs from his custom by making one of a very few explicit references to Christianity in his public career and displays a remarkable confidence that he knows the mind of God, saying that “Intelligence, patriotism, Christianity, and a firm reliance on Him, who has never yet forsaken this favored land, are still competent to adjust, in the best way, all our present difficulty.”⁷⁵ It is worth asking why, in a speech characterized by a relative paucity of his favored civil religious themes, Lincoln makes direct reference to the Christian faith. This is less puzzling when one remembers that Lincoln had a keen sense not only of when to speak, but when to keep silent, as he did between his election and his departure from Springfield. Lincoln’s civil religious speech is centrally concerned with a vision of divinely mandated human equality, and as such is unambiguously opposed to slavery.

When Lincoln directs Americans to look to their intelligence, patriotism, and religion, though, he directs them to things he believes to be common between

⁷⁴ Noll (2006) p. 88

⁷⁵ CW 4:271

sections and which will motivate toward the preservation of the Union⁷⁶. An invocation of sacralized political equality would only have had the opposite effect, working to remind Americans of their divisions. Clarity and the impression of sincerity were for him here paramount, and he later said of his speech in the first inaugural address that he “took pains not only to keep this declaration [of non-aggression] good, but also to keep the case so free from the power of ingenious sophistry as that the world should not be able to misunderstand it.”⁷⁷ In this way, then, like the silence between his election and departure for the capital, the plainness of his speech here is tactical, a calculated rhetorical omission deployed as an adaptation to shifting political circumstances.

In the conclusion to his first inaugural address, though, Lincoln invests the nation itself with religious significance. Basing his conclusion on suggestions from Secretary of State William H. Seward, Lincoln makes an appeal to national fraternity and shared destiny, foreshadowing the themes of the Gettysburg Address.⁷⁸ He

⁷⁶ Jaffa (1959) p. 350

⁷⁷ CW4:425, “Message to Congress in a Special Session,” July 4, 1861.

⁷⁸ Seward is himself an interesting character. Governor of New York from 1838-1842, he and his wife had developed radical anti-slavery views (though, like Lincoln, he was at this time a gradualist rather than an abolitionist) during an 1835 tour of the South, for which he was feared and reviled by Southerners across his political career. Elected as a US senator from New York in 1849, he became one of the leading voices among the Whig anti-slavery wing, the Conscience Whigs, notable for the purposes of this chapter due to their recurrent description of slavery as a national sin. He stood for the Republican presidential nomination in 1860, but lost it to Lincoln in part due to a speech in which Seward seemed to describe civil war as inevitable. Nonetheless, he served as Lincoln’s secretary of state, often consulting with the president on the wording of his speeches. On April 15, 1865, the same conspiracy responsible for the assassination of the president that day dispatched Lewis Powell to the Seward’s home. After his pistol jammed, Powell attempted to murder Seward, his nurse, his son Augustus, and his guards, with a knife and Seward bore the resulting scars on his face and neck for the rest of his life. Though Powell escaped, he was later captured and hanged with three other conspirators on July 7, 1865. Upon recovery, Seward kept his position under the Johnson administration, negotiating the purchase of Alaska from Russia in 1867. He continued to pursue

says, "I am loth to close. We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies." Lincoln's reluctance to close can be attributed to his knowledge that his first inaugural address was perhaps his best chance to make the case for peace and Union on the national stage.⁷⁹ He emphasizes a romantic, nationalist vision of republican fraternity, stemming from a shared faith and common history: "Though passion may have strained it, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battle-field, and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."⁸⁰ Lincoln's hope is that he can invoke the power of a shared national identity to overcome sectional loyalties and grievances, restoring the Union to harmony and avoiding civil war. In this hope he would, of course, be disappointed.

5. Our Strife Pertains to Ourselves

Though Lincoln initially saw the preservation of the Union as the ultimate aim of the war, by 1863 the war had become for him a crusade to end slavery, which bore fruit in the Emancipation Proclamation. Given the detailed civil religious framework that Lincoln used to describe slavery within the American context as a

Lincoln's path of reconciliation between sections, becoming an enemy of the Radicals. Leaving office upon Grant's inauguration in 1869, Seward died in October of 1872. Doris Kearns Goodwin's *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (Simon & Schuster. New York, 2005) delivers a good representation of Seward's role in the Lincoln administration.

⁷⁹ Briggs (2005) p. 300

⁸⁰ CW 4:271, Winger 120. This romantic nationalism was characteristic not only of Lincoln, but also of Seward, who helped to compose the first inaugural address.

singular sin against the nations providential *telos*, the dry legalism of the Emancipation Proclamation is notable. Despite this, the events surrounding its promulgation are significant for tracing the development of his civil religious thought. In coming to the decision to abolish slavery, Lincoln faced a thicket of conflicting moral, political, and military incentives. Ultimately, he navigated these difficulties by striking a personal bargain with God. In the wake of this, his civil religious rhetoric was transformed, depicting a much more personal deity who was more directly involved than ever in the nation's political life, and prioritizing the end of slavery even over the preservation of the Union in his presentation of the war's aims. As late as August 1862 Lincoln had written, "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that."⁸¹ By 1863, though, he viewed the end of slavery as a non-negotiable part of the Union's restoration.

In the summer of 1862, the war went poorly for the Union. Confederate forces scored a series of victories at the Seven Days Battles in Virginia, resulting in heavy losses for both sides and the withdrawal of the Army of the Potomac in defeat to the fortified city of Washington. Worse yet, the Union faced disaster at the Second Battle of Bull Run, where 75,000 Union soldiers under the command of Maj. Gen. John Pope were defeated by Lee's 55,000 strong Army of Northern Virginia,

⁸¹ "To Horace Greeley", August 22, 1862, CW 5:389

causing the Federals to once again retreat to Washington, where it was again feared that the Confederates would conquer. In the days following Second Bull Run, Lee would invade the North with 50,000 Confederate soldiers under his command, looking both to replenish his supplies and turn Northern sentiment against the continued prosecution of the war. As the situation deteriorated, means which Lincoln had not even considered earlier in the conflict now seemed available for his consideration, among them emancipation. Though Lincoln had never previously spoken, in public or private, of planning to do anything more than set slavery on the path to gradual extinction, he had visited Virginia during the failed Peninsular Campaign to capture Richmond in the first part of 1862, where he observed the fundamental role that slavery played in organizing Southern society and economy.⁸² Emancipation was clearly for him a moral issue, and it had political benefits as well, in that it could rally Lincoln's core voters among the evangelical Christians.⁸³

However, after visiting Virginia he came to believe that emancipation would have military value: by declaring the end of that peculiar institution, Lincoln hoped to drain slaves from Southern farms and plantations, forcing the Confederacy to suffer decreased productivity or to replace them with whites.⁸⁴ These whites, of course, would then be unable to fight in the war. Seeing not only a moral good in abolition, but also the possibility to disrupt the economic and military functioning of

⁸² Guelzo (1999) p. 336

⁸³ The embrace of evangelical language and politics allowed the Whigs, and later the Republicans, to reach beyond the middle classes that formed its "natural" (in material terms) base. Howe (1979) p. 169

⁸⁴ Guelzo (1999) p. 336

the South, Lincoln had been considering the question since his return from Virginia. His cabinet had been divided on the issue: several had threatened to resign should he free the slaves of the Confederacy, while others, such as the profoundly anti-slavery (and ambitious) Treasury Secretary Salmon Chase, found Lincoln too soft on the issue.⁸⁵ Political concerns at the time won out, as Seward and Republican political boss Thurlow Weed argued that to proclaim emancipation in the wake of the failed Peninsular Campaign to seize Richmond in summer, 1862 would, in Seward's words, "be viewed as the last measure of an exhausted government, a cry for help" in the form of a slave rebellion in the South. While he endorsed the abolition of slavery, Seward asked Lincoln to postpone it until he could "give it to the country supported by military victory," so that it would not appear "our last *shriek*, on the retreat." Lincoln at first refused to delay, but was convinced by a midnight visit from Weed.⁸⁶

Confronted by conflicting moral, political, and military incentives, Lincoln looked to supplement his reasoning through recourse to doing the will of Providence, if it could be known. His uncertainty regarding God's will (as well as his occasionally acid wit) is demonstrated in a September 13, 1862 exchange with a delegation of abolitionist Chicago ministers, who urged on the president immediate emancipation of slaves throughout the Union and the Confederacy. In response,

⁸⁵ Chase was extremely popular with the Radical wing of the Republican party, and maneuvered to undermine Lincoln in preparation for a bid at the 1864 nomination, at one point acting as an informant to the Senate in a failed attempt to force Lincoln to reconfigure his cabinet, not coincidentally removing Seward, who was Chase's chief rival. (see Burlingame (2008) vol. 2, p. 448-459)

⁸⁶ Guelzo (1999) p. 340

Lincoln described the political difficulties at hand: whether emancipation would cause the border states to break from the Union, what exactly would become of the newly freed slaves, and whether an unenforceable proclamation regarding slavery in the South would make the president look as powerless as the pope's bull against the comet.⁸⁷ Urged by the ministers to put aside such questions and do what they knew to be the will of God, Lincoln replied, "I hope that it will not be irreverent for me to say that if it is probable that God would reveal his will to others, on a point so connected with my duty, it might be supposed he would direct it to me; for, unless I am more deceived in myself than I often am, it is my earnest desire to learn the will of Providence in this matter. *And if I can learn what it is I will do it!*"⁸⁸

At this point, the division that I have been attempting to maintain in this dissertation between the public speech of each individual and whatever his personal beliefs may have been becomes difficult to preserve. It is in fact likely that despite his arch tone, Lincoln's hope for a sign from on high was sincere. Four days after he met with the Chicago ministers, Union forces under Gen. George B. McClellan engaged Lee's army at Antietam. It remains the bloodiest day in American history, with 23,000 casualties incurred in just over 24 hours. Though McClellan was successful in driving Lee's forces out of the North, back into Virginia, his caution in deploying his numerically-superior forces allowed Lee to slip away, wasting an opportunity to deliver a crushing blow to the Army of Northern Virginia.

⁸⁷ CW 5:420, 423. Lincoln here referred to the apparently apocryphal bull supposedly issued by Pope Callixtus III in 1456 excommunicating Haley's Comet.

⁸⁸ CW 5:420

Nonetheless, a few days later Lincoln called a special meeting of his cabinet at which he announced that the time had come for emancipation, and that he had two weeks earlier (around the end of the first week of September, about the time that he likely composed his Meditation on the Divine Will, which is discussed in section 4 of the next chapter) determined to abolish slavery as soon as Lee was driven out of Maryland. According to the diary of Salmon P. Chase, Lincoln's Secretary of the Treasury, Lincoln told the assembled cabinet that "I said nothing to any one; but I made the promise to myself, and [hesitating a little]—to my Maker. The rebel army is now driven out, and I am going to fulfill that promise."⁸⁹ In the diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy, Welles describes Lincoln as having made "a vow, a covenant, that if God gave us the victory in the approaching battle, he would consider it an indication of the divine will and that it was his duty to move forward in the cause of emancipation. It might be thought strange that he had in this way submitted the disposal of matters when the way was not clear to his mind what he should do. God had decided this question in favor of the slaves. He was satisfied that it was right, was confirmed and strengthened in this action by the vow and the results."⁹⁰

It might indeed be thought strange. If one considers the chief executive of the nation, in a time of civil war, telling a room of seasoned politicians, party operatives, and military men that he plans to alter the basic organization of society

⁸⁹ *Diary and Correspondence of Salmon P. Chase*. Samuel H. Dodson & George S. Denison, eds. Da Capo Press. New York, 1971. p. 88

⁹⁰ Quoted in Noll (2006) p. 89

based on a secret personal covenant with God, it becomes apparent just how extraordinary an event this was. It was not, however, the abandonment of political, pragmatic reason. Rather, it is more appropriate to say that Lincoln supplemented that reasoning with “a larger moral and theological perspective.”⁹¹ Lincoln appears to have increasingly inhabited a universe ruled by an ultimately moral supreme being, and when confronted by an apparently insoluble problem, one for which the evidence could not definitively be interpreted, he fell back on that Being for guidance.⁹² As he put it in his October, 1863 remarks to the Baltimore Presbyterian Synod, though he had “often wished that he was a more devout man,” when he “could not see any other resort, I would place my whole reliance in God, knowing that all would go well, and that He would decide for the right.”⁹³

Though Lincoln is never recorded as having spoken in these terms again, his civil religious conceptualization of the war and of the relationship between God and the United States were afterwards transformed. The bargain struck was that, in return for victory, Lincoln was to proclaim the abolition of slavery. Imagined as an exchange of goods between contracting actors, God’s ‘payment’ in the form of the expulsion of Lee from Maryland indicates that he willed the immediate abolition of slavery. Whether or not Lincoln, as Welles reports, used the word ‘covenant,’ his reasoning here reflects a response to God’s inscrutable will with a long tradition in

⁹¹ Winger (2003) p. 163

⁹² William J. Wolf has described this instance as one of “primitive superstition” with “no place in a reasoned faith,” and asserts that Lincoln had a “view of reality [with] an element of the primitive in it represented by his vow...” (*Lincoln’s Religion*. Pilgrim Press, 1970. p. 28) One is compelled to ask, primitive compared to what?

⁹³ CW 6:535-6

monotheist religion. It is the same covenantal response seen in John Winthrop's 1630 sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity".⁹⁴ There, Winthrop says that "if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath he ratified this Covenant and sealed our Commission and will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it." Lincoln's reasoning is identical: the appropriate course of action is now clear, as God has through his intervention in history demonstrated the purposes and desires behind what he has caused to happen. From this point on, Lincoln in his civil religious speech almost always identifies slavery as the sin for which the United States is being punished. Though the particulars of God's will would remain opaque, Lincoln was now sure that he had determined the crux of the issue.

On September 22, Lincoln in his capacity as commander-in-chief issued the preliminary emancipation proclamation, declaring all slaves free in any rebel state that did not return to Union control by the first day of 1863.⁹⁵ The anti-Lincoln London *Times* predicted "horrible massacres of white women and children, to be followed by the extermination of the black race in the South," and Lord John Russell urged British intervention in the war to head off the violent revenge that was sure to follow emancipation. None of this happened, of course, but up to 20% of slaves did abandon the South for the Northern lines, just as Lincoln had hoped.⁹⁶ Lincoln's

⁹⁴ Winger (2003) p. 164

⁹⁵ It also served to complicate plans in both France and Britain to recognize the Confederacy. A concern among abolitionists was that both of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamations were military orders, to apply only during wartime, and did not, in fact, have legal force in times of peace.

⁹⁶ Guelzo (1999) p. 345

revelation after Antietam is reflected in his increased confidence that the Union served the cause of God, at least insofar as it has pleased God to reveal his purposes. This is shown in an October 26 letter to Eliza P. Gurney, the widow of Quaker leader Joseph John Gurney, in which Lincoln writes that “after endeavoring to do my best in the light which he affords me, I find my efforts fail, [and] I must believe that for some purpose unknown to me, He wills otherwise.”⁹⁷ While God’s mind remains mysterious, Lincoln now speaks as if the divine will in this case is at least partly known, and that it is both right and necessary that humans act on those parts of his will which it has pleased God to reveal. Though the outcome of the war yet remained in doubt, the cause was certain. The conflict had transformed from a battle to preserve the Union into a crusade to cleanse it of the evil that had stained it since its inception.⁹⁸

On November 5, Lincoln removed McClellan from Command over the Army of the Potomac, replacing him with Ambrose Burnside. Weary of McClellan’s hesitancy to follow up on his success at Antietam, Lincoln wrote to McClellan that “If you don’t want to use the army, I should like to borrow it for a while.”⁹⁹ In the same month, Lincoln approved Burnside’s plan to capture Richmond, and Union forces under Brigadier General James Blunt repelled a Confederate effort to drive them out of northern Arkansas at the Battle of Cane Hill, forcing the Confederates into Arkansas’

⁹⁷ CW 5:478

⁹⁸ Winger (2003) p. 164

⁹⁹ McClellan was ordered to report to Trenton, New Jersey, to wait for new orders that never came. He never forgot the insult to his skills as a military commander, and it was a key factor in his decision to run as the Democratic candidate in the 1864 presidential elections.

Boston Mountains. Though there was no end of the war in sight, the Union had reason to hope, and the disasters of the war's first year seemed to have been overcome. It was in this environment that Lincoln on December 1 delivered his annual message to Congress, depicting slavery as a national sin and the continuing convulsions of the civil war as a moment of religious and political transformation.

He opened by saying that while "it has not pleased the Almighty to bless us with a return of peace, we can but press on, guided by the best light he gives us, trusting that in His own good time, and wise way, all will yet be well."¹⁰⁰ Echoing the language of his October 26 letter to Gurney, Lincoln here alludes to his private revelation that God willed the end of slavery in the United States. Though he does not claim to understand the full working of God's mind, it is this that is "the best light" that he has been given. In this way, Southern secession thus represents not only a rebellion against federal authority, but against the will of God.¹⁰¹ That being said, the taint of their sin is not contained within the Confederate states, but because the nation is for him a single moral unit it is shared across the polity as a whole.

This shared moral culpability is emphasized as Lincoln identifies the nation as consisting of three parts: territory, laws, and people. Arguing that America's geography makes disunion impossible, as the sections require one another for survival to the point that should they separate they would soon be forced to reunite, Lincoln can perceive no external cause of the war. Rather, quoting his first inaugural speech, he says that "One section of our country believes that slavery is

¹⁰⁰ CW 5:518

¹⁰¹ Carwardine (2009) p. 242

right, and ought to be extended, while the other believes that it is *wrong*, and ought not to be extended. This is the only substantial dispute.”¹⁰² Thus, “Our strife pertains to ourselves—to the passing generations of men, and it can, without convulsion, be hushed forever with the passing of one generation.”¹⁰³ Here, Lincoln demonstrates the priestly concern with codification of belief and the delineation of the community of faith: Understood within the terms of Lincoln’s civil religious framework, his words implicitly describe slavery as a national sin, the burden of which is borne between sections and across generations, even since the founding. Though his argument for abolition, which immediately follows the above quotation, is as a war measure designed to weaken the South (which cannot endure without slavery),¹⁰⁴ Lincoln frames the issue in terms of collective sin and redemption. Though slavery has stained the United States since its birth, the crisis of the war presents an opportunity to wipe it away forever, and with it the disharmony that it has provoked within the Union.

Thus, the critical moment of abolition is a moment of the Union’s religious transformation. As Lincoln puts it, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present.” This is a moment of spiritual revolution and redefinition, as the Union is to be founded again purified in the embrace of equality. Addressing the American people directly, and arguing in favor of a constitutional amendment

¹⁰² CW 5:527

¹⁰³ CW 5:529

¹⁰⁴ CW 5:534. Implicitly, then, Lincoln casts slavery as the core value of the Confederate polity, just as he had located anarchy as the central idea of secession and equality as that of the Republic. Thus, by opposing slavery to divinely mandated equality, the rebels are in diametrical opposition to the will of God.

prohibiting slavery, Lincoln urges them to confront this moment of crisis, saying, “Fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history.” This moment is a crucible forced on the nation by Providence, a moment of religious ordeal, and “the fiery trial through which we pass will light us down, in honor or dishonor, to the latest generation.” Thus, the purification of the Republic will be remembered through all time.¹⁰⁵ The crisis of the civil war is nearly cosmic in significance, being universally significant not only across space but throughout all of time. The eyes of the world are on the United States, which alone bears the responsibility to preserve the light of democracy in the world:

We *say* we are for the Union. The world will not forget that we say this. We know how to save the Union. The world knows we do know how to save it. We—even *we here*—hold the power, and bear the responsibility. In *giving* freedom to the slave, we *assure* freedom to the *free*—honorable alike in what we give, and what we preserve. We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth. Other means may succeed; this could not fail. The way is plain, peaceful, generous, just—a way which, if followed, the world will forever applaud, and God must forever bless.¹⁰⁶

Here, Lincoln makes possibly the most forceful elaboration of the model perspective within the whole of the American civil religious tradition. The hopes of mankind all over the world and across all of time depend on not only the preservation of the Union, but on its purification. The case of the United States is definitive: it is the last, best hope of earth, and if it fails, any hope of democratic government falls with it. That the civil religious tradition has power to mobilize is clear, as Lincoln bases his

¹⁰⁵ Lincoln’s language here is reminiscent of Psalm 100:5, which says that God’s truth “endureth to all generations.”

¹⁰⁶ CW 5:537

argument for abolition in the moral responsibility of American political actors before all generations of humanity and even before God himself. It is a moment that he defines in terms of moral courage, challenging Congress to be willing to meet the divine charge of the United States and the moral challenge that it presents: the Union may with honor be saved and purified, or it may be lost via a mean moral cowardice. Such a failure would imperil the Union because for Lincoln there are here two opposed concepts of freedom: on the one hand, there is the vision of a negative liberty rooted in dominance over others, as the master is liberated by his mastery over the slave. On the other hand is Lincoln's vision of a freedom in which one's own liberty is indivisible from that of others, and because of this must be universally and equally acknowledged in all humans.¹⁰⁷ In his 1858 debates with Stephen Douglas, Lincoln had argued that "the same spirit that says, You work and toil and earn bread, and I eat it" was found in "the divine right of kings."¹⁰⁸ Slavery not only diminishes the prestige of American political institutions abroad, but also spiritually corrupts it at home by introducing a counter-republican privilege of aristocratic dominance.

When he speaks of saving or losing the Union, he means more than the empirical preservation of political institutions in their pre-war form. Lincoln here refers to saving the nation's soul. Where at one point he would save the Union by any means at all, here he rejects all means save abolition, which will finally make concrete the claim that all men are created equal. No means save the end of slavery

¹⁰⁷ Niebuhr (1966) p. 175

¹⁰⁸ In the seventh and last debate with Douglas at Alton, IL, Oct. 15, 1858. CW 3:316

are acceptable because no other means so guarantee the rebirth of the nation, which he will describe in the Gettysburg Address as a “new birth of freedom.” After agonizing over slavery for most of his political career, finally he feels that the way is plain. After Antietam, Lincoln is certain that God wills the end of slavery, and however imperfect his understanding of God’s will might be, it is his obligation to act in the best light that he is given.

On January 1, 1863, Lincoln issued the final Emancipation Proclamation, which Richard Hofstadter has famously described as having “all the moral grandeur of a bill of lading.”¹⁰⁹ Indeed, the language of the Emancipation Proclamation is dryly legal, detailing the liberation of slaves in the rebel states and encouraging the enlistment of black soldiers. Though Lincoln concludes it by invoking every source of authority available to him, saying, “upon this act, sincerely believed to be an act of justice, warranted by the Constitution, upon military necessity, I invoke the considerate judgment of mankind, and the gracious favor of Almighty God,” the document is otherwise free of rhetorical flourish.

There was, however, good cause for this. Lincoln and his cabinet were at pains to guarantee that the abolition of slavery should meet every legal technicality. This concern was motivated in large part by the Lincoln administration’s contentious relationship with the Taney court, which had been a thorn in their side since the beginning of Lincoln’s presidency. Maryland-born Chief Justice Roger B. Taney was a Jacksonian stalwart, and was in many ways sympathetic to the

¹⁰⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*. Knopf. New York, 1973 (1948) p. 169

Confederate cause. He had presided over the Dredd-Scott decision, and denied Lincoln the right to suspend habeas corpus in *Ex parte Merryman*, a ruling largely ignored by the administration, and one for which congressional radical Republicans considered impeaching Taney.¹¹⁰

The Emancipation Proclamation should thus be thought of primarily as a legal document, rather than one of rhetorical uplift. Lincoln is anxious to remain within constitutional bounds, and it is for this reason that he describes with such specificity the authority under which he is abolishing slavery, saying that he does so “by virtue of the power in me vested as Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States in time of actual armed rebellion against authority and government of the United States, and as a fit and necessary war measure for suppressing said rebellion.”¹¹¹ Lincoln is careful to spell out in detail under what authority he acts, over whom that authority is applicable, the conditions under which he is acting, and to what end. Each of these qualifications is designed to demonstrate how it is that Lincoln can, in his military capacity, undertake an action that would otherwise require the approval by Congress and the states of an amendment to the Constitution.¹¹² At all points, Lincoln felt his actions circumscribed by the letter of the Constitution, in a manner befitting his Protestant mode of understanding the nature of the American state and his priestly mode of speech.

¹¹⁰ Burlingame (2008) vol. 2, pp.151-153

¹¹¹ Emancipation Proclamation, Jan. 1, 1863, CW 6:30

¹¹² Wills (1992) p. 137, 141

6. The Unfinished Work

Though it lasted only a few minutes, the Gettysburg Address is perhaps the most influential of Lincoln's speeches, despite the fact that he was not the featured speaker of the day, that honor belonging to Whig politician and orator Edward Everett. The speech's profound articulation of Lincoln's understanding of the nature of the American polity has been transformative in terms of the nation's self-understanding, recentering it on the ideal of substantive equality and largely determining how one of its founding documents, the Declaration of Independence, is understood and interpreted. Delivered at the dedication of the Gettysburg cemetery, it describes a single nation united and defined by the pursuit of political equality. The cemetery itself reflected these concerns: unlike other military cemeteries, the men were buried with no distinction for rank. William Saunders, the landscape engineer who designed the cemetery, planned it so that "the position of each [state] lot, and indeed of each interment, is of relatively equal importance," so that Lincoln's words and the place of their delivery were in aesthetic and political harmony.¹¹³

The Battle of Gettysburg itself is often identified as the moment that the war's tide turned against the South. In June of 1863, Lee had again invaded the North, this time taking 75,000 soldiers through the Shenandoah Valley into Pennsylvania. Though Southern forces hoped to seize territory as far north as

¹¹³ Faust (2008) p. 100. Saunders quoted in Wills (1992) p. 29

Philadelphia, the goals of this campaign were political as well as military: the Confederates hoped, by a display of renewed military strength, to force Northern politicians to reconsider their commitment to the war. As Lee moved through Pennsylvania, Gen. Hooker hurried with the Army of the Potomac to engage him, only to be replaced in his command by George Meade three days before engaging the Confederate forces, making Meade the fifth man to command the Army of the Potomac in less than a year. The three days of battle between the 95,000 strong Army of the Potomac and Lee's 75,000 soldiers resulted in 23,000 Union and 28,000 Confederate casualties, or about one quarter of the Northern and one third of the Southern forces fielded.¹¹⁴ The battle reached its climactic moment on the third day with Pickett's Charge, when Lee in desperation ordered the advance of 12,500 men across three-quarter mile of open space, facing concerted artillery and rifle fire from the forces under Meade, who had expected the attack. More than half of the soldiers who undertook the charge were killed, wounded or captured. This decisive defeat brought the battle to a close, driving Lee to start his retreat to Virginia on July 4, with Meade's forces, damaged as they were, making only a half-hearted pursuit.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ McPherson (1988) pp. 653-663

¹¹⁵ Meade's offer of resignation was refused by his bitterly disappointed President. The cause for Lincoln's disappointment is revealed in a letter to Meade that he wrote but never sent, where he wrote to his general that "I do not believe you appreciate the magnitude of the misfortune involved in Lee's escape. He was within your easy grasp, and to have closed upon him would, in connection with our other late successes, have ended the war." (CW 6:327-28) Lee also offered his resignation to Davis, writing to him on August 8 that, "No one is more aware than myself of my inability for the duties of my position. I cannot even accomplish what I myself desire. How can I fulfill the expectations of others?" (*The Wartime Papers of R.E. Lee*, Clifford Dowdey & Louis H. Manarin, eds. Da Capo. New York, 1987. pp. 589-90) Though Davis rejected Lee's offer of resignation, the loss at Gettysburg was a political disaster for the Confederacy. The Union victory strengthened Northern support for the war effort and temporarily silenced the Copperheads. Suddenly, to the people and

Nonetheless, Lincoln appeared on the White House balcony to tell a gathered crowd that the “gigantic Rebellion” determined to “overthrow the principle that all men are created equal” had suffered a major defeat.¹¹⁶

The project of Lincoln’s speech at Gettysburg is one of interpreting and revising the American polity’s self-understanding, in fitting with the priestly concern for the codification of belief. In it, he looks not only to embed the carnage of the war within a greater narrative, making it comprehensible and thus meaningful, but also to decisively reject slavery as being outside the bounds of orthodox American life. It is a distillation of the history and content of what Lincoln described in an 1854 speech in Peoria as “our ancient faith”, casting the American polity as being at its core dedicated to political equality (a value, as his critics noted, not included in its Constitution). As such, it should be understood as part of a work of the refounding of the Republic, and indeed as part of its spiritual and political rebirth. Lincoln’s critics have picked up on this, as when H.L. Mencken remarked that

The Gettysburg speech was at once the shortest and the most famous oration in American history... the highest emotion reduced to a few poetical phrases. Lincoln himself never even remotely approached it. It is genuinely stupendous. But let us not forget that it is poetry, not logic; beauty, not sense. Think of the argument in it. Put it into the cold words of everyday. The doctrine is simply this: that the Union soldiers who died at Gettysburg sacrificed their lives to the cause of self-determination – that government of the people, by the people, for the people, should not perish from the earth. It is difficult to imagine

leadership of both North and South the war seemed on the verge of ending with a decisive defeat for the Confederacy. Moreover, the decisive defeat ended the hopes of the Confederacy for recognition and intervention by the British Empire. (McPherson (1988) pp. 664-667)

¹¹⁶ CW 6:319-320

anything more untrue. The Union soldiers in the battle actually fought against self-determination; it was the Confederates who fought for the right of their people to govern themselves.¹¹⁷

Mencken's argument here hinges on the question of who constitutes the people, and functions only if one is willing to exclude slaves from "person" status. At Gettysburg, Lincoln emphatically defines the United States as being a community of belief in universal human equality. In this way, it is the capstone of the priestly strand of Lincoln's civil religious speech, affirming the moral, spiritual, and political value of equality in such a way that it defines the American polity by its orientation toward that ideal. At Gettysburg, he argues for the efficacy of human action, saying that through devotion and faithful sacrifice, Americans can move the nation forward along its teleological trajectory toward equality. Implicit in this argument is the claim that the enemies of equality, which is to say the defenders of slavery, would retard that progress. In grounding national *telos* and identity in the affirmation and pursuit of the good of equality, Lincoln excludes the defenders of slavery from the American community of belief.¹¹⁸

The emphasis on equality is present from the first sentence of the Address: Lincoln begins by saying "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth upon this continent a new Nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." The method of dating, and indeed the cadence of the speech as whole, is derived from the Old Testament, as in Psalm

¹¹⁷ In *A Mencken Chrestomathy*, Edited and Annotated by the Author. Vintage Books. New York, 1982. pp. 222-223

¹¹⁸ Wilson (1974). p. 210

90:10, which reads “The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away.”¹¹⁹ The concern for mortality found in the Psalm is appropriate to the theme of the Gettysburg Address as a whole, which looks to give meaning to human death through the preservation of the life of the Union.¹²⁰

Lincoln’s use of the plural possessive pronoun “our” in reference to the fathers is suggestive, as the Israelites used the same language to refer to their forebears, and especially to the prophets.¹²¹ Thus, Lincoln depicts Americans as being a single people descended from common ancestors, who are in turn themselves dedicated to something higher. Lincoln presents this not as a new tenet of American belief, but as being in continuity with original ideals of American politics. The shared heritage of the American people is thus to pursue the charge of their fathers, here interpreted as the proposition that all men are created equal.¹²² Lincoln’s project is here one of the codification and affirmation of American belief,

¹¹⁹ Winger (2003) p. 101. Jaffa (1959) p. 189. Representative Galusha Grow used very similar language in an 1861 speech at the House of Representatives, but both instances strongly echo the biblical method of dating. (Don E. Fehrenbacher, *Lincoln in Text and Context*. Stanford, 1987. p. 283)

¹²⁰ McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*. Oxford. New York, 1990. p. 111; Winger (2003) 201. Garry Wills has argued that the Gettysburg Address should be understood within the Greek oratory tradition, and though this is true as a matter of form, it is shot through with Lincoln’s typically biblical choices in theme and wording. (Wills (1992) pp. 41-63)

¹²¹ As in Exodus 3:15: And God said moreover unto Moses, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, the LORD God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations.

¹²² Wills (1992) has an extensive commentary on Lincoln’s choice of the word “proposition”, meaning ‘a thing that is yet to be proved.’ See also Thurow (1976) pp. 76-77

as he looks to make substantive equality, rather than the social contract represented by the Constitution, the foundation of American political identity.¹²³

This common identity is reinforced when Lincoln describes a single Nation, not various States, as being the product of the founders' efforts. Moreover, Lincoln dates the Nation's existence from the Declaration of Independence, meaning that the existence of the unified American people is prior to any particular arrangement existing between the states.¹²⁴ In this way, the pursuit of political equality for Lincoln is the essence of the American polity, and serves as the common heritage and identity of the American people. It is the faith in human equality that marks one as being a legitimate descendent of the fathers. On July 4, 1858, Lincoln said of immigrants to America that

When they look through that old Declaration of Independence they find that those old men say that "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal," and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh, of the men who wrote that Declaration, and so they are.¹²⁵

¹²³ Winger (2003) p. 201

¹²⁴ This argument, originating with Daniel Webster, is deployed by Lincoln (as indeed it was by Webster) against the arguments put forth by John Calhoun, who argued that the Declaration of Independence had established 13 states as independent of one another as they were of the Great Britain. Calhoun and his followers contended that the United States came into being at the same time as the Articles of Confederation, and denied that the statement of principles at the outset of the Declaration had any binding force, or indeed particular import, whatsoever. (Jaffa 1959, p. 189)

¹²⁵ CW 2:501. Lincoln here echoes biblical language in two ways. First, the language of Genesis 3:23, in which Adam describes Eve as being the "flesh of my flesh." In this way, new believers in the tenet of equality are closer to the founders even than children are to fathers.

Second, Lincoln's language of blood and flesh is also reminiscent of the Eucharist, as in 1 Corinthians 24-25: "And when he had given thanks, he brake it, and said, Take, eat: this is my body, which is broken for you: this do in remembrance of me. After the same manner also he took the cup, when he had supped, saying, this cup is the new testament in my blood: this do ye, as oft as ye drink it, in remembrance of me." Thus, the sharing of flesh and blood is transformative and redemptive, an

Americans are for Lincoln united by shared belief, and the nation is a lineage defined by that belief in the place of blood, or rather, that faith *is* its blood. The fathers are the fathers only insofar as the children embrace the central idea that all men are created equal.¹²⁶

Lincoln continues, “Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that Nation or any Nation so conceived and so dedicated can long endure.” Lincoln again argues that the United States is a definitive case that demonstrates the possibility of democratic governance in the world.¹²⁷ Moreover the war is a test, in the form of an ordeal, which will reveal the truth of whether democratic order can resist localist anarchy, and whether republican equality can overcome the aristocratic domination found in slavery. Karl Marx, living in England at the time, concurred with Lincoln on the world-historical import of the American civil war, writing to Engels that “events over there are such as to transform the world.”¹²⁸

There is the shadow of Armageddon in Lincoln’s speech at Gettysburg, as the armies of two opposing faiths meet in final battle. The war is not only a military but also a spiritual conflict. “We are met,” he says, “on a great battle-field of that war. We are met to dedicate a portion of it as the final resting-place of those who here

act of remembrance leading to spiritual unity with the founder of the faith, as in John 6:56: “He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him.” The sharing of the political faith of the fathers, and thus their flesh and blood, initiates in immigrants a transformation that renders them as American as if they had all been the literal descendents of Thomas Jefferson (all of whom, admittedly, have not always been treated equally).

¹²⁶ Wills (1992), p. 86

¹²⁷ Jaffa (1959) p. 361.

¹²⁸ Marx to Engels, Oct. 29, 1862 (http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1862/letters/62_10_29.htm)

gave their lives so that the nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we do this.” The thematic concern with death is matched by Lincoln’s emphasis on life, and indeed on birth, as signaled by his repeated emphasis on the nation’s fathers, conception and “bringing forth”, as from the womb. Here, he identifies the continued life of the Union as being due to the redemptive sacrifice of the fallen of Gettysburg. Importantly, the dead in Lincoln’s telling did not simply lose their lives, but willingly *gave* them for the single purpose of the nation’s continued survival.¹²⁹ Lincoln casts the fallen as martyrs in a sacred cause, but in doing so names no individual, nor does he divide the soldiers by rank, as Everett did in his much longer speech that day.¹³⁰ They exist in a state of equality perfected by their collective sacrifice. In their sincere, egalitarian martyrdom for the cause of Union and equality, they can be said to have approximated the democratic ideal of the man who had once said that he would “rather be assassinated on this spot than to surrender” the principle that all men are created equal.

The sacred character of the soldiers’ sacrifice is emphasized when Lincoln says that “But in a larger sense we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men living and dead who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or subtract.”¹³¹ The struggle of the survivors and the blood of the dead has a sacralizing power beyond that of those

¹²⁹ Wills (1992) p. 59

¹³⁰ Winger (2003) p. 202

¹³¹ The AP transcript omits “poor”, but the Philadelphia *Inquirer* and the Chicago *Tribune* include it. Though both are generally inferior to the AP version, that both include the word seems to indicate that it was likely included, despite its absence from prepared drafts of the speech. For more, see CW 7:20 fn19.

Americans who had been spared the war, a transcendental move signaled by the shift of his argument to “a larger sense”.¹³² Lincoln emphasizes this with a triple denial: “we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow.”¹³³ The veterans of Gettysburg have reaped all possible honor, so it is impossible for the rest of the community to give more honor to the ground on which they fought; their sacrifice has itself made that ground sacred, and it cannot possibly be made more so. Indeed, that is not only sacred, as might be the grounds of a church, but hallowed, which is to say *holy*, in the way of a martyr’s relic.¹³⁴ It is a place not only for prayer, but a locus of religious veneration. Lincoln describes the place at which the tide of the war turned as the site of a holy event. It is honored, sacred, holy by its own virtue, and the community of believers can give it nothing beyond what it already possesses. The dead of Gettysburg have through their redemptive sacrifice become agents of religious and political meaning.¹³⁵

Lincoln emphasizes this, saying that “The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.” This may seem to be only an expression of modesty, to say nothing of being flatly wrong, as Lincoln elides his own role in insuring that the sacrifice at Gettysburg will be

¹³² Winger (2003) p. 202

¹³³ Briggs (2005) p. 309

¹³⁴ According to the OED, “hallow” and “holy” are both etymologically derived from the Teutonic *hailag*, derived in turn from the adjectival form of *heill*, which denotes full and perfect health, the absence of any illness or injury. In the Christian sense, the word indicates freedom from spiritual flaw or the taint of sin.

¹³⁵ Faust (2008) p. 189

remembered.¹³⁶ More than that, though, it is an expression of the humility that Lincoln believes to be essential to republican equality and solidarity. The dead of Gettysburg, perfected in equality by their death in the cause of the Union, are ironically elevated above the reach of the living. This in turn renders the living equal to one another, humbled before the sacrifice at Gettysburg.¹³⁷ By emphasizing the need for remembrance, Lincoln subtly shifts the focus of his speech from the dead to the living.

This shift in emphasis becomes more apparent as Lincoln advises his audience that “It is for us, the living, rather to be rededicated to the unfinished¹³⁸ work that they have so far so nobly carried on.” Americans for Lincoln can give no more honor to the dead, but by their sacrifice the dead have done honor to the living, pledging them to serve the same cause in which they themselves gave their lives. The redemptive blood sacrifice at Gettysburg requires the devotion of those for whom it was made. As he did in his farewell address in Springfield, Lincoln here depicts the Union as a political entity that points beyond itself to something better, to the central idea that all men are created equal. This was not something achieved by the fathers, but it was the fathers who set the United States on the course of

¹³⁶ Wills (1992) p. 58. Abolitionist Massachusetts Sen. Charles Sumner disagreed with Lincoln, saying that “The speech will live when the memory of the battle will be lost or only remembered because of the speech.” (Quoted in Fornieri (2003) p. 135)

¹³⁷ In Lincoln’s prophetic speech, God fills this role. In this crowning example of his priestly speech, it is possible (as it is not possible in his prophetic speech) for Americans to through devotion and sacrifice move America forward along the nation’s historical trajectory. It is this efficacy of human effort that is one of the major factors separating what I am calling Lincoln’s priestly speech from his prophetic.

¹³⁸ the AP has “refinished,” an obvious typographical error.

communal moral striving after a potentially unattainable goal.¹³⁹ In this way, Lincoln implies that there is nothing new in his agenda, which he portrays as in continuity with American political orthodoxy.¹⁴⁰ His cause is not valuable because it supports the Union, but the Union valuable because it supports the cause. Despite this, Lincoln here is engaged in a radical project of historical revision, attempting to reconstruct the past so that it authorizes a particular version of the future, while at the same time historicizing the institution of slavery in order to diminish its authority.

This emphasis intensifies in the remarkable last sentence of the Gettysburg Address:

It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us, that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that the dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation shall, under God, have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Lincoln's narrative of the nation's birth and soldiers' deaths concludes with the rebirth of the nation, which is born again in the blood of martyrs. This rebirth enables the living to draw increased devotion even as the dead gave the last of theirs; the living must go beyond what was given by the fallen, as the task remaining is one which only they can complete.¹⁴¹ It is a moment of romantic transcendence,

¹³⁹ Winger (2003) 59

¹⁴⁰ He does this in a way that J.G.A. Pocock describes as characteristic of religious radicals. (*Politics, Language and Time*. Atheneum. New York, 1973, p. 261)

¹⁴¹ Wills (1992) p. 62

as the Union overcomes past and present to be born anew in a perfected form.¹⁴² This rebirth is a radical moment of refounding in the ideal of substantive equality, and the new birth of freedom is backed by the weight of federal force in this expanded, open-ended concept of positive liberty.¹⁴³ In the terms of Mircea Eliade, this is a repetition of the cosmogonic act of the founders, repeating their actions and reconfirming them in an act of religious piety. Lincoln in this speech makes an effort to shift the hegemonic understanding of the United States from one grounded in consent and contract to one grounded in the admission and pursuit of human equality.

Importantly, this redemptive rebirth is accomplished under God, words that appear in none of the previously prepared transcripts of the speech but in almost all newspaper transcripts, indicating that Lincoln may have added it extemporaneously.¹⁴⁴ The claim that the nation is reborn under God is simultaneously to lend authority to the refounded American Republic and to chasten it. Across his career, Lincoln had deployed the language of civil religion to argue that God wills political equality, but in the course of his presidency almost as often deployed it to remind the polity that it is ultimately answerable to a higher

¹⁴² Winger (2003) p. 102. In a November 17, 1862 letter to Engels, Marx described the transformation of the American state under Lincoln's leadership as a "revolutionary movement." (http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1862/letters/62_11_17.htm)

¹⁴³ McPherson, *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution* 64

¹⁴⁴ Wills (1992) is suspicious of this claim, arguing that the addition could just as well have been made to the prepared speech in pencil (since faded) as added spontaneously. I suppose such an assertion could be made for any deviation from any script, though it is not clear why Wills makes this claim here. (p. 194)

authority.¹⁴⁵ Earlier in his career, this higher authority took the form of a set of sacralized political ideals, but by this point it is the living, personal God who was present at the nation's founding and who now punishes it with civil war. The people to whom Lincoln refers, in language borrowed from Webster,¹⁴⁶ is the *whole* of the people, rendered equals before the power of their God.¹⁴⁷

This interpretation is supported by Lincoln's use of the phrase "perish from the earth". It has been asserted that this speech, despite its remarkable religious sensibility, is without biblical reference, but this is not the case: this precise wording twice occurs in the Old Testament.¹⁴⁸ The first time is in the Book of Job, the definitive illustration of God's transcendence over human understanding, when Job's friend Bildad tries (mistakenly) to persuade Job that Job must have done something to deserve the suffering with which God has inflicted him. Bildad argues of the wicked that "His remembrance shall perish from the earth, and he shall have no name in the street. He shall be driven from light into darkness, and chased out of the world." "This," he says, "is the place of him that knoweth not God."¹⁴⁹ The second use of the phrase is in the Book of Jeremiah, in which God, speaking through the prophet, says to the nation of Israel that

The LORD is the true God, he is the living God, and an everlasting king:
at his wrath the earth shall tremble, and the nations shall not be able
to abide his indignation. Thus shall ye say unto them, The gods that

¹⁴⁵ Fornieri (2003) p. 47

¹⁴⁶ Wills (1992) 145

¹⁴⁷ Fornieri (2003) p. 87

¹⁴⁸ This is asserted by William J. Wolf (*The Almost Chosen People*. Garden City. Doubleday. New York, 1959. pp. 169-170). Thurow (1976) accepts Wolf's claim without comment. (p. 67)

¹⁴⁹ Job 18:17-18, 21

have not made the heavens and the earth, even they shall perish from the earth, and from under these heavens. He hath made the earth by his power, he hath established the world by his wisdom, and hath stretched out the heavens by his discretion.¹⁵⁰

Thus, Lincoln's double reference is a reminder to his audience that it is deviation from their divine charge that has led their nation to the brink of ruin. The transcendent judgment of the Almighty God is such that before it even other deities are as nothing. If this is true of gods, what then of the works of human hands? Even in the heart of one of his most optimistic public speeches, promising rebirth and redemption, Lincoln embeds a warning to maintain the political virtue of republican humility.

7. Conclusion

Throughout his priestly speech, Lincoln argues for the efficacy of human action in moving America forward through linear time toward the *telos* of political equality. In this strand of his civil religious thought, humans act as God's servant, even junior partners, in making manifest the good of democratic government. Throughout, he affirms the political, moral, and religious good of the United States of America, but as his presidency progressed, he increasingly emphasized that this good was due to the fact that the Union pointed beyond itself to something higher. Though he began his time in office by invoking the "mystic chords of memory" that bind individuals to one another and to the nation, by the time of his speech at

¹⁵⁰ Jeremiah 10:10-12

Gettysburg he has come to define and affirm the nation by its dedication to the ideal of equality, by definition depicting the defenders of slavery as being alien to the American polity and opposed to its world-historical mission.¹⁵¹ In his priestly speech, every affirmation of American political faith serves to define that faith, and thus also functions as an exclusion of that not affirmed.

The affirmative tone is a hallmark of Lincoln's speech in the priestly, mode, and as will be seen in the next chapter, it is notably absent from what I describe as his prophetic speech. Rather than depicting the American people as being ultimately united in their faith and affirming their agency in working to carry out God's will, Lincoln in the prophetic mode describes a people united in their failure before their God, and who are justly punished for their apostasy with the scourge of war. There, the American people, and indeed people everywhere, are revealed to be impotent before the will and judgment of an all-powerful God.

¹⁵¹ Wilson (1974) p. 210

3. THE DEMOCRACY OF THE FALL

ABRAHAM LINCOLN AS PROPHET

Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?
Genesis 18:25

As Lincoln concluded his second inaugural address, Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase (appointed to his position by Lincoln as a sop to the Radicals) stepped forward with the Bible, on which Lincoln had sworn his oath of office, open, at Lincoln's choosing, to Isaiah 5, which Lincoln leaned forward to kiss. This passage has been interpreted optimistically, even humanistically, as when one commentator (in what can only be described as a willful misreading) depicts Lincoln as kissing the Bible at the words "None shall be weary nor stumble among them."¹ This message of tranquil wellbeing is manifestly not the message of Isaiah 5. Lincoln's chosen passage reads in context:

²⁴Therefore as the fire devoureth the stubble, and the flame consumeth the chaff, so their root shall be as rottenness, and their blossom shall go up as dust: because they have cast away the law of the LORD of hosts, and despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.

²⁵Therefore is the anger of the LORD kindled against his people, and he hath stretched forth his hand against them, and hath smitten them: and the hills did tremble, and their carcasses were torn in the midst of the streets. For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand is stretched out still.

²⁶And he will lift up an ensign to the nations from far, and will hiss unto them from the end of the earth: and, behold, they shall come with speed swiftly:

¹ Allen C. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids, MI & Cambridge, 1999. p. 420

²⁷None shall be weary nor stumble among them; none shall slumber nor sleep; neither shall the girdle of their loins be loosed, nor the latchet of their shoes be broken:

²⁸Whose arrows are sharp, and all their bows bent, their horses' hoofs shall be counted like flint, and their wheels like a whirlwind:

²⁹Their roaring shall be like a lion, they shall roar like young lions: yea, they shall roar, and lay hold of the prey, and shall carry it away safe, and none shall deliver it.

³⁰And in that day they shall roar against them like the roaring of the sea: and if one look unto the land, behold darkness and sorrow, and the light is darkened in the heavens thereof.²

The importance of equality to Lincoln's civil religious speech cannot be overstated. In his prophetic mode of speech, however, it is expressed in terms of religious virtue rather than civic, as Lincoln in this mode speaks in terms not of equality, but humility.³ The difference in terminology is important because, while political equality may or may not be present, Lincoln conceives of humility as being motivated by the recognition of the fact that all humans, being imperfect, are rendered equal in the face of an inscrutable and transcendental God, a condition known among the New England Puritans as "the Democracy of the Fall."⁴ Thus, while political equality may or may not be present, its value is grounded in the recognition of a spiritual equality that is always present, whether or not it is recognized. In this way, humility is the appropriate recognition of this fact in terms

² Lincoln had marked with pencil verses 27 and 28. (Ronald C. White, Jr. *Lincoln's Greatest Speech*. Simon & Schuster. New York, 2002. p. 181) All biblical quotations from the King James Version.

³ Martin E. Marty describes civil religion as existing within a four-cell conceptual matrix, being either priestly or prophetic and depicting the nation as either under God or as self-transcending. Though it is my argument that Lincoln speaks in both priestly and prophetic modes, his civil religious speech always remains firmly within the "under God" category. ("Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion," in *American Civil Religion*, Russell E. Richey & Donald Jones, eds. Harper & Row, New York, 1974. pp. 145-146)

⁴ Wilson Carey McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America*. University of California. Berkeley, Los Angeles, & London, 1973. p. 128

of religion as equality is in terms of politics. Slavery is for Lincoln a denial of spiritual equality and an affront to God for which the nation as a whole is justly punished. This civil religious insight on Lincoln's part constitutes a new religious revelation, a new doctrine looking to transform the nation's self-understanding.⁵

Lincoln's speech in the prophetic mode has humility in the face of God as its center, as a religious corollary to the political good of equality, and it is in this that his warnings against triumphalism, self-righteousness, and pride are grounded. In this mode, Lincoln continues (as he does in his priestly speech) to depict all of the States, both loyal and rebel, as belonging to a single moral community, but it is a community defined by shared moral failure. Thus, Lincoln's favored genre in his prophetic mode is the jeremiad, calling on the apostate nation to return to the faith that constitutes it. He makes "not just a historical or political argument but a theological, even cosmological one,"⁶ as the war takes the form of divine justice against the nation for her sins. For Lincoln, the guilt for those sins is a burden shared between sections and among all Americans.

To a much greater degree here than in his priestly speech, the will of God is not to be understood but obeyed. Lincoln speaks in a way that is at once Calvinist and Hebraic, with a permeating emphasis on the religious and political importance

⁵ While for Marty prophetic speech is in some ways a matter of tone as much as content, Lincoln's prophetic speech in this way also meets Max Weber's standard of containing a new revelation of religious doctrine. (*Economy & Society*, vol. 1. Guether Roth & Claus Wittich, eds. Ephraim Fischhoff, Hans Gerth, A.M. Henderson, Ferdinand Kogler, C. Wright Mills, Talcott Parsons, Max Rheinstein, Guenther Roth, Edward Schills, & Claus Wittich, trans. University of California Press. Berkeley, Los Angeles, & London, 1978 (1968). p. 440)

⁶ Andrew R. Murphy, *Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11*. Oxford. New York, 2009. p. 10. On the tradition of the jeremiad in America, see also Sacvan Bercovitch's *The American Jeremiad* (University of Wisconsin. Madison, 1978)

of covenant. Further, the plans and desires of human beings are in his prophetic speech shown to be utterly impotent, though not meaningless, as God's will moves events to their appointed outcomes. It is this shared powerlessness in combination with the shared burden of sin that serves to render all humans spiritually equal. Touring the captured Southern capital of Richmond on April 3, 1865, Lincoln was greeted by a throng of liberated slaves, one of whom fell on his knees before the president. Lincoln's words at that moment succinctly encapsulate his thought, as he said "Don't kneel to me. You must kneel to God only, and thank him for the liberty that you will enjoy hereafter."⁷ Lincoln's words here reflect his conviction that humans are made equal by their shared insufficiency before the transcendent and all-powerful God. Embedding the nation's politics and history, to say nothing of the war's suffering and destruction, within a cosmic narrative, Lincoln is able to derive meaning from a long and bewildering series of events. In this way, he in his public speech fulfills what Weber describes as one of the primary functions of the prophet, to present a "unified view of the world derived from a consciously integrated, meaningful attitude toward life." For Weber, this attitude derives from the "religious conception of the world as a cosmos which is challenged to produce somehow a 'meaningful,' ordered totality, the particular manifestations of which are to be evaluated according to this postulate."⁸

Lincoln's prophetic project is centrally one of deriving moral, religious, and political meaning from history. He pursues this project by describing a universe

⁷ Guelzo (1999) p. 424

⁸ Weber (1978) p. 450, 451

under the control of an omnipotent and ultimately moral God who reveals himself through interventions in human, and especially American, history. This vision of the cosmos and of American history then provides a critical dimension from which specific actions, institutions, and events can be finally evaluated. Slavery in this strand of his speech is depicted less as retarding the nation's progress along its historical trajectory (as it is in his priestly speech) than as an affront to God on the part of a people providentially mandated to recognize the political good of equality. Though he presents this as a culmination of the project begun in the Declaration of Independence, it is equally true that Lincoln here works to transform Americans' understanding of their relation to their nation, their politics, and their God.⁹ Abraham Heschel writes of ancient Israel that "the countries of the world were full of abominations, violence, falsehood. Here was one land, cherished and chosen for transforming the world. *This* people's failure was most serious."¹⁰ These words describe exactly Lincoln's understanding in his prophetic mode of the relationship between God and the United States. He doubtless hoped that a chastened and repentant nation, humbled by the wrath of its God, would return to his favor, and that the punishments promised by Isaiah would come to an end.

Lincoln's prophetic mode of civil religious speech is a creation of his time in the presidency, demanding an attitude of humility, contrition and forgiveness as an acknowledgement of national sin and a universal human impotence in the face of

⁹ Weber (1978) argues that the "merging" of the categories of founders and renewers is typical of prophets. p. 439

¹⁰ Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*. Harper & Row. New York & Evanston, 1962. pp. 15

the overwhelming power of God. Though he had previously demonstrated a fear that the nation would fall from its political faith into apostasy and corruption, it is only in the period of his presidency that Lincoln's civil religious speech has this constellation of political virtues and vices.¹¹ This chapter moves chronologically through the development of Lincoln's civil religious thought in the prophetic mode, from his first Proclamation of a National Day of Fasting in 1861, announcing a day of national fasting and humiliation in the face of God's scourge of war, and traces its development across his presidency up to its culmination in the Second Inaugural Address.

1. The Beginning of Wisdom

The first year of the war went badly for the Union, and a Confederate victory at times seemed likely. On July 21, 1861, Union forces under Gen. Irvin McDowell suffered a humiliating defeat at Bull Run, 25 miles southwest of Washington. As the Federal troops returned to the capital as "a rain-soaked mob," Lincoln saw hopes

¹¹ Lincoln's concern with national apostasy dates back to his first major speech delivered upon his return to politics in 1854 in Peoria, in opposition to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which undid the Missouri Compromise. There, he described the opposition to slavery's expansion as being in line with "our ancient faith" in "the spirit of '76", which tells us plainly that "all men are created equal." It is worth noting that even in 1854, he conceived of the Declaration of Independence as the foundational document of American politics and identity, and equality as the nation's political *telos*. Nonetheless, the total lack of emphasis on the activity of God in this speech, combined with an Arminian (or even Pelagian) understanding of political salvation in which individuals essentially save or damn themselves by their own actions, distinguishes it from the rigorous affirmation of God's omnipotence over impotent human action that is the hallmark of his prophetic speech. At Peoria it is the faith in the messianic function of the Revolution that is threatened, while the personal God is present almost not at all. (*The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. Roy P. Basler, ed. Rutgers. New Brunswick, NJ, 1953-1955. Volume 2, p. 247-283. In further citations of Lincoln's *Collected Works*, I will refer to note it as CW volume:page, so that this reference, for example, would appear as CW 2:247-283)

for a speedy victory fade, remarking of the war's progress that "It's damned bad." The route was so devastating that the capital ran wild with rumors that the Confederates were on the heels of the retreating Union forces, and that internal traitors were about to hand the city over to Jefferson Davis. One of Lincoln's generals, anticipating the capital's overrun, came to the White House at two o'clock in the morning to evacuate Lincoln's family, though Mary Todd Lincoln would have none of it.¹² Moreover, Lincoln faced a number of political crises, as when Gen. John C. Fremont, a committed abolitionist, issued a military order of emancipation in Missouri. Fearing that "half the army would lay down its arms" and "that three more states would rise—Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri," Lincoln swiftly countermanded the order and stripped Fremont of his command.¹³

As an overabundance of caution on the part of general in chief George B. McClellan allowed the Confederacy time to consolidate militarily and politically, the Union's prospects in the war were not encouraging.¹⁴ It was in this environment of military and political anxiety that Lincoln on August 12 issued his first Proclamation of a National Fast Day. In this, he adopted a ritual observance characteristic of New England Puritanism, and of New England Christianity in general through the end of the 19th Century. While one prominent historian has dismissed these proclamations,

¹² Guelzo (1999) p. 294

¹³ Guelzo (1999) p. 331

¹⁴ In March of 1862, McClellan came under withering criticism after the Confederate evacuation of Manassas, when it was discovered that the Confederate forces that he had been so reluctant to engage due to their artillery had slipped away, leaving behind logs painted black to resemble cannon known as Quaker guns. (James McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*. Oxford. Oxford & New York, 1988. p. 423-24)

along with Lincoln's proclamations of various days of Thanksgiving, as being 'only' symbolic, they are in fact communications of Lincoln's vision of the nature of the American polity and its special obligations to and relationship with God.¹⁵ Analysis of the first Proclamation of a National Fast Day is to my knowledge rare, and it is uncommon to see it mentioned even in passing. An in-depth analysis of its text reveals an early version of Lincoln's civil religious understanding of the war's meaning in ways that are indicative of his later, more well-known public speech.

Noting that he is acting in response to a request from both houses of Congress to "recommend a day of public humiliation,¹⁶ prayer, and fasting, to be observed by the people of the United States with religious solemnities," he writes that "it is fit and becoming in all people, at all times, to acknowledge and revere the Supreme Government of God, to bow in humble submission to his chastisements; to confess and deplore their sins and transgressions in the full conviction that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom".¹⁷ Though this is in many ways a standard call to repentance, it is made with a sacralized political purpose in mind, as suggested by the invocation of God in his governing capacity. The phrase "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" occurs twice in the Bible, at Psalm 111:10 and at Proverbs 9:10. Psalm 111 is devoted to describing the transcendental

¹⁵ Guelzo (1999) p. 322

¹⁶ In his Fast-Day Sermon delivered in Boston, January 1636, John Wheelwright, a Massachusetts contemporary of John Winthrop, also described the fast day as a "day of humiliation". (*John Wheelwright, His Writings, including his Fast-Day Sermon, 1637, and his Mercurius Americanus, 1645, With a Paper upon the Genuineness of the Indian Deed of 1629, and a Memoir by Charles H. Bell, AM.* Prince Society, Boston, 1876, p. 157)

¹⁷ CW 4:482

greatness and goodness of God, and the two verses preceding that cited by Lincoln read, "The works of his hands are verity and judgment; all his commandments are sure. They stand fast for ever and ever, and are done in truth and uprightness." Thus, in the context of Psalm 111, the fear of God is warranted by his stature above all other things in power and in goodness. There is a quality here that speaks strongly to the predestinarian Calvinist tradition in which Lincoln was embedded, and which in the United States birthed the tradition of the fast day. Indeed, the whole of Psalm 111:10 speaks strongly to a Protestant, voluntarist view of God's goodness: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do his commandments: his praise endureth for ever." It is the understanding of man's insignificance before God that generates the fear of him, and obedience is the mark of this good understanding. This obligation to obedience is not then contingent on human understanding, nor on human notions of justice: God does not in this view will a thing because it is just, it is just because God wills it.

Taken in isolation, the meaning of Proverbs 9:10, which reads in its entirety that "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding", is similar to that Psalm 111:10. In context, however, it is slightly but importantly different, as the ninth chapter of Proverbs is concerned with the way that wisdom is acquired, and with that which separates the wise from the foolish. Written in the voice of wisdom personified, Proverbs 9:11-12 read, "For by me thy days shall be multiplied, and the years of thy life shall be increased. If thou be wise, thou shalt be wise for thyself: but if thou scornest, thou alone shalt bear it."

Further, while foolishness personified encourages “he that wanteth understanding to enter her home, saying that “Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant,” he who heeds her is doomed by his folly, because “he knoweth not that the dead are there; and that her guests are in the depths of hell.” Lincoln’s double citation has the implication that those who heed the will of God will be preserved, while those who stray will be justly punished for their actions. At the same time, this divine will, and thus the divine justice by which punishment is meted out, exists on a plane so far removed from the human experience as to be incomprehensible to its recipients. Calvin’s claim that God works through “a just and blameless, but at the same time incomprehensible judgment” well applies to Lincoln’s formulation of the divine will.¹⁸

In the following paragraph of this proclamation, Lincoln moves from the universal religious obligations of humanity to those specific to the United States, emphasizing the special obligations of the United States before the will of God. He continues:

And whereas, when our own beloved Country, once, by the blessing of God, united, prosperous, and happy, is now afflicted with faction and civil war, it is particularly fit for us to recognize the hand of God in this terrible visitation, and in sorrowful remembrance of our own faults as a nation and as individuals, to humble ourselves before Him, and to pray for His mercy,—to pray that we may be spared further punishment, though most justly deserved...

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Henry Beveridge, trans. Hendrickson Publishers. 2008. Book 3, chapter 21, p. 613

In the strongest language of his political career to this point, Lincoln asserts that nations, as well as individuals, have a moral and ever religious character, and thus that even those who may be individually innocent can be justly punished for the transgressions of their polity. As Abraham Heschel puts it in his analysis of the Jewish prophets, when God apportions moral responsibility for the actions of Israel, even if “few are guilty, all are responsible.”¹⁹ Lincoln’s words here are a remarkably written expression of the common Whig trope that the moral well-being of the community affected the extent to which the individual was able to embrace a correct form of morality.²⁰ That there exists a definitively correct form of political morality for Lincoln is apparent, and though it remains unstated here, its content is equally apparent from his civil religious speech elsewhere: for him, the United States has a divine mandate to pursue the political ideal of equality, a pursuit in which failure equates to the defiance of God’s will. Slavery for Lincoln takes on the character not only of sin, but almost of original sin, causing the nation to fall from a state of grace.²¹ Though the nation may be redeemed from this sin, it can never pretend to

¹⁹ Heschel (1962) p. 16

²⁰ For the Whigs, the moral states of the individual and of the community were interdependent. A virtuous community was understood to more easily produce virtuous individuals, who in turn worked to render the community yet more virtuous, in a kind of feedback loop that led either to ever-increasing virtue or, in the reverse, vice. (J. David Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion: Remaking American Liberalism*. Princeton. Princeton, 1994. p. xxviii)

²¹ Hannah Arendt comes close to saying this, when in her essay “Civil Disobedience” she describes slavery as the nation’s “original crime” and argues that its taint on the nation’s institutions and tacit political consensus complicated the ability of those institutions insufficient, as they exist, to deal with the slavery’s full legacy. (in *Crises of the Republic*. Harcourt, Brace, & Jovanovich. New York, 1969. pp. 90-91) Barack Obama, in a 2008 campaign speech on race issues titled “A More Perfect Union” delivered at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia after the publicization of politically inflammatory by his longtime pastor Rev. Jeremiah Wright, was more explicit. There, he described the Constitution as “ultimately unfinished. It was stained by this nation’s original sin of slavery, a question that divided the colonies and brought the convention to a stalemate until the founders

innocence, and any such pretension in the past was an act of vanity. Thus, the “terrible visitation” of God’s wrath in the form of the Civil War, and more than that, is “most justly deserved,” for the same reason that “it is particularly fit for us to recognize the hand of God” in the coming of the war, because the United States is special in the eyes of God, who has given it its reason for being. Lincoln’s hope here is that the mercy of God is as great as his fury, and that the nation will not reap the full justice of its punishment.

It is “by the blessing of God” that the United States had previously enjoyed its success and stability, and it is to this state that Lincoln hopes to return by means of a national return to the faith, urging Americans to pray

that our arms may be blessed and made effectual for the re-establishment of law, order and peace, throughout the wide extent of our country; and that the inestimable boon of civil and religious liberty, earned under His guidance and blessing by the labors and sufferings of our fathers, may be restored in all its original excellence.

The ultimate blessing of God for Lincoln is not the prosperity and happiness that he had previously mentioned, but the freedoms obtained under republican government for the “wide extent of our [united] country.” The combined mention of fathers and origins is clearly a reference to the founding generation, but note how far he has traveled from the description of the founders in the Lyceum Address of 1838: where at that time he described America as the result of human action in accordance with sacred political principles, here the founders act as the direct instruments of God’s

chose to allow the slave trade to continue for at least twenty more years, and to leave any final resolution to future generations.” (<http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/hisownwords>, as of 8/30/2010)

will. The call for a restoration to “original excellence” further emphasizes the way in which the nation has fallen from a state of edenic grace. At the time of the founding, which for Lincoln is the issuance of the Declaration of Independence, the nation was in his telling fully committed to the pursuit of equality, but its subsequent transgressions have stripped it of the blessed state of peace and unity.

Though this language is very much that of Calvinism, the God described is not that of Christianity so much as he is the God of America. Recommending the last Thursday of the following month as “a day of humiliation, prayer, and fasting for all the people of the nation,” a group that for him includes the residents of the rebel states, Lincoln concludes his proclamation saying

I do earnestly recommend for all the People, and especially to all ministers and teacher of religion of all denominations, and to all heads of families, to observe and record that day according to their several creeds and modes of worship, in all humility and with all religious solemnity, to the end that the united prayer of the nation may ascend to the Throne of Grace and bring down plentiful blessings upon our Country.

Lincoln here alludes to Hebrews 4, which is devoted thematically to the irresistible judgment and infinite mercy of God. The God described there is all-seeing and quick to judge, as in Hebrews 4:12: “For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” However, in Hebrews 4:16, the verse cited by Lincoln, it is divine mercy that is emphasized, as it reads “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” Despite the

nation's collective sinfulness, Lincoln hopes that it can successfully approach God for forgiveness. Though the language and mode of spiritual redemption are obviously Christian, it is to all clergy and religious individuals in the nation that Lincoln addresses himself, explicitly acknowledging their religious diversity.²² It is not to any particular denomination, or even to Christians per se, that he speaks, but to the American people, united by their shared destiny, obligations, and political identity. He asks the nation, riven by war, to demonstrate its spiritual union through the "united prayer of the nation," and in so doing to obtain God's forgiveness, restoring it to political unity and rededicating it to its sacred charge. Though he cites the New Testament, his civil religious framework strongly emphasizes the salvation of the community in this world. In this way, it has more affinity with the conception of salvation held by the ancient Israelites than that of the New England Puritans. Understanding the nation as a moral and religious unit that has been visited by divinely-inflicted political disaster, Lincoln focuses on the community's atonement with its God, bracketing the question of the individual's salvation in the afterlife.²³ Though the Union was politically divided, Lincoln at all

²² Lincoln's political relationship was very much strongest with the evangelical Christian community, but he strove to cultivate good relationships with Catholic and Jewish groups as well. Given his distaste for sectarian conflict of all stripes, it is reasonable to assume a high level of religious tolerance and respect on his part. (Richard Carwardine, "Lincoln's Religion" in *Our Lincoln*. Mark A. Noll, ed. W.W. Norton & Co. New York & London, 2008. p. 244)

²³ The vision of the relationship between the community and its God that Lincoln depicts here is indebted to Puritan conceptions of covenant, but he leans even more heavily on the Old Testament than they did. The New England Puritans understood there to be two different forms of covenant with God, the personal and the communal, both understood as branches of the Covenant of Grace. On the personal level, it was believed that God's grace could fall on the individual alone, as the saint could be regenerate with or without inhabiting a virtuous community. The community, by contrast, could by taking Israel as its model enter into a collective covenant with God by dedicating itself to "a

times envisioned it as a moral and spiritual unit, bound together in sin and virtue by responsibilities that it was not possible to abandon.

A number of commentators have suggested that the death from fever of Lincoln's eleven year-old son Willie on February 20, 1862, led to an increase in his level of religiosity.²⁴ In this, they have some contemporary precedent, as Herndon quoted Mary Todd Lincoln as saying "Mr. Lincoln never joined any church. He was a religious man always, as I think. He *first thought*—to say think—about this subject was when Willie died—*never before*; he read the Bible a good deal about 1864. He felt religious, more than ever before, about the time he went to Gettysburg. Mr. Lincoln was not a technical Christian."²⁵ While it is obviously difficult to prove that Lincoln's personal religiosity increased after the death of a second son (and he had been speaking the language of biblical religion for a long time before), it is a possible explanation for the increased presence of religious themes in his private writing. At his son's funeral, Lincoln is reported to have cried out, "My poor boy. He was too

specifically enunciated political program," regardless of whether some (or even most) of its component individuals were in a state of grace.

Because the community exists only in this world, it would be rewarded for its obedience and punished for its transgressions in this life rather than the next. Different from other communities, the covenanted polity rose and fell not by the whims of fate, but at the will of God. Moreover, unlike the personal covenant, the communal was not irrevocable, and could be ended by its own depravity. (Perry Miller, *The New England Mind from Colony to Province*. Belknap. Cambridge, MA and London, 1953) Though this has obvious similarities to Lincoln's civil religious framework, Lincoln differs from the Puritans in that he speaks *only* of the communal covenant, rarely if ever indicating any belief in the existence of individual covenants for otherworldly salvation. In this way, he cleaves more closely to the Puritans' Israelite model than did the Puritans themselves.

²⁴ See, for example, Michael Burlingame, *Abraham Lincoln: a Life*. John Hopkins. Baltimore, 2008. Vol. 2, p. 299

²⁵ Herndon, "Lincoln's Religion," *Illinois State Register*, Dec., 1873. Mary would claim to never have said any such thing, writing to her cousin John T. Stuart on December 15, 1873, that "With very great sorrow & natural indignation have I read of Mr Herndon, placing words in my mouth—*never once* uttered." (*Mary Todd Lincoln: Her Life and Letters*, ed. Justin G. Turner and Linda Leavitt Turner. Alfred A. Knopf. New York, 1972. pp. 603)

good for this earth. God has called him home. I know that he is much better off in heaven, but then we loved him so. It is hard, hard to have him die!" Desperate with grief, he asked over and over, "Why is it? Oh, why is it?"²⁶ In his moment of anguish, Lincoln experiences grief in the form of human impotence before the will of an inscrutable God. Where human desires and the divine will conflict, the divine will of necessity wins out regardless of the sincerity or even the goodness of those desires. This is a theme that very much comes to the forefront of his civil religious speech in the following years, culminating in the Second Inaugural Address.

2. God Wills This Contest

As his words upon receiving news of his son's death suggest, Lincoln came to see the hand of Providence as being increasingly active, one might even say heavy, in American history. More and more, he saw God himself as motivating all events, but at the same time grew less and less certain that he could understand to what end. At around the time of his son's death, Lincoln's doubts about the cautious Gen. McClellan's ability were justified by the latter's failure to capture Richmond in the Peninsular Campaign, especially when his abundance of caution led to a series of humiliating defeats against highly mobile forces commanded by Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson, culminating in the Seven Days Battles. At first, however, the Campaign looked to be succeeding, which prompted Lincoln to issue his first

²⁶ Burlingame (2008) vol. 2, p. 298

national proclamation of a day of Thanksgiving on April 10, 1862.²⁷ Titled “Proclamation of Thanksgiving for Victories,” Lincoln appears to feel that the prayers of the American people have begun to be answered, saying that “It has pleased Almighty God to vouchsafe signal victories to the land and naval forces engaged in suppressing an internal rebellion, and at the same time avert from our own country the dangers of foreign intervention and invasion.”²⁸ The eyes of God, then, are firmly focused on the United States, and Lincoln credits him with direct intervention in the war’s fortunes. Moreover, he appears to take the early victories of the Peninsular Campaign as a sign of God’s favor, despite a bloody Confederate victory at Shiloh only days before, a battle resulting in more American casualties than all wars to that point combined, as each army suffered about 10,000 casualties.²⁹

This Proclamation is in many ways the mirror image of the Proclamation of a National Fast-Day, with the “People of the United States” now being encouraged to “gather in their accustomed places of public worship” to “especially acknowledge and render thanks to our Heavenly Father,” to ask consolation for the families of the dead, and to “reverently invoke the Divine Guidance for our national counsels, to the

²⁷ Lee’s dynamic deployment of his forces convinced McClellan that he was outnumbered two to one, when in fact the Army of the Potomac was confronting Confederate forces less than half their own number. He at one point telegraphed, “I shall have to contend against vastly superior odds... If [the army] is destroyed by overwhelming numbers... the responsibility cannot be thrown on my shoulders; it must rest where it belongs.” Quoted in McPherson (1988) p. 464

²⁸ CW 5:185. Before Lincoln, days of national thanksgiving had been proclaimed only about a dozen times.

²⁹ McPherson (1988) p. 413. McPherson quotes Gen. Sherman on seeing “piles of dead soldiers’ mangled bodies . . . without heads and legs. . . . The scenes on this field would have cured anybody of war.”

end that they may speedily result in the restoration of peace, harmony, and unity throughout our borders, and hasten the establishment of fraternal relations among all the countries of the earth.”³⁰ Here, the United States is exceptional not only due to God’s special involvement in its history, but in that it is in some way determinative of the future of global politics, as Lincoln ties the restoration of the Union to the coming of world peace.³¹

Lincoln’s civil theology was moved to greater heights by adversity than by victory. His first proclamation of a day of national thanksgiving sounds notes important to and familiar from his previous civil religious speech, but lacks the piercing theological edge found even in such neglected documents as his first proclamation of a national fast day. That being said, the months following provided much to spur his civil religious thinking forward. The restoration of the Union of which Lincoln had spoken, to say nothing of the establishment of fraternal relations between the nations of the earth, seemed very far off in the summer of 1862, as major Union Defeats came at the Seven Days Battles and the disaster of Second Bull Run.

As described in the previous chapter, the question of abolition at this time weighed heavily on Lincoln’s mind, demonstrated by what has come to be referred

³⁰ CW 5:186

³¹ In closing, he dates his proclamation as having been “Done at the City of Washington, this tenth day of April, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-two, and of the Independence of the United States the eighty-sixth.” This style of dating serves to link the history of the United States to that of Christianity, on the one hand measuring time from the birth of the Christian messiah and on the other from the moment of the Union’s founding, which is of course the time of the Declaration of Independence. This style of dating is not unique to him, but the frequency with which he deploys it is notable, and, as argued in the previous chapter, has the same effect when he uses a similar measurement of time in the Gettysburg Address.

to as his Meditation on the Divine Will.³² Nicolay and Hay, his secretaries and biographers, account that it was written in September of 1862, “while his mind was burdened with the weightiest question of his life... It was not written to be seen of men.”³³ This fragment of Lincoln’s personal writing is remarkable in the way that it foreshadows the themes of the Second Inaugural Address, delivered three years later, even from its short opening sentence, “The will of God prevails.” One commentator has held that these words are innocuous enough, palatable to all Christians and indeed all within the monotheistic tradition, but this is not the case.³⁴ Lincoln is not saying that the will of God is a thing that prevails, or that his will always overcomes the obstacles in its way, but that the will of God is *that which* prevails, which is to say that all that *is* is the direct result of God’s having willed it. This is an idea fraught with religious horror, building on the voluntarist ethical position attributed to God in Lincoln’s earlier proclamation of a national fast day, as the inscrutable mind of God wills *absolutely everything* that should occur in history, for the good or ill of humans yet always in a perfect condition of divine justice.

³² Recall from the previous chapter that contemporary sources describe Lincoln wrestling mightily with the decision of whether to proclaim the abolition of slavery. In the end, he described to his cabinet a pact that he had made with God that, if Lee was driven from the North, he would abolish slavery. From this point on, slavery assumed the central role in Lincoln’s understanding of the war, which he now understood to have been inflicted on the United States by God in punishment for the sin of slavery. For more, see chapter 2, part 3.

³³ CW 5:404 The precise date that it was composed is uncertain. Nicolay and Hay date it at September 20th, but Basler argues persuasively that this is too late, as his mind had clearly been made up on the subject of emancipation by that point. Basler argues persuasively that it could have been written as early as September 2, when he was in near despair following Second Bull Run. Attorney General Bates said of him then that he “seemed wrung by the bitterest anguish—said he felt almost ready to hang himself.”

³⁴ Guelzo (1999) says this. p. 327

Lincoln's utter uncertainty at this time as to what God's will might be is described as he writes,

In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one *must* be wrong. God can not be *for*, and *against* the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something altogether different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say that this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it not end yet. By his mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either *saved* or *destroyed* the Union without human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.

It is for Lincoln not possible to know the will of God. It may or may not coincide with either party of the war, or may be something else altogether. Having once been confident that "God is with us," Lincoln had begun to suspect that it was simply not possible to say what the purposes of God may or may not be.³⁵ He approaches this theological conclusion tentatively, saying that he is *almost* ready to say that it is *probably* true that God willed not only the advent of the war, but its continuance. For an omnipotent being, it would be of no cost to save or destroy either side, to prevent the war altogether, or to end it immediately, or simply to use his "quiet power" to alter the minds of the combatants.³⁶ "Yet the contest proceeds." It is

³⁵ Included in a speech at a Republican banquet, December 1856. CW 2:385 See previous chapter for more on this.

³⁶ Lincoln here speaks of the bad will of the secessionists as being not due to God's action, but to his inaction. Paradoxically, this in no way affirms the freedom of even a bad will. This is apparent when Luther speaks in the same terms in *Bondage of the Will*. There, he describes God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart in Exodus, and argues that "God works evil in us (that is, by means of us) not through God's own fault, but by reason of our own defect", which is itself inescapable without God's redeeming power. (Packen & Johnston, trans. London, James Clarke & Co. Ltd, 1957. p. 193) It is

small wonder that Lincoln hesitates to attribute to God's will the destruction, bloodshed, and suffering of the war, but to do otherwise would be tantamount to denying the existence of God at all.³⁷

Here, Lincoln appears to doubt the efficacy of human effort, assuming "an attitude of humility toward life and death that adequately took into account the extent to which human beings are not entirely in control of events."³⁸ As he later wrote, he felt plainly that he had not been in control of events, but rather than events had controlled him.³⁹ This state of heightened anxiety arising from a combination of human responsibility before God and impotence before his will is characteristic of Protestant thought. In the late 16th century, English non-conformist and proto-Puritan Rev. Richard Rogers expressed this sentiment by saying that "The Lord hath hedged me in on every side."⁴⁰ It is known that in his youth Lincoln for a time held to the doctrine of necessity, an atheistic point of view that all things in the universe were more or less mechanically determined, and that he had been raised in a strongly predestinarian environment.⁴¹ In the Meditation, he appears to have been driven by the events of his life since taking office to adopt a fusion of the two, with humans acting as little more than God's instruments in the world. God

worth considering, however, that for an omnipotent being action and inaction are equally costless, and so it must be that both good and evil outcomes are according to His will.

³⁷ This is made explicit in Lincoln's letter to Thurlow Weed of March 15, 1865, on the subject of his Second Inaugural Address. (CW 8:356) See below in section 7 of this chapter for more.

³⁸ Stewart Winger, *Lincoln, Religion, and Romantic Cultural Politics*. Northern Illinois University Press. DeKalb, 2003. p. 181

³⁹ Letter to Albert G. Hodges, April 4, 1864. CW 7:282

⁴⁰ Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament*. Alfred A. Knopf. New York, 1977. p. 207

⁴¹ For a scholarly and intellectually sensitive examination of the sources and implications of Lincoln's fatalism, see Guelzo's "Abraham Lincoln and the Doctrine of Necessity", *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association*, vol. 18, no. 1. Winter 1997, pp. 57-81

certainly could accomplish his aims without any of their involvement, yet, for reasons that remain unknowable, he chooses not to.⁴²

3. We Have Forgotten God

As described in part three of the previous chapter, after the Battle of Antietam Lincoln became increasingly confident that it was slavery that had caused God to punish the United States with civil war. Where in his priestly speech Lincoln exhorts Americans to devote themselves anew to working God's will in the world, he in his prophetic speech urges contrition and repentance in the hope that God will turn away his wrath. At Chancellorsville, Virginia on May 1-5, Union forces under Gen. Hooker suffered a decisive defeat at the hands of Lee's dramatically outnumbered soldiers, with the battle ending in Hooker's retreat. Over the five days of fighting, the Union suffered 17,000 casualties out of 130,000 soldiers fielded, while Lee's Confederates lost 13,000 out of 60,000. It was the most catastrophic Union defeat since the early days of the war, which in early 1862 had seemed to be drawing to a close and now had no end in sight. Lincoln is reported to have reacted with shock to the news, saying "My God! My God! What will the country say?"

⁴² During the war, the idea that God backed one side or the other, guiding events toward its eventual victory, was by far the majority view. Less common was the perspective that Providence was uninvolved in the war's outcome, as expressed by Confederate General Edward Porter Alexander when he said that "It is customary to say that 'Providence did not intend that we should win.' But Providence did not care a row of pins about it." Even less common was to say, as Lincoln does, that while Providence may have been involved, the purposes of God could not be known. (Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as Theological Crisis*. University of North Carolina. Chapel Hill, 2006. p. 87)

The disaster at Chancellorsville prompted Lincoln to issue a second proclamation of a national fast day. In it, he depicts a nation spiritually united by its failure to uphold the will of a transcendental God. Moreover, he argues for a republican equality based in the virtue of humility, which is in turn rooted in a shared human inadequacy before a transcendent God.⁴³ His focus here is on the collective moral character of the Union, and the failures that have led God to inflict on it the scourge of civil war. That the nation has its own moral being is explicit, as Lincoln writes that “it is the duty of nations as well as men to own their dependence upon the overruling power of God, to confess their sins and transgressions in humble sorrow.”⁴⁴ The moral status of individuals and their communities are here analytically separable, but interdependent in a way characteristic of Whig moral and political thought. Moreover, Lincoln depicts the American polity as being directly answerable to the transcendental authority of God. The emphasis on humility and the sin of pride is central to this proclamation in a way typical of Calvinist thought, as “we have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of Heaven,” but “we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own.”⁴⁵ This is the same overweening self-regard that Lincoln identified in his 1854 speech in Peoria as

⁴³ Glenn E. Thurow, *Abraham Lincoln and American Political Religion*. State University of New York. Albany, 1976. p. 114

⁴⁴ CW 6:156

⁴⁵ T.H.L. Parker has argued that this emphasis on the vanity of human wisdom is “a distinctive feature of Calvin’s thought. Our sin consists in pride, pride not only of will, but of mind: we are ‘high minded.’ Although we are ignorant, we think we know and that we do not need to be taught like the dunces’ table in the village school.” (*Calvin’s Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. Grand Rapids, MI, 1959. p. 47)

being akin to the worship of Mammon, contrasting it against the “ancient faith” (ancient as in original) rooted in the Declaration of Independence’s assertion that all men are created equal. There, self-regard led to a level of self-interest that legitimized slavery and led Americans astray from their faith in the ideals of democracy, and here their self-deification has had the same effect, though the emphasis on an active, personal God is much greater here. The problem for Lincoln is clear: “we have forgotten God.”

In the terms of Lincoln’s civil religious framework, the United States is a nation whose birth was accomplished by divine intervention, and Americans are thus “an almost chosen people.” This near-chosenness, and the exceptionality that it implies, are the result of the special standards to which the United States is held. For the American people to forget God is in this way equivalent to forgetting that which makes them Americans, losing what Lincoln believes to be the central element of American political identity. The central role of the relationship between the nation and its God, which renders that nation exceptional among the peoples of the earth, is strongly reminiscent of that between Israel and the God of the Old Testament. Indeed, the phrase “forgotten God” appears a number of times throughout the Old Testament as an accusation against the Israelites who have strayed from their covenant with their God. For the Israelites to abandon their relationship with God, forsaking the special accountability before him implicit in that relationship, is obviously for them to cease being Israelites in any meaningful way; to be an Israelite *is* to be specially accountable to the God of Israel, the two are

not separable. In the Old Testament, this sin is met with the promise of divine retribution, as in Deuteronomy 32:17-19, which says of the Israelites that “They sacrificed unto devils, not to God; to gods whom they knew not, to new gods that came newly up, whom your fathers feared not. Of the Rock that begat thee thou art unmindful, and hast forgotten God that formed thee. And when the LORD saw it, he abhorred them, because of the provoking of his sons, and of his daughters.”⁴⁶

Lincoln describes exactly the same relationship existing between the Americans and their God, saying “inasmuch as we know that, by His divine law, nations like individuals are subjected to punishments and chastisements in this world, may we not justly fear that the awful calamity of civil war, which now desolates the land, may be but a punishment, inflicted upon us for our presumptuous sins, to the end of our national reformation as a whole people?”⁴⁷ “Reformation” in this context bears a number of meanings: it may refer to the reforming of the Union as a whole people, or to the moral improvement of the American people as a result of their chastisement, or it may describe a return to a purified version of the faith, as Protestants understand the Reformation. Based on the civil religious framework that he describes here and elsewhere, it is likely that

⁴⁶ Compare Isaiah 17:10-11, which says of the Israelites that “Because thou hast forgotten the God of thy salvation, and hast not been mindful of the rock of thy strength, therefore shalt thou plant pleasant plants, and shalt set it with strange slips: In the day shalt thou make thy plant to grow, and in the morning shalt thou make thy seed to flourish: but the harvest shall be a heap in the day of grief and of desperate sorrow.”

⁴⁷ CW 6:156. Compare Jeremiah 3:20-22: “Surely as a wife treacherously departeth from her husband, so have ye dealt treacherously with me, O house of Israel, saith the LORD. A voice was heard upon the high places, weeping and supplications of the children of Israel: for they have perverted their way, and they have forgotten the LORD their God. Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings. Behold, we come unto thee; for thou art the LORD our God.”

Lincoln means all three, or rather, it is better to say that these three things are not for him separate ideas. In his December 1, 1862 address to Congress, he described the war as a scourge that would lead to an America cleansed in its faith, with a more rigorous adherence to its divine charge than existed even at the time of the founding.⁴⁸ It is equally clear that Lincoln conceives of the Americans as a single, unified people: as he did in his previous proclamation of a national fast day, he concludes by invoking the spiritual unity of the American people, saying “let us then rest humbly in the hope authorized by the Divine teachings, that the united cry of the Nation will be heard on high, and will be answered with blessings, no less than the pardon of our national sins, and the restoration of our now divided and suffering Country to its former happy condition of unity and peace.”⁴⁹

The mechanism of political restoration here, the Christian emphasis on turning and repentance, is identical to that which Lincoln described in and 1854 speech at Peoria, where he advised that “Our republican robe is soiled, and trailed in the dust. Let us repurify it. Let us turn and wash it white, in the spirit, if not the blood, of the Revolution.” There, he identified slavery as a spiritual stain, but placed the revolution in the redemptive office of the messiah. Though the mechanism is the same, in 1863 he speaks not in the symbolic language of 1854, but directly advocates the engagement of the American people with their God. In the intervening years, the deity has moved to the forefront of his civil religious speech, and Lincoln invokes his authority with much increased frequency. The American

⁴⁸ For more on this, see the previous chapter.

⁴⁹ CW 6:157

political project has moved from a position of sacredness, being a thing set apart for veneration, to one of *holiness*, being invested with the active presence of God.

Lincoln's concern here cannot easily be said to lie with motivating compliance with his war aims, as the war is depicted as being almost like a lightning bolt, a catastrophe inflicted from out of heaven. Rather, this is to generate compliance with a political aim, to persuade Americans to *be* Americans in what he believes the proper way. Invoking the transcendent power of God, he implicitly reminds his audience of the equality created by their, and his, shared inadequacy before the Almighty. Having put themselves in the place of God, Lincoln argues that Americans can in fact do nothing but beg for a forgiveness that is undeserved. For him, humility is a key republican virtue, being appropriate to individuals who regard one another with a fraternal sense of equality as members of the same body politic.⁵⁰ Confronted with the just wrath of their God, there is nothing for Americans to do but to "humble ourselves before the offended Power, to confess our national sins, and to pray for clemency and forgiveness."⁵¹ The American polity is for Lincoln united in its responsibilities, and thus in its failure, regardless of any political division. In his second proclamation of a national fast day, he not only emphasizes the spiritual unity of the United States but asserts the equality of a sinful people before their God. Where he elsewhere expresses political ideas through the language of religion, he here bases his two central arguments, for the political goods of Union and equality, in the religious concept of sin. The moral-religious failure

⁵⁰ McWilliams (1973) p. 276

⁵¹ CW 6:157

shared by all Americans renders them both united and equal before their God, regardless of whether or not they would have it so.

4. A More Religious Feeling

Lincoln's civil religious speech served the delicate political purpose of sustaining the war effort, maintaining morale among civilian and military populations, while preparing for fraternal reunion with the enemy, and his sustained emphasis on the nation's spiritual unity and shared moral culpability was key to this effort. Additionally, his deployment of civil religious language worked to mobilize electoral support for his re-election campaign, as did a series of military victories. On July 4, 1863, the same day that Gen Meade drove Lee out of the North at Gettysburg, Gen. Ulysses S. Grant accepted the surrender of Confederate forces in Vicksburg, Mississippi, ending a six-week siege of the fortress city. First demanding unconditional surrender, Grant soon determined that the starving Confederate soldiers could not be made to fight again, and hoped that their return to their homes would sap Southern morale. Vicksburg had been the last Confederate stronghold on the Mississippi, and with its surrender the Union controlled the whole of the river, effectively dividing the Confederacy in two. The Fourth of July, 1863, was an excellent day for the Union war effort.⁵²

In recognition of the victories of July 4, Lincoln on July 15 once again issued a proclamation of a day of thanksgiving. There, he uses language very similar to that

⁵² Pickett, told to assemble his forces after the charge, told Lee that he *had* no forces to assemble.

found in his earlier proclamation of thanksgiving, saying that “It has pleased Almighty God to hearken to the supplications and prayers of an afflicted people,” and to provide Union forces with “victories on land and on the sea so signal and so effective as to furnish reasonable grounds for augmented confidence that the Union of these States will be maintained, their constitution preserved, and their peace and prosperity permanently restored.”⁵³ Though the united cry of the nation appears indeed to have been heard on high, Lincoln here seems remarkably tentative, showing little of the confidence that he had possessed in the first proclamation of thanksgiving. The victories definitively prove nothing, they only “furnish reasonable grounds for augmented confidence” that the Union will endure.

Lincoln’s hesitance to say that God is on the side of the Union is due to the fact that, unlike O’Sullivan, Lincoln is unwilling to ascribe only those things favorable to the nation to God’s will. This is made clear when, as he describes the destruction and suffering wrought by the war, he says that “It is meet and right to recognize and confess the presence of the Almighty Father and the power of His Hand equally in these triumphs and these sorrows.”⁵⁴ He sounds the same note in an October 3 proclamation of thanksgiving, advising gratitude to “the Most High God, who while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.”⁵⁵ Though Lincoln is sure that God wills human equality and the end of slavery, he is certain of no more than that. Though it seems that one party to the

⁵³ CW 6:332

⁵⁴ CW 6:332

⁵⁵ CW 6:497

war is more aligned with God's wishes than the other, nothing is promised to the Union. As he says on October 3, Americans must only pray that the God will restore unity "as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes". When that may be, it is impossible to say.

It is significant that for Lincoln *we* are being punished for *our* sins.⁵⁶ Despite its de facto division, the United States remains for him a single community in terms of its political and religious responsibilities. Though the war must be fought to its finish, Lincoln's language continually reminds his audience to think of themselves in communion with the rebel states. Nevertheless, there is no question for him that of the two parties to the war, the Union is the one most aligned with God's will. He advises Americans to "invoke the influence of His Holy Spirit to subdue the anger which has produced and so long sustained a needless and cruel rebellion, to change the hearts of the insurgents." Moreover, they should pray God "finally to lead the whole nation, through the paths of repentance and submission to the Divine Will, back to the perfect enjoyment of Union and fraternal peace." In this way, Lincoln describes disunion as the product of sin, a direct rebellion against the Divine Will. Though the nation as a whole must repent and re-submit itself to the will of God, the rebels are singled out as being wrathful and needlessly cruel. Americans are to pray for them in the way that one would pray for those deep in a state of sin, that God "change their hearts." While the mind of God remains for Lincoln inscrutable, humans have an obligation to obey on those points on which he has revealed his

⁵⁶ Fornieri (2003) p. 169

will. While the language of sin was used by Lincoln earlier in his career to describe slavery and corruption within the Republic, his deployment of the language of sin is decreasingly metaphorical. Religious sin and a failure of republican virtue are increasingly conflated.

As the cost of the war in life and property mounted, peace sentiment was built across the North, spurred on by the deeply unpopular drafts of 1863 and capitalized on by the Peace Democrats, the so-called Copperheads, who favored peace at any price. Politically, Lincoln was caught between these and the Radical Republicans, who argued that Lincoln had been far too hesitant to politically and militarily chastise the South.⁵⁷ In 1863 through the election of 1864, Lincoln was deeply concerned to remind Americans why they must continue to fight until the Union was restored, but also that they should think of the Rebels not as enemies but as wayward countrymen. Key to this argument is the proposition that the United States is not an alliance of sovereign states, but a single nation, in the form of one people. In this way, the language of civil religion was a key weapon in his rhetorical arsenal, and Lincoln's second inaugural address represents his crowning achievement in the genre of the jeremiad and of his prophetic speech. Distilling the themes that had marked his work in the prophetic mode into their purest expression, it serves, like the Gettysburg Address, to embed the spectacular destruction of the war within a narrative that not only gave it meaning, but served to reinterpret the nature of the American polity, redefining its *telos* and its

⁵⁷ Burlingame (2008) vol.2, pp. 351-360, 411, 587

relationship with its God. Like his address at Gettysburg, the second inaugural is aimed to affect a shift in the hegemonic American understanding of the nation.

That there would in fact be a second inaugural address was at one point very much in doubt. In 1864, despite the Union victory at Gettysburg, the Confederates had significant victories at the Battle of the Crater and the Battle of Cold Harbor, where Union forces under Grant took heavy casualties in a series of futile assaults. The grinding carnage of the war caused the electorate to warm to Copperhead calls for peace at any cost. At the same time, Radical Republicans in Congress castigated Lincoln for being timid in his handling of the war and of racial equality, demanding that the South be crushed and advocating for constitutional amendments securing the end of slavery and equality for blacks before the law.

In May of 1864, the Radicals put forth their own candidate, John C. Fremont, the general who had issued the order of emancipation in Missouri in 1861. Republicans loyal to Lincoln, allied with a number of War Democrats, joined in June to form the National Union party, with Lincoln taking Andrew Johnson, War Democrat and Military Governor of Tennessee, as his running mate. The Democrats, for their part, faced deep divisions within their own party between the War and Peace factions, nominating for president pro-war George B. McClellan, former general-in-chief of the Union forces and commander of the Army of the Potomac, with anti-war Rep. George H. Pendleton as his vice president.

At the outset, McClellan was heavily favored to win the election. As late as the end of summer, things looked grim for Lincoln. On August 23, he penned a terse

memo that read, in its entirety, "This morning, as for some days past, it seems exceedingly probable that this Administration will not be re-elected. Then it will be my duty to co-operate with the President elect, as to save the Union between the election and the inauguration; as he will have secured his election on such ground that he cannot possibly save it afterwards."⁵⁸ Shortly thereafter, however, the situation began to improve. In September, Fremont, fearful of aiding a Democratic victory, withdrew, thus ending the party-splitting candidacy that had badly impaired Lincoln's chances.⁵⁹ Further, the Democrats had included in their platform the demand for immediate peace with the Confederacy, which McClellan was obliged to publicly reject, intensifying the intra-party conflict. Also helping Lincoln's odds were a series of significant military developments, as Sherman on September 2 captured Atlanta and Grant contained Lee and his forces within the vicinity of Richmond. As Sherman set off on his March to the Sea, promising to "make Georgia howl," the war suddenly appeared to be entering its final act.

Lincoln's reelection campaign did not entirely depend on the whims of fate. For the entirety of his administration, he had carefully cultivated relationships with representatives of all religious denomination, but especially with the Northern evangelical churches.⁶⁰ Though the churches were on the whole far more confident of God's favor than was Lincoln himself, his civil religious rhetoric marked him in their minds as one of their own, and the political advantage of having pre-existing

⁵⁸ CW 7:515

⁵⁹ Burlingame (2008) vol. 2 692

⁶⁰ Carwardine (2008) p. 244

local institutions supporting his campaign, complete with highly motivated congregational membership, is difficult to overstate.⁶¹ Northern Evangelical churches on the whole were either committed to Lincoln or were radical critics of him who electorally had nowhere else to go after Fremont's withdrawal. The churches became engines of mobilization in the 1864 campaign, forming Union-Republican clubs and providing recruiters, organizers, and the resources of their associated aid agencies in what one commentator has described as arguably "the most complete fusing of religious crusade and political mobilization in America's electoral experience."⁶²

This level of mobilization is a key example of the political effectiveness of the language of American civil religion. Though not himself of their number, Lincoln through his deployment of that language serves to mark himself as being held to a set of religious standards against which his actions can be evaluated, binding his hands in order to generate compliance in a significant faction of the electorate. Moreover, he is able to mobilize the constituents to bring a level of religious conviction to what would otherwise be purely political goods, including political equality and the preservation of political institutions. In so doing, he structured the way that Americans approached the national polity, recasting it for many as having quasi-divine sanction. Articulated through a religious set of symbols and tropes, Lincoln generates not only compliance with the escalating costs of the war, but indeed is able to generate a high level of active commitment to his policy aims. In

⁶¹ Guelzo (1999) 410

⁶² Carwardine (2008) p. 246-247

the face of war exhaustion, spectacular casualty rates, and the near collapse of American government, Lincoln was able to win 55% of the popular vote, carrying 22 out of 25 voting states (the Confederate states, obviously, were not eligible to participate) and 212 electoral votes to McClellan's 21.

Lincoln even won 70% of the votes in the Army of the Potomac, which had once been so loyal to McClellan that upon his removal from its command, it had been feared that its morale would be irreparably damaged.⁶³ Across the whole of the Grand Army of the Republic, 78% of soldiers gave their vote to Lincoln, despite the fact that 40-45% of them identified as Democrats.⁶⁴ In James McPherson's analysis of letters from 1,076 civil war soldiers (647 Union, 429 Confederate), he has demonstrated that their motives were often highly ideological, and that that ideology was for the most part expressed in religious terms.⁶⁵ One Pennsylvania officer wrote home to his wife in 1863 that, "Every day I have a more religious feeling, that this war is a crusade for the good of mankind... I [cannot] bear to think of what my children would be if we were to permit this hell-begotten conspiracy to destroy this country."⁶⁶

Despite the fear that emancipation would cause soldiers to lay down their arms, overt opposition to the end of slavery was very much a minority position by 1864. A private in the 6th Wisconsin battery of Sherman's army wrote just before

⁶³ McPherson (1988) p. 505, 533-34

⁶⁴ James McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades*. Oxford. New York & Oxford, 1997. p. 176

⁶⁵ *ibid*, 91. In the midst of the war's carnage, religious revivals swept both armies. (Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*, 176)

⁶⁶ McPherson (1997) p. 13

the election that “In the evening a general discussion took place on ‘the nigger question,’ politics, etc. All agree on ‘Old Abe’ for president.” After the election, in which the battery voted 75-0 for Lincoln, the same soldier wrote home thanking God that “the sin of slavery” would soon be gone, and said that “I can cheerfully bear all the discomforts of a soldier’s life for the overthrow of the monster evil.” An officer on the flagship USS *Hartford*, a Quaker who had joined the war against his family’s urging, believed that “slavery is such a horrible blot on civilization, that I am convinced that the war will exterminate it and its supporters, and that it was brought about for that purpose by God.”⁶⁷ Others echoed Lincoln even more strongly. A lieutenant in the 59th Illinois wrote in May 1863 that “it is astonishing how things has changed in reference to freeing the Negros... It allwais has been plane to me that this rase must be freed befor god would recognise us... We bost of liberty and we should try to impart it to others... Thank god the chanes will soon be bursted... now I belive we are on gods side... now I can fight with a good heart.” A lieutenant of the 5th Iowa also wrote home in 1863 that “the hand of God is in this, and that in spite of victories and advantages he will deny us Peace until we grant to others the liberties we ask for ourselves... and sweep every vestige of this cursed institution from our land.”⁶⁸ The emphasis on the exceptionality of the United States and on its special obligation before God that marks so much of Lincoln’s civil religious speech is also found in the letters of his soldiers.

⁶⁷ *ibid* 129

⁶⁸ *ibid* 130

Though there were, as in any war, a goodly number of shirkers and foot-draggers in the Union forces, McPherson shows that many soldiers, especially the volunteers of 1861-63, were highly motivated by political ideology expressed in religious terms. Though McPherson's sample is not random, being skewed toward racial and class groups, and thus military ranks, with higher literacy rates, the sample is also skewed toward combat troops: though 5% of all Union soldiers were killed in action, 17% of those in his Union sample were killed or mortally wounded in battle.⁶⁹ Thus, the utility of the civil religious language used by Lincoln was not limited to generating compliance among civilians, nor even to motivating hordes of political volunteers, but actually served to help generate above-average levels of combat compliance among those with whom the language resonated.⁷⁰ Lincoln was

⁶⁹ *ibid* viii, ix

⁷⁰ McPherson's analysis of letters written by Confederate soldiers predictably shows that they too often understood the war in civil religious terms, invoking a divinely sanctioned state liberty in place of Lincoln's equality of individuals. Indeed, clergy were instrumental in the project of creating a Confederate national identity. As there was in the letters of Confederate soldiers, there was remarkable uniformity among clergy on the moral nature of slavery, with opinions ranging between viewing slavery as a positive good and seeing it as morally neutral. Otherwise, there was a great deal of similarity between Northern and Southern versions of civil religion, as Northern clergy and politicians worked to argue the necessity for continued Union by drawing from the same conceptual lexicon that Southerners used to legitimize secession. The language of partisans on each side was similar, with both understanding America to possess a redemptive world historical destiny and exceptional status in the eyes of God, and each viewing its own party as working to continue the legacy of 1776. (McPherson (1997); Snay, Mitchell. *Gospel of Disunion*. University of South Carolina. 1997. pp. 181-193, 198)

Though political leaders did not rely on religious language to the same degree as did Lincoln, religious elites commonly spoke in this way about the progress of the war. As defeat seemed increasingly likely, Southern ministers often spoke in the terms of Puritan thought, arguing that God was punishing them for unknown reasons of his own. Though religious in both sections habitually attributed righteousness to their own party and viciousness to the other, there was no notable figure in the South who was able to navigate the tensions between the fortunes of war and the will of God with the same skill that Lincoln did. Indeed, the trace of O'Sullivan's insistence on American sinlessness and providential destiny remained: a Methodist minister in Petersburg, VA said of the South that "God has chosen us as his particular people, made us the repository of His will and the light of the world." After the Confederate victory at Manassas, a Methodist minister at Yorkeville, SC

able to do this in part because, through the language of civil religion, he was able to articulate a complex and nuanced set of political, ethical, religious, and even ontological arguments within terms and categories already familiar to his audience.

5. And the War Came

Lincoln's mastery of the language of American civil religion enabled him to change its emphasis, and even the content of its terms, and it is in this light that his Second Inaugural Address should be understood. In it, Lincoln unequivocally defines equality as the core value of the American polity, and strongly grounds this centrality in the shared powerlessness of all Americans in their shared insufficiency

proclaimed that God had surely marked the South as "the highest culmination of Christian civilization," while the *Texas Christian Advocate* expressed gratitude that "the Southern people have been chosen as the witness and instrument of the triumph" of the providential plan. Even as the fortunes of war turned against them, any suggestion of Southern religious guilt was denied in favor of the idea that "God chastens most whom he loves best." The words of John Adger, editor of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, are typical of the Southern providential argument. He rejected any notion of Southern guilt, insisting on the justice of the Southern cause as a resistance against "a cruel, unjust, and wicked war of invasion upon free States ... urged on, in great part, by infidel fanaticism." The Southern error, he said, was to think "that God must surely bless the right." For Adger, God had allowed "the overthrow of that just cause" in order to "make evident... the direct hand of the Almighty." (Noll (2006) pp. 79, 85; Snay (1997) pp. 193-94; Guelzo (1999) pp. 412-414)

Secessionist clergy looked to religion as a centripetal force within the nascent Confederacy. Despite this, the Confederate government was not able to capitalize on this way of thinking with the same success as did the Union. The reasons for this are several. One, the Confederate States had through seceding definitionally rejected the strong sense of collective and national identity that American civil religion is directed toward supporting. This subdivision and heterogeneity was also present in the Democratic approach to religion, as the party relied on a coalition of religious believers that was, in comparison to the Whig/Republican coalition, notably diverse. Since Jackson, Democrats had striven to reduce government power in what they considered to be private spheres of life, including religion, morality, and economy. Jackson early in his first term spoke against government proclamations of days of thanksgiving or fasting as illegitimate violations of the barrier between church and state, saying that religion had nothing at all do with politics or social order. Ultimately, though the clergy would present a united front until the end, the effort to craft a Confederate equivalent to American civil religion was unable to overcome the centrifugal forces of Southern politics. (Lawrence Frederick Kohl, *Politics of Individualism*. Oxford. New York & Oxford, 1989. pp. 110-11, 157; Snay (1997) pp. 181, 200, 214; Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism, Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South*. Louisiana State University. 1990. pp. 4-7)

before the power and judgment of their God. Frederick Douglass' observation that "The address sounded more like a sermon than a state paper" is astute, as at the moment of his electoral triumph, on the verge of a definitive military victory, Lincoln describes the ultimate powerlessness, though not meaninglessness, of human action in the face of God's will.

It has been argued that Lincoln in the Second Inaugural rejects the American exceptionalism that he described in the Gettysburg Address, to argue that the United States is but one nation among many, no different from the rest, but this is I think to misunderstand his point.⁷¹ That Americans are for him as flawed as humans anywhere is beyond doubt, but the United States remains especially accountable to God's justice, for the reason that it has obligations not shared by other nations, and is thus set apart from them. Lincoln describes the United States here as having a divinely mandated work to finish, just as in the Gettysburg Address he spoke of the "great task remaining before us," in both cases referring to the realization of human equality.⁷² That it is for him a work that will likely never be completed is reason for humility, but this humility is in recognition of inadequacy to the greatness of the task assigned. Lincoln's claim in the Second Inaugural is not that the United States is like any other nation, but that due to the greatness of its assigned task, it is the most accountable to the will of God, and is thus the most insufficient before his judgment.

On the day that it was delivered, March 4, 1864, there was little expectation that Lincoln would attempt such a statement. The capital was packed with

⁷¹ Winger (2003) asserts this on p. 208.

⁷² Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*. Simon & Schuster. New York & London, 1992. pp.189

spectators, but the day was gloomy, rainy, and in the largely unpaved Washington, muddy. The mood was triumphal, even self-righteous, with campaign posters and medals promising retribution against the rebels, and it was widely expected that Lincoln would allow himself to celebrate both his reelection and the war's progress.⁷³ Coming to the stage after an expectation-lowering performance by a clearly drunk Vice President Johnson, Lincoln would quickly subvert these expectations.⁷⁴

According to contemporary accounts, the rain stopped at the moment that Lincoln took the stage, with the sun breaking through the clouds in a moment of naturally-assisted political theater.⁷⁵ In just under five minutes worth of speaking, Lincoln attempted to render definitive his understanding of the American polity. He began

At this second appearing to take the oath of the presidential office, there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first. Then, a statement, somewhat in detail, of a course to be pursued seemed fitting and proper. Now, at the expiration of four years, during which public declarations have been constantly called forth on every point and phase of the great contest which still absorbs the nation, little that is new could be presented. The progress of our arms, upon which all else chiefly depends, is as well known to the public as to myself; and it is, I trust, reasonably satisfactory and encouraging to all. With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured.⁷⁶

⁷³ White (2002) p. 25-30

⁷⁴ Johnson had been up late the previous night celebrating the election with a friend. Having overindulged, he felt unwell in the morning and, in an impressive show of dedication to the "hair of the dog" theory of hangover treatment, took three glasses of whiskey straight. He had been recovering from typhoid, and in his weakened condition he became very, very drunk. (Burlingame (2008) vol.2, p. 765)

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 766. Lincoln later said that he was "just superstitious enough to consider it a happy omen."

⁷⁶ CW 7:333

At his moment of electoral triumph and on the threshold of a military victory that would complete the reunion of the United States, Lincoln in this first paragraph relentlessly emphasizes the limitations of human action. The actions of the present are bounded by history: where four years before he had argued at length against the legitimacy, ethics, and political wisdom of secession, those arguments failed. Now, four years later, there is nothing left to argue, as the question has been left to the fortunes of war. Much of what might otherwise be worth saying has already been said, and there is “little that is new could be presented” about the war.

While the past works to constrain the present, the future is utterly inscrutable, and about it nothing can be even conjectured. Lincoln here sounds a very different note from his speech at Gettysburg, wherein he promised a new birth of freedom, now looking to scale back the messianic potential of the United States.⁷⁷ After four years of unexpected victories and disasters in war, to say nothing of the sudden death of his son, Lincoln emphasizes the impotence inherent in the human condition. A month later, in a letter to his friend Albert Hodges, Lincoln would write that “I attempt no compliment to my own sagacity. I claim not to have controlled events, but confess plainly that events have controlled me. Now, at the end of three years struggle the nation's condition is not what either party, or any man devised, or expected.”⁷⁸ Bounded on all sides, the nation's leader claims to possess no knowledge about the progress of the war that is not available to any citizen. The series of negations present in the first paragraph of Lincoln's second inaugural

⁷⁷ Winger (2003) p. 205

⁷⁸ April 4, 1864. CW 7:282

address emphasizes the humility that he believes to be the rational and moral response to human powerlessness.⁷⁹ For him, there exist hard limits on the possibility of human action and knowledge: the past binds his hands, the victories of the present offer only reasonable satisfaction and encouragement, and the future is so utterly impenetrable that even with every sign and omen being favorable, he dares venture no prediction beyond high hope.⁸⁰

This theme carries over into the second paragraph:

On the occasion corresponding to this four years ago, all thoughts were anxiously directed to an impending civil war. All dreaded it—all sought to avert it. While the inaugural address was being delivered from this place, devoted altogether to *saving* the Union without war, insurgent agents were in the city seeking to *destroy* it without war—seeking to dissolve the Union, and divide effects, by negotiation. Both parties deprecated war; but one of them would *make* war rather than let the nation survive; and the other would *accept* war rather than let it perish. And the war came.

Lincoln here emphasizes his understanding of the United States as a single moral unit, using the words ‘all’ or ‘both’ four times.⁸¹ His voice here shifts to that of a third person observer, speaking in a passive voice: *he* did not deliver the inaugural address, it was delivered. In so doing, he continues to minimize the role of human agency in the events of the past four years, subtracting himself from the story entirely. Even as he does so, he moves the war front and center, using the word

⁷⁹ White (2002) p. 48, 59

⁸⁰ Notable is how strongly this contrasts with the language found in his proclamations of thanksgiving, which even at their most ambivalent speak confidently of victories signaling God’s favor.

⁸¹ Wills (1992) 186

“war” seven times (or nine, if you count the instances of ‘it’ that refer to the war).⁸² Thus, by the time that “the war came,” it possesses an inevitable quality; it is a thing that everyone sought to avoid but knew was on its way. According to contemporary accounts, Lincoln made a “sententious pause” between “let it perish” and “And the war came,” emphasizing the space between human will and historical outcome.⁸³ His phrasing here is similar to that of abolitionist Wendell Phillips in his January 8, 1852 speech, when he said that “Revolutions are not made; they come. A revolution is as natural a growth as an oak. It comes out of the past. Its foundations are laid far back.” The differences, though, are significant: though both minimize the efficacy of individual human agency, in Phillips’ phrasing, the revolution is “natural,” an outgrowth of historical circumstance. Lincoln, on the other hand, flatly emphasizes the way in which the war comes regardless of what anyone desired, but leaves this fact standing in isolation. The war is not an organic outgrowth, but something that comes like lightning out of the sky.

Lincoln begins the third paragraph by moving to the war’s cause, attributing it solely and directly to slavery.⁸⁴ He says that

One eighth of the whole population were colored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the Southern part of it. These slaves constituted a particular and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war. To strengthen, perpetuate, and extend this interest was the object for which the insurgents would rend the Union; while the government claimed no right to do more than to restrict the territorial enlargement of it.

⁸² White (2002) p. 62

⁸³ Reporter and Lincoln biographer Noah Brooks, quoted in White (2002) pp. 78

⁸⁴ Guelzo (1999) p. 417

Though the United States forms a single moral community, Lincoln nonetheless lays the majority of the responsibility for the war's cause at the feet of the South. The sentence reading that "all knew that this interest was, somehow, the cause of the war" is central to the Second Inaugural both in theme and in its placement within the text.⁸⁵ All knew, whether or not they would admit it, that slavery was the war's cause. This is a criticism not only of the South, but also of Lincoln himself: his earlier accounts of the conflict make it a war for Union, but here it is and always has been a war over slavery.⁸⁶

Despite this, Lincoln continues by again emphasizing the shared moral burden common to both North and South as sections of a single polity. "Neither party expected for the war the magnitude, or the duration, which it has already attained. Neither anticipated that the *cause* of the conflict might cease with, or even before, the conflict itself should cease. Each looked for an easier triumph, and a result less fundamental and astounding." The repetition of "neither" joins the sections in their failure. Again, Lincoln implicitly implicates himself in this shared failure, as he had been among those who sought a result "less fundamental and less astounding" than what came. He refers here not only to the basic reconfiguration of American social relations, but to a refounding of the American republic in a purified ideal of equality.

⁸⁵ White (2002) p. 90

⁸⁶ White (2002) p. 90

It is this ideal that Lincoln has in mind as he continues. At this point, his analysis moves from past to present, with an emphasis on the subjects of 'now', 'here', and 'we'.⁸⁷ He asserts of the sections that "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not that we not be judged." He here twice cites the Bible. The first is an allusion to Genesis 3:23, which recounts the curse of God on the disobedient Adam and Eve, reading "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." This reference is doubly appropriate to Lincoln's message, as first, it is an instance of God's judgment against his disobedient creation, just as the nation is for Lincoln being punished for its transgressions through the war. Second, through this reference he casts slavery in being defiance of the will of God, who has through his curse commanded man to eat from the sweat of his own face.

This particular verse had always been a favorite of Lincoln's when arguing against slavery. He had used it as a barb against Douglas in their 1858 debates, arguing that slavery was fundamentally anti-democratic, and that "the same spirit that says, You work and toil and earn bread, and I eat it" was found in "the divine right of kings."⁸⁸ This verse also appears to be crucial to Lincoln's understanding of

⁸⁷ John Channing Briggs, *Lincoln's Speeches Reconsidered*. Johns Hopkins. Baltimore & London, 2005. pp. 308

⁸⁸ Seventh debate, at Alton, IL, October 15, 1858. CW 3:316

what demarks a true understanding of God's will from a false one: when visited in December of 1864 by wives of captured Confederate soldiers, one of whom advocated for her husband's freedom on the grounds that "her husband was a religious man," Lincoln responded that "In my opinion, the religion that sets men to rebel and fight against their government, because, as they think, that government does not sufficiently help *some* men to eat their bread on the sweat of *other* men's faces, is not the sort of religion upon which people can get into heaven!"⁸⁹ For Lincoln, the marker of true faith in God is the recognition of one's equality with others in the face of the Almighty God.

Lincoln had in fact paired Genesis 3:23 with his second reference here, to Matthew 7:1, "Judge not, that ye be not judged," in a May 30, 1864 letter to a prominent Baptist anti-slavery advocate.⁹⁰ There, he is rather less open handed, writing that "To read in the Bible, as the word of God himself, that 'In the sweat of *thy* face shalt thou eat bread,' and to preach therefrom that 'in the sweat of *other mans* faces shalt thou eat bread,' to my mind can scarcely be reconciled with honest sincerity." He concludes the letter by arguing that such preaching by Southern clergy "contemned and insulted God and His church, far more than did Satan when he tempted the Saviour with the Kingdoms of the earth. The devils attempt was no more false, and far less hypocritical. But let me forbear, remembering it is also written 'Judge not, lest ye be judged.'" These two quotations function as a pair for Lincoln. The first, from Genesis, is an example of God's wrath, while the second is

⁸⁹ CW 8:154-55, quoted in White (2002) p. 117

⁹⁰ CW 7:368

from the account in Matthew of the Sermon on the Mount, a divine commandment to forgive. Indeed, the command to refrain from judgment is based in the universality of human sin, as in Matthew 7:5, wherein Christ admonishes “Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother's eye.” Though Lincoln does not see North and South as being morally equivalent, he here implicates both in the sin punished by the coming of the war.

There is a central irony here, as Lincoln avoids judging so that he himself (and by extension, the soon-to-be victorious North) may not be judged, but the judgment of God has already come. This is made clear as Lincoln continues, saying of the sections that “The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has his own purposes.” Here, Lincoln retroactively alters the implication of the first paragraph of the speech. It is more than history that constrains human action, or that thwarts human aims. With these words, Lincoln describes God as the primary actor in the story of the war. It is in this way that he is able to ascribe moral culpability for the war to the American people though they did what they could to avoid it. His language here echoes that of a September 4, 1864 letter to Eliza P. Gurney, which in turn echoes that of the meditation on the divine will.⁹¹ He wrote, “The purposes of the Almighty are perfect, and must prevail, though we erring mortals may fail to accurately perceive them in advance.” God has his own purposes, which a flawed and sinful humanity

⁹¹ CW 7:368

cannot possibly hope to understand, much less contravene. Lincoln writes to Gurney that he had hoped the war would by the time of his writing have come to an end, but that God had ruled otherwise, for his own reasons: "Surely he intends some great good to follow this convulsion, which no mortal could make, and no mortal could stay." The war for Lincoln is nothing less than God's wrath against his errant people.

This is apparent as he continues, quoting Matthew 18:7:

'Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!' If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the Providence of God, must needs come, but which having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war, as the woe due those by whom the offense came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away.

Lincoln's argument is here rooted in a deeply Protestant view of the relationship between God's omnipotence and his justice, strongly reminiscent of Calvinist arguments for the doctrine of predestination. In *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin wrote that "Scripture clearly proves this much, that God by his eternal and immutable counsel determined once for all those whom it was his pleasure one day to admit to salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, it was his pleasure to doom to destruction. We maintain that this counsel, as regards the elect, is founded on his free mercy, without any respect to human worth, while those whom he dooms to destruction are excluded from access to life by a just and

blameless, but at the same time incomprehensible judgment.”⁹² Lincoln here politicizes Calvinist thought, applying it to his consideration of the justice of history rather than to that of the salvation of the elect. Embracing a distinctly predestinarian and deterministic view, Lincoln argues that slavery could not have existed but by God’s will, though it nonetheless constituted an offense against him. Moreover, it is in every sense just that God in his inscrutable justice punishes those by whom this sin came, despite their inability to defy the divine will.⁹³

The whole of this argument is captured in Lincoln’s quotation of Matthew 18:7, as the offense must come, as irresistibly as the war did, but punishment is nonetheless due those by whom it came. In this way, Lincoln in his prophetic speech is able to distill moral and religious meaning from the bewildering events of the civil war.⁹⁴ In his description of the relationship between the United States and its God, he argues that despite all appearances, “the world has a certain systematic and coherent meaning, to which men’s conduct must be oriented if it is to bring salvation, and after which it must be patterned in an integrally meaningful manner.”⁹⁵ Despite the impotence of human agency that he has described, moral responsibility remains.

This responsibility is shared across both North and South, despite the moral difference that he attributes to them, due to the fact that the Union is here for

⁹² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Henry Beveridge, trans. Hendrickson Publishers. 2008. Book 3, chapter 21, p. 613

⁹³ Briggs (2005) p. 322

⁹⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Religion of Abraham Lincoln” *The Christian Century*, no. 82. February 10, 1965 p. 172

⁹⁵ Weber (1978) vol. 2, p. 450

Lincoln, as always, a single moral unit. He does not say only that slavery is an offense against God, but singles out American slavery, directly emphasizing the shared moral community and obligation to equality of Americans as a people.⁹⁶ This means that even though the North has superior moral standing relative to the South, all share the burden of guilt and all deserve punishment by the transcendental justice of the Living God.⁹⁷ This is a devaluation of human claims to justice and a rejection of any Northern claim to purity, as divine truth, for Lincoln as for Jeremiah, expose human ethical certainties as “scandalous pretensions.”⁹⁸ Lincoln here looks to chasten the victorious North in preparation for reunion with the rebel states, affirming the transcendence of God and rejecting any image of him as a tribal god backing one group or another against its enemies.⁹⁹ The justice of God is such that no transgression is unnoticed or forgotten, and the issue is not that one section was right and the other wrong, it is that the nation failed in its divine charge and by its guilt has no recourse but to fond hope and fervent prayer that their punishment will soon come to an end. Despite the apparent moral difference between the parties to the war, Lincoln by acknowledging the mutual injustice of the North and South affirms the divine standard of justice by which both are judged equally guilty.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶ White (2002) p. 145

⁹⁷ Guelzo (1999) p. 418

⁹⁸ Heschel (1962) p. 10. Heschel is describing the effect of the prophet’s words at Jeremiah 6:20: “To what purpose cometh there to me incense from Sheba, and the sweet cane from a far country? your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices sweet unto me.”

⁹⁹ White (2002) p. 113

¹⁰⁰ Thurow (1976) p. 114

“Yet,” he continues, “if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still must it be said ‘the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.’” Just as the war is not for Lincoln the product of human agency, neither can humans bring it to an end. In what may be understood as a rebuke to the political-millenarian radicals of his own party, God here is depicted not as a redeemer, but as a remote judge, weighing and punishing the actions of a sinful people.¹⁰¹ Lincoln rejects the triumphalism characteristic of victors in war in favor of the humility appropriate to humans in the face of God’s judgment. Americans for him are a people guilty unto death, having transgressed to such a degree as to warrant their utter destruction. When he speaks of wealth being sunk or blood being paid, he speaks in the language of accounting or of reckoning: though God’s mind is inscrutable and his purposes unknown, the war is nonetheless deserved.¹⁰² As Lincoln almost a year before had written in a letter to Albert G. Hodges, “If God now wills the removal of a great wrong, and wills also that we of the North as well as you of the South, shall pay fairly for our complicity in that wrong, impartial history will find therein new cause to attest and revere the justice and goodness of God.”¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Guelzo (1999) p. 419

¹⁰² Wills (1992) 188

¹⁰³ CW 7:281

The aspect of religious horror present in the Meditation on the Divine Will here comes to fruition, providing a conceptual leap that allows Lincoln to adopt a critical position on politics, history, and even himself. The awareness that he must act within a context beyond his comprehension, with outcomes that are impossible to firmly predict, and be judged by the inscrutable mind of God according to standards that he cannot fully understand is the grounding for his humility here. Moreover, it firmly commits him to a political equality that recognizes this universal aspect of the human condition. By emphasizing the antiquity of the pronouncement that “the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether”, quoted from Psalm 19:9 and written “more than three thousand years ago,” Lincoln emphasizes his call to national humility by placing the American experience within the broader scope of biblical time, reminding his fellow citizens that their nation is accountable to standards which predate their existence by thousands of years, and which may well outlast them by as much. Taken as a whole, the 19th Psalm is devoted to expounding the greatness and goodness of God, as the psalmist praises his God and humbles himself before him, exactly the attitude that Lincoln here urges on the American people. The psalm concludes: “Keep back thy servant also from presumptuous sins; let them not have dominion over me: then shall I be upright, and I shall be innocent from the great transgression. Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.”¹⁰⁴ Such humility is for Lincoln a political good, one appropriate to a

¹⁰⁴ Psalm 9:13-14

republic based in the political virtue of equality. For him, slavery represents a mortal transgression against this core value, and it is for this deviation from its divine charge that the United States is scourged by war.

But as it was for Israel, God's chastisement of the United States functions as an invitation to repentance.¹⁰⁵ Faced with God's judgment, Lincoln urges his countrymen to repentance, concluding his speech by saying

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve a just and a lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

In concluding the jeremiad that is his second inaugural address, Lincoln speaks in the tone of benediction. His aversion to malice recurs from a July 28, 1862 letter in which he wrote, "I shall do nothing in malice. What I deal with is too vast for malicious dealing."¹⁰⁶ Lincoln is driven to forgiveness both by his keen awareness of the shared burden of national sin and the way in which it has caused divine chastisement to fall on both parties to the war, and by his acknowledgement of the justice of that punishment.¹⁰⁷ The coda to the Second Inaugural is a moment of both forgiveness and contrition, and thus describes atonement not only between North

¹⁰⁵ Heschel (1962) p. 12

¹⁰⁶ Letter to Cuthbert Bullitt, CW 5:347

¹⁰⁷ Thurow (1976) p. 106

and South, but also between the United States and its God. After the nation's chastisement and repentance, it can be rededicated to its work.¹⁰⁸

Though Lincoln again emphasizes the inscrutability of God's mind and the limited possibilities of human knowledge, this is not to excuse passivity but to urge a national chastity of purpose, both in ultimate intentions and in immediate policy.¹⁰⁹ The function of the United States is not, as it was for O'Sullivan and the supporters of Manifest Destiny, to redeem the world through millennial political transformation, but to "to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan." Lincoln here rejects all forms of postmillennial belief, religious or political. Though he describes the national mission in terms that may seem more biblical than political,¹¹⁰ it is in fact an argument for political humility. In the Old Testament, the treatment of widows and orphans, the most vulnerable members of society, functions as a minimal threshold by which the justice of a person or a people can be judged.¹¹¹ Human efforts for

¹⁰⁸ Lincoln's thought here is strongly reminiscent of the relationship between God and the Israelites, for example at Jeremiah 31:31-34, which describes the new state of moral purity and closeness between God and his people that will exist after their punishment and contrition as part of a new covenant: "Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people."

¹⁰⁹ Guelzo (1999) p. 420

¹¹⁰ Guelzo (1999) p. 420

¹¹¹ See for example Exodus 22:22-24: "Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry; And my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless." Compare to the accusation of maltreatment of widows and orphans as part of an invocation of divine justice at Psalm 94:3-6:

LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked triumph?

Lincoln cannot possibly achieve utopia, as the Second Inaugural is surely a rejection of all forms of postmillennialism, but human effort may well ameliorate the suffering and injustice inherent to a fallen world.¹¹² For Lincoln, the central project of American government is the asymptotic pursuit of human equality, here described as a work of healing in the same way that the inscription at the Statue of Liberty reading “Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free” is a commitment to equality in the language of the alleviation of suffering. This is the right that Americans have been given to see, and the work in which they must strive.

By all reports, the response of the audience to Lincoln’s speech was muted, whether due to displeasure or solemnity it is not possible to say.¹¹³ Responding to a remembered compliment from Thurlow Weed, Lincoln wrote to him on March 15, 1865, saying of his Second inaugural address that he expected it

to wear as well as—perhaps better than—any thing I have produced; but I believe that it is not immediately popular. Men are not flattered by being shown that there has been a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them. To deny it, however, in this case, is to deny that there is a God governing the world. It is a truth which I thought needed to be told; and as whatever there is of humiliation there is in

How long shall they utter and speak hard things? and all the workers of iniquity boast themselves?

They break in pieces thy people, O LORD and afflict thine heritage.

They slay the widow and the stranger, and murder the fatherless.

Though the emphasis is common in the Old Testament, it to my knowledge occurs only once in the New Testament, at James 1:27, though it is there strongly emphasized as a condition of faithful action: “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.”

¹¹² Winger (2003) p. 11

¹¹³ Guelzo (1999) p. 420

it, falls most directly on myself, I thought others might afford for me to tell it.¹¹⁴

Reinhold Niebuhr describes the error that Lincoln here identifies as a denial of God's reality, that of too close an identification of God's will with one's own, as "the very essence of sin."¹¹⁵ It is telling that Lincoln identifies himself as the primary target of this criticism, as his religious thought provides a critical dimension that allows him to evaluate events internal and external, and he here comes close to renouncing the stirring vision of partnership between God and man in achieving the American *telos* that he described in his priestly speeches, including the Gettysburg Address, as being incompatible with the virtue of humility.

6. Conclusion

It has been said of Lincoln's Second Inaugural address that it "is one of the few speeches ever delivered by a great man at the crisis of his fate on the sort of occasion which a tragedian telling his story would have devised for him."¹¹⁶ While it is true that it is in a sense anachronistic to regard it as anything other than a forward-looking speech from a vigorous executive, Lincoln's assassination six weeks after its delivery means that almost from the time that it was given, the Second Inaugural has been regarded within a narrative of martyrdom and national

¹¹⁴ CW 8:356

¹¹⁵ Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*. University of Chicago. Chicago & London, 1952. pp. 122. The "men who are not flattered" may well have been Lincoln's Radical critics.

¹¹⁶ Lord Charnwood, *Abraham Lincoln: A Biography*. Holt & Co. New York, 1916 (Madison Books. Boston, 1996). pp. 316

redemption.¹¹⁷ This narrative was shaped on the one hand by the content of his civil religious speech, and on the other by a pre-existing martyrdom narrative within the abolitionist movement.¹¹⁸ Ironically, despite the scorn in which many abolitionists held him during his presidency, Lincoln in death became the most famous of their martyrs.

The public reaction to Lincoln's death is illustrative of the impact of his civil religious speech. While in the occupied South there was muted compliance with mandatory displays of mourning, including compulsory church services, the reaction in the victorious North was altogether different.¹¹⁹ Lincoln's death was understood, in the words one contemporary song sheet, to be a "National Funeral," embodying and emblemizing all of the deaths of the war.¹²⁰ More than that, though, Lincoln's death on Good Friday, less than a week after Lee's surrender,

¹¹⁷ Winger (2003) argues that the "Second inaugural should be read not as the last, parting words of a dying prophet but as the statement of a vigorous executive who had every intention of living" (p. 161). While this may well be an accurate description of the state of mind in which Lincoln delivered his Second Inaugural address, the fact remains that it *was*, in fact, a parting address from a soon-to-be dead leader speaking to his people in the prophetic mode.

¹¹⁸ Many abolitionists, like Lincoln, saw the existence of slavery as an issue of national sinfulness, causing those of the Garrisonian variety to themselves advocate disunion as a method of cleansing the nation of its stain. This, combined with the religious basis of most abolitionist organizations, predisposed them to seeing murdered abolitionists like publisher and minister Elijah Lovejoy not as victims, but as martyrs in a righteous cause. For a much fuller discussion of the abolitionist martyrdom narrative, see Hazel Catherine Wolff's *On Freedom's Altar: The Martyr Complex in the Abolition Movement*. (University of Wisconsin Press, 1952)

¹¹⁹ For more on the Southern response to Lincoln's death, see Carolyn R. Harrell, *When the Bells Told for Lincoln: Southern Reaction to the Assassination* (Mercer University Press, Macon, GA, 1997). While in the occupied Southern states there was little public display of joy at Lincoln's death, the reaction in Texas can be fairly described as gleeful. Harrell's examination of privately kept journals shows that while many private citizens were pleased by Lincoln's death, the majority of political, religious, and cultural elites seemed to have realized that reunion under Lincoln was likely to be much more comfortable for the South than it would be under Johnson and the vengeful Radical Republicans.

¹²⁰ Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2008. pp. 156

made analogies between Christ and the president unavoidable, with Lincoln being depicted as redeeming the nation as Christ had the world. In this way, the contemporary response to Lincoln's death was in religious terms of sin and atonement.¹²¹ In his Easter sermon, the pastor of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Troy, New York declared that "We, as a people, feel more than all others that we are bereaved. We had learned to love Mr. Lincoln... We looked up to him as our savior, our deliverer." In his Easter sermon, Rhode Island Congregational minister Leonard Swain said that "one man has died for the people, in order that the whole nation might not perish," invoking Christian themes of martyrdom and substitutionary atonement as well as Lincoln's own words from the Gettysburg Address two years earlier.¹²²

In this way the image of Lincoln himself, to a much greater extent than that of any other figure considered in this dissertation, became integrated into the tradition of American civil religion, with he himself being invoked as a symbol of civil religious legitimacy. The reception of his death as martyrdom brought meaning not only to his assassination, but to the tragedy of the war as a whole, with Lincoln being depicted as living and dying to reform and regenerate the nation.¹²³ Writing twenty-five years later, Walt Whitman wrote that Lincoln's martyrdom had brought a sense of narrative meaning to the chaotic events of the Civil War, as "a long and varied series of contradictory events arrived at last at its highest poetic, single,

¹²¹ Eyal Naveh, *Crown of Thorns: Political Martyrdom in America from Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York University. New York, 1992. pp. 72-73

¹²² Faust (2008) pp. 156-157

¹²³ Naveh (1992) pp. 5

central, pictorial dénouement.”¹²⁴ Whitman depicts this gathering and ordering of events in terms of messianic redemption, writing that “in one man’s life, in our own time, that seal of the emancipation of three million slaves—that parturition and delivery of our at last really free Republic, hence forth to commence its career of genuine homogenous Union, compact, born again, consistent with itself.”¹²⁵ Just as Lincoln spoke of the Founding generation as fathers present at the nation’s conception and bringing forth, he himself is here shown by Whitman to be the nation’s spiritual father present at its redemptive rebirth, purifying and uniting the Union in the cause of freedom. For Whitman, this rebirth in suffering is necessary and emblematic of the larger conflict, as “battles, martyrs, blood even assassination, should so condense— perhaps only really, lastingly condense—a Nationality.”¹²⁶ For Whitman, then, Lincoln’s death made possible a new birth not only of freedom,

¹²⁴ Jason Frank (in “Aesthetic Democracy: Walt Whitman and the Poetry of the People,” *Review of Politics* 69 (2007), pp. 402-430) has argued that this kind of aesthetic interpretation of the events of American history is typical of Whitman’s democratic project. According to Frank, Whitman emphasized the importance of the “infrasensible level of democratic life and practice” provided by the aesthetic dimension as a means of reinforcing national adhesion during a time of institutional crisis. Whitman, then, seizes on the Lincoln assassination as an aesthetically rich historical gathering of narratives and events, not imposing a meaning on them, but as Frank puts it, providing Americans with imagery “for adaptation and imitation,” working with “images taken from the sublime resources of the ‘people.’” (Frank, *Constituent Moments Constituent Moments: Enacting the People in Postrevolutionary America*. Duke, 2009., pp. 193, 204) Whitman here draws from the universally available image and narrative of redemptive martyrdom to translate the death of Lincoln more clearly into the binding and purifying event that he believes it to be, using the symbols and language of the American people themselves. On this point, I agree with Frank’s criticism of George Kateb on Whitman, when Frank argues that Kateb presents a false dichotomy between Whitman as aesthetic individualist and Whitman as communitarian nationalist. (See Kateb, *The Inner Ocean: Individualism and Democratic Culture*. Cornell. Ithaca & London, 1992. pp. 258-261.). At least in this instance, Whitman is less navigating the tensions between antinomian individualism and a collective, civic identity than suspending the tensions between them: the death of an extraordinary individual has universal and determinative significance for all Americans.

¹²⁵ Walt Whitman, *Walt Whitman’s Memoranda During the War & Death of Abraham Lincoln*. Roy P. Basler, ed. Indiana University Press. Bloomington, IN, 1962. pp. 11

¹²⁶ Whitman (1962) pp. 12

but of the redeemed nation itself. It is in the same spirit of messianic redemption that Royal Cortissoz' inscription at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC is written, reading "In this temple / as in the hearts of the people / for whom he saved the Union / the memory of Abraham Lincoln / is enshrined forever". Lincoln after his death was and is received as a kind of American messiah, whose memory is to be enshrined within temples.

That Lincoln's death should be received as redeeming the nation from sin is ironic, given that the overriding concern of his prophetic speech is the universality and inevitability of human sin. In this sense, his priestly speech in many ways eclipses his prophetic speech in the popular imaginary, even as intellectuals like Reinhold Niebuhr focus on his role as a prophet. Lincoln's pervasive awareness of the universality of human sin is a conceptual leap that enables him to take a critical position of remarkable strength and analytical power, and that most distinguishes his civil religious thought from that of the other figures in this dissertation.¹²⁷ In the next chapter, I show how the civil religious speech of Woodrow Wilson, who describes Lincoln in messianic terms as "a font of living water", emphasizes Lincoln's priestly speech to the exclusion of his speech in the prophetic mode. Wilson marries Lincoln's understanding of America as a covenanted community to the missionary goals of O'Sullivan, seeing the United States as compacted to spread and defend democracy throughout the world. Further, he sees sin as existing both outside the nation, in the form of nondemocratic government in Europe, and inside

¹²⁷ Winger (2003) p. 208

its borders, as any groups that fail to fully embrace his vision of the American destiny can only be regarded as enemies. Wilson shares O'Sullivan's emphasis on liberty, but like Lincoln sees the *telos* of the United States as legitimizing the compulsion of its citizens in the service of its historical mission. Like Lincoln at Gettysburg, Wilson believes strongly in the efficacy of human action in moving the United States forward on its teleological trajectory, which for him ends in the democratization of the globe. Unlike Lincoln in his prophetic mode, however, Wilson believes that the purposes of the Almighty can indeed be known.

4. THE SPIRIT OF THE CRUSADES

WOODROW WILSON AND THE DEMOCRATIC MISSION

*We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities,
against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world,
against spiritual wickedness in high places.*
Ephesians 6:12

Woodrow Wilson, like Abraham Lincoln, is a key figure in the development of the civil religious tradition, and his justification of American involvement in the First World War remains influential through the present day. Examinations of Wilson's influence on American civil religion often follow Robert Bellah in asserting that the experience of the First World War in the United States transformed American's collective sense of purpose. Though it was followed by a short period of isolationism, Bellah argues, Wilson's presidency ultimately worked to move the American self-image away from one in which it looked primarily to itself, attempting to maintain its own purity.¹ Instead, the new messianic self-understanding promoted a feeling of international obligation that legitimated the interventionalist course of American international politics in the 20th century. This renewed sense of a messianic mission is, in Bellah's telling, affirmed in national rituals like Veterans Day, which ceremonially affirm this new direction for the community. While it is true that Wilson had a transformative effect on America's civil religious self-

¹ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America" *Daedalus* Winter, 1967, reprinted in the Fall 2005 edition. p. 49, 53; Phillip E. Hammond, "The Sociology of American Civil Religion: A Bibliographical Essay" in *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 37, No. 2 (Summer, 1976), 170, 174; John F. Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture*. Temple University Press. Philadelphia, 1979.

understanding, this transformation was not to instill within the tradition a mission of international messianism, as that trope was present from the tradition's earliest days.

Rather, the transformative effect of Wilson's presidency on the civil religious tradition was to reinforce this messianism with the understanding of the American state presented by Abraham Lincoln. This chapter argues that Wilson's civil religious speech should be understood as taking place within an existing rhetorical tradition, drawing elements from the perspectives discussed in the previous chapters and combining them in new ways. Thus, the public speech of Woodrow Wilson and his administration during the First World War, illustrates the ways in which the two branches of civil religion represented by O'Sullivan and Lincoln became fused into a single rhetorical tradition. This fusion is made possible by a strong emphasis on the mode of Lincoln's priestly civil religious speech, to the point that what I have called his prophetic speech is largely omitted.

Though he was President nearly seven decades after O'Sullivan founded the *Democratic Review*, Wilson's civil religious speech demonstrates the extent to which the thought of the former had permeated the Democratic Party. Exactly as does O'Sullivan, Wilson conceives of democratic (specifically, American) political institutions as being the embodiment of liberty, so that to be governed democratically is by definition to be free, while the absence of democratic institutions marks a government that is by definition tyrannical and thus illegitimate. For Wilson, as for O'Sullivan, the United States is an agent of the divine

will, produced by the providential guidance of history to bring about a democratic world order. In his civil religious speech he locates sin externally, in the nondemocratic governments of Europe.

Interestingly, however, Wilson's civil religious speech also clearly bears the hallmarks of Lincoln's thought, especially as pertains to the legitimate authority of the state over its citizens. Wilson was a great admirer of Lincoln, describing him in messianic terms as a "great reservoir of living water" for Americans. Wilson, a Presbyterian, was like Lincoln an inheritor of the Puritan notion of the covenanted community of belief. Unlike Lincoln, however, he saw the United States as being obligated to spread the good news of democracy throughout the world. Nonetheless, this view of the community as having a special religious character legitimates the use of coercion by the central government against its citizens in ways that O'Sullivan would have found illegitimate. Like Lincoln, Wilson understood the religious obligations of the national community to have priority over the desires of its component groups and individuals.

In this chapter, I focus primarily on Woodrow Wilson's public speech and writing. Wilson promoted what has since been a characteristic willingness of the American people and government to intervene aggressively in the affairs of other nations, and the tendency to convey this willingness in the language of religious obligation or duty. In all of this, the weight of my analysis will be on Wilson's public speech, focus on its use of the themes, tropes, and symbols of the civil religious tradition. This chapter is organized chronologically, first examining Wilson's early

speech and writings to find the sources from which he develops the civil religious themes that mark his presidency. I then move to consider Wilson's deployment of civil religious tropes while in office, analyzing the developments of those themes and the causes that bring them about, from peace, through war to victory. Interestingly, across this period of time, Wilson moves from an emphasis on the United States as having a duty before God to a description of the ideals and institutions of American government as having a sacred character of their own. For him, the cause of democracy eventually becomes holy even in and of itself. I end this chapter by examining how Wilson deployed the same themes as he had in war and peace in his effort to build the League of Nations. That his deployment of civil religious language fails in support of the League is in part because of its content as Wilson interpreted it: dividing the political world into good and evil, he refused to compromise; having described the United States as exceptional, he could not persuade Americans to submit to any other body.

1. Religion, Leadership, and the State

Wilson biographer Arthur S. Link, in his book *The Higher Realism of Woodrow Wilson*, rejects out of hand the notion that Wilson was "an impractical idealist and visionary", describing him instead as a "supreme realist."² Link hails not only

² Arthur S. Link, *The Higher Realism of Woodrow Wilson*. Vanderbilt University. Nashville, 1971. p. 130, 135. Link also asserts that Wilson is a representative and inheritor of a tradition of orthodox Christian leadership, but this claim is debatable. Gregory S. Butler argues persuasively that Wilson's millenarian belief, described in this chapter, that a new world of peace and justice could emerge as the product of human effort, and salvation be the product of earthly politics, is well outside the realm

Wilson's political instincts, but also his refusal to conceive of moral and political ideals as somehow not possessed of the same level of reality as the concerns of so-called realpolitik. It is in this way that Link conceives of Wilson's realism as "higher", in that according to Link, Wilson's political pragmatism accords questions of justice the same priority as those of power. Whether or not this is sound political reasoning, it is difficult to overstate the degree to which Wilson's religious and philosophical beliefs factored into his political speech and reasoning.

Woodrow Wilson was a Presbyterian and a committed proponent of Calvinist Covenant theology; he believed that all of life, including politics, should be based in God's justice and righteousness.³ These beliefs are reflected in a series of short articles that appeared in the Wilmington, North Carolina *Presbyterian* between August and December 1873. One of these is "A Christian Statesman," in which he argues that a statesman's first responsibility is always to God. Moreover, he writes that "in no case should he allow expediency or policy to influence him in the least," if this "involves a support of untruth or injustice... Those who are not for truth are against it. There is here no neutrality."⁴ These early writings evince a strong tendency to perceive politics in an idealist mode, and demonstrate Wilson's belief that politics consists primarily of ruling in adherence to a set of transcendental concepts and ideals. His insistence that "those who are not for truth are against it,"

of Christian orthodoxy. (Gregory S. Butler, "Visions of a Nation Transformed", *Journal of Church and State*, vol. 39, no. 1. 1997. pp. 47-48)

³ Gary Scott Smith. *Faith & the Presidency*. Oxford University Press. Oxford & New York, 2006. p. 161

⁴ Wilson, Woodrow. In *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*. Vol. 1. Arthur S. Link, ed. Princeton University Press. Princeton, NJ, 1966-1994. p. 188

with its stark division between the righteous and the unrighteous, would inform his political views during his administration, when he divided the world between the friends of democracy on the one hand, and its unholy enemies on the other.

In this same vein, another article, "Christ's Army," extends the military metaphor of Ephesians 6 to describe human life as a battle between the forces of God and Satan, emphasizing the importance of service and sacrifice. Here again, "there is no middle course, no neutrality." In this dualistic battle of life, "each one will be made to render a strict account of his conduct on the day of battle."⁵ Wilson's thinking strongly emphasizes on the duty of the individual to adhere to ethical and religious precepts in service to the greater good and the higher power. This same theme appears in a more specifically political vein in his May 7, 1911 address in Denver, "The Bible and Progress," where Wilson argues that "Nothing makes America great except her thoughts, except her ideals, except her acceptance of those standards of these [biblical] pages of revelation. America has all along claimed the distinction of setting this [democratic] example to the civilized world..."⁶ Wilson, on the eve of his presidency, here argues that the glory of the American political project is a product on the one hand of its piety, and on the other its political and ethical thought, which is rooted in but distinct from its religious tradition. By making the nation's worth dependent on the piety and idealism of the United States as a whole, Wilson depicts America as being set apart from other nations, different in the sense that it is the exemplar of the highest ideals and,

⁵ Ibid. p. 181

⁶ *Papers*, 23:18

accordingly, the most just politics, in the mode of what I have termed the model perspective within American civil religion. It is worth noting that this is also to accord a special moral status to the actions and policies of the United States, insofar as those actions are in accordance with its ideals. This position in some ways splits the difference between those of Lincoln and O'Sullivan: like the latter, Wilson accords a special moral position to the actions of the United States by virtue of its exceptional religious status, but like the former sees this status as depending on the maintenance of the nation's covenant with God, from which it remains possible to stray.

The special status that Wilson believes to exist between God and the United States is attested to in an address delivered in Chicago on February 12, 1909, entitled "Abraham Lincoln: Man of the People." Though a Southerner (Wilson's Virginian family had stood for the Confederacy, and though his grandfather had been an abolitionist, his father had owned slaves), Wilson allows himself to wax rhapsodic regarding the slain president, and writes with an uncharacteristic level of enthusiasm. The picture that he paints of Lincoln is (interestingly for a man so strongly associated with liberal thought) one well at home within the republican tradition as it is depicted by modern thinkers such as J.G.A. Pocock and Hannah Arendt: Wilson's Lincoln is uninterested in riches, but a seeker of leisure and conversation; he is of the "mass" but "lifted" to rightful rule by personal excellence; courageous and forthright, but studious and prudent; wise and appreciative of individual persons and self-reliance, but aware that coolness and distance are best

for one in a position of leadership.⁷ Most interesting for the purposes of my argument, however, is the source to which Wilson attributes Lincoln's excellent qualities. Rather than manly virtú or traditional Christian piety, Wilson describes Lincoln's genius as follows:

You feel that there is no telling what it might have done in days to come, when there would have been new demands made upon its strength and upon its versatility. He is like some great reservoir of *living water* which you can freely quaff but can never exhaust. There is something absolutely endless about the lines of such a life.⁸

Here, Wilson refers in his description of Lincoln to the fourth chapter of the Gospel according to John, where the Christian kerygma is described in very similar terms.⁹

In describing Lincoln as a "reservoir of living water," Wilson makes Lincoln, if not the equal of Christ, at least in this way of a kind with him. Wilson finds in Lincoln an inexhaustible supply of truth that is described in the terms of Christian soteriology, and moreover sees in Lincoln an aspect of the eternal, the "absolutely endless." As shown above, Wilson sees the Christian faith and the American political project as being fundamentally linked, but here goes further, and accords to a purely political figure in American history a semi-divine, messianic status. In this way, not only Lincoln's words and thoughts, but also his figure itself are incorporated into the

⁷ *Papers* 19:36-38

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 36. My italics.

⁹ John 4:10-14, in which Jesus speaks to the woman at the well, read as follows: Jesus answered and said unto her, If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water. The woman saith unto him, Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep: from whence then hast thou that living water? Art thou greater than our father Jacob, which gave us the well, and drank thereof himself, and his children, and his cattle? Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again: But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.

tradition of American civil religion. This incorporation, though, is partial. It strongly emphasizes Lincoln's priestly civil religious speech, which affirms the American community of belief, over his prophetic mode, which criticizes it. As will be seen in the following pages, this emphasis allows Wilson to fuse Lincoln's speech with O'Sullivan's civil religious framework to a degree that would be impossible were Lincoln's prophetic speech given greater weight.

Central to the tradition of American civil religion is the question of the relationship between the individual and the community he or she inhabits. This question is posed not only in terms of rights and duties, but also in the terms of moral and spiritual relationships, qualities strongly present in Wilson's civil religious thought. On the relationship between the state and its components individuals, he writes,

*The State, therefore, is an abiding natural relationship; neither a mere convenience nor a mere necessity; neither a mere voluntary association nor a mere corporation; nor any other artificial thing created for a special purpose, but the eternal, natural embodiment and expression of a higher form of life than the individual, namely, that common life which gives leave to individual life and opportunity for completeness,—makes individual life possible and makes it full and complete.*¹⁰

The state, then, for Wilson takes on an important moral role in the life of the individual, whose attainment of the good life not only becomes dependent on citizenship, but also on the individual's conformity to the broader will of the state,

¹⁰ "Notes for Lectures." *Papers* 7:124. Italics in original.

which acts as a bridge between the life of the individual and that of society.¹¹ The relationship between state and citizen is reciprocal, with each heeding and accepting the guidance of the other.¹² The state, it is worth noting, is for Wilson not only salutary, but natural, meaning that the individual can only be fully human within the state, and eternal, which takes it out of the realm of human works. In this way, his concept of the state is not what one might expect from a Presbyterian so steeped in covenant theology. The state is expressly not an artificial construct created by the freely contracting actors, making pacts with either men or God, but an entity that is inherent in, and indeed coexistent with, humanity.

Indeed, Wilson's understanding of the state in this way has a Hegelian flavor. This is not entirely surprising, given that his teachers at Johns Hopkins University, where he attended graduate school, had all been educated in Germany, where they were trained in philosophy and political thought. Indeed, the two professors who most influenced Wilson, Richard T. Ely and Herbert Baxter Adams, had both received their doctorates from the University of Heidelberg after studying under Johann K. Bluntschli, a prominent Hegelian theorist of the state.¹³ Wilson has a

¹¹ Ronald J. Pestritto, *Woodrow Wilson and the Roots of Modern Liberalism*. Rowman & Littlefield. Lanham, Boulder, New York, Toronto, & Oxford, 2005. p. 5

¹² *Papers* 59:534

¹³ Ronald J. Pestritto (2005) p. 8 According to Pestritto, Bluntschli's papers were housed during Wilson's time at Johns Hopkins in a classroom where Wilson studied and participated in a seminar. Interestingly, Bluntschli critiqued Hegel for having an incomplete understanding of the state, arguing that "Hegel's State... is only a logical abstraction, not an organism, a mere logical notion, not a person. Hegel, by founding the State and law merely upon will overlooks the fact that in the State not only is the collective human will operative, but all the powers of human spirit and feeling together." This emphasis on the organic nature of the state is present in Wilson's political thought. (in *The Theory of the State*, Authorized English Translation of the Sixth German Tradition. Clarendon Press. Oxford. London, 1885. pp. 69-70)

strongly linear, teleological view of history, which is guided by God's will toward a providentially determined endpoint. For him, "America and mankind were moving to a world-immanent transfiguration of the human condition."¹⁴ Thus, he like O'Sullivan saw the future history of the United States as being more important for American identity than its past. Wilson wrote in 1913 that, though a people's past was important as a "ballast" to keep them steady in their course, "We think of the future, not the past, as the more glorious time in comparison with which the present is nothing."¹⁵

Wilson sees the special claims of the United States as being validated by its ideals, which are derived from the revealed will of a living God. As did O'Sullivan, he believes the destiny of the American state to be determined by the active intervention of God in history. For Wilson, the ideals of American government are found not in the Constitution, but in "unwritten laws higher than any constitutions and of which our constitutions are but a particular expression." These unwritten laws make Americans "conscious of our oneness as a single personality."¹⁶ The American state is thus for Wilson an organic entity brought into being by the slow working of God's will in history. He believes God's plan to be such that one day all nations of the earth will be democratic republics, and that it is the divine mission of

¹⁴ Richard J. Bishirjian, "Croly, Wilson, and the American Civil Religion," *Modern Age* (Winter 1979) p. 36.

¹⁵ Woodrow Wilson, *The New Freedom: A Call for the Emancipation for the Generous energies of a People*. Doubleday, Page, & Co. New York, 1913. p. 42. Wilson did not disregard the past as O'Sullivan did, seeing it as the "ballast" that kept a people on their steady course

¹⁶ Quoted in Butler (1997) p. 41

the United States to bring this plan to its fruition.¹⁷ This national purpose works to ground the authority of the federal government: in the Wilsonian view, the American state can place legitimate demands on the citizenry, even if these demands are extraordinary, insofar as they are in the service of America's ideals and divine mission.¹⁸ Wilson's picture of the United States is one that would have the nation play the roles of prophet, messiah, missionary, and even martyr in the fulfillment of his eschatological vision, and his presidency could be described as an effort to fulfill this vision in the face of rapidly developing political realities that necessitated constant revision and adaptation to circumstance. This process of fidelity and adaptation is key to understanding Wilson's thinking on the war in Europe, and the way in which a war that was once to be avoided came to appear the only possible course of action.

Wilson's belief that the United States exists as a divine instrument is given voice in his 1913 Independence Day address at Gettysburg, given before Union and Confederate veterans on the fiftieth anniversary of the battle, where he describes America as "the nation that God has builded by our hands."¹⁹ But to what end? In this speech, Wilson returns to his earlier theme of the warring armies of God and his Adversary, invoking the memory of the warring armies of Gettysburg to call for a

¹⁷ Smith (2006) p. 173

¹⁸ It is this view of federal authority that would ground Wilson's support of Prohibition as a wartime measure for the conservation of resources during the First World War, as well as his opposition to its being made permanent. The intrusion of the state into the private lives and choices of individuals was for him justified by its service to the national purpose of spreading and defending democracy, but after the end of the war it became illegitimate.

¹⁹ *Papers* 28:25

similar kind of service in peacetime America. Indeed, the choice of location works not only to recall the battle itself, but Lincoln's famous speech at the same site, which Wilson echoes. As in the Gettysburg Address, as well as in Wilson's earlier writing, the end of bloodshed does not mean the end of spiritual struggle:

May we break camp now and be at ease? Are our forces disorganized, without constituted leaders and the might of men consciously united because we contend, not with armies, but with principalities and powers and wickedness in high places? Are we content to lie still? ... War fitted us for action, and action never ceases.²⁰

The combatants in this spiritual warfare are not armies, but another kind of force:

That host is the people themselves, the great and the small, without class or difference of kind or race or origin; and undivided in interest, if we have but the vision to guide and direct them and order their lives aright in what we do. Our constitutions are their articles of enlistment. The orders of the day are the laws upon our statute books. What we strive for is their freedom...²¹

Echoing the apocalypticism of his earlier writing, Wilson here describes a kind of mystical union in battle through faith, not in biblical revelation, but in the American political project. It is a union in which the state orders aright the lives of individual for a continuous struggle in the name of freedom, which is of course a political good.

That this message is not merely civil in content but also religious is clear: for Wilson, God built the United States using humans as his tools, and Wilson emphasizes the religious content of his address by quoting from Ephesians 6:12, saying that "we contend, not with armies, but with principalities and powers and

²⁰ Ibid. p. 24-25

²¹ Ibid. p. 25

wickedness in high places.”²² Wilson here affirms the value of human agency in realizing the nation’s providential destiny, much as Lincoln does in the Gettysburg Address. What emerges is a message that is both political and religious in equal share and at the same time. As Lincoln in his priestly speech argued that God had endowed the United States with the *telos* of equality, Wilson is saying that God created the United States with the purpose of human freedom in mind, and that it is the duty of its citizens to cleave to its political precepts and to realize this goal. Thus, the state for him has a religious function, making possible for the individual a heightened level of spiritual being. Moreover, the true threat to American ideals and beliefs comes not from hostile armies, not from the force of earthly flesh and blood, but from religious evil in places of power and influence. This is an extension of Wilson’s belief that the greatness of the United States stems entirely from American faith and ideals, in that the true threat to any such nation would have to strike at the basis of its excellence. It is only through faith in its political gospel that the United States can hope to stand against the wiles of the Devil.

Wilson’s speech at Gettysburg has in it the ghost of Lincoln (that reservoir of living water) in content as well as setting. As in Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, Wilson urges a renewed dedication to the same cause in which the Civil War had died. That national purpose for him is the “peace and union and vigor, and the maturity and might of a great nation” striven for by both Union and Rebels,

²² KJV Ephesians 6:11 Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.

“enemies no longer, generous friends rather, our battles long past, the quarrel forgotten.” Here as elsewhere, the language of American civil religion is deployed to evoke a national sense of purpose, here a national pursuit of human freedom. This spirit of militancy is directed against threats of a spiritual kind, which can be located at home or, importantly, abroad. In this address, Wilson employs the missionary perspective within American civil religion in order to direct the militant spirit of warfare against evil in high places, foreshadowing the rationale that he will deploy in favor of American involvement in the First World War. For Wilson, the mission and sacred duty of the United States is to defend and spread human freedom, which for him is identical with democracy, throughout the world. In his speech at Gettysburg, he deploys the tropes of Lincoln’s prophetic speech, but with an emphasis on liberty rather than equality.

Wilson’s civil religious framework differs from Lincoln’s in that while the nation is obligated to the pursuit of political justice, here interchangeable with liberty, this pursuit is not limited to the nation’s borders by a sense of national sinfulness or humility. Thus, when the War approached, it was not necessary in terms of Wilson’s civil religious framework for nondemocratic governments to present a military threat to the nation’s security. Rather, the existence of non-democratic states, “principalities and powers and wickedness in high places,” could be viewed as a threat in and of itself to the nation’s reason for being, allowing them to be conflated with political, moral, and religious evil. The fear here is not of eventual invasion or conflict, but of the evil itself, of corruption in a republican vein.

Together, these elements drive Wilson's argument with both active and reactive force, as the drive to spread democracy abroad is motivated both by a sense of divine mission in the world and the need to defend American virtue from the corrupting threat presented by the mere existence of the enemies of human freedom.

The civil religious exceptionalism of the United States made its tranquility and unity of special value for Wilson, as internal division meant a threat to its providential mission. While he was president of Princeton, all black applicants were successfully persuaded to withdraw, as for him "the paramount issue in this matter was not the admission of Negroes, but rather the social peace of the university, which, he feared, would have been disturbed by it. He did not want to create complications for the many Southern students who attended Princeton."²³ As a Southern and Democratic President at the turn of the century, Wilson's civil religious framework is unique in this dissertation in that the issue of race is conspicuously absent. African-Americans were for Wilson not truly a part of the American political community insofar as their interests could be safely and regularly sacrificed in the name of national unity.²⁴ Though in his 1912 campaign he courted

²³ Henry Blumenthal, "Woodrow Wilson and the Race Question". *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Jan., 1963), p. 2. See also W.E.B. DuBois, "An Essay Toward a History of the Black Man in the Great War", *Crisis*, no. 18 (June 1919), pp. 63-87; Jane L. Scheiber and Harry N. Scheiber, "The Wilson Administration and the Wartime Mobilization of Black Americans, 1917-1918" in *Labor History* no. 10 (Summer 1969), pp. 433-458; and Nancy J. Weiss, "The Negro and the New Freedom: Fighting Wilsonian Segregation", *Political Science Quarterly*, no 84 (March 1969), pp. 61-79.

²⁴ In this way he is in many ways a man of his time. In the decades following Reconstruction, Americans North and South regularly went about reestablishing national unity by way of ignoring the issue of race, resulting in a *de facto* exclusion of blacks from politics even in places where this exclusion did not have the force of law.

the black vote, once in office he courted Southern support by appointing a number of militantly segregationist Southerners to cabinet appointments, and under his presidency the Department of the Treasury, the Post Office, and the Bureau of Engraving and Printing all instituted segregated lunchrooms for the first time since the Civil War.²⁵ Despite Wilson's promise to black Americans that it was his "earnest wish to see justice done them in every matter, and not mere grudging justice," his actions once in office clearly demonstrated a belief that they were of at most secondary importance.²⁶

For Wilson, it was necessary that the United States be without internal division in order to pursue its messianic mission. This messianic theme, as well as those of collective purpose, national virtue, militant service to American ideals, and America's special relationship with God, all are included in his civil religious framework during his presidency as he made the case for joining the war in Europe. Interestingly, however, these tropes are first deployed in the service of peace and neutrality. The transition between the two, from the posture of neutrality to the readiness for war, illuminates not only the relationship between Wilson, his ideals, and his God, but also the dynamic political tensions present within the tradition of American civil religion.

²⁵ Blumenthal (1963) p. 5

²⁶ *ibid.*

2. Mediator and Messiah

Arthur Link argues that between 1914 and 1917, both Wilson and the nation over which he presided were, on the whole, sincerely neutral regarding the war that raged in Europe, an argument lent credence by Wilson's choice of the antiwar William Jennings Bryan as his Secretary of State. According to Link, Wilson's "one great objective from 1914 to 1917 was peace; every policy that he executed during this period has to be understood within the framework of this one overriding goal."²⁷ If this is indeed the case, it is interesting to observe the shifts in language that take place over the course of Wilson's efforts to remain neutral and to end the war with a just peace. In his August 18, 1914 appeal for neutrality, for example, where he calls for the nation to "be neutral in fact as well as in name during these days that try men's souls,"²⁸ there is no trace of civil religious rhetoric. At this time, according to Link, popular sentiment was well in line with Wilson's desire to remain a neutral arbiter between the warring alliances. Though that sentiment would be badly tested by such events as the sinking of the *Lusitania* in the years between 1914 and 1917, the summer and autumn of 1916 would find it strengthened by an ambitious and ascendant Britain's rejection of American arbitration plans, as well as the American popular reaction to the wave of executions and repressions that

²⁷ Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson: Revolution, War, and Peace*. AHM Publishing Corp. Arlington Heights, Il, 1979. P. 22-23. There exists some reason to doubt that peace was the only thing on Wilson's mind, however, as other factors may well have inclined Wilson to the Allied cause. Even aside from the "golden chains" of debt that may have bound the United States to Britain, an Allied victory would have serious long-range advantages over the alternative: the economic benefits to the United States of a liberalized political and economic world were clear, and American security depended in part on the protective umbrella of British sea power. (August Heckscher, *Woodrow Wilson*. Charles Scribner's Sons. New York, 1991. p. 434)

²⁸ *Papers* 30

followed the Irish Easter Rising of 1916. Further, mounting casualties and the fact that the war had no end in sight appeared to have convinced most Americans that intervention was well avoided.²⁹

In a draft for an undelivered speech or note dating from autumn of 1916, Wilson presents a plan for peace that is in many ways similar in content to the address which he would make to the Senate in January of the next year (on which more below).³⁰ However, the rhetoric of civil religion is again absent. Though Wilson's desire to stay out of the war was as strong as ever, rapidly developing events in the months between the autumn of 1916 and January 1917 made it increasingly unlikely that America would be able to avoid belligerent status. On December 12, 1916 and January 12, 1917, the Germans and Allies respectively rejected Wilson's peace plans, with each ironically counting on a forthcoming German declaration of unrestricted submarine warfare to turn the tide of war in their own favor. Both sides knew that such a move would bring the Americans in on the side of the Allies, but the Germans, for their part, thought that American aid would be inconsequential in the face of their U-Boats, which would be able, they believed, to end the war in a matter of months. The Allies, on the other hand, believed that American intervention would prove decisive for their cause, and were content to delay until the Germans made their declaration. As the chances for peace became increasingly desperate, Wilson remained undeterred, telling his foreign

²⁹ Link (1979) p. 53

³⁰ Ibid, p. 24-27

policy advisor, Col. Edward M. House, that “This country does not intend to become involved in war. It would be a crime against civilization for us to go into it.”³¹

It was in this environment that Wilson made his January 22 address to the Senate, in which he lays out his plans for a settlement to the war in Europe, foreshadowing his famous Fourteen Points. Wilson here makes no mention of God or of explicitly religious sentiment. He does, however, utilize certain formal tropes of American civil religion familiar from O’Sullivan, as he lays out a messianic and millenarian mission for the United States and the American people in world history, a mission which the nation’s unique history makes it both qualified and obligated to undertake. The moment in which he speaks, for Wilson, is “the opportunity for which [the American people] have sought to prepare themselves by the very principles and purposes of their polity and the approved practices of their Government ever since the days when they set up a new nation in the high and honorable hope... [to] show mankind the way to liberty.”³² It is the moment for the messianic potential of the United States to be made good, to bring about a just and stable peace by a gospel of liberal democracy. This peace, he continues, “must engage the confidence and satisfy the principles of the American governments, ... consistent with their political faith and with the practical convictions which the peoples of America have once for all embraced and undertaken to defend.”³³ Peace, then, will only be reached when the nations of the world model themselves on the

³¹ Page Smith, *America Enters the World: A People’s History of the Progressive Era & World War I*, vol. 7. McGraw-Hill. New York City, 1985. p. 508-509

³² *Papers* 40:534

³³ *Ibid*, p. 535

United States, and it is the mission of the United States to expedite that process. Numbering himself among the “convinced disciples of liberty,” Wilson describes the liberal democratic policies that he has set out (including the freedom of the seas, the avoidance of “entangling alliances,” and the establishment of an international, peace-enforcing body) as “American principles, American policies,” and continues that “We could stand for no others.”³⁴

Wilson’s vision of a messianic entrance of the United States into the affairs of the warring powers is one that allows the nation to bring peace by the truth of its beliefs and ideals. It combines elements of both the messiah and the missionary, as the conversion of foreign powers to the American truth is believed to be the firm basis of peace: “No peace can last, or ought to last, which does not recognize and accept the principle that governments derive all their just powers from the consent of the governed.”³⁵ Wilson here quotes the Declaration of Independence, depicting the proselytizing of the democratic gospel as being in continuity with the vision of the Founders. For him, the only true peace is democratic peace, as democracy is the only form of government compatible with religious and political truth. Wilson’s hope here is that America can leverage the unique position and (he hopes) credibility that its history has bestowed upon it, bringing peace, yes, but at least as importantly, uniting the world under the democratic creed. His hope here is messianic and millennial, aiming not only to end the war in Europe, but to bring about the end of the world that produced it, ringing in an epoch in which democratic

³⁴ Ibid, p. 397

³⁵ Ibid, p. 536-537

thought, practice, and institutions at the national and international levels will bring about a stable and enduring world peace.

There is, then, a strong element of the apocalyptic in Wilson's speech. "Mankind," he says, "is looking now for freedom of life, not for equipoises of power."³⁶ The end state that he envisions is one in which the spread of democracy has so radically transfigured politics, even at the international level, that peace is in no way based on *any* balance of power. Though he elsewhere calls for the establishment of an international peacekeeping body to weight the world's force in the favor of peace, these words make it clear that this is not thought to be only an alliance of nations in favor of peace, but an entirely new epoch in history, one in which a just peace with no unfair advantage is to be maintained and enforced. If the rest of the world can be persuaded to take the United States as its example, Wilson argues, the spread of peace and justice the world over would result. J.G.A. Pocock says of this impulse in the American political mind that, if as Locke says in the beginning all the world was America, then "if in the end all the world should be America again, the mission of a chosen people would have been fulfilled."³⁷ According to Pocock, the political apocalyptic is a means of drawing the redemptive process out of a purely spiritual realm and squarely into the realm of social history.³⁸

³⁶ Ibid, p. 536

³⁷ Pocock, J.G.A. *The Machiavellian Moment*. Princeton University Press. Princeton & London, 1975. p. 542

³⁸ Ibid, p.46

Though Pocock is speaking specifically about medieval republics, the same can be applied to Wilson's vision of the United States as it appears in the speeches and writings presented here: history, guided by the hand of God, has prepared the American people to redeem the world, bringing the historical process to its culmination, in which peace and freedom endure across the globe. In this way, Wilson like O'Sullivan argues that history must be reinterpreted in the light of America's advent, much as Christians reinterpret the Old Testament in the light of Christ's coming. As O'Sullivan put it, "All history has to be re-written; political science and the whole scope of all moral truth have to be considered and illustrated in the light of the democratic principle. All old subjects of thought and all new questions arising, connected more or less directly with human existence, have to be taken up again and re-examined in this point of view."³⁹ By grounding his case in a familiar and widely persuasive religious narrative, Wilson is able to draw on the signs and symbols of religious and political traditions to reinforce his plea for peace. Such reinforcement was needed, because although most Americans supported neutrality, they for the most part did so for reasons very different from Wilson's, which would be challenged by the developments that he knew were in the offing.⁴⁰ He envisions not only the end of history, but also in a sense the end of politics as we know it, as he envisions an end to war *and* unregulated political conflict, as "freedom of life," liberty, not power, becomes the basis of world politics.

³⁹ *Democratic Review* #1, October 1837, p. 14

⁴⁰ Page Smith (1985) p. 512

In his 1913 Independence Day address at Gettysburg, Wilson describes this same freedom as being God's ultimate purpose in building the United States with human hands. What emerges from these speeches is an image of a God whose involvement in human history is constant but mediated through the use of human agents, and most especially the United States and its people. America for Wilson functions as it did for O'Sullivan, as a kind of democratic ground zero through which democratic political ideals not only enter the world, but also spread out across the globe, eventually bringing human social and political history to its predetermined endpoint. The vision of American purpose laid out by Wilson is one in which human and divine wills are reconciled, synthesized in a common purpose. In late January of 1917, Wilson knew that the odds of the United States being able to play the role of non-belligerent mediator, much less that of a messiah, were low, but his faith remained that such a thing was not only possible, but necessary. While the next months would change his mind, his use of the language of civil religion would continue, but with a new purpose: where once it was used to bolster Wilson's peace effort, it would now enter the service of his call for war.

3. The Crusade

The causes that led the United States to enter the First World War have been widely studied, and need only be touched on here. The initiation of unrestricted submarine warfare by the German fleet together with the Zimmerman telegram and the furor provoked by its publication, among other things, led to the formal

American entrance into hostilities.⁴¹ On April 2, 1917, Wilson addressed Congress to deliver his call for a formal declaration of war against Germany. In so doing, he faced two formidable rhetorical challenges: on the one hand, he had to reverse the course that he had run over the span of his presidency, and on the strength of which he had won his second term, moving from a defense of peace to a call for war. On the other hand, he had to win over the diverse coalition that had supported him in his pursuit of peace, a group that included Christian pacifists, socialists, anarchists, populist Westerners who opposed the war because Wall Street favored it, and German- and Irish-Americans, among others.⁴² He addressed the former difficulty by grounding his apparent turnabout in the pursuit of the most direct path to peace, and the latter, in part, by ratcheting up his use of the language of American civil religion, laying out themes that would be common in propaganda produced by his Committee for Public Information (on which more later).

In his call for war, Wilson is at pains to lay out the grievances against the German government that precipitated American involvement in the war. In so doing, he is careful to repeatedly distinguish the German people from their government, saying at one point that “We have no feeling towards them but one of sympathy and friendship. It was not upon their impulse that their government acted in entering this war.”⁴³ Continuing on this theme, Wilson promises to “fight... for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples, the German

⁴¹ Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Zimmerman Telegram*. Ballantine Books. New York, 1958 & 1966. p. 175

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 512

⁴³ *Papers* 41:523

peoples included.”⁴⁴ This represents an extension of the millenarian themes found in his January 22 address to the Senate, during which he spoke of America’s mission to spread democracy across the globe. Further, Wilson combines this message with one familiar from his 1913 Independence Day speech, in which he spoke of the threats presented by “wickedness in high places.” Again, as he did on that occasion, he identifies non-democratic government with immorality, describing the German government as cruel, avaricious, secretive, and untrustworthy, and saying that “The wrongs against which we now array ourselves are no common wrongs; they cut to the very roots of human life.”⁴⁵ These wrongs, it is clear, are not to be regarded as excused by political expediency, because “the same standards of conduct and of responsibility for wrong done shall be observed among nations and their governments that are observed among the individual citizens of civilized states.”⁴⁶ Wilson here draws on the Puritan tradition as Lincoln did before him, depicting the political community as having a moral character and obligations distinct from those of its component individuals.

The conflict in Europe is not for Wilson only a matter of politics, it is one of good and evil, and the perpetrators of evil are to be held accountable for their deeds as individuals are for theirs. Here, the possibilities that were latent in his 1913 address at Gettysburg become overt, as the non-democratic in high places are to be held responsible and punished for their deeds. This, in combination with his pledge

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 525

⁴⁵ Ibid, p. 521

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 50

to liberate the German peoples, places the democratization of Germany among the most prominent goals for which the war will be fought. Lacking this, he argues, no stable peace is possible, and a war against Germany is thus a war in favor of peace. He makes this explicit when he says that, with such a government as the German, “we can never have a friend; and that in the presence of its organized power, always lying in wait to accomplish we know not what purpose, there can be no security for the democratic governments of the world.”⁴⁷ Wilson’s missionary perspective demands engagement with the world in order to promote the spread of democracy. For him, the world cannot be allowed to take the role of spectators, but must be actively encouraged to arrange their own internal institutions on the American model. Failing this, the world cannot be made safe for democracy.

In the course of making the case for understanding war against Germany as the most direct path to meaningful peace, Wilson characterizes democracies, and particularly the United States, as paragons of virtue, saying that “We have no selfish ends to serve,” seeking no advantage and representing only the right.⁴⁸ As Reinhold Neibuhr and Alan Heimert note, this sort of self-righteousness is not unique to the United States, but the messianic qualities of the American sense of mission here lead Wilson to ascribe “a purity of motive to which no nation possesses, or for that matter which all but saintly individuals lack.”⁴⁹ This pretension to purity is part and

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 525

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 525

⁴⁹ Neibuhr, Reinhold & Alan Heimert, *A Nation So Conceived*. Charles Scribner’s Sons. New York, 1963. p. 138. In his 2003 State of the Union address, President George W. Bush sounded themes

parcel of the image of the United States that Wilson lays out over the course of his presidency: if the nation is builded by God with human hands to carry out his divine will, how could it be otherwise than righteous? How could its motives be otherwise than pure? If Allied victory or the spread of democracy across the globe are sought for reasons of self-interest, then the messianic mission which Wilson describes is nothing but a sham, window dressing to cover up a new balance of power. If, however, the nation's motives are pure, then the war has a specific type of moral content. The United States then is not only a political model, but a moral one, and the coming conflict is not only a war, but a crusade to work the will of God for the good of all mankind. The linkage of God's will to American political practice and belief is made implicitly in the conclusion of Wilson's address:

...[T]he right is more precious than peace, and we shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts,—for democracy, for the rights of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free. To such a task we can dedicate our lives and our fortunes, everything that we are and everything that we have, with the pride of those who know that the day has come when America is privileged to spend her blood and her might for the principles that gave her birth and happiness and the peace which she has treasured. God helping her, she can do no other.⁵⁰

Here, Wilson describes the conditions of the transformation of global politics which he hopes American involvement will bring about, while acknowledging that, in

similar to Wilson's, saying "We exercise power without conquest, and we sacrifice for the liberty of strangers."

⁵⁰ *Papers* 41:526-527

order for America to play the roles of prophet and messiah which he had always seen for her, she may also have to play the role of martyr. The acknowledgment that blood must be shed for the greater good comes between two historical allusions, one to the Declaration of Independence and the other to the words of Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms.⁵¹

Wilson, just as he did in his 1911 essay "The Bible and Progress," here ultimately roots his call for war in two separate but linked grounds, both of which proclaim a willingness to face death rather than betray principle. It is significant that the two are joined by an acceptance of the martyrdom to come: the document of American ideals (derived, according to Wilson, primarily from the Bible) and the words of the man who would base Christian faith exclusively on scripture are synthesized in a willingness to accept self-sacrifice in the name of truth, and in this way the political and religious bases which Wilson presents for his argument are essentially one. The war, then, is not only in accordance with American political thought and with Christian scriptures, it is the continuation, perhaps even culmination, of the single tradition of which both are a part. To shed blood in such a cause is for him no grim necessity, but a privilege. The Reformation and the American Revolution are linked here by Wilson not only historically, nor even solely in the spirit of human freedom, but in a religious sense, as the continuation of God's

⁵¹ Quoth the Declaration: "With a firm reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred Honor." Martin Luther, for his part, is famously said to have concluded his response to Johann Eck at Worms with the words, "Here I stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen."

providential design to bring that freedom about, and which will at last make freedom the property of not a scattered handful of nations, but of all mankind.⁵²

Niebuhr and Heimert argue that in a democracy with a strong sense of mission like the United States, it becomes difficult to wage war for reasons other than for “‘righteousness sake,’ real or pretended.”⁵³ Wilson, even when defending the neutral position, appears to think similarly: “When you are asked, ‘Aren’t you willing to fight?’ reply, yes, you are waiting for something worth fighting for; you are not looking for petty quarrels, but ... you are looking for some cause which will elevate your spirit, not depress it, some cause in which it seems a glory to shed human blood, if it be necessary, so that all the common compacts of liberty may be sealed with the blood of free men.”⁵⁴ As far as the war in Europe was concerned, it appeared that Wilson had found such a cause. By presenting his case for the war within the civil religious framework that he had been developing since before his presidency, Wilson is able to cast the case for war as being not only necessary, but also ultimately moral. In a way reminiscent of Lincoln in his priestly mode, Wilson emphasizes the significance of human agency in moving the nation toward its providential *telos*. The war for him will allow the individual to participate meaningfully in the grand historical trajectory of the United States, working to democratize the world and thus fulfill the hopes not only of humanity, but also of

⁵² Wilson explicitly describes American involvement in the war as a continuation of the Revolution in his June 14, 1917 Flag Day address. (*Papers* 42: 499-500)

⁵³ Niebuhr & Heimert (1963) p. 137

⁵⁴ Quoted in Edward Buehrig, *Woodrow Wilson and the Balance of Power*. Indiana University Press. Bloomington, Indiana, 1955. p. 248

God himself. It is worth recalling that, for Wilson, the state represents “that common life which gives leave to individual life and opportunity for completeness, — makes individual life possible and makes it full and complete.”

The civil religious framework that he lays out should be understood in the light of this: for him, membership in the American polity comes with moral obligations, the fulfillment of which allows the individual to participate in God’s providential plan for the global attainment of human freedom. The importance of this union is reinforced in his 1917 Thanksgiving Day proclamation, where he thanks “God, the Great Ruler of nations” that “we have been brought to one mind and purpose.” America, he says, has been transformed by what he calls “the revelation of our duty” to spread democracy through the world, and to oppose this duty is to oppose the nation itself, to be in an important way un-American.⁵⁵

For Wilson, this is very much an issue of national identity, and one was either a believer in America’s religio-political destiny or an enemy of it, as Wilson made emphatically clear in 1919 when discussing so-called “hyphenated Americans.” He said, “I want to say, I cannot say too often, any man who carries a hyphen about with him carries a dagger that he is ready to plunge into the vitals of this Republic whenever he gets ready.” For Wilson, national identity functions akin to religious identity, in that it is simply not possible to have two at the same time. This

⁵⁵ *Papers* 44:524-525. It seems likely that this demand for a pure and unadulterated sense of national identity also underlay his dismissive attitude toward American blacks. Whiteness for him was a default part of American identity, and thus in terms of self-identification it was neutral and not in tension with wholehearted support of the national mission. Blackness, on the other hand, marked an individual as a kind of internal alien akin to immigrant community, and Wilson may well have perceived them as having an identity less than fully “American.”

emphasis on defining the community in terms of total commitment was part and parcel of his effort to build support for the war effort, especially in the South, where the antiwar Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan had a substantial and loyal following. Wilson's equation between American mission and identity was calculated to resonate with Southerners, who fifty years after the Civil War remained sensitive to accusations of sectional disloyalty.⁵⁶ Speaking before an assembly of Confederate veterans in June of 1917, Wilson argued that "we now at last see why this great nation was kept united," as God wanted the United States to serve as a "united, indivisible, indestructible instrument" for the spread of democracy across the world.⁵⁷ As American piety admitted no other national allegiance, so it could not allow section loyalty to trump loyalty to the nation as a whole: "It is now more than ever a duty to teach a burning, uncompromising patriotism which will admit of no divided allegiance but demands all that the heart and energy of the citizen can give..."⁵⁸ In the context of war and the movement toward war, Wilson deploys the language and tropes of American civil religion to make the war effort identical with American identity, attempting to motivate Americans to see in the bloody war in Europe a cause in which it seemed a glory to shed both their own blood and that of their enemies. In such a cause, he would brook no hesitation.

⁵⁶ Anthony Gaughn. "Woodrow Wilson and the Rise of Militant Interventionism in the South" in *The Journal of Southern History*, vol. 65 no. 4. November 1999, p. 789 Gaughn argues persuasively that Wilson's appeal to Southern loyalty and nationalism was key to overcoming what was an initially substantial Southern opposition to the war, motivated by a suspicion of the British and the belief that Northern industrialists would use war as an opportunity to increase their power.

⁵⁷ *Papers* 42:452

⁵⁸ *Papers* 48:456. Quoted in Gaughn (1999) p. 789

4. Spreading the Word

Key to Wilson's efforts to generate compliance with the war effort was the formation of the Committee on Public Information, headed by journalist George Creel. Wilson's choice of Creel for the leadership of the CPI is interesting in itself: though an avowed atheist, Creel's autobiography describes political activity through religious metaphor with such a frequency as to seem intentional, describing different political creeds as "gospels" and nativist xenophobes as "the high priests of hate," and presenting a quotation from *Collier's* that likens him to one of the nation's most prominent evangelists, saying, "What [Billy] Sunday is to religion, Creel is to politics. Creel is a crusader, a bearer of the fiery cross."⁵⁹

According to his autobiography, when pitching the idea of an American propaganda ministry, Creel distinguished his plans from their German equivalents by saying that it would produce "Not propaganda as the Germans had defined it, but propaganda in the true sense of the word, meaning the 'propagation of the faith.'"⁶⁰ That despite his lack of a Christian faith Creel saw politics as a whole and American politics particularly in this way may well have made him appealing to Wilson, whose own thinking was, as has been shown, compatible. Describing the purpose of the

⁵⁹ George Creel. *Rebel At Large*. Van Rees Press. New York, 1947. p. 22, 44, 196, and 161. As one might expect from a propagandist's autobiography, it is thoroughly and entertainingly self-serving.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 158. "Although not explicit, the reference is to the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of Faith (de propaganda fide) established by Pope Gregory XV (1621-1623) to train priests for battle against the Protestant Reformation and for the conversion of the Heathens." (Jackall, Robert & Janice M. Hirota *Image Makers: Advertising, Public Relations, and the Ethos of Advocacy*. University of Chicago Press. 2003. p. 19)

CPI, Creel asks rhetorically, “What was more important than to preach the gospel of Americanism?”⁶¹ In his autobiography, Creel consistently distinguishes the efforts of the CPI from those of their Central counterparts on the basis that, while German propaganda was pervaded with lies and distortions, the CPI was spreading the truth in powerful, persuasive ways. Like Wilson, Creel appears to find in the American political system and way of life a kind of spiritual or even religious meaning. He portrays himself as a protector of the true faith, telling a congressional appropriations committee in 1918 that the function of the CPI was to convince “every man, woman, and child in the United States that this war is a just war, a holy war, and a war in self-defense.”⁶²

This theme continues in the propaganda produced by the CPI, for example, the movie poster for the 1918 CPI-produced film, *Pershing's Crusaders* (advertised as “The First Official American War Picture”). While the film itself consists primarily of documentary footage (sometimes staged) of Wilson’s war address and of American forces in France, the film’s marketing illustrates Wilson’s understanding of the war in Europe as a holy war, in particular the poster by which it was promoted:

⁶¹ Creel (1947) p. 198

⁶² Quoted in Stewart Halsey Ross, *Propaganda for War*. McFarland & Co. Jefferson, NC & London, 1996. p. 226

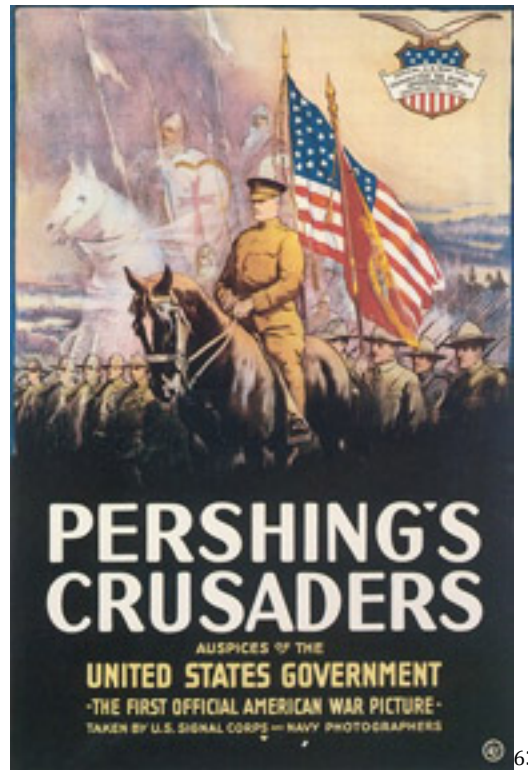


Figure 1: Artist Unknown , "Pershing's Crusaders". 1918

Depicting Pershing's American Expeditionary Force as the inheritors of crusading knights, the image emphatically casts American involvement in the Great War as a holy war, in which righteous warriors of the faith travel far to fight against the infidel. By equating the war with the crusades, the image not only invests the conflict with the legitimacy of a holy endeavor and of religious duty, but it also draws on a powerful narrative in the history of the West, in which the forces of Christendom sally forth with God's blessing to confront a force that is entirely other. Casting American forces as crusaders in turn casts the Germans (or, in the parlance of the time, the "savage Hun") as being a people apart from the West, and by

⁶³ In Walton Rawls, *Wake Up, America!* Abbeville Press. New York, 1988. p. 243

definition opposed to its most sacred beliefs and institutions. At the same time that much was being made in American churches of supposed German atheism, the President was in his own speech, as we have seen, at pains to depict the war as being over political ideals with religious groundings, while Creel's CPI was draping the conflict in religious vestments.⁶⁴ The end result of this is to invest American political ideals with the force and legitimacy of religion, in turn charging the enemies of the United States with opposing not only justice, but also God's plan for the human race as a whole.⁶⁵

Like Wilson, Creel's CPI followed O'Sullivan in equating non-democratic government with spiritual evil, which serves as a kind of double legitimation for violence against them.⁶⁶ On the one hand, defining the Germans as being in

⁶⁴ Abrams, Ray H. *Preachers Present Arms*. Round Table Press. New York, 1933. Revised: Herald Press. Scottsdale, PA, 1969. p. 56

⁶⁵ Pestritto (2005) p. 41

⁶⁶ This legitimation worked as well for coercion on the domestic front. Under Wilson, the Department of Justice embraced the American Protective League, a vigilante organization operating with the explicit approval of law enforcement, who allowed them to put the words "Organized with the Approval and Operating under the Direction of the United States Department of Justice, Bureau of Investigation" on their letterhead. The unpaid, unscreened volunteers of the APL infiltrated unions and leftist organizations like the International Workers of the World (Emerson Hough, author of *Western* and member of the APL, wrote a history of the organization, describing IWW members as "not worth the name of men," saying, "You can not make citizens of such creatures. *Fear* is all they understand.") They also performed what they called "slacker raids", with the intent of discovering young men who were not complying with Section 57 of the Selective Service act of 1917, which required men to carry their draft registration cards at all times (Bough describes "weak American pacifist propaganda" as being the product of German spies and infiltrators. Though not authorized to make arrests, they often did so, often claiming the Army's \$50 bounty on the delivery of deserters. On September 3-5, 1918, the APL performed a citywide "slacker raid" in New York City, approaching civilians and demanding that they produce their registration cards. In these three days in New York, the APL illegally detained 60,187 men, discovering 199 men who had evaded the draft and only eight deserters. Despite the national controversy that erupted, Wilson never disavowed the raids, and indeed commented that the raids had "put the fear of God in others just before the new draft." (Emerson Hough, *The Web: A Revelation of Patriotism*. Arno Press & the New York Times Publishers. New York, 1969; orig. The Reilly & Lee Co. Chicago, 1919. pp. 140-143. Christopher Capozzola, *Uncle*

opposition to the universalist, religiously-grounded transcendental ideals offered by the Wilson administration as justification for the war dehumanizes them in a way that Carl Schmitt would certainly recognize.⁶⁷ In the words of media critic Robin Anderson, this results in “a demonized enemy” that is “no longer recognizably human, and without the quality of empathy can be killed with impunity.”⁶⁸ On the other hand, the claim that American soldiers are the soldiers of God takes the conflict out of the political realm of human agency and complex international relationships and into the realm of religion, “into a belief system based on prescribed categories of faith,” thus exchanging a complicated and sometimes opaque political and historical explanation for the war for one that is clear, unambiguous, and calculated to be maximally forceful.⁶⁹ This is, of course, the task of all propaganda, but it is significant that the CPI and other propagandists seemed

Sam Wants You: World War I and the Making of the Modern American Citizen. Oxford. New York, 2008. pp. 41-52)

Despite the obvious disregard of the APL for the civil rights of Americans, the federal government viewed them with favor, and upon their dissolution in 1919 Attorney General T.W. Gregory wrote to them in gratitude (it is the frontispiece of Hough’s *The Web*), saying that “as head of the Department of Justice, under which the American Protective League operated, I render you thanks with sincere pleasure.” He concludes his letter by quoting Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address to express his belief that “The work of your organization will long be an inspiration to all citizens to render their full measure of service to their country according to her need, without reward, and with abundant zeal.” Seeing the nation as covenanted with God, Wilson like Lincoln believed that the state had a right to coerce citizens into abiding by that covenant.

⁶⁷ The Wilsonian claim to speak in the name of the universal human interest means that “all those by whom one is opposed must perforce be seen as speaking against humanity and hence can only merit to be exterminated.” (Tracy B. Strong “Foreword: Dimensions of the New Debate Around Carl Schmitt” in *The Concept of the Political*, Carl Schmitt. George Schwab, trans. University of Chicago Press. Chicago & London, 1996. P. xxii) Within Wilson’s civil religious framework, the enemies of democracy merit not only extermination but damnation, as they are enemies not only of man but of God.

⁶⁸ Anderson, Robin. *A Century of Media, A Century of War.* Peter Lang Publishing. New York, 2006. p. 6.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, p. 9

to often believe the most effective mode for accomplishing this goal to be that of American civil religion.

On a similar theme is the poster "That Liberty Shall Not Perish," also from 1918:

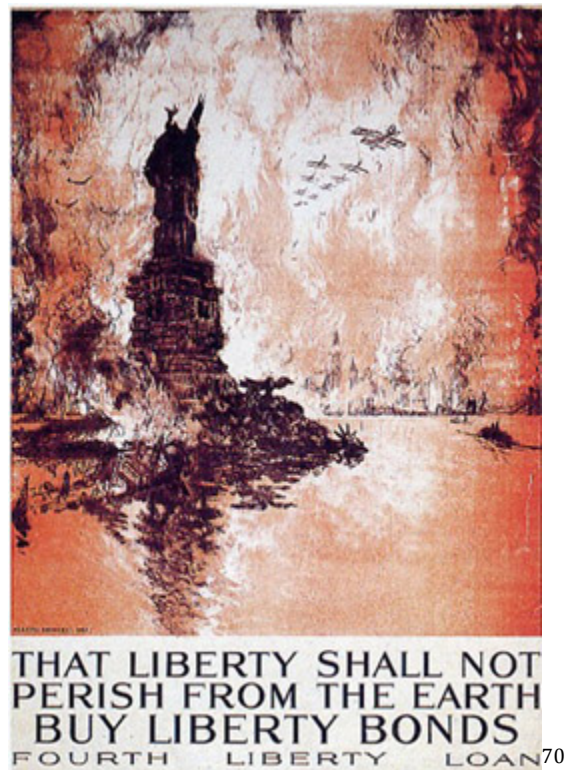


Figure 2: Joseph Pennel, "That Liberty Shall Not Perish". 1918

The effect here is twofold, a kind of double allusion: first, fittingly considering Wilson's admiration for the man, the caption invokes the memory of Abraham Lincoln by paraphrasing the Gettysburg Address, the crowning achievement of Lincoln's priestly speech.⁷¹ This in itself serves to situate the then-current conflict in

⁷⁰ In *The First World War in Posters*. Joseph Darracott, ed. Dover Publications. New York, 1974. p. 35.

⁷¹ Says Lincoln, "It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full

continuity with what Lincoln had called “that great unfinished work,” calling upon the political and moral authority of the martyr-President whose stature had only increased since his death. Second, as shown in chapter 2 of this dissertation, Lincoln himself alluded to Job 18 and Jeremiah 10, with the implication that national ruin would follow deviation from the nation’s divine charge. Lincoln at Gettysburg invoked biblical authority for the American political project, for which he called for ever increasing devotion, and the poster invokes the double authority of the Bible and Lincoln himself in order to persuade civilians that it is their duty as much as it is the soldier’s to advance the American cause in war. In this way, the civil religious framework of Lincoln and the global crusade for democracy described in O’Sullivan are combined into a single, civil religious tradition.

Further, as Wilson often does in his public speech, the poster equates the United States with the principles of democratic government, meaning that if one fails, the other cannot be long for the earth. Indeed, the poster’s graphic depiction of a ruined New York City suggests that for the Allies to fail will mean the end of America itself. The war is then not only a military conflict, but a moral, religious, and political struggle to the death in which either tyranny or liberty must meet its end. Though by no means the sole mode of persuasion utilized by the state or even by the CPI during the First World War, the themes, symbols, and rhetoric of civil religion formed a key element of the American propaganda effort, touching on many

measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

of the same points that Wilson himself did in his public speech. While this may be due in part to an effort to stay “on point” in the state’s dialogue with the American people, the continuities and overlap found in presidential speech and CPI propaganda also demonstrate the extent to which American civil religion forms a tradition with a distinct lexicon of ideas, tropes, and symbols to draw upon, invoking divine authority for the principles of American democratic government.

5. Peace and Covenant

Upon presenting the Versailles Treaty to the United States Senate, Wilson described it as having been produced “by the hand of God,” reflecting a high level of confidence of his knowledge of God’s will that becomes ironic when considered in the light of Versailles’ legacy.⁷² Just as Wilson’s use of civil religion did not originate with the war, neither did it end with the conclusion of hostilities. Having defeated the militaristic government of Germany and made the world “safe for democracy,” Wilson, with the arrival of the peace in Europe that he had long sought (albeit with limited success), believed that he was at last in a position to bring about a just and stable peace through world democratization, again deploying the language of civil religion to buttress his arguments. As he did when changing his message from one of peace and neutrality to one of a readiness for war, Wilson reoriented himself while retaining the same set of civic religious symbols and ideas that he had put forth during the whole of his presidency. In his November 17, 1918 Thanksgiving

⁷² Quoted in Smith (2006) p. 165.

proclamation (the full title is “A Proclamation of Thanksgiving for Victory”), Wilson attributes the end of hostilities ultimately to “God... in His good pleasure.” God’s pleasure, he continues, has brought not only peace, “but the promise of a new day as well, in which justice shall replace force and jealous intrigue among the nations.”⁷³ Having come through the war, Wilson believed that the providential mission charged to America was only partly complete, and now that the world was safe for democracy, it was time for democracy to make the world safe from war.

In his February 24, 1919 address at Mechanics Hall in Boston, Wilson uses imagery almost identical to that found in the poster for *Pershing’s Crusaders*.⁷⁴ Describing the initial European reaction to the arrival of American forces, Wilson says that they were at first suspicious, believing American forces, and by implication American intervention itself, to be no different from those of any other nation, motivated by self-serving concerns for power and profit. In his telling, the people of Europe were eventually able to realize that the Americans fought not for themselves or even for national benefit but for the ideals of human freedom and liberty, which at last “converted Europe to believe in us.”⁷⁵

At that moment, “they raised their eyes to heaven, when they saw men in khaki coming across the sea in the spirit of crusaders.” Wilson continues, saying of these crusaders that

⁷³ Quoted in *Guarantees of Peace*. Harper & Brothers. New York & London, 1919. p. 111

⁷⁴ The image is in fact something of a workhorse for Wilson, appearing in no less than four different speeches delivered between February and August 1919.

⁷⁵ *Papers* 55:240

Men have testified to me in Europe that our men were possessed by something that they could only call a religious fervor. They were not like any of the other soldiers. They had a vision, they had a dream, and fighting in the dream they turned the whole tide of battle and it never came back.⁷⁶

In these words, Wilson ascribes the decisive American contribution to Allied victory not to any material cause, but to the political ideals for which they fought. It is worth noting that they are in fact *political* ideals, because in Wilson's telling, the American military mission in Europe appears to have been less motivated by political aims than by religious enthusiasm. Motivated by a "religious fervor" for their ideals, Americans here are set apart from the nations of Europe in a way analogous to the exceptionality claimed by the Israelites of old. Wilson portrays the Americans as special, sacralized by their particular relationship to their ideals, which he had previously described as serving a kind of mediating role between America and its God. Further, American forces don't fight *for* the dream, they fight *in* it, in a kind of religious exaltation which, it is Wilson's claim, allowed them to do what all the armies of Europe could not, bringing the war to a decisive conclusion. Though explicit references by Wilson to God or religion decline in the aftermath of the war, the language of crusade, martyrdom, and faith is at least as prominent as it was before, now with American political ideas standing in their own right as a source of sanctity and religious fervor. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the treaty founding the League of Nations was officially named the Covenant of the League of

⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 241

Nations. In his March 4, 1919 speech in New York City, urging ratification of the Covenant, Wilson speaks of soldiers being “sacredly bound to the realization of [American] ideals,” and describes the “irresistible spiritual force of the armies of the United States” and the “crusading spirit” of those who went “to serve their fellow-men.”⁷⁷ Divorced from either explicit or implicit reference to the deity, Wilson increasingly invests American political institutions and thought with a sanctity all their own.

This trend not only continues, but is made all but explicit in Wilson’s 1919 Memorial Day address, as he continues to describe the conflict just concluded in the terms of holy war. There, he says that American soldiers, whose “like has not been seen since the far days of the Crusades,” “had a touch of the high spirit of religion, that they knew that they were exhibiting a spiritual as well as a physical might, and those of us who know and love America know that they were discovering to the whole world the true spirit and devotion of their motherland.”⁷⁸ Again, Wilson emphasizes that American soldiers are distinct from those of other nations by virtue of their religious devotion to democratic principles. The violence of war is here sanctified and lent a religious significance, as Allied victory is attributed to not only physical but also to spiritual force. Further, again following the example of the Gettysburg Address, Wilson argues that the spiritual obligations of Americans are not concluded by the end of hostilities; rather, the blood of martyred soldiers presents the nation with new obligations, as “it is our privilege and our high duty to

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 416-417

⁷⁸ *Papers* 59:606-607

consecrate ourselves afresh on a day like this to the objects for which they fought.”⁷⁹ Like Lincoln at Gettysburg, Wilson looks to rededicate the nation with the blood of martyrs, setting the United States both apart from and in service to the world at large.

Wilson does not deploy the language of civil religion only to bless the sacrifices and struggles of the past, but also to persuade Americans to prepare for a permanent and prominent role in world politics. As has been shown, Wilson throughout his presidency described the American political project in the terms of religion, with the United States itself being the primary instrument in God’s providential plan to bring democracy to the world. In an address given at a May 27, 1919 dinner in Paris for the Pan-American Peace delegation, Wilson argues that, just as Christian missionary organizations must show a united front in spreading their faith, so must those who would see democracy spread across the world, with the implication that the two efforts are essentially similar.⁸⁰ As missionaries must spread what they believe to be God’s word throughout the world if they are to be loyal to their faith, so must the United States work for the spread of democracy if it is to be true to its own principles.

Wilson’s deployment of civil religious language after the end of the war is intended in large part as an effort to mobilize Americans in favor of the League of Nations. It is interesting to note that he describes soldiers explicitly as crusaders only after the end of hostilities, seeking to remind Americans that the cause for

⁷⁹ Ibid, p. 607

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 521

which they had fought had not yet reached its fruition, and that service and sacrifice remained necessary. In his 1919 Memorial Day address, Wilson portrays the League as the continuation of the American political project and imbued with the same kind of religious legitimacy, saying that just as the soldiers of the past had fought so that American states could be united, so “these men have given their lives in order that the world might be united.”⁸¹ The blood of martyrs has, for Wilson, not only marked Americans as a people apart, but also put on them a special obligation to work for the spread of democracy throughout the world. Just as it did in his 1913 Independence Day address, this obligation takes the form of permanent and universal military service, as Wilson, speaking in the voice of the dead soldiers, asks all Americans to “make yourselves soldiers now, once and for all, in this common cause” of supporting the spread of democracy and thus the League. The language of permanent service in a spiritual war that Wilson used in his 1873 article appears again here, with the sole major change being that the army of God is here equated with the United States and the forces of democracy. Wilson’s public speech regarding the League seeks to persuade Americans that the same divine mandate for which they went to war demands that the League succeed, as when he told the Senate in July, 1919 that,

The stage is set, the destiny is disclosed. It has come about by no plan of our conceiving, but by the hand of God who led us into this way... It was of this that we dreamed at our birth. America shall in truth show the way.⁸²

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 608

⁸² *Papers* 61:436. His claim that “America shall in truth show the way” echoes his January 22, 1917 address to the Senate in which he said that America would “show mankind the way to liberty.”

The League, Wilson argued, was the culmination of America's providential purpose in the world, bringing peace, justice, and human freedom to all nations the world over. In his telling, its success would be America's success, and the War would be the Armageddon to the League's Millennium, as the old world ended and a new one began.

6. Conclusion

In the end, Wilson's confidence in his knowledge of America's providential destiny proved unwarranted, and the nation turned its back on what he considered to be its covenanted responsibility. The United States would neither join the League nor ratify its charter. Why did the language of civil religion, which he had so often successfully drawn upon to persuade the American people, fail him in drumming up popular support for the League of Nation? On one hand, like so much propaganda of the First World War, it was badly undercut by the news of the reality of combat that came home with returning soldiers. According to George Creel, Wilson himself had worried about the disillusionment that could follow the inevitable dashing of the messianic image that America had created for itself.⁸³ Though the press had for the most part cheerfully complied with state propaganda efforts, depicting bloody carnage as gallant adventure, soldiers on their homecoming told a different story,

⁸³ Creel (1947) p. 206

from which inspiring ideals and nobility were often absent, and the image of the War as a glorious crusade was replaced by the brutal realities of trench warfare.⁸⁴

On the other hand, Wilson's use of civil religion to legitimate the League of Nations was problematic in and of itself: core to the civil religious tradition is the idea of American exceptionalism, the belief that the United States is set apart from other nations by its very nature. Given that this is the case, it seems natural to assume that civil religious language might be of limited utility in terms of a sustained international effort to democratize the globe, much less in terms of persuading a sufficient number of Americans that their nation should join an international peacekeeping body. It would perhaps have been a different matter to bring Europe under American guidance, but the American people saw the League not as the expansion of America to the world, but as the subjugation of the United States to Europe. His political nemesis in the Senate, Henry Cabot Lodge, made much of this point, arguing in 1917 that Wilson's doctrine of an "equality of nations" in the league would allow foreign governments to bring the United States into war against its will by majority vote. As Wilson had not yet elucidated a voting procedure for the League, Lodge's accusation was based entirely on Wilson's language of equality.⁸⁵ Having grounded his argument for both peace and war in American exceptionalism, depicting the nation as being uniquely possessed of a providential mission, Wilson could not use the same language to place the United

⁸⁴ Robin Andersen, *A Century of Media, a Century of War*. Peter Lang Publishing, 2006 p. 15

⁸⁵ Ross A. Kennedy, *The Will to Believe: Woodrow Wilson, World War I, and America's Strategy for Peace and Security*. Kent State University. Kent, OH, 2009. p. 60.

States in parity with other nations. He was so unsuccessful in persuading some Americans that a petition was circulated calling for his impeachment, accusing him of committing high crimes against the Republic by betraying American sovereignty.⁸⁶

Further, Wilson had throughout the war depicted the opponents of his vision of American mission in terms of religious evil. Though this is as much a product of his own thinking as it is to his use of civil religious language, the fact remains, Wilson thought and spoke of the domestic debate over the League as a conflict between the righteous and the corrupt. The same moral, political, and religious certainty (for Wilson, the three were much the same) that had led him into the war resulted in a rigidity that diminished his ability to negotiate terms with his opponents, whom he often saw as evil men determined to destroy both himself and the League.⁸⁷ Wilson's certainty that he was acting with divine sanction resulted in a division of the world at home and abroad into sheep and goats, the faithful and the apostate. Lodge and his allies in the senate were mostly concerned with Article X of the League charter, perceiving in it an unpredictable and open-ended military commitment by the United States.⁸⁸ However, they were amenable to voting to ratify the league charter provided that a reservation were added stating that the United States had no obligation to deploy its armed forces under Article X. The United

⁸⁶ Page Smith (1985) p. 729

⁸⁷ Page Smith (1985) p. 822

⁸⁸ Article X read, "The Members of the League undertake to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League. In the case of any such aggression or in case of any threat or danger of such aggression the Council shall advise upon the means by which this obligation shall be fulfilled."

States would agree to be bound by the League's other powers of conflict resolution. Wilson refused to compromise, believing Article X to be "the very heart and life of the Covenant itself."⁸⁹

Disgusted with the Senate, Wilson took his case directly to the people themselves, embarking on a strenuous speaking tour despite being in tenuous health and ending any chance at compromise with Senate Republicans, whom he believed corrupt and self-serving.⁹⁰ It was this same stark division between the righteous and the unrighteous that he had used in promoting American involvement in the War in Europe, but in promoting the League of Nations his refusal to compromise robbed him of any hope that the League treaty would be ratified. Though a large majority of Americans favored ratification of the League charter in some form, Wilson's attempt to mobilize support for the League with the language of American civil religion may have been counter-productive. American civil religion is not mere rhetoric or jingoism, but a tradition with a body of symbols and ideas of its own.

Wilson's speaking schedule in support of the League charter was so taxing that he suffered a stroke and was incapacitated for the rest of his term. On September 25, 1919, the day of his stroke, Wilson delivered a speech in Pueblo, Colorado, where he said that "mothers who lost their sons in France have come to me and, taking my hand, have shed tears upon it not only, but they have added, "God

⁸⁹ Quoted in Kennedy (2009) p. 218

⁹⁰ *ibid.* 220

bless you, Mr. President!' Why, my fellow citizens, should they pray God to bless me?" He answers his own question, saying,

Because they believe that their boys died for something that vastly transcends any of the immediate and palpable objects of the war. They believe and they rightly believe, that their sons saved the liberty of the world. ... These men were crusaders. They were not going forth to prove the might of the United States. They were going forth to prove the might of justice and right, and all the world accepted them as crusaders, and their transcendent achievement has made all the world believe in America as it believes in no other nation organized in the modern world.

At the end of his speaking career, Wilson spoke less of America as chosen by God than as being in itself as a messianic, redemptive figure, whose soldiers were martyrs and the faith in whom would transform the world. It was not necessary that the world look to God, but rather that it "believe in America as it believes in no other nation organized in the modern world." The war had been nothing less than a crusade in the name of the true faith, and that faith was America.

Thus, where for O'Sullivan the will of God was identified with the American interest, for Wilson the nation itself eventually took on the mantle of divinity. In the next chapter, I turn to Wilson's erstwhile Secretary of State, William Jennings Bryan, whose civil religious framework makes for a useful contrast with Wilson's. Both men stand as the inheritors of the civil religious tradition as derived from Lincoln and O'Sullivan, but despite the fact that Wilson and Bryan were contemporaries, they each emphasize different aspects of that tradition, interpreting it in different ways. Though both strongly adhere to the missionary perspective, embracing the obligation of the United States to spread and promote democracy throughout the

world, Bryan differs from Wilson in that he does not see the nation as being a covenanted community. Rather, the political and moral good is for him embodied in the practices of the white, rural laboring American majority, which for him constitutes “the people”. The absence of a covenant is important because for Bryan, unlike Wilson, there is no possibility that the American people can fail, or even be in error. Rather than deploying O’Sullivan’s rhetoric of good against evil in the international sphere, as Wilson does, Bryan deploys it *within* American politics, depicting a virtuous and righteous democratic majority opposed by antidemocratic elites who, in Bryan’s civil religious framework, take on the character of satanic evil. Bryan follows Lincoln in embracing equality as the nation’s primary political good, and for him the voice of the people is akin to the voice of God.

5. VOX DEI, VOX POPULI

WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN AND THE RIGHTEOUS MULTITUDE

*Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.
No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another,
God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us.
1 John, 4:11-12*

Though William Jennings Bryan may today be best known at the popular level for his role in the Scopes trial, he was in his life one of the most influential politicians on the American national stage, crusading for women's suffrage, social justice, temperance, and world peace. He spoke to his constituents in the language of American civil religion, depicting the United States as having a providential mission to democratize the globe and arguing for the existence of a special relationship between the nation and the Christian God. Bringing revivalist fervor to politics, Bryan argued for a vision of Christianity as a force for moral and political reform, motivating individuals toward a sense of universal human brotherhood that for him functions as the only secure foundation for democratic practice.

Of the four figures examined in this dissertation, Bryan is the most vocal about his religious beliefs, and his public speech is shot through with public professions of his Christian faith. Despite this, he should not be understood only as a Christian in politics (though he was doubtless that) but as someone speaking in the language of American civil religion. Bryan, like the other figures included here, describes an exceptional and sacred relationship between American citizens, their

political institutions, and their God. Likewise, he sees America as having a divinely mandated responsibility and destiny on the world stage. His understanding of Christianity is one in which the duty to political action has the force of religious obligation. Bryan was committed to a clear and optimistic vision of a reformed American polity, based in a civil religious framework that lent the force of religion to his progressive project. Across his career, he subjected political issues to a two-criteria test: first, whether they were compatible with the tenets of Christianity as he understood them, and second, how they would affect the masses of the American people. In practice, these two criteria of judgment were almost always collapsed, as Bryan understood the laboring masses to be deeply and piously Christian (not to mention Christ-like), and for a thing to benefit or be approved of by the masses was functionally to have that thing be approved by the tenets of Christianity.

The American people as Bryan saw them were good by definition, made moral by their Christian virtue and made instinctively democratic through Christian fraternal love. For him, all political questions were ultimately moral, and all moral questions were ultimately religious. Thus, his theologically-derived understanding of the American polity joined him to Populist reformers and other progressives, as he looked to purify the democratic practice of the nation such that it would in turn benefit the many, the humble, and the good, rather than the few, the mighty, and the wicked. Even the more sympathetic writing on Bryan notes that he was not particularly original conceptually, but that his particular talent lay in novel

applications of existing ideas.¹ Indeed, Bryan's civil religious framework marks him as the inheritor of both John L. O'Sullivan and Abraham Lincoln. On the one hand, Bryan like O'Sullivan believed God's will to be comprehensible by mortal men, and saw the United States as divinely obligated to spread democratic institutions across the globe. Consequently, he identified opponents of his conception of democracy as agents of religious evil. On the other hand Bryan, like Lincoln before him, believed that the moral wellbeing of the individual and of the American polity were intimately interdependent. This interdependence would become increasingly important for Bryan's civil religious thought in the latter half of his career. Even more importantly, Bryan saw equality rather than liberty as the *telos* of the American polity.

After the cataclysm of the Civil War, it was not possible for Bryan to speak, as O'Sullivan had, of a providentially guaranteed American flourishing, nor was it possible given Bryan's general opposition to imperialism to claim that the United States acted sinlessly in the international sphere.² Instead, Bryan describes a war between good and evil occurring within *domestic* politics. Across his career, Bryan saw the American people as exceptional due to their deep adherence to the Christian faith, as well as to the democratic political truths that he believed inherent in their religion. For him, the white, laboring Christian masses (especially as

¹ Michael Kazin, *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan*. Knopf. New York, 2006, p. xx

² Bryan's attitudes toward the Civil War are uncertain. Though more than 1,500 men from Marion County, where he was born a year before the war, fought for the Union, the local community was made up largely of migrants from the South who favored neither abolition nor the rule of the Republicans. Interestingly, Bryan's memoirs omit mention of the war altogether. (Kazin (2006) p. 6) He seems to have dealt with this challenge to his vision of the American people by ignoring it.

represented by the farming communities of the South and Midwest) that formed his constituency were a morally pure and functionally infallible political entity.³ The masses are in Bryan's civil religious framework opposed by a minority composed of economic elites, whom he describes in terms of religious evil.⁴

Thus, the American people are both the foundation of democracy and its bastion against subversion by antidemocratic elites. In this way, when the American state sins in the international sphere (for example by engaging in imperialism) Bryan is able to explain it as a temporary victory by corrupt American elites. For him, though, each setback is temporary, as he is possessed of a sunny optimism that ultimately God will not allow the forces of political and religious good to fail. Bryan was confident that eventually, God's support of the good would always see it win out no matter the odds. He was fond of paraphrasing Deuteronomy 32:30, saying "One with God shall chase a thousand and two, put ten thousand to flight," meaning that despite the political and economic forces arrayed against them, God would see the forces of righteousness and democracy triumphant.

For Bryan, the truest expression of fraternal equality is the reduction of suffering and the uplifting of the humble. It is easy to see how his assignation of civil religious virtue to the masses serves to ground his opposition to colonialism and war in general, as he viewed both as the exploitation of the weak by the strong. Less easy to see, though, is the way in which this assignation works also to ground

³ Like his hero Thomas Jefferson, Bryan thought in the Rousseauian tradition, seeing the just state as the expression of the general will. Unlike either Jefferson or Rousseau, however, Bryan saw "the people" as composing only a part, albeit the majority, of the nation's citizenry. (Kazin (2006) p. xv)

⁴ Kazin (2006) p. 93

Bryan's willingness to see blacks excluded from the American political community. While identifying the perspective of the Midwestern and Southern agricultural communities with the civil religious good provided Bryan with a critical standard that could be used to judge national and international political practice, it could not be used to criticize the practices of the rural majority itself.⁵ Thus, my account of Bryan's civil religious framework explains not only his tireless activism on behalf of those he saw as oppressed and his opposition to war and colonialism and, but also his defense of white supremacy and his support of American intervention in the First World War.

Bryan's political career on the national stage spanned three decades, up to almost the day of his death, and in that time he delivered literally thousands of speeches. Given the sheer volume of his work, it is not possible in this chapter to present anything approaching an analysis of the whole of his public speech. Instead, I look to provide an understanding of Bryan's civil religious framework, which remains remarkably consistent across the whole of his career. I do this by close consideration of four definitive episodes in his career. These include his famous 'Cross of Gold' speech at the 1896 Democratic National Convention, his opposition to and later support of American involvement in the First World War, his intertwined

⁵ Despite his uncharitable view of Bryan, Hofstadter is right about Bryan on three important points: first, that Bryan was unable to look at his followers with a critical eye; second, that Bryan saw his political enemies as akin to war against a foreign power; and third, that Bryan thought "the voice of the people was still the voice of God," and that common men (and women, Hofstadter does not say) were qualified to judge on all political issues. (Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It*. Knopf. New York, 1973 (1948) pp. 190, 194, 204)

campaigns for Prohibition and Women's suffrage, and his 1925 appearance at the Scopes trial.

In the pages that follow, I begin with an account of the shifting attitudes toward Bryan and the Populists in academic research, followed by a brief outline of Bryan's biography and religious beliefs. Then, in part 3, I analyze Bryan's civil religious framework beginning with a consideration his belief in the irresistible spread of truth and his faith in the sinlessness of the majority. I argue that the relationship between these two things, as seen through the lens of the 'Cross of Gold' speech, helps to explain his commitment to social justice. From there, I move in part 4 to argue that the apparent incompatibility between his initial opposition to American involvement in the First World War and his later support of the same can be reconciled when understood within his civil religious framework. Next, in part 5, I argue that the same is true of the tension between his commitment to equality and his defense of institutionalized racism. In the final two sections of this chapter, I demonstrate that starting around 1912, Bryan's faith in the irresistible triumph of moral and religious truth began to falter: while the people were still good by definition, he now began to see them as potentially corruptible by elite forces working to undermine their morality and separate them from their religion. Thus, in the sixth part of this chapter, I argue that Bryan's crusade for the national prohibition of alcohol, and his closely related advocacy of women's suffrage, should be viewed as representing an important shift in his civil religious thinking, which now moved toward viewing the people's own moral status as needing the active

protection of the state. Similarly, I then show that his appearance at the Scopes Trial should not be understood as being motivated by religious fundamentalism. Rather, Bryan feared the political consequences that would result from popular abandonment of Christianity, as people instead came to see the human not as made in God's image, but as being the most successful creature in a bloody struggle for survival. Thus Bryan's appearance at Scopes is not a sudden collapse into reaction, but of a piece with his career of progressive social activism: as he did for Prohibition and against economic injustice, Bryan invoked the force of democratic government in response to what he perceived as a threat to the foundation of American social justice and democratic practice.

1. Academic Attitudes Toward Bryan and the Populists

Academic attitudes toward Bryan and the Populists have varied across time to a noteworthy degree, and appear to be tied to contemporary understandings and evaluations of 'progress' as a historical narrative. In the wake of the Second World War, there was a strong temptation to view class-based mass movements as foreshadowing the rise of fascism or McCarthyism, drawing "a straight line ... from Bryan and LaFollette to Gerald L.K. Smith, Father Coughlin and Senator McCarthy."⁶ Thus, Bryan and his fellow Populists were portrayed as reactionaries, looking to arrest their declining status by looking for scapegoats, finding them among Jews,

⁶ Edward A. Shils *The Torment of Secrecy: The Background and Consequences of American Security Policies*. Free Press. Glencoe, IL, 1956, p. 103

bankers, and the East generally.⁷ In the two decades following the end of the Second World War, probably the most influential text on Bryan himself was the 1960 film *Inherit the Wind*, based on the 1955 play by Jerome Lawrence and Robert Edwin Lee.⁸ Not unlike many of the scholarly texts of the 1950s, the film uses a thinly fictionalized though seriously distorted version of Bryan at the Scopes trial to argue against McCarthyism.

Historian Richard Hofstadter, in his 1955 Pulitzer Prize-winning book argues in a somewhat more nuanced vein. He describes the Populists as having an ambiguous legacy, being reactionaries even as they were agents of progress. The Populists were for him motivated by legitimate economic injustice, and he argues that “it was in their concrete program that they added most constructively to our political life.”⁹ He also argues, however, that they were motivated by nativism and religious intolerance, and that these qualities contributed both to the war with Spain and to the rise of American anti-Semitism.¹⁰ If Hofstadter sees the Populists as having an ambiguous political legacy, he sees no such ambiguity in the person of Bryan himself, whom he describes as a man of severely limited intellect whose ability to convince himself “was probably the only exceptional thing about his

⁷ Seymour Martin Lipset, “The Sources of the ‘Radical Right’”, in *The New American Right*, Daniel Bell, ed. Criterion Books, New York, 1955.

⁸ In a 1996 interview with *Newsday*, Lawrence said that he and Lee had looked to Scopes as having important similarities to the McCarthy period, as “another time when there was a corset on your intellectual and artistic spirit” and that “We used the teaching of evolution as a parable, a metaphor for any kind of mind control.” (quoted by Bill Blankenship in the *Topeka Capital-Journal*, 3/2/01, http://cjonline.com/stories/030201/wee_inherit.shtml as of 11/10/10)

⁹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR*. Vintage Books. New York, 1955 p. 20

¹⁰ *ibid.* pp. 78, 90

mind.”¹¹ Seeing Bryan’s involvement in the Free Silver movement as nothing more than a distraction, Hofstadter is flatly wrong when he asserts that Bryan was unwilling to invoke substantive state intervention in the economy and in society, an error arising from the fact that he examines Bryan’s social philosophy only from 1892-1896.¹² As I show in this chapter, an examination of Bryan’s positions across a broader frame of time shows that Hofstadter’s understanding is here very much incomplete.

As the Second World War receded into memory, the orthodox understanding of Bryan and the Populists as acting out of blind ignorance and resentment began to be challenged, especially as the social upheavals of the 1960s got under way. One example of this, Walter T.K. Nugent’s *The Tolerant Populists*, demonstrates conclusively that the religious and ethnic intolerance was far less central to the Populist movement than had been supposed, and that existing prejudices were often ignored in the name of political pragmatism.¹³ This level of political calculation chips away at the argument that the Populists and their allies were motivated by irrational bigotry or a vague sense of decline in status. A second example, Lawrence W. Levine’s *Defender of the Faith*, does an admirable work of placing the last ten years of Bryan’s life and career in a political and historical context.¹⁴

¹¹ Richard Hofstadter (1973/1948) pp. 202, 190

¹² *ibid.* pp. 191-192

¹³ University of Chicago, 1968

¹⁴ Oxford, 1965. For sheer volume of biographical detail, though, the interested reader should consult Paolo E. Coletta’s three-volume biography of Bryan, *William Jennings Bryan* (University of Nebraska Press, 1964-69)

Illustrating a rising skepticism toward the progress narrative is Lawrence Goodwyn's *Democratic Promise: The Populist Moment in America*.¹⁵ There, Goodwyn advances the argument, dominant in the 1970s and 1980s, that the Populists are best understood as being a cultural response against the "creed of progress". This same thesis motivates Christopher Lasch's *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*, which deploys the Populists as the last great American protest against an amoral and dehumanizing modernity. Lasch, like Goodwyn, dismisses Bryan as "Populist in name only", who helped to divert the potentially transformative Populist movement into the cul-de-sac of Free Silver.¹⁶

In recent years, study of the Populist era has again shifted to include an approach more sensitive to the historical, cultural, and economic context of the era, recognizing the complexity and diversity of those who styled themselves Populists. These studies have led to a reappraisal of Bryan's career and legacy in American politics, providing a more nuanced view of his strengths and shortcomings as a political figure. For example, Charles Postel, in his book *The Populist Vision* argues persuasively that the Populists should be understood as of a piece with the optimistic, progressive *zeitgeist* of their time.¹⁷ Against Goodwyn and Lasch, Postel demonstrates that it was in fact an embrace of progressive modernity that allowed the Populists to undertake the projects of transformative reform that formed the

¹⁵ Oxford, 1976

¹⁶ Norton, 1991. p. 218. It is not clear to me why the advocacy of a bad strategic choice should make one a false Populist. If this is the case, given the groundswell of support that both Bryan and Free Silver received, I am not certain how many Populists we are left with to talk about.

¹⁷ Oxford, 2007

core of their political movement. Other recent works have had the same emphasis on social and cultural context when describing the Populist movement as a whole. Part of this context has been to emphasize the religious and cultural motives of the Populists as being more than just windowdressing over an economic impulse, as Joe Creech argues in *Righteous Indignation: Religion and the Populist Revolution*.¹⁸ According to Creech, the evangelist cosmic narrative that depicted the godly forces of democracy as in conflict with the satanic agents of tyranny formed the foundation of the Populist worldview. The best of the recent academic writing on Bryan himself is probably Michael Kazin's biography *A Godly Hero: The Life of William Jennings Bryan*, written with a keen eye toward cultural and political context.¹⁹ Even here, though, the discomfort that arises from Bryan's popular image is evident, as Kazin feels the need to identify himself to his readers "as a secular liberal" who must "confess to a certain ambivalence about Bryan and his many admirers, who swore that a supernatural force was guiding him."²⁰ The shadow of Scopes looms large.

2. Biography and Religious Background

Bryan was very much a man of his time and place. Born in southern Illinois on March 19, 1860, the middle child of nine, he was homeschooled for the first ten years of his life by his parents, Mariah and Silas.²¹ Both religion and politics had a

¹⁸ University of Illinois Press. Urbana and Chicago, 2006

¹⁹ Knopf. New York, 2006

²⁰ Kazin (2006) p. xx

²¹ Three of his siblings died as infants, and a fourth at sixteen. (Kazin (2006) p. 8) Hofstadter (1973/1948) is oddly focused on the fact that Bryan had a close relationship with his father, never

strong presence in the Bryan household: Mariah was a Methodist and her husband a Baptist, and the family attended Methodist services on Sunday mornings and Baptist services in the afternoon.²² Silas was a committed Jacksonian Democrat, and argued as his son would that the nation owed its agricultural “producers” every opportunity that it could offer. Silas was as vehement an egalitarian as he was a racist, and had served a term as an Illinois state senator before being elected a state circuit judge, impressing in his son the relationship between political success and moral character.²³ Bryan would spend the whole of his youth in the Midwest, graduating Illinois College as valedictorian in 1881 and attending Union Law College (now the Northwestern University School of Law) in Chicago, where he met his wife, Mary. The Bryan marriage was one of remarkable devotion, and Mary, also a lawyer, would be her husband’s partner and collaborator until his death.

In many ways the face of the Populist movement, Bryan served two terms in the US House of Representatives between 1890 and 1894, but these would be his only electoral successes. He was defeated in a race for the Senate in 1894, as he

going through much of a period of adolescent rebellion. (pp. 194-195) This is part of his argument that whatever his political positions, Bryan was not psychologically a rebel, lacking the “a sense of alienation. He never felt the excitement of intellectual discovery that comes with rejection of one’s intimate environment.” (p. 193) This is an oddly personal and even Freudian weight to put on the political category of the rebel, as if an absence of domestic discord could be balanced against a political career.

²² Bryan himself would be baptized into the Presbyterian Church at a revival at the age of 14. It seems likely that the multi-denominational character of his family home would influence Bryan’s broad religious tolerance and ecumenicalism in his later life. The conversion made little difference in his life, as he said late that “Having been brought up in a Christian home, conversion did not mean a change in my habits of life or habits of thought. I do not know of a virtue that came into my life as a result of joining the church, because all the virtues had been taught me by my parents.” (Coletta (1964-69) v. I, p. 6) In terms of his speaking style, however, the influence of the religious revival on Bryan cannot be overstated.

²³ Kazin (2006) pp. 4-5. Silas’ influence on his son is apparent in William’s far too tolerant attitude toward the Ku Klux Klan.

would be in his hopes for the presidency in 1896, 1900, and 1908.²⁴ Bryan's deployment of civil religious language was key to winning him mass support, but it also at the end of his career became something of a political liability. As such, his use of civil religious tropes provides an interesting indicator of the tradition's strength. His repeated nominations for the presidency speak to his appeal among a large number of Americans. Bryan's political agenda and use of civil religious language was attractive to many, and he was hugely popular among Democrats, rural laborers, and reformers across the nation.²⁵ His three stints as the Democratic nominee for president attest to his broad appeal, but the fact that each ended in defeat also underscores the new complexities that faced the language of American civil religion as the 20th Century wore on. While his religiously-based brand of social activism won him huge numbers of followers, by his death in 1926 it seemed in large parts of the country an anachronism. On the one hand, as demonstrated by the popularity of Bryan's contemporary Eugene V. Debs, Marxism was making inroads among those in the American left. On the other, increasing levels of religious diversity, including the spread and acceptance of unbelief, worked to sap the civil religious tradition of some of its power.²⁶ The Protestant Christian hegemony over American politics endured, but it had begun to fracture.

Understanding how Bryan's religious beliefs motivated his political engagement is important to understanding the man. Though he has been taken for

²⁴ These defeats, however, were not remarkable, as the presidential elections from 1860-1932 were dominated by Republicans.

²⁵ Kazin, (2006) p. 305

²⁶ *ibid*, 300-304

an ignorant fundamentalist (in the words of historian Richard Hofstadter, as a “bitter and malignant old man” with a “childish conception of religion” and “inchoate notions of democracy”) this does Bryan a real injustice.²⁷ Throughout his life, his religious impulses were more in line with the advocates of the contemporary Social Gospel movement than they were with the fundamentalists with whom he would find himself allied at the Scopes trial.²⁸ Like the adherents of the Social Gospel, he saw American Christianity as being necessarily a movement for social change as well as a set of beliefs.

Bryan’s faith did not motivate him to withdraw from a fallen world, as did contemporary fundamentalists, but instead demanded energetic engagement with it.²⁹ He held firm to his belief that the only true Christianity was what he called “applied Christianity”, eschewing the contemplation of a transcendent deity for the earthly application of God’s word.³⁰ For him, the “love of one’s neighbor is the only visible proof that can be given of love of God.”³¹ This love, though, was not for Bryan an individual matter, but a social one.³² Walter Rauschenbusch, Baptist minister and author of *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, could have been speaking for Bryan when he wrote, “The individual is saved, if at all, by membership in a community which has salvation. When a man becomes loyal to a community, he identifies

²⁷ Hofstadter (1973/1948) p. 199)

²⁸ Willard H. Smith, “William Jennings Bryan and the Social Gospel” in *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (June, 1966) p. 60. Smith argues that by the Scopes trial, Bryan had aligned himself with the fundamentalist position, implying a discontinuity between Bryan-as-social reformer and Bryan-as-enemy of Darwinism. I argue against this division in part 6 of this chapter.

²⁹ Ibid. pp. 43-44

³⁰ Ibid. p. 52

³¹ Ibid. p. 51

³² Ibid. 44

himself with its life; he appropriates its past history and memories, its experiences and hopes, and absorbs its spirit and faith. This is the power which can lift him above his own level.”³³ Rauschenbusch here distinguishes between what he calls the individual gospel, which is to say an understanding of salvation as an individual concern, and the social gospel, which views the salvation of individuals and their society as inseparable. In this perspective, the faithful community makes possible individual salvation, and when the individual embraces the faith of the community, he in turn expands and strengthens it.

For Bryan, the United States is exactly such a community of belief. Despite their agreement on this point, Bryan strongly differed from Rauschenbusch on a number of subjects. The fundamental difference is that Bryan was, for the most part, highly and instinctively orthodox in his religious beliefs, while Rauschenbusch was theologically aligned with Liberal Christianity. Under the influence of the Higher Criticism, Rauschenbusch rejected the infallibility of the Bible, and more radically, he also rejected the notion of substitutionary atonement, maintaining instead that Christ’s sacrifice had been exemplary, demonstrating how love could replace force as the basis of human society. Bryan disagreed on both points, seeing the Crucifixion and forgiveness of sins as the ultimate expression of divine love, and while he did not believe in a literal interpretation of the text (for example, he understood the Days of Creation as representing ages of development) he strongly

³³ Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. Westminster John Knox Press. Louisville, KY, 1997 (1917) pp. 126-127

believed that the Bible was the infallible word of God.³⁴ Bryan understood a broadly orthodox Christianity to be the foundation of democratic politics and morality, and thus took any attack on the tenets of Christianity to be also an attack on democratic practice.

3. The Irresistible Power of Truth and the Virtuous Majority

For Bryan, as it was for O’Sullivan, democratic equality is a core tenet of Christian belief, though for Bryan it is democracy that is sacralized by its adherence to the Christian love and charity, rather than the reverse. For him, democratic adherence to this imperative makes democracy the most Christian form of government, in that it is the most egalitarian and fraternal. According to him, for every Democrat “who knows what democracy means—it is a religion, and when you hear a good democratic speech it is so much like a sermon that you can hardly tell the difference between them.” Like a sermon, a democratic speech is built on “the commandment to love thy neighbor as thyself... and a good democratic speech is built upon the doctrine of human brotherhood, equal rights and self-government”, a doctrine that grounds Bryan’s advocacy of social reform at home and opposition to imperialism abroad. For him, democracy is only the political expression of Christianity, as when “you get down to bed rock you find that the love of mankind is

³⁴ Willard H. Smith, *The Social and Religious Thought of William Jennings Bryan*. Coronado Press, 1975. pp. 170-173. Ronald L. Numbers, *The Creationists: From Scientific Creationism to Intelligent Design*. Harvard. Cambridge, 2006.

the basis of both, and democracy can never die as long as there is in democracy a love of mankind.”³⁵

Though Bryan was too much an orthodox Christian to explicitly ascribe infallibility to human beings, he (especially in the early part of his political career) strongly implies that in matters of politics and morality, the majority functionally cannot but be right.³⁶ On the majority, Bryan wrote, “There is no reason to believe that a majority or a minority will always be right. There is, however, reason to believe that the rule of the majority is more apt to be right than the rule of a minority. Truth has in it such a persuasive power that a minority in possession of the truth generally grows into a majority, but until it becomes a majority it cannot insist upon recognition.”³⁷ Though Bryan here explicitly describes the majority as fallible, he also sets up the consensus of the majority as being the single best test for the truth of a proposition: if it has the power to persuade most people, it must be true. For Bryan, truth possesses an irresistible force, as God himself works to see it spread. Likening the irresistible progress of truth to the growth of crops, Bryan refers to the workings of God when he writes “we know that there is back of the seed a force irresistible and constantly working. As ceaseless and irresistible is the force behind political and moral truth.”³⁸

For Bryan, the truth cannot but spread to persuade the majority, which functions as the ultimate authority in matters of politics, morality, and religion. For

³⁵ Quoted in Smith (1975) p. 19

³⁶ *The Commoner Condensed*, vol. 2. General Books, LLC. 2010. p. 25

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ William Jennings Bryan, *The Old World And Its Ways*. Kessinger Publishing, 2005. p. 490

this reason, then, the advocates of American democracy can work “with the confident assurance that the principles planted upon American soil a century and a quarter ago are destined to grow here and everywhere until arbitrary power will nowhere be known, until the voice of the people shall be recognized, if not as the voice of God, at least, as Bancroft defines it, as the best expression of the divine will to be found upon the earth.”³⁹

The moral and religious status that Bryan ascribes to the masses of Americans led him to the political positions that he took in his “Cross of Gold” speech at the 1896 Democratic National Convention, which won him the party’s presidential nomination. The 1896 presidential election was a watershed moment in American political history. The Republican convention went smoothly, nominating William McKinley on the first ballot, running on a platform that was pro-gold standard, pro-expansion, and in favor of limits on immigration. The Democratic nomination process, on the other hand, was much more turbulent, riven by internecine conflict. On one side was the party’s Eastern wing, called the Bourbon Democrats, who were pro-gold and strongly supportive of business interests. On the other were the Southern and Western factions, who were much influenced by the Populist movement, supporting free silver and a number of economic reforms. An early victory by the latter group led to the party rejecting both the gold standard policies and person of their own President Grover Cleveland, which left no clear candidate for the Democratic nomination, allowing the 36 year-

³⁹ *ibid*

old Bryan to use his brilliant oratorical ability to sweep him into the party's candidacy.⁴⁰ Though the Republicans would win this election, holding the presidency until Woodrow Wilson's election in 1912, the Democrats were in 1896 set on the course of political and economic reform that would culminate in the New Deal and Great Society of the 20th century.

In his speech at the convention, Bryan argued vehemently in favor of bimetallism and Free Silver, which would tie the dollar's value to a standard based on both silver and gold rather than on gold alone. This argument itself is indicative of the way in which Bryan believed that a democratic government should function: basing the value of the dollar even partially on silver would be a strongly inflationary monetary policy. This 'bimetallism' benefitted debtors over creditors, because as the buying power of the dollar decreased, debtors would be able to repay

⁴⁰ A number of pro-gold Democrats reacted to Bryan's nomination by bolting the party to form a splinter group calling itself the National Democratic Party, which nominated 79 year-old John M. Palmer for the presidency after Cleveland announced that he would refuse the new party's nomination if he were given it. The National Democrats did massive damage to their own credibility by accepting funding from the Republican Party to campaign in contested states. The Republicans, obviously, hoped that a division of the Democratic Party could deliver these states into their own hands. (Kazin (2006) pp. 66-67)

There were a number of third parties in the 1896 election, including the Socialist Labor and Prohibition parties, but by far the largest of these was the Populist Party, which had an essentially identical platform to that put forward by Bryan. Deciding that to run their own candidate would be to stymie the forces of reform, the Populists nominated Bryan as their candidate, making a show of independence by nominating one of their own, Sen. Thomas E. Watson of Georgia, as his vice president. While Bryan enthusiastically accepted the Populist nomination, he was noncommittal on Watson as his vice president, and the 1896 election spelled the beginning of the end for the Populists as an independent political force in national politics. Though the party had tactically fused with Democrats in local elections (and even with Republicans in areas dominated by the Bourbon Democrats), doing so at the national level began their assimilation into the Democrats. Resisters among the Populists were accused of putting party loyalty above reform principles, but they saw the chance for fundamental reform slipping away. (Postel (2007) pp. 170-171) The President of the North Carolina Populist Party, for example, despised the Democrats' active embrace of white supremacy, demanding "Are we not all under bondage to certain capitalistic tyranny, passed and voted upon and now sustained by both parties alike?" "White and black," he insisted, "are now under the same bondage. We don't intend to cringe under the party lash." (quoted in Creech (2006) p. 133)

their debts in cheaper dollars than those they were lent. The opponents of Free Silver argued in favor of what they called “sound money,” a policy that would result in stable value of the dollar across time, on the grounds that Free Silver would be calamitous for businessmen across the country, and thus for the economy as a whole.⁴¹ Thus, small farmers, laborers West and South (to say nothing of the silver miners of the West) tended to support Free Silver, while the organized industrial and financial interests of the East were willing to provide the Republican party with unlimited funding to oppose it.

Bryan’s argument in support of Free Silver at the convention was essentially that the federal government should structure the economy in order to most directly benefit those at the mass level, rather than industrial and financial elites. As he put it in his speech, “There are two ideas of government. There are those who believe that, if you will only legislate to make the well-to-do prosperous, their prosperity will leak through on those below. The Democratic idea, however, has been that if

⁴¹ At the 1896 Democratic National Convention, Bryan responded to this argument: “We say to you that you have made the definition of a business man too limited in its application. The man who is employed for wages is as much a business man as his employer; the attorney in a country town is as much a business man as the corporation counsel in a great metropolis; the merchant at the cross-roads store is as much a business man as the merchant of New York; the farmer who goes forth in the morning and toils all day—who begins in the spring and toils all summer—and who by the application of brain and muscle to the natural resources of the country creates wealth, is as much a business man as the man who goes upon the board of trade and bets upon the price of grain; the miners who go down a thousand feet into the earth, or climb two thousand feet upon the cliffs, and bring forth from their hiding places the precious metals to be poured into the channels of trade are as much business men as the few financial magnates who, in a back room, corner the money of the world. We come to speak of this broader class of business men.”

you legislate to make the masses prosperous, their prosperity will find its way up through every class which rests upon them.”⁴²

Bryan makes clear exactly what he means by this, saying, “You come to us and tell us that the great cities are in favor of the gold standard; we reply that the great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country.”⁴³ Thus, the rural masses are the economic and political foundation of American democracy. This in turn leads to the normative moral claim that, because agriculture causes the nation to work, it should work for them. It is in this light that he says “The humblest citizen in all the land, when clad in the armor of a righteous cause, is stronger than all the hosts of error. I come to speak to you in defence [*sic*] of a cause as holy as the cause of liberty—the cause of humanity.”⁴⁴ As O’Sullivan identified the universal human interest with that of the United States, Bryan identifies the cause of the rural masses with that of all humanity, and for much the same reasons.

⁴² William Jennings Bryan & Mary Baird Bryan, *Speeches of William Jennings Bryan*, vol. 1. Nabu Books, 2010 (1923) p. 248

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ *ibid.* p. 238 Bryan was not alone in seeing Free Silver as a holy cause. Populist J.F. Click of North Carolina wrote that the gold standard “means abject slavery to your children and their posterity. It means damnation to your children whom you have tried to teach to reverence God as the Great Ruler of the Universe. When your children realize that this claims to be a Christian nation and that the religion of the Lord Jesus reigns, they will be loath to accept such Christianity and such religion that underlies a government that has no humanity in it, and that would oppress the poor, those Christ ... wanted ... free from want and misery which is brought upon them by uncivil, immoral and unjust laws, instigated at all times by the devil himself.” (quoted in Creech (2006) p. 141) Clearly, Bryan spoke in the language of his supporters, making the same case that they themselves made, but on the national stage. Like them, he saw Free Silver as a crusade of the faithful against the satanic, with the future of Christianity and democracy, for them so intimately intertwined, hanging in the balance.

Bryan's civil religious framework depicts the pious masses as engaged in holy war against evil elites, and Free Silver was a major battleground of this war. Thus, with a "zeal approaching the zeal which inspired the crusaders who followed Peter the Hermit, our silver Democrats went forth from victory unto victory".⁴⁵ Bryan here draws on a powerful narrative in the history of Western civilization, in which the forces of Christendom sally forth with God's blessing to confront a force that is entirely other, by definition opposed to its most sacred beliefs and institutions.⁴⁶ Bryan implicitly describes himself as analogous to Peter the Hermit, the mendicant revivalist who during the First Crusade believed himself appointed by Christ to lead a "People's Crusade" composed of peasants and paupers. Bryan understands Free Silver as exactly such a people's crusade. It is typical of his political thought to remove the controversy from the complex and murky sphere of politics into the sphere of religion, conceiving it as a conflict between the righteous and the corrupt.⁴⁷ The issue Free Silver, then, is not one on which individuals of good conscience can disagree, but a stark choice between good and evil.

⁴⁵ Bryan (1923) v. 1 p. 239

⁴⁶ The theme of a virtuous and religious mass of common folk opposed by evil cabals in high places was also far from unique to Bryan, though he was perhaps its most eloquent expositor. Just as Evangelicals in the late 19th century saw the centralization of religious denominations as a crisis in the faith, Populists condemned "corporations' centralized control of pricing structures because it fouled up God's natural governance of the economic system; they likewise condemned monopolists for their undue influence in politics that had resulted in class legislation that silenced the voice of God in favoring the wealthy over the farmers and producing classes. Populists believed such influence could only have occurred, however, because the institutions of state, local, and national government were no longer governed by the rule of a consenting majority, or the 'voice of People,' but rather by centralized committees, 'rings,' 'mafias,' and 'combines' that dictated legislation to those governed and thus quelled the 'voice of God.'" (Creech (2006) p. 100)

⁴⁷ Levine (1965) p. 50

Depicting the relationship between elites and masses as that between persecutors and persecuted, Bryan famously ended his speech with the defiant proclamation that “You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold!”⁴⁸ He then pressed his splayed fingers down on his forehead in the shape of the Cross of Thorns before taking and holding the pose of Christ at the crucifixion, drawing sustained, thunderous applause even from his enemies. The gold standard is here identified with the weapons of Christ’s humiliation and martyrdom, and its advocates with the imperial legionnaires at whose hands he suffered. Bryan’s goal here is to prevent the democratic passion play from reaching its conclusion. Thus, Bryan departs from the crucifixion narrative in that labor’s work of (political) redemption is to be accomplished not by its martyrdom, but by its political and economic thriving.⁴⁹ For Bryan, then, the torment of the masses is identical to the subversion of democracy, caused by economic elites who through their political lackeys work to undermine democracy for their own benefit.

Bryan draws on the tropes of the civil religious tradition as represented by O’Sullivan, though Bryan locates sin within the American polity. That sin, however, is in no way equally distributed. This means that Bryan is able to view the majority as a morally stainless political actor and defender of democratic practice, in the same way that O’Sullivan views the United States. Moreover, Bryan both identifies

⁴⁸ Bryan (1923) v. 1 p. 249.

⁴⁹ Kazin (2006) p. 59 Bryan knew perfectly well what he was doing by comparing the suffering of the masses to that of Christ, who he describes elsewhere (in good orthodox fashion) as being “without sin.” (Bryan, *Prince of Peace*. Zion’s Printing & Publishing Co. 1926. p. 61)

the laboring majority with Christ and views democracy as the only form of government compatible with Christianity. Within Bryan's civil religious framework, elites are by their opposition to democratic government so sinful as to be like the persecutors of Christ.

4. The Crusade for Peace and the People's War

Bryan's defeat in the election of 1896 was lost by a slimmer margin than had been expected, as he took just under 46% of the vote. McKinley (whose campaign, backed by Eastern manufacturing and financial concerns, had outspent Bryan's by 500%) received about 51% of the votes. For a democrat like Bryan, the defeat must have been stinging, though outside the Northeast he usually carried the rural vote even where he lost the state.⁵⁰ Publicly, Bryan as always bowed to the will of the people, wiring McKinley that "We have submitted and the issue to the American people and their will is law."⁵¹ In private, however, he appeared to share the suspicions of some of his followers that a conspiracy of elites had stolen the election by fraud. His friend Josephus Daniels, a newspaper editor and Secretary of the Navy under Woodrow Wilson, attested that Bryan had never doubted the election had been stolen, and had only accepted the outcome because he feared the possibility of

⁵⁰ Coletta (1964-69) v. I p. 191

⁵¹ Kazin (2006) p. 79

civil war.⁵² Nonetheless, Bryan was sure of his eventual triumph, telling a reporter on the day after the election that “The fight has just begun.”⁵³

Equally inevitable to his mind was the eventual end of war. Bryan saw the cause of peace, like that of democracy, as being inseparable from a Christian message of fraternal love, and believed that this message was opposed at the international level by exactly the same forces that worked to exploit the American masses on the domestic level. Though Bryan was never a nonresistant pacifist, and had in fact enlisted in the Army during the Spanish-American War, he viewed war as legitimate only in defense of democratic government. For Bryan, the obvious cause of almost all war was material gain on the part of organized industrial and financial interests.⁵⁴ He worked to publicize the way in which American manufacturers, through the Preparedness Movement to strengthen the military, pushed the nation into war by depicting them as servants of Mammon, saying that “light should be turned upon this and force these men, who are wrapping the nation’s flag about them while trying to plunge their hands into the nation’s pocket, to stand forth in their true mercenary character.”⁵⁵ Likewise, as Wilson’s Secretary of State, he argued that American loans to European belligerents made a mockery of American neutrality, and should be prohibited in the same way as munitions sales, saying that

⁵² Coletta (1964-69) v. I pp. 193-194

⁵³ *ibid*, p. 190. Bryan’s campaign memoir, released in 1896, was likewise titled *The First Battle*.

⁵⁴ Kazin (2006) p. 251

⁵⁵ On Preparedness a front for the provocation of war, see Levine (1965) p. 49. He used a similar metaphor in a 1908 recording of his speech “The Labor Question,” referencing Genesis 1 and paraphrasing John 3:19-20, saying “Let there be light. If there are any who love darkness, the excuse must be found in Holy Writ, it is because their deeds are evil.” For Bryan, the actions of economic elites are not merely antidemocratic or immoral. Given the level to which he charges democratic egalitarianism with religious sanction, to act against it becomes an act of satanic blasphemy.

there was no reason for lenders to “make money out of carnage” when others were already prohibited from doing so.⁵⁶

In this way, then, Bryan depicts economic elites as being not only exploiters of the people, and thus counter-democratic, but as men who have chosen the pursuit of wealth over obedience to God, describing them as “an unholy combination of the powers of high finance.”⁵⁷ This unholy alliance was the same one that had exploited farmers and workers, and the war was nothing but a new theater of this exploitation. In October of 1915 he plainly said that “I shall continue to exert whatever influence I have left to protect the public from exploitation whether that exploitation is attempted by the tariff magnates, the trust magnates, the money power, or this new batch of exploiters, that manufacturers of munitions of war and the preparers of preparedness.”⁵⁸

For Bryan, peace, like democracy and social reform, is nothing but the practical application of Christian beliefs. Thus, war and preparedness for war were not policies open for debate, but a conflict between evil venality and a sacred national mission.⁵⁹ In 1926, he wrote, “Our nation ought not to wait for other nations—it ought to take the lead and prove its faith in the omnipotence of [Christian] truth.”⁶⁰ The United States, as the best and truest embodiment of Christian fellowship, had a unique mission to spread the democratic institutions that

⁵⁶ Smith (1975) p. 85

⁵⁷ Kazin (2006) p. 251

⁵⁸ Levine (1965) p. 51

⁵⁹ *ibid.* p. 50

⁶⁰ Bryan (1926) p. 55

Bryan believed would bring an end to warfare.⁶¹ Shortly after his appointment to the position of Secretary of State, Bryan wrote, “What a glorious mission God has reserved for our nation; to be the pathfinder among the nations. The torch bearer for mankind.”⁶²

Later, as the conflict in Europe intensified, Bryan argued that it was the uniquely religious character of American democracy that made it specially qualified to arbitrate for peace, as it was “the leading exponent of Christianity and...the foremost advocate of worldwide peace.” Elsewhere, he wrote that “The Gospel of the Prince of Peace gives us the only hope that the world has—and it is an increasing hope—of the substitution of reason for the arbitrament of force in the settlement of international disputes. And our nation ought not to wait for other nations—it ought to take the lead and prove its faith in the omnipotence of truth.”⁶³ Thus, America’s exceptional status on the world stage sprung from its exceptional faith, and this faith was one that could and should be spread across the globe. This missionary zeal, shared by Bryan and Wilson, was not unproblematic. Despite an apparently sincere desire to spread peace and democracy, they both assumed that American advice would be welcomed when given. This meant that the rejection of

⁶¹ For him, as for O’Sullivan, the United States pointed toward ideals beyond itself, as its flag is “a flag that points toward better things than war.” *San Francisco Examiner*, July 6, 1915

⁶² *The Commoner*, April 11, 1913, p. 15

⁶³ Bryan (1926) p. 55

the democratic good news was evidence of moral perversity, and in turn legitimated force, as in the bloody invasions of the Dominican Republic and Haiti.⁶⁴

Bryan's belief in the irresistible spread of democratic truth at home and abroad illustrates his purely linear view of political and religious history. Bryan's civil religious view of the relationship between time and democracy is in this way most akin to that of Woodrow Wilson, being more purely linear than either that of Lincoln or even O'Sullivan. Unlike the latter two men, Bryan was never of the belief that the evil accretions of time had to be scraped away from the present in order to return to the faith of the Founding Fathers. Rather, he was resolutely progressive in view, looking always toward the promise of future flourishing.⁶⁵ Thus, he straddles the division between what Major Wilson has identified as the characteristic attitudes of Democrats and Whigs (and their Republican heirs) to time and the nation in his book *Space, Time and Freedom*. There, Wilson argues that the Democrats tended to be interested in the quantitative expansion of American society through space, while the Whigs were concerned with its qualitative

⁶⁴ One Haitian journalist observed, "The Americans are enemies of despotism, and to prevent its return, they invaded." Bryan's religious zeal for the spread of democracy, combined with his belief in the legitimizing power of majority opinion, had also made him an enthusiastic supporter of the Spanish-American War, which he viewed as being in defense of Cuban's struggle for national self-determination. Such was his commitment that he in 1898 volunteered for military service in the National Guard (this enthusiasm for a free Cuba is an interesting continuity with O'Sullivan). In the Guard, Bryan attracted a regiment of volunteers (the Third Nebraska) composed largely of supporters of his 1896 campaign. It being customary at the time for volunteer regiments to elect their own officers, they chose Bryan as their colonel. The Third Nebraska would never see combat (Bryan suspected a political conspiracy in the McKinley administration had robbed him of a chance at glory), and would remain encamped in Florida for months, through the end of the war. Despite this, several members of Bryan's regiment did die of malaria and typhoid, and others, including Bryan himself, were sickened. (Kazin (2006) pp. 87-89, 229-230)

⁶⁵ It is this very linearity that leads Postel (2007) to argue that the Populists should be understood within the confines of "modernity" rather than as resisters against it. (p. 266)

development across time.⁶⁶ Bryan's commitment throughout his career to proselytize democracy across the globe locates him in the missionary tradition with Wilson and O'Sullivan.

At the same time, however, his concern in the latter part of his career for the corruption of the polity from within demonstrates that he became increasingly concerned with the preservation of the polity's political faith across time.⁶⁷ For Bryan, American history takes place within a sacralized vision of linear time, as there is present in Christianity, with which it is in continuity.⁶⁸ With American democracy being an expression of Christian belief, the advent of the United States is for Bryan a major victory for the Christian faith, being both a political and religious event. The founding of the United States, its continued politico-moral purification, and the democratic transfiguration of the globe take place within a linear history that originates with Christ himself, and Bryan understood his political causes as a taking place within this sacred and linear history.

Though willing to accept the occasional use of violence in fulfilling America's world-historic, redemptive destiny on the world stage, Bryan increasingly saw war as an unnecessary evil. As the First World War intensified, and American involvement seemed ever more likely, he became more strident in his opposition to the war, resigning his position as Secretary of State (permanently damaging his relationship with Wilson and opening himself to widespread public scorn) to ally

⁶⁶ Greenwood Press. Westport, CT and London, 1974. See entire, but especially pp. 86-110.

⁶⁷ Much more on this follows in parts 5 and 6 of this chapter.

⁶⁸ Postel (2007) p. 111

with socialists, pacifists, and other political radicals against American involvement in the war.⁶⁹ Describing his conflict with Wilson, Bryan did so in terms more religious than political, terming Wilson's willingness to go to war "a repudiation of all that is essential in the Christian religion." The war in Europe was for him "a mockery that men who worship God should kill each other."⁷⁰ Like O'Sullivan, Bryan saw the United States as having a transformative and redemptive function in the world, combating oppression and promoting democracy. Unlike O'Sullivan, though, Bryan thought it possible for America to err and fail on the world stage. This is because for him, there existed both sinful and perfectly virtuous *parts* within the nation, meaning that though the nation may sometimes fail, this failure never taints the virtuous masses, being instead the responsibility of corrupt elites. Bryan, believing the masses shared his opposition to the war, was confident of the justice of his cause.

Thus, Bryan's location of civil religious sin shares much with O'Sullivan's, despite the fact that the latter asserts the sinlessness of the nation as a whole while the former acknowledges the possibility of sinful actions by the state. Bryan's location of civil religious sin exclusively within elites means that when the masses speak, they are both correct and religiously virtuous by definition, as his dramatic reversal of himself on the issue of American involvement in the First World War demonstrates. Bryan had dismissed the Preparedness Movement as a front for those who would profit from war, and he was willing to believe that Wilson could be fully

⁶⁹ Kazin (2006) p. 253

⁷⁰ Smith (1975) p. 118

captured by bias or interest on the question of war.⁷¹ The Congressional declaration of war against Germany, however, functioned for him as the proclamation of the majority. The day after it was made, Bryan wrote to Wilson offering his services in support of the President and the war.⁷² Once burnt by the Great Commoner, Wilson declined but asked that Bryan use his oratory to promote the war effort, which Bryan dutifully did. Bryan, a rebel against the powers dominating politics at home and abroad, held publically to a position only so long as he felt that he had the support of the majority behind him.⁷³ Faced with the conflict between his own conscience and the voice of the masses, he conceded at once that the majority spoke truly.⁷⁴ He toured with speeches such as “Buy Liberty Bonds”, “Make the World Safe for Democracy,” and, tellingly, “The War To End War”.⁷⁵ Describing the war as a “People’s War,” Bryan now believed that “the shortest way to peace is straight ahead” to victory in Europe.⁷⁶

While once the enemies of peace and virtue had been economic elites, Bryan’s identification of the masses as sinless forced him to dramatically shift his position during the war. The American majority, by definition speaking for the universal human interest and thus aligned with the will of God, had spoken, and the

⁷¹ Levine (1965) p. 50

⁷² Levine (1965) p. 90

⁷³ Levine (1965) p. 92

⁷⁴ His critics picked up on this. George Foster Peabody, of the American Peace Society (of which Bryan himself was an official) wrote in criticism of Bryan that he himself saw his obligation to God as being separate from and prior to that to his government. Peabody noted with sorrow that Bryan’s peace principles seemed to apply to other countries. (Smith (1975) p. 131) While this is true, Bryan was no jingoist. The issue for him was precisely that the United States was in fact different from other nations, as it was only there that the virtuous many could meaningfully govern themselves.

⁷⁵ Smith (1975) p. 132

⁷⁶ Levine (1965) p. 101

war stood revealed to him as the surest means of instituting a meaningfully anti-war global order. In order to reach this political millennium, Bryan now identified the *opponents* of the war as agents of sin and treason. The good of the many for him outweighed the rights of the few, and he advised his brother Charles, editor of Bryan's newspaper *The Commoner*, that no one should be "permitted to cloak his attack upon his government or aid the enemy under the claim that he [was] exercising freedom of speech" and no sympathy should be extended to those who made "unpatriotic utterances."⁷⁷ Thus, Bryan did not object when those with whom he had once been allied against the war were arrested under the Espionage and Sedition Acts.⁷⁸ He said of dissidents and draft resisters that the democratic state could do with them as it would, as when the individual's "conscience forbids him to do what the government demands he must submit without complaint, to any punishment inflicted, whether the punishment be imprisonment or death."⁷⁹ Bryan had no clear picture of minority rights: for him "the people" were identical with the majority, and once they had spoken, to oppose them was to be an enemy of both God and humanity.

Indeed, after the war ended, he said of Wilson's League of Nations that "The covenant of the League of Nations breathes the spirit of the Nazarene. It is a momentous hour: Christianity has triumphed on the battle-field; let the victory be made enduring by the application of Christian principles to the work of

⁷⁷ Bryan, August 1917. Quoted in *The Credo of the Commoner*, William Jennings Bryan, Jr. & Franklin Modisett, eds. Occidental College. Los Angeles, 1968.

⁷⁸ Kazin (2006) p. 255

⁷⁹ Bryan, August 1917 (1968)

reconstruction.”⁸⁰ It is worth noting here that before the war Bryan had been willing to acknowledge each of the belligerent nations as being (equally flawed) believers in God, after the war he identifies only those ostensibly fighting in the name of democracy as Christians, and inspired ones at that. It is ironic that the religion of the man Bryan so often described as the Prince of Peace should have its victory on the battlefield, but for Bryan the victory of the Allies was a victory for the “doctrine of human brotherhood, equal rights and self-government” present in Christianity.

This is the same doctrine that grounded his opposition to imperialism. Bryan’s view, though he was not always true to it as Secretary of State, was that it was on the face of it incompatible with democratic thought and practice to force it on more vulnerable peoples. To do so, he thought, would make a mockery of the principles of self-determination and fraternal love that was the foundation of democratic government.⁸¹ The flat contradiction between Bryan’s defense of the self-determination of foreign peoples, not to mention his advocacy of political equality (including women’s suffrage), and his defense of the system of racial oppression in the United States can be understood in light of his civil religious framework. As Kazin has it, Bryan could “believe in a mass of pious ‘commoners’ in perpetual conflict with a greedy and irreligious elite only if he omitted black people from either camp.”⁸²

⁸⁰ Bryan, July 1919 (1968)

⁸¹ Bryan in *American Imperialism*, Arno Press, 1970. p. 47

⁸² Kazin (2006) p. 93

5. Egalitarian Racism

Bryan's defense of white supremacy, despite its obvious conflict with his egalitarian principles, should be understood in continuity with his advocacy of social justice and opposition to war and imperialism. This continuity is borne by the fact that Bryan conceives of 'Americans', which is to say those who compose the American polity, as the majority of the American people. Thus, Bryan depicts the political, financial, and industrial interests that prey on the agrarian worker as foreign to the American political community, a hostile alien force within the nation that exploits the labor of the majority and causes wars for its own material benefit. In some ways, then, he mirrors Lincoln's depiction of the slave power as alien and as in active opposition to the American political *telos* of equality. That being said, however, Bryan and Lincoln's location of the domestic alien is importantly different: for Lincoln, the criterion of judgment for whether a given practice or belief is authentically American is whether it violates a transcendental, divinely mandated obligation for Americans to seek political equality; for Bryan, however, the criterion is whether a thing is injurious to the majority of Americans. In doing this, his delineation of the American political community is based not in transcendent political goods, but in the ideas, people, and practices of the agrarian majority in the South and Midwest. Unlike Lincoln, he identifies the civil religious good with the customs and wellbeing of a specific group within the United States, meaning that some individuals are, while others are not, truly of the polity. Where Lincoln would

see Americans in error, Bryan saw individuals who were American only by legal citizenship.

Bryan's speech on the subject of race in American politics makes clear that this is how he defines the American polity. His personal feelings on race were typical of his time. Whites, to his mind, were all equal regardless of ethnicity or religious sect. He appears to have viewed Asians ("Orientals" in the language of the time) as being roughly equal in ability and culture to whites, though unable to assimilate in the United States, and seen the potential of Latin Americans and Native Americans to achieve a level of politics and culture equivalent to that of whites, especially with paternalistic direction from the United States. By contrast, he saw blacks as being intrinsically inferior to all other races.⁸³ Though he played no direct role in the Wilson administration's segregationist policies, he raised no objections when they were discussed in cabinet meetings. Striving to reconcile his acceptance of Jim Crow with his religiously-driven impulse to equality, he once wrote a poem from the point of view of a black man, describing his skin as the mark of the curse of Ham, accepting his subservience as the will of God, and resolving himself to "a life of willing service" in order to win a place in heaven.⁸⁴ While Bryan believed that a life

⁸³ Willard H. Smith, "William Jennings Bryan and Racism" in *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (1969) pp. 127-149. Smith describes Bryan's religious tolerance as in remarkable tension with his attitudes on race, especially as regarding American blacks. Though he was a committed opponent of the Ku Klux Klan's anti-Semitism (and indeed had heaped scorn on Henry Ford's publication of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*), anti-Catholicism, and xenophobia, Bryan in 1922 opposed an anti-lynching bill before the House of Representatives, describing it as a "grave mistake." (Smith (1969) p. 129, Levine (1965) p. 257)

⁸⁴ Kazin (2006) pp. 227-228. The story of the curse of Ham is described in Genesis 9:20-27, as "Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness" of his drunken father Noah. Noah's other sons covered their father while averting their eyes from his nakedness, but when Noah awakened from his

of service was essential for all Christians, in the context of the curse of Ham, who was cursed to see his descendents be hewers of wood and bearers of water, this service takes on an oppressive cast.

Bryan's stance on racial relations is not remarkable for a man of his time, but it does mark him as being less progressive on this issue than many of the Populists with whom he was allied. While there were certainly racist elements within it, the movement as a whole was not strongly concerned with ethnic or religious homogeneity.⁸⁵ Though Southern Populists embraced white supremacy, it is difficult to lay this at the feet of the movement as a whole, as it is difficult to think of any significant presence in Southern politics that did not. Elsewhere, Populists often worked against ethnic and religious bigotry, or were at least willing to ignore ethnic and religious difference in the name of political and economic success. The Populists were neither ignorant nor fanatical, and well understood the necessity of cooperation across groups for political success. Though there were doubtless elements among them that were racist, nativist, or otherwise xenophobic (especially in the Southern branch of the movement), the Populists as a whole were not noticeably worse in this regard than were many of their contemporaries.⁸⁶

drunken slumber, he "knew what his younger son had done unto him" and said "Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren." This story was often invoked by the defenders of slavery against abolitionists, believing that the enslavement of Africans in America marked them as the sons and daughters of Ham.

⁸⁵ Nugent (1968) pp. 60-61, Creech (2006) p. 133.

⁸⁶ For example, the Democratic orthodoxy in North Carolina in 1893 portrayed the state's Populists as anarchists out to destroy not only the Democratic Party, but the system of white supremacy that it had gone through such trouble to install. Though some Populists and their Allies in the state's Farmer's Alliance sought exactly that, neither organization ever directly opposed it. (Creech (2006) p. 96)

Ultimately, Bryan's defense of white supremacy results from his civil religious understanding of 'the people' as being rural, working, Christian, and white. When defending racial oppression on the public stage, Bryan did so in terms of the will of the majority. His vision of equality was not, as it was for Lincoln, a transcendental ideal that could be approached if not achieved, but one embodied in the institutions and practices of the rural, working majority. In this way, it provided a critical standard that could be used to judge national and international political practice, but it could not be used to criticize the practices of the majority itself. Bryan, having defined the masses as intrinsically good, necessarily accepted their actions as good themselves. Nowhere is this as clear as it is in Bryan's public defense of racism. Forced to choose between the ideal of equality and the rule of the majority, he chose the latter for the simple reason that for him, equality was fully embodied in the principle of majority rule.

On the subject of race, Bryan was caught between two political commitments: on the one hand, his anti-imperialist position, which argued from a position of universal spiritual equality and the resulting right to self-determination that no group could rightfully govern another by force. On the other hand was his defense of Jim Crow, under which whites clearly governed blacks by force and excluded them from the democratic process. Attempting to navigate the tensions between these beliefs, Bryan relied on a combination of white supremacy and majority rule as a solution. Bryan's arguments in favor of a universal right to national self-determination were dependent on the existence of homogenous

populations, as a homogenous people had the right to self-determination. However, at times “when races of different degrees of civilization are thrown together and must necessarily live together under the same government,” Bryan’s political thought follows the lead of John C. Calhoun. “The more advanced race,” he says, “has always exercised the right to impose conditions upon the less advanced.”⁸⁷ In the United States, moreover, this ‘more advanced’ element was a majority organized under the institutions of democratic government. While in colonies, he argued, the colonizer legislated, but was not himself bound by the resulting laws, “the black people of the south have the advantage of living under a government that the white people make for themselves. The laws apply to everyone [including Southern whites] and are better laws than the black man would make for himself.”⁸⁸ On the same note, he said, “The negro in the south, as I have frequently pointed out, has the same constitutional guarantees as the white man, and lives under the same law that the white man makes for himself. If he cannot vote today, he may look forward to the time when he may vote.”⁸⁹ This despite the fact that many of “the laws that the white man makes for himself” applied only to blacks, while constitutional guarantees more often did not.

In white supremacy Bryan sees egalitarian democracy in action, as present in the rule of the majority. Though he holds out the possibility that, “the time when he may vote” will arrive for American blacks, he made it clear that that time would not

⁸⁷ *The Commoner*, November 1, 1901.

⁸⁸ Levine (1965) p. 257

⁸⁹ *The Commoner Condensed*, vol. 5 General Books, LLC. 2010 p. 285-286

be soon: despite his own support of (and donations to) Booker T. Washington, he opposed President Theodore Roosevelt's invitation of Washington to dinner at the White House, which he described as "unfortunate, to say the least. It will give depth and acrimony to a race already feeling strained to the utmost."⁹⁰ Having identified rural Southern communities as embodiments of political and religious good, Bryan defended their institutions, seeing African-Americans who desired racial equality as nothing more than troublemakers who were determined to cause needless upset for both themselves and whites through an increase in what he called the "race problem."⁹¹ In this way, Bryan's attribution of an intrinsic, inerrant moral goodness to the American majority led him to support a plain contradiction to his sincerely professed belief in equality as the primary political good of the American polity. This contradiction springs from Bryan's understanding of political equality: for him, political equality is only truly expressed in the principle of majority rule, and this majority, being composed of the humble and hardworking, is necessarily of a virtuous character. Identifying the political and religious good with the empirical practices of an existing group within national politics means that Bryan is able to criticize events external to that group, but also that he is unable to critically regard its practices and beliefs.

⁹⁰ quoted in Smith (1975) p. 52

⁹¹ In his 1908 presidential campaign he refused the endorsement of W.E.B. DuBois on just these grounds. The endorsement would have cost him among Southern voters. (Kazin, 2006, p. 93, 162). The problem, it should be noted, was less the domination exerted by whites over blacks than it was the tensions that arose from challenging this domination.

6. A Mother's Love Against the Demon Rum

In the last decade of his life, Bryan's certainty of the irresistibility of the spread of religious and political truth began to weaken. Though he did not doubt either the morals or the judgment of the people, he came to believe that they were vulnerable to moral corruption, and it is in this light that his passionate involvement in the Prohibition movement should be understood. This trend in his thought, dating from around 1912, became more apparent in his later years, but existed contemporaneously with his certainty in the inerrancy of the popular will. At the same time that he bent his knee to the will of the majority by reversing himself on American involvement in the First World War, Bryan was becoming increasingly concerned that the majority was in danger of corruption. Though that time had not yet arrived, and he still saw the will of the majority as the closest thing to inerrant next to the voice of God, Bryan saw in the moral corruption of the American majority a threat to democratic thought and practice, as demonstrated by his civil religious rhetoric in support of Prohibition and his related advocacy of women's suffrage.

There is some irony in the fact that Bryan became a figurehead of the national prohibition movement. Though he had long promoted temperance, he came late to Prohibition, which had traditionally been a Republican issue. Bryan had in fact opposed its national implementation for decades and would not

publically support national Prohibition until 1912.⁹² His conversion to the cause may have been in part because he politically had little to lose after his aspirations to the presidency were defeated for the last time in 1908. That same year, he became interested in the prohibition movement, when Democratic state senators acting on behalf of the liquor interests had quashed a direct elections bill in Nebraska. This event fundamentally changed Bryan's understanding of temperance from that of an issue of individual morality to one of public virtue, as the liquor interests had acted through their political agents, members of his own party, to thwart the expression of a purer form of democracy. The corrupting influence of the liquor interests, whom he described as "the most unpatriotic and conscienceless group [that the United States] has ever known," now stood revealed to him as a pressing threat to democratic practice.⁹³

This development in Bryan's political-moral thought marks a step away from O'Sullivan's certainty of American purity. In this, he moves toward Lincoln's fear that America's moral status was contingent on the virtue of its citizens and institutions, and thus vulnerable to corruption. It is important to recognize that

⁹² Coletta (1964-69) v. III, p. 62

⁹³ Coletta (1964-69) v. III, p. 65 The issue of patriotism in the Prohibition struggle is interesting. depicted Prohibition as patriotic issue: aware that the South was strongly likely to favor Prohibition, members of the Women's Christian Temperance Union worked to smooth over the divides still lingering from the Civil War. For example, WCTU activist Frances Willard presented American North and South as being naturally one people, "one Anglo-Saxon race," with a shared "heritage of a queenly language and a heroic history of hardships mutually borne" that made it "hard for us to hate each other." As Willard includes individuals in both sections within the American political community, it is worth noting that she considers that community to be explicitly white. Indeed, she does not even include all those of European descent within that community, but only those of the Anglo-Saxon race. (in Edward J. Blum, *Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865-1898*. Louisiana State University. Baton Rouge, 2005. pp 174-208.)

Bryan perceived the liquor interests as corrupting the American polity on two levels: on the one hand, they work in the same way as other economic powers to manipulate and pervert the institutions of democracy in their own interest, exactly as did the industrial and financial concerns.⁹⁴ More dangerously, however, liquor had the particular ability to spread corruption within the people themselves, and as such posed a direct threat to the continued practice of American democracy by separating the people from religious, moral, and political truth. This threat was present even in rural communities, whose virtue was partly due to the “absence of many of the temptations which throng about the city.”⁹⁵ Agrarian virtue, which in Bryan’s framework functions as both the foundation and guarantor of democratic practice, is for him in large part due to the structural differences between city and country life, and any potential corruption of the agrarian citizen would be a corruption of the American polity.⁹⁶

Thus, Bryan comes to view drink as a sin because it corrupts both the individual and the polity. Beyond reinforcing yet another anti-democratic interest, it produced in the individual mental and physical degradation, retarding his sense of

⁹⁴ Coletta (1964-69) v. II, p. 10

⁹⁵ Levine (1965) p. 122

⁹⁶ Though Bryan frames the issue as the preservation of agrarian virtue, it would in fact be more of a purification thereof. Though the rural communities of the South and Midwest had the strongest support for Prohibition, it could hardly be said that they were, on the whole, averse to drink. Interestingly, Bryan appears to have viewed the need for Prohibition as being a needed remedy for Americans, particularly. In Bryan’s memoirs, his wife Mary writes of the Prohibition struggle that “In our state, Nebraska, there were counties, settled entirely by those from other countries, who opposed the measure. And to their credit let me add that most of these people knew how to use intoxicants. Americans seem unable to do anything in moderation.” (William Jennings Bryan and Mary Baird Bryan, *The Memoirs of William Jennings Bryan*. John C. Winston Co. Chicago, 1925. p. 290) It was not liquor, per se, that Bryan thought should be banished by law (though he himself was a teetotaler), but rather its corrupting influence on the polity.

moral responsibility and reducing his earning power, thus creating poverty, crime, and ultimately, he believed, social breakdown. Though he made much progress on Prohibition as a war measure after leaving the Wilson administration (his argument was that liquor consumed grains needed to feed the soldiers overseas) Bryan was well aware that his embrace of prohibition on the national stage would be politically costly.⁹⁷ It is estimated that about two thirds of Democrats, with whom Bryan never ceased to loyally identify, opposed it, while the same fraction of Republicans supported it.⁹⁸ In large part, this was because northern Democrats had a firm basis in urban, immigrant labor, which was universally hostile to prohibition.⁹⁹

After his final run for the presidency in 1908, Bryan had no compunction against opposing the leadership of his party, framing the issue in moral terms, saying of the issue “There is only one side of a moral issue, and that is the moral side.”¹⁰⁰ That being said, he understood that his alienation of urban labor and a large fraction of Democrats would cost him political support. In this, it is apparent that Bryan conceived of his true constituency as being the white, rural, laboring Christian majority. His lifelong allegiance to the Democrats had more to do with the fact that

⁹⁷ Coletta (1964-69) v. III, p. 72

⁹⁸ Coletta (1964-69) v. II, p. 12

⁹⁹ The very wet Personal Liberty League, for example, had more than a hundred foreign-language newspapers, which were in turn “liberally subsidized by the liquor interests.” Coletta (1964-69) v. II, p. 12

¹⁰⁰ Levine (1965) p. 120. Bryan even committed the cardinal sin of the partisan, refusing to endorse John C. Dahlman, as the Democratic nominee governor of Nebraska for the election of 1912, despite the fact that two men had been friends and allies for more than 20 years. Bryan’s devotion to his new cause alienated his old friends: the Omaha Democrats, after a “vitriolic speech” by Dahlman, passed the following resolution: “We deplore and condemn the action of him who, having repeatedly received the loyal spirit of the Democratic Party of Nebraska, turned treacherously upon it in its hour of need and accomplished its defeat.” (*New York Times*, July 16, 1911)

his constituents happened to be Democrats than to the party per se. This is made clearly apparent by using the House of Representatives' July 22, 1919 vote on the Volstead Act, which implemented Prohibition, as a proxy for regional support. The urban-rural divide is a much better predictor of a given congressman's vote on this issue than is party affiliation, with representatives from major urban centers almost uniformly opposing the law. Illinois is a representative case: of its 26 representatives, nine (five Republicans and four Democrats) voted "nay". Eight of these are from Illinois congressional districts 1, 4, 5, 7, 8 and 9, which are all of the districts that include the Chicago area. The ninth is from district 21, which includes Springfield. The 15 "aye" votes from Illinois (fourteen Republicans to only one Democrat; two representatives, both Republicans, abstained) are from rural and small town areas of the state. This urban-rural divide holds with remarkable strength across the nation (though only a relative handful of House votes came from the West). Southern representatives are an exception to this, as they for the most part vote in favor of Volstead whether from urban or rural areas.¹⁰¹

To mobilize his constituents, Bryan looked to strengthen his already firm alliance with Protestant churches across the country, ratcheting up his civil religious rhetoric to describe Prohibition as nothing less than a battle for the soul of America and the future of democracy. In the same vein, he drew close to prohibition

¹⁰¹ Exceptions to this Southern solidarity include the representatives from the New Orleans area, who unsurprisingly voted against Prohibition. (The vote count is from http://www.govtrack.us/congress/vote.xpd?vote=h66_1-43 as of 11/12/10, using data collected by Keith Poole. Congressional district maps from Kenneth C. Marts, *The Historical Atlas of United States Congressional Districts: 1789-1983*. The Free Press. New York, 1982. p. 153

organizations, almost all of which were religious in character. In 1918, he even became the president of the National Dry Federation, a coalition of 28 dry groups closely allied with the other major forces for prohibition, the Anti-Saloon League and the Women's Christian Temperance Union.

It is important to understand the terms in which Bryan and others understood the prohibition struggle. For them, it was not an effort to compel others to adopt their own religious or moral views, nor did they see themselves as a righteous few out to squelch everyone's sinful good times. Rather, they understood themselves as in continuity with the other reform movements of their era, including the struggles for abolition, social justice, the humane treatment of the mentally ill, and against child labor. Though it is doubtless true that they assumed their own vision of the good to be the only vision of the good, reformers saw themselves as their brothers' keepers. Their advocacy of political and moral reform was based not only in the benefit of the individual, but also in the individual's obligation to the polity as a whole. A sober electorate was for the reformers one that would be more responsible and rational in its judgment, and the prohibition of alcohol would itself eliminate many social problems.¹⁰² Thus, prohibition was understood not only as an issue of personal morality, though it was also that, but as one of good citizenship, as the individual was called upon to sacrifice for the greater good of the polity.

After 1912, Bryan conceived of prohibition in terms of a revised civil religious framework that saw the masses as vulnerable to corruption. On January

¹⁰² Levine (1965) p. 104

20, 1920, at an event to celebrate the implementation of the Volstead Act and the “Passover from the old era to the new”, he read from Matthew 2:20, wherein an angel notifies Mary and Joseph of the death of Herod, saying, “They are dead that sought the young child’s life.”¹⁰³ This should be understood in two ways: First, he meant it literally in that he alleged “King Alcohol” to have been responsible, both directly and indirectly, for the deaths of more children than any other cause.¹⁰⁴ Second, understood within the context of his remarks elsewhere, it is apparent that he here describes the lethal threat to the American polity that he believed was posed by the liquor interests. For Bryan, alcohol exerted a corrupting influence on Americans by distancing them from their religious and political morals, and thus threatened the continued practice of American democracy, as well as its messianic mission on the world stage.

For Bryan, the sphere of politics is interdependent with that of personal morality, and as in Lincoln’s civil religious framework, he saw the virtue of the American relies on the personal virtue of its citizens. Thus, when at the 1920 Democratic national convention he warned that, “If there be any here who would carry us back into bondage to alcohol, let them remember that it is better to have the gratitude of one soul saved from drink than the applause of a drunken world.”¹⁰⁵ It is worth noting that, first, Bryan’s vision of freedom is positive, as he sees the

¹⁰³ Coletta (1964-69) v. III, pp. 78-79, The Volstead Act codified the Eighteenth Amendment’s prohibition on “intoxicating liquors” and set forth the terms of its enforcement, and was the de facto beginning of the Prohibition era.

¹⁰⁴ Bryan (1925) p. 473

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.*

federal prohibition of alcohol not as an act of restriction but of liberation, liberating “us” from enslavement to alcohol.¹⁰⁶ The use of the first person plural is significant, as this is an issue not only of individual morality and wellbeing, but also of the virtue and freedom of the political community. Second, and just as importantly, Bryan sees the political community and the federal government as having the potential not only to reform the shared moral climate, but to assist in the saving of individual souls, and he argues that this religious function should have priority over the nation’s political prestige abroad.

The emphasis on the interdependent moral status of the individual and the community typified Bryan’s speech on Prohibition. His position was that “It is true a man has a right to drink if he chooses and if he considers himself alone, but there are duties which he owes to society which cannot be ignored. Personal liberty is often curbed for a greater good.”¹⁰⁷ Here again Bryan prioritizes the will and wellbeing of the majority over the rights of the individual, seeing individual virtue as intimately tied to the health of the body politic. To his mind, the corruption of the individual by alcohol was contagious: the drunkard, in corrupting himself, drove his family into poverty and degradation, which in turn diminished the moral standing of

¹⁰⁶ Isaiah Berlin says of positive liberty that “we recognize that it is possible, and at times justifiable, to coerce men in the name of some goal (let us say, justice or public health) which they would, if they were more enlightened, themselves pursue, because they are blind or ignorant or corrupt.” (“Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind*, Chatto & Windus, London 1997, p. 204) In this respect, Bryan hews closer to Lincoln, who saw the abolition as being of spiritual benefit to the nation (the South included) than he does to O’Sullivan and the voluntary principle. This indicates the extent to which the evangelical abolition crusade had permeated American politics and religion, and the way in which it was the direct ancestor to the reform movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Levine (1965) p. 104).

¹⁰⁷ Bryan (1925) p. 292

the community that they inhabited by introducing an element so desperate that morality was no longer an issue.¹⁰⁸ In the same way, Bryan considered prohibition at the most local level, allowing counties to determine for themselves whether they would be dry or wet to be ineffectual. The morally vulnerable living in dry counties, he believed, were tainted by the proximity of and ease of access to alcohol in nearby wet counties, necessitating a resolution at the national level.¹⁰⁹ Prohibition was for him an effort to purify the nation “body and soul,” and he believed that he had “never espoused a more righteous cause.”¹¹⁰

The Women’s Christian Temperance Union had been on the front lines of this righteous cause since 1873, and women were among the most visible and vocal supporters of Prohibition. Bryan recognized what he believed to be the unique capacity of women to morally reform the nation. With this in mind he (rightly) believed that enfranchising women would dramatically bolster the electoral support for national prohibition, and the issues of prohibition and women’s suffrage were for him intimately intertwined. In a way consistent with the Victorian feminine ideal, Bryan understood women to possess a stronger innate moral character than men, being by their maternal natures gentle and refined.¹¹¹ Bryan believed that the

¹⁰⁸ *ibid*, 290-291

¹⁰⁹ *ibid*, 290

¹¹⁰ Kazin (2006) p. 173

¹¹¹ “The attributes of True Womanhood [the feminine ideal in late-19th century America], by which a woman judged herself and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society, could be divided into four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submission, and domesticity.” Religion, especially, “belonged to woman by divine right, a gift of God and nature.” The moral and religious virtue of women was understood to be a natural corrective to the equally natural proclivities of men to intemperance and immorality. Obviously, this idealized vision of what it meant to be a woman had a political dimension, especially in its value of feminine submission. An 1851 essay in *Ladies Wreath*, for

concern of women for their children translated into an increased concern for national posterity, saying that the liquor interests opposed women's suffrage because "Those making a profession of wickedness understand that a woman's conscience is *against* them."¹¹²

For these reason, Bryan sought to enlist newly enfranchised female voters in the cause of Prohibition. Though the Nineteenth Amendment would precede the Twentieth by more than a year, Bryan still saw female voters as being essential to the cause of Prohibition and national rebirth.¹¹³ At the Democratic National Convention of 1920, after the passage of Prohibition by a Democratic president and congress, Bryan advised candidates worried about the alienation of their constituents from the party to "have more faith in the virtue of the people." "Be not afraid," he advised them,

Time and time again in history the timid have been afraid. But they have always found that they have underestimated the number of those who have not bowed the knee to Baal. The Bible tells us of a time when the great Elisha was told by his servant that the enemy was too great for them, the prophet answered: 'Fear not, they that be with us are more than they that be against us.' And then he drew aside the veil and on the mountain top the young man could see horses and

example, argued that the vote was unnecessary for women on the grounds that it would produce confusion, that women would only follow their husbands, and that if "we were to go a step further and let the children vote, their first act would be to vote their mothers at home." (Barbara Welter, *Dimity Convictions*. Ohio University Press. Athens, 1976. P. 21, 22, 31, 39) Bryan's understanding of femininity should be understood both as in continuity and in tension with this ideal. While he similarly saw women as naturally moral, pious, and domestically-oriented (indeed seeming to have difficulty thinking of women other than as wife and mother), he always saw passive virtue as being no virtue at all. Given the other qualities of women, he saw their active participation in politics as being essential to the moral, religious, and political purification of the United States. It is interesting to contrast this with the valorized masculinity and glorification of the "strenuous life" advocated by contemporary politicians like Theodore Roosevelt.

¹¹² Levine (1965) p. 130

¹¹³ Though he was, as with prohibition, a latecomer to the struggle for women's suffrage, Bryan had spoken publically in favor of it as early as 1896. (Coletta (1964-69) v. III, p. 82.)

chariots that had been invisible before. In just a few days another state will ratify the Suffrage Amendment, and then on the mountain tops you will see the women and children, our allies in every righteous cause. We shall not fail.¹¹⁴

Bryan's allusion to 2 Kings 6, in which God sends reinforcements to defend the Israelites from the armies of Syria, illustrates the challenges posed to Bryan's civil religious framework by his struggle for Prohibition.¹¹⁵ Having heretofore defined the people as virtuous by definition, he now found himself opposed by many of the very same groups that had previously supported him, even being jeered at Democratic events for the first time in his career. Those who had before been numbered among his enemies he now counted righteous, while those who had been friends he saw as enemies of the faith. The admonition to "Be not afraid" is present frequently in the Bible as a reminder of the saving power of Providence for the faithful, as Bryan here so clearly considers the supporters of Prohibition to be, but the majority that supported him in this new cause was not the same majority that he was accustomed to addressing. They were still the people, though not the same people. Faced with what he perceived as the hostility of his former allies to the democratic faith, Bryan invoked God's direct intervention in American politics, saying that the Twentieth Amendment had been sent by divine Providence. The action of Providence in the face of a potentially hostile electorate, it must be noted,

¹¹⁴ Quoted in Bryan (1925) p. 473

¹¹⁵ It is ironic that Bryan here identifies Israel, which was always alone among the nations, with the will of the majority. This is illustrative of the extent to which the vision of the United States as being a new Israel had permeated political discourse and civil religious understandings of the nation.

is to change the composition of that electorate, and to set up a new majority such that “they that be with us are more than they that be against us.”

With the people in danger of corruption by liquor and the liquor interests, Bryan looks to reinvigorate the electorate with a providentially sent infusion of voters who were of even greater intrinsic virtue, guaranteeing a more virtuous democracy in the future. Women are for Bryan uniquely suited for this function by their role as mothers. Of this role, he said, “I do not put any father in the same class with the mother in love for the child.” It is regard for maternal love that authorizes women’s inclusion in the electorate, as “If there is such a thing as justice, surely a mother has a just claim to a voice in shaping the environment that may determine whether her child will realize her hopes or bring her gray hairs in sorrow to the grave.” In defense of his vision of a mother’s love, Bryan says that “If you would know why the mother’s love for a child is the sweetest, tenderest, most lasting thing in the world, you will find the explanation in the Bible, ‘Where your treasure is, there will be your heart also.’”¹¹⁶ Bryan here quotes from Matthew 6:20-21, which reads “lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”¹¹⁷ Interestingly, the sentiment that he attributes to women, an overriding concern with the state of the world and with providing for their children, appears to be in direct conflict with Christ’s call for the Christian to focus on transcendent goods over the mundane.

¹¹⁶ Bryan (1925) p. 506

¹¹⁷ The text of Luke 12:33-34 is very similar in both wording and meaning.

This tension is partly resolved when Bryan continues, saying that “The child is the treasure of the mother; she invests her life in her child. When the mother of the Gracchi was asked: ‘Where are your jewels?’ she pointed at her children.”¹¹⁸ For Bryan, to care for her children, and by implication the world of posterity, is the *telos* of woman, that for which she was created and intended. Alluding to the Gracchi, Bryan argues that this *telos* properly understood has a political utility and republican virtue: Cornelia Africana, mother of Tiberius and Gaius Gracchus, was remembered as a paragon of Roman feminine virtue under the Republic, in which her patrician sons served Rome in the second century BC. This example would have been doubly attractive to Bryan, as not only was Cornelia virtuous, but her sons were the Roman equivalent of populists, basing their power in the plebeian class, arguing that there was no legitimate opposition to the popular will, and pushing for land reform, food price controls, and an expansion of the rights of citizenship to non-Italians, though both found themselves assassinated for their efforts. The love of a mother, Bryan implies, is the basis for a virtuous nation, and thus women’s inclusion within the electorate works as a virtuous corrective to the corruption introduced to the people by the liquor interests.

Thus, Bryan’s public speech on Prohibition and women’s suffrage should be understood both as being contained within his civil religious framework and as representing an important evolution of it. As before, the religious and political virtue of the people is at the foundation of democracy and the best guarantee of its

¹¹⁸ Bryan (1925) p. 506

continued practice, with the nation divided between a virtuous many and a vicious elite few bent on perverting democracy for their own interests. However, the people themselves are now understood as being corruptible, which is for Bryan deeply dangerous to the health of American democracy. The truth for him is no longer guaranteed to triumph over falsehood, and if the people can be separated from their virtue, the last best hope of the democracy would be extinguished.

7. The Law of Love

Bryan's position against the teaching of Darwinian natural selection at the end of his life should be understood in terms of his fear that the people could be cut off from the source of their virtue, threatening the survival of American democracy. Across his career, he had subjected political issues to a two-criteria test: first, whether they were compatible with the tenets of Christianity as he understood them, and second, how they would affect the masses of the American people. Bryan had in practice always collapsed these two criteria, in the view that the people's deeply ingrained Christianity rendered the approval of the masses functionally identical approval to by the tenets of Christianity. Natural selection, though, threatened to corrupt the morality of the masses, cutting them off from the fraternal Christianity from which they drew their essential goodness. "Religion," he wrote, "is the foundation of morality, in the individual and in the group of individuals."¹¹⁹ It is important to recall that for Bryan the laboring masses were the virtuous bastion of

¹¹⁹ Bryan (1926) p. 8

democracy, a people who lived and breathed democratic practice in their communities, their work, and their faith. In his view, their lives and beliefs together made egalitarianism and compassion natural to them to such a degree that they were incapable of behaving in ways that were unjust, cruel, or antidemocratic. For them to be corrupted would be for democracy to risk collapse.

All involved in the Scopes Trial were well aware of its political context. Indeed, in some ways, the trial was a political more than a legal event. The World's Christian Fundamentals Association, under the leadership of John W. Butler, had persuaded the Tennessee state legislature to ban Darwin from the state's schools in 1925. This in turn provoked a response from the ACLU, who offered to defend anyone tried under what was called the "Butler Act." In the small town of Dayton, Tennessee, a cadre of local businessmen led by mine manager George Rappleyea, along with city attorneys Herbert E. Hicks and Sue K. Hicks, were convinced that a controversial trial would bring publicity to their town and businesses. Thus, they persuaded local high school teacher John T. Scopes to court prosecution under the Butler Act.¹²⁰ Scopes was an enthusiastic participant, having "urged [his] students to testify against him, and coached them in their answers."¹²¹ After Sue Hicks called Bryan to serve as an attorney for the prosecution, Clarence Darrow, familiar to the public from his 1924 defense of Leopold and Loeb, volunteered his own services for the defense. The stage was set for a media spectacle.

¹²⁰ Edward L. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion*. Basic Books. New York, 1997. pp. 88-92

¹²¹ Larson (1997) p. 108

Bryan's argument at Scopes was that the state had the right to prohibit the teaching of evolution as "manifestly inimical to the public welfare."¹²² Though some commentators have dismissed Bryan's concerns out of hand, the question of the extent to which a community should be able to control the education of its children cannot be dismissed so easily.¹²³ Given his understanding of the relationship between the religious beliefs and the political practices of the American polity, and the extent to which this understanding was shared among his supporters, it seems reasonable at least to ask whether the community's ability to preserve itself is threatened by a given educational practice. Understood in this way, the question at hand is political more than it is scientific. It is not "Will our children be taught the most scientifically accurate information?" but rather "What will be the nature of our community in days to come?"¹²⁴

¹²² Fred Foote, *The Complete Scopes Trial Transcript*, derived from *The World's Greatest Court Trial*, National Books, 1925 p. 256

¹²³ Hofstadter, writing in 1948, mocks Bryan for his belief that "the ability of the common man to settle every question ... applied equally well to the conduct of schools as it did to the regulation of railroads or the recall of judges or the gold standard." Bryan was only "a provincial politician following a provincial populace in provincial prejudices" when he argued that the people had the right "to have what they want in government, including the kind of education they want," and that academic freedom "cannot be stretched as far as Professor Scopes is trying to stretch it. A man cannot demand a salary for saying what his employers do not want said." (p. 204-205) Though the benefits of academic freedom are obvious, Hofstadter writes as if education were a purely intellectual exercise, but this is transparently not the case. Education shapes the way that individuals relate to themselves and to their society, and the level at which the community should be able to control this appears, to my eyes, at least, more ambiguous than he supposes. It seems a vanity to pretend as if the unwillingness to allow certain beliefs to be challenged is unique to rural or Southern communities.

¹²⁴ Though his concern at Scopes was primarily for the community, Bryan also understood the issue as a matter of individual rights, as it seemed to him that, just as no religious doctrine could be promoted in the schools, so should no religious doctrine be attacked. Noting that Christians across the nation had to build their own colleges in which to teach Christianity, he argued in his closing statement that "it is only simple justice that atheists, agnostics and unbelievers should build their own colleges if they want to teach their own religious views or attack the religious views of others." (Foote, 1925, p. 257)

The text of Bryan's undelivered closing statement at the Scopes Trial make clear that this was precisely his concern.¹²⁵ At the trial, Bryan spoke for the prosecution at the behest of the World Christian Fundamentals Association, but he did not share many of their views. For example, he "not only read the Mosaic 'days' as geological 'ages' but allowed for the possibility of organic evolution—so long as it did not impinge on the supernatural origin of Adam and Eve."¹²⁶ At the trial, he allowed defense attorney Clarence Darrow to draw him into a number of positions that either revealed his scientific ignorance or depicted the Scriptures as being incomplete.¹²⁷ Darrow's examination of Bryan was ruled inadmissible, as the veracity of the biblical account was deemed irrelevant to the legal question at hand, but the damage had been done on the public stage. Thanks in part to accounts like H.L. Mencken's, which looked to use Bryan as an example of Southern ignorance

¹²⁵ The judge in the case had ruled that Bryan's response to Darrow's questioning was irrelevant, as the issue at hand was whether Scopes had violated the law by teaching evolution, not whether and by what means God had created man. Thus, Bryan's planned response was not allowed to be delivered, though he would later publish it for popular consumption. (Coletta (1964-69) v. III pp. 267-271)

¹²⁶ Numbers (2006) p. 7. Bryan's responses to Darrow's interrogation about the days of Creation reveals him as rather more open-minded, and indeed less literalistic, than his interrogator:

Darrow: You think those were not literal days?

Bryan: I do not think they were twentyfour-hour days.

D: What do you think about it?

B: That is my opinion—I do not know that my opinion is better on that subject than those who think it does.

D: You do not think that?

B: No. But I think it would be just as easy for the kind of God we believe in to make the earth in six days as in six years or in 6,000,000 years or in 600,000,000 years. I do not think it important whether we believe one or the other.

D: Do you think those were literal days?

B: My impression is they were periods, but I would not attempt to argue as against anybody who wanted to believe in literal days. (Foote, 1925, p. 241)

¹²⁷ Darrow challenged Bryan on the exact age of the human race, the origins of Cain's wife, and how exactly the serpent moved in Eden before God commanded him to crawl on his belly. Bryan, uncharacteristically taken off-balance, replied in a stammering and uncertain fashion. Darrow's examination ended with both men shouting and shaking their fists at one another. (Kazin (2006) p. 203; Levine (1965) p. 350-351)

(despite the fact that the Commoner was from the Midwest), Bryan's public image suffered a major blow.¹²⁸

Both sides closed out the trial without summation, so Bryan's response to Darrow went undelivered, though it would later be published in the popular press. In it, Bryan argues that the acceptance of Darwinian evolution will have a catastrophic effect on morality. "Science," he says, "is a magnificent material force, but it is not a teacher of morals. It can perfect machinery, but it adds no moral restraints to protect society from the misuse of the machine." The danger, for him, is that modern science has dramatically expanded human capabilities at the same time that it erodes all sense of moral limitations. Looking at the Great War of less than a decade before, it is clear to Bryan that for all of its benefits, science "has made war so hellish that civilization was about to commit suicide; and now we are told that newly discovered instruments of destruction will make the cruelty of the late war seem trivial in comparison with the cruelties of wars that may come in the future."¹²⁹ Thus, at the moment that science extends human capabilities beyond what had been imagined possible, it also teaches that in the coming era anything is permitted. The danger of science for Bryan is that it amplifies power while erasing morality.

¹²⁸ Mencken described the residents of Dayton variously as "morons," "peasants," "hill-billies," and "yokels." His contempt for the ideal of equality applied to Bryan even more than it did to Lincoln. (quoted in Levine (1965) p. 352-354) Attorney Alan Dershowitz aptly describes Mencken as "a rabid racist as well as an antireligious bigot." (in *America on Trial: Inside the Legal Battles That Transformed Our Nation*. Warner Books. New York, 2004. p. 265)

¹²⁹ Foote, (1925) p. 269

The acceptance of Darwinism would for Bryan mean a fundamental shift in the nature of how humans understand themselves. No longer would a human be that creature made in God's image to love his fellows as equals, but that animal most successful in the bloody struggle for survival. He wrote, quoting from *On the Origin of Species*,

Darwin speaks with approval of the savage custom of eliminating the weak so that only the strong will survive, and complains that "we civilized men do our utmost to check the process of elimination." How inhuman such a doctrine as this! He thinks it injurious to "build asylums for the imbecile, the maimed and the sick" or to care for the poor. Even the medical men come in for criticism because they "exert their utmost skill to save the life of everyone to the last moment." And then note his hostility to vaccination because it has "preserved thousands who, from a weak constitution would, but for vaccination, have succumbed to smallpox!" All of the sympathetic activities of civilized society are condemned because they enable "the weak members to propagate their kind."¹³⁰

For Bryan evolution "if taken seriously and made the basis of a philosophy of life ... would eliminate love and carry man back to a struggle of tooth and claw."¹³¹ He wrote elsewhere that the political and moral problem was not that Darwinian

¹³⁰ Foote (1925) p. 267. Though Bryan did not refer to it, perhaps because he was unaware, the text that Scopes used in class (George William Hunter's 1914 *A Civic Biology: Presented in Problems*, makes clear in its title that it is a political argument) vigorously expounded the use of eugenics to create a cleaner, more intelligent, and more law-abiding body politic. Hunter wrote: "Attributing crime and immorality to genetic factors, Hunter wrote that, "Just as certain animals or plants become parasitic on other plants or animals, these families have become parasitic on society. They not only do harm to others by corrupting, stealing, or spreading disease, but they are actually protected and cared for by the state out of public money. Largely for them the poorhouse and the asylum exist. They take from society, but they give nothing in return. They are true parasites." He continues that, "If such people were lower animals, we would probably kill them off to prevent them from spreading. Humanity will not allow this, but we do have the remedy of separating the sexes in asylums or other places and in various ways preventing intermarriage and the possibilities of perpetuating such a low and degenerate race. Remedies of this sort have been tried successfully in Europe and are now meeting with success in this country." (quoted in Dershowitz (2004) pp. 264-265; Kazin (2006) p. 289)

¹³¹ Foote (1925) p. 267

evolution postulated violent competition as necessary, but that evolutionists portrayed this struggle as being *good*: “The Darwinian theory represents man as reaching his present perfection by operation of the law of hate—the merciless law by which the strong crowd out and kill off the weak.”¹³² This contradicted everything that Bryan’s civil religious framework, based in fraternal love, gave him to understand. For him, “love rather than hatred is the law of development,” and the principle of fraternal love that led to social justice also led to political and social progress across time.¹³³ He spoke of immortality both of the soul and in posterity when he wrote “We win immortality, not by remembering ourselves, but by forgetting ourselves in devotion to things larger than ourselves.”¹³⁴ In the absence of love, democracy would crumble and politics would be nothing more than a savage struggle for wealth and power.

Bryan, had he been allowed to deliver this speech, would have drawn from Clarence Darrow’s performance at the trial of Leopold and Loeb. There, Darrow had argued that the environment in which the boys were raised had rendered them unaccountable for their actions. Asking, “Do bad doctrines corrupt the morals of students?” Bryan quotes from Darrow’s defense of Leopold, in which Darrow had argued that Nietzsche’s arguments (which Darrow had described as being delivered by “the bravest soul since Jesus”) against pity had damaged the boy, and that he

¹³² Bryan (1926) p. 18

¹³³ *ibid*, p. 19

¹³⁴ *ibid*, p. 32

could not be held accountable morally or legally.¹³⁵ This for Bryan was part of the problem: if humans were only the products of their environment, how could one ask them to be moral? How could one ask that they show compassion for their fellows? The rule of natural selection is for Bryan the rule of force and struggle. He understood the Scopes trial not as the site of a conflict between faith and reason, but as the battleground between two warring faiths: on one side the forces of Christian love, brotherhood, and democratic fraternity, and on the other the forces of 'evolutionism'—of which he identified Darwin as the "high priest"—savage competition, and political and economic oppression.¹³⁶

As he did in 1896, Bryan thirty years later conceives of democracy in terms of the crucifixion, saying

Again force and love meet face to face, and the question, "What shall I do with Jesus." must be answered. A bloody, brutal doctrine - evolution - demands, as the rabble did 1,900 years ago, that He be crucified. That cannot be the answer of this jury, representing a Christian state and sworn to uphold the laws of Tennessee. Your answer will be heard throughout the world; it is eagerly awaited by a praying multitude. If the law is nullified, there will be rejoicing wherever God is repudiated, the Saviour scoffed at and the Bible ridiculed. Every unbeliever of every kind and degree will be happy. If, on the other hand, the law is upheld and the religion of the school children protected, millions of Christians will call you blessed and, with hearts full of gratitude to God, will sing again that grand old song of triumph:

*Faith of our fathers. living still,
In spite of dungeon, fire and sword;
O, how our hearts beat high with joy,
Whene'er we hear that glorious word;
Faith of our fathers - holy faith -*

¹³⁵ Foote (1925) p. 144, 270

¹³⁶ *ibid*, p. 267

*We will be true to thee till death!*¹³⁷

For Bryan, the Scopes trial is decisive, and the moment at which his civil religious framework is most threatened. Having defined the masses as Christian and equated them with the good, popular apostasy becomes a catastrophe that democratic thought and politics cannot survive. The 'faith of our fathers' (quoted from the hymn of that title) to which he refers is as much political as religious, an understanding of democracy as egalitarian, rural, and fraternal. Were Darwin accepted, he fears, fraternal love would fall away as cruel competition and exploitation became not only common, but *legitimate*, seen as befitting the nature of man. His vision of democracy was based in love, and without the religious imperative to love one's brothers and to care for the vulnerable, he believed that democracy could not long endure. Even if it did not, he was determined to remain a faithful believer until the bitter end.

8. Conclusion

The end came only days later, as Bryan died in bed at the age of 65. He had led a checkered career, encompassing three failed bids for the presidency, activism in the temperance and women's suffrage movements, publishing his own newspaper, *The Commoner*, and a stint as a paid spokesman for a Florida housing development. He spoke powerfully to his supporters, who felt that their government had ceased to represent them, and framed complex political and economic issues in

¹³⁷ Ibid. p. 270

civil religious terms and ideas already familiar to broad swaths of the American populace.¹³⁸ It was less a matter of simplification than it was of finding the words that would communicate to people of any region or class, using a lexicon of symbols, concepts, and ideas common to a broad spectrum of Americans.

His means of doing this was the language of American civil religion, which resonated powerfully with his supporters, whom the *New York Times* described in a headline as a “Wild, Raging, Irresistible Mob Which Nothing Can Turn from Its Abominable Foolishness”.¹³⁹ According to his wife Mary, Bryan received about two thousand letters a day during his 1896 presidential campaign, swelling to three thousand at the time of the election. The letters of that time that survive (the Bryans seem to have discarded almost all of them, which, given their volume, is understandable) are commonly saturated with religious idiom. One man, who wrote “I have felt the pangs of hunger,” ended his letter by invoking the mercy of God, saying “May the God of the widow and the fatherless—the God of the poor and oppressed—be with and guide you.”¹⁴⁰ One writer from Missouri, describing Bryan

¹³⁸ Kazin (2006) p. 196

¹³⁹ Kazin (2006) p. 64. The full headline is “The Silver Fanatics Are Invincible: Wild, Raging, Irresistible Mob Which Nothing Can Turn From Its Abominable Foolishness: Sound Money-Men Surely Doomed to Defeat:” *New York Times*, Jul7, 1896

¹⁴⁰ In the Old Testament, the treatment of widows and orphans, the most vulnerable members of society, functions as a minimal threshold by which the justice of a person or a people can be judged. See for example Exodus 22:22-24: “Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry; And my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless.” Compare to the accusation of maltreatment of widows and orphans as part of an invocation of divine justice at Psalm 94:3-6:

LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked triumph?
How long shall they utter and speak hard things? and all the workers of iniquity boast themselves?
They break in pieces thy people, O LORD, and afflict thine heritage.

as “the saviour of our nation,” wrote that “in god [*sic*] and Bryan I put my trust.” D.D. Hatfield, writing from a Colorado mining camp, asserted his faith that “in all times of great peril to the people God has raised up a leader to save them from their errors and lead them up to a higher plane of hight [*sic*] and to a knowledge of their rights and duties.”¹⁴¹ Bryan advanced a populist political agenda in the language of American civil religion, and together these things led a great many Americans to recognize him as one of their own.

Ironically for a man known today for fundamentalist reaction, Bryan was for his supporters in many ways a transformative figure, opening up radically new possibilities of politics for people who felt themselves excluded from and persecuted by the machineries of power. Vachel Lindsay, writing in 1919 of his experience as a sixteen-year old boy in 1896, writes in his poem “Bryan, Bryan, Bryan, Bryan”

I brag and chant of Bryan, Bryan, Bryan
 Candidate for president who sketched a silver Zion,
 The one American Poet who could sing outdoors,
 He brought in tides of wonder, of unprecedented splendor,
 Wild roses from the plains, that made hearts tender

Bryan’s poetic speech allowed his supporters to envision a finer world, and he was both their leader and one of their own of whom they could be proud. He spoke to them, with them, and for them: he was not merely fluent in the language of his

They slay the widow and the stranger, and murder the fatherless.
 Though the emphasis is common in the Old Testament, it occurs only once in the New Testament, at James 1:27, though it is there strongly emphasized as a condition of faithful action: “Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.”

¹⁴¹ Letters quoted in Kazin (2006) p. 72-75

supporters, but a native speaker, and his deployment of the language of civil religion served to integrate his followers across the nation into a single political movement. That movement transformed the Democratic Party, beginning its shift from libertarian principles to an acceptance of state power as a means to further the cause of social justice and equality. It was the identification of the candidate and his supporters that allowed him to three times win the Democratic nomination to the presidency, and the defeat of the “Populistic, anarchistic / deacon-desperado” by the “plutocrats in miles / With dollar signs upon their coats, / Diamond watchchains on their vests / And spats on their feet” was felt by them to be their own defeat. For Lindsay, it was a loss of personal innocence, the “defeat of my boyhood, defeat of my dreams.”

That same quality instrumental in drawing the loyalty of millions to Bryan’s banner, however, was by the end of his career equally a political liability. The Scopes trial marks a moment in American politics when the cultural gulf between urban and rural, between those with educations and those without, and between the American poor and the middle class widened. Afterward, advocates of social progress and the representatives of religion increasingly found themselves in opposition, and a religious progressive of Bryan’s stripe began to seem an anachronism.¹⁴² Though the tradition of American civil religion would survive into the 20th century, a rapidly diversifying religious landscape would mean that it would never again speak with the same force.

¹⁴² Kazin (2006) p. 306

CONCLUSION

THE CHECKERED PAST AND UNCERTAIN FUTURE OF AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

*The prophet is an iconoclast, challenging the apparently holy, revered,
and awesome. Beliefs cherished as certainties, institutions endowed
with supreme sanctity, he exposes as scandalous pretensions.*
Abraham J. Heschel¹

*To what purpose cometh there to me incense from Sheba, and
the sweet cane from a far country? Your burnt offerings are
not acceptable, nor your sacrifices sweet unto me.*
Jeremiah 6:20

The American civil religious tradition has been one that historically speaks to many Americans, and one in which complex issues of national identity and purpose have been discussed in terms broadly comprehensible. In the introduction to this dissertation, I used words from John Winthrop's sermon, "A Modell of Christian Charity" as an epigraph. American civil religion shares the New England Puritan's sense of exceptionality and purpose, but in terms that are not constrained by the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy. The emphasis that each of the four men considered in this dissertation places on the United States as exceptional before God hardly finds much scriptural support, and there is good reason to doubt whether Abraham Lincoln and John L. O'Sullivan thought of themselves as Christians. American civil religion, though conceptually related to Christianity, is distinct from it. It is a common language articulating the nature of the American exceptionality

¹ In *The Prophets*. Harper & Row. New York, 1955. p. 10

and what is at stake in it. The American civil religious tradition in the 19th century drew its power from the broad comprehensibility of biblical language, describing American history as occurring within a set of tropes and symbols already familiar to the American people. However, even as American civil religion described that history, its narratives worked to shape it. Americans understood themselves to be exceptional in the eyes of God, and acted accordingly.

The fracturing of the American religious (and civil religious) landscape on display at the Scopes trial accelerated throughout the 20th century, showing no signs of slowing as we enter the 21st and proving the reality of the religious freedom guaranteed in the First Amendment. This growth of religious diversity is in a great many ways to the good, enriching American culture and infusing it with a variety of religious and nonreligious perspectives. Nonetheless, as religious diversity has increased, so has an individualistic approach to religion, which has eroded the ability of religious language to speak meaningfully to communal obligations.² Though sincere communities of faith continue to exist, they speak no common tongue. Richard Madsen argues persuasively that, all too often, they speak past one another, failing “to overcome the moral fragmentation of modernity.” American religion is still vital, but it is not *civil*. “It scatters consciousness. It apports religious belief into little islands of faith.”³

² The classic work on this is Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, & Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. University of California Press. Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1985.

³ Richard Madsen, “The Archipelago of Faith: Religious Individualism and Faith Community in America Today”, *American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 114 Number 5 (March 2009), p. 1299

One result of this apportionment is that the civil religious framework presented by William Jennings Bryan has become strongly influential in our time. Of the visions of American civil religion presented in this dissertation, it is his that is most compatible with the fractured state of the national religious landscape. American civil religion thus becomes a voice that speaks not to the nation as a whole, but to one part thereof that imagines itself to be the “true” America, following Bryan in depicting politics as a confrontation between the forces of good and evil. This species of civil religious commitment sanctifies its holders while demonizing their opponents.

Bryan’s understanding of who constitutes ‘the people’ is broadly influential in 2010. Witness Sarah Palin, who has argued that American law should be based in the Ten Commandments⁴ and who during the 2008 presidential campaign said, “We believe that the best of America is in these small towns that we get to visit, and in these wonderful little pockets of what I call the real America, being here with all of you hard-working, very patriotic, very pro-America areas of this great nation.”⁵ Palin implies that those not living in these wonderful little pockets, or who do not at least feel themselves represented by those who do, are not Americans. More, they

⁴ Appearing on *The O'Reilly Factor* on May 6, 2010, Palin said, “I think we should kind of keep this clean, keep it simple, go back to what our founders and our founding documents meant. They're quite clear that we would create law based on the God of the Bible and the 10 Commandments. It's pretty simple.” <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,592422,00.html>, accessed November 15, 2010.

⁵ At an October 16, 2008 fundraiser in North Carolina. <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2008/10/17/palin-touts-the-pro-america-areas-of-the-country>, accessed on November 15, 2010. Perhaps not coincidentally, Palin also endorses the teaching of Creationism in public schools, telling the *Anchorage Daily News* on October 26, 2006, that she is “a proponent of teaching both” Darwinian and Creationist stories of human development. <http://www.adn.com/2006/10/27/217111/creation-science-enters-the-race.html> accessed Nov. 15, 2010.

are importantly un-American, their political loyalties suspect. This suspicion extends even to the sitting president. Despite having deployed the language of American civil religion,⁶ President Barack Obama is often identified as being a Muslim. Given that exposure to the fact of his Christian religious faith has little effect on those who claim to believe this, it seems reasonable to think that holders of this belief (who are disproportionately biblical literalists and conservatives) are using 'Muslim' as a proxy category for religious outsiders, those alien and hostile to the community of belief.⁷ In the religious archipelago of 21st century America, the dominant strain of civil religious thought divides the nation into loyal Americans (those like oneself) and traitors (those who are not).

In the 21st century, whereas Bryan's civil religious framework has prevailed in the domestic sphere, the civil religious framework that prevails in the international sphere of politics owes much to Woodrow Wilson, who is in turn the heir of John L. O'Sullivan. During his presidency, George W. Bush's civil religious speech echoed Wilson's, as when he said that, "Liberty is both the plan of Heaven for humanity, and the best hope for progress here on Earth."⁸ America for him was the primary agent of Heaven's plan, as he made clear when justifying the 2003 invasion

⁶ As he did in his inauguration address when, quoting 1 Corinthians 13:11, he said that "the time has come to set aside childish things" and "to choose our better history" by making good "the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free". <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address/> accessed on 11/16/10.

⁷ On the finding that exposure to the facts of President Obama's religious faith has little effect on those who believe him a Muslim, see Barry A. Hollander, "Persistence in the Perception of Barack Obama as a Muslim in the 2008 Presidential Campaign" in *Journal of Media and Religion*, vol. 9, no. 2. 2010. pp. 55 — 66

⁸ "Remarks by President George W. Bush at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy" November 6, 2003. <http://www.ned.org/george-w-bush/remarks-by-president-george-w-bush-at-the-20th-anniversary> accessed November 15, 2010.

of Iraq. "Americans," he said, "are a free people, who know that freedom is the right of every person and the future of every nation. The liberty we prize is not America's gift to the world, it is God's gift to humanity."⁹ President Bush, like Wilson before him, described international politics as being a conflict between the godly forces of democracy and their wicked, antidemocratic opponents, or as Bush called them, "The Axis of Evil."¹⁰

The civil religious frameworks that descend from Bryan and Wilson have in common that each locates sin exclusively outside of the community of its believers. Being purely affirmative, even celebratory, each of these can be located within what I described in Chapter 2 as the priestly vein of the American civil religious tradition. These two civil religious frameworks can easily coexist, as their adherents are in both equally able to view their own beliefs and practices as identical with the will of God. This blasphemous level of self-regard, this idolatry of the self, has been a dimension of American civil religious thought since its origin. It is a scandalous claim to know the mind of God, or (worse!) to embody his will. Reinhold Niebuhr describes this as "the very essence of sin. It identifies the interests of a particular self or a particular force in history with the final purposes" of God.¹¹ In American politics, this tendency has allowed political actors to say that all things are permitted in the service of a holy cause, acknowledging no legitimate restraint.

⁹ 2003 State of the Union Address, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/01/29/us/state-union-president-s-state-union-message-congress-nation.html> accessed November 15, 2010

¹⁰ 2002 State of the Union Address, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/print/20020129-11.html> as of 11/16/10

¹¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*. University of Chicago. Chicago, 1952/2008. p. 122

Viewing the American interest as the will of God allowed John L. O'Sullivan to exclude black and native populations from the rights that he claimed for all mankind, thereby denying their humanity. Identifying the religious and political good with the practices of white, rural, Christian laborers, Bryan was blind to the ways in which his endorsement of Jim Crow made a mockery of his egalitarian politics. Viewing black men and women as somehow less than fully American, Woodrow Wilson gave the lie to his talk of global democracy. Believing his opponents in the Senate to be creatures of religious evil, his failure to compromise guaranteed that the charter of the League of Nations would not be ratified. Identifying their own purposes with the will of God, these men undermined the very faith that they claimed to uphold.

Absent in most incarnations of American civil religion is the prophetic mode, and it is this mode that is most able to speak to the nation as a whole.¹² The prophetic mode of civil religion calls the community to account for its failures to uphold the beliefs that undergird it. It is also the aspect of the civil religious tradition that makes it more than merely the celebration of the American way absent a theological framework of meaning, which Robert Bellah describes as "American Shinto".¹³ Though it may be dormant now, it was the prophetic mode that Martin Luther King, Jr. called upon in support of the struggle for civil rights.

¹² Also on this absence, see Will Herberg's *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (Anchor. Garden City, 1955) and Robert Bellah's *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial* (University of Chicago. Chicago, 1992 (1974)).

¹³ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America." *Daedalus*, Winter 1967. Reprinted in the Fall 2005 issue, pp. 40-55 p. 49

Standing before the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, King explicitly evoked Lincoln's civil religious authority and language, saying "Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity."

Though he placed himself in continuity with Lincoln, King's speech was intended not to celebrate America, but to call it to account for its failures and hypocrisies, saying,

Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check — a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

The promise of the civil religious tradition is found not in its affirmations, but in its prophetic accusations, which can spur Americans to action, driving them toward the ideals that they profess to hold self-evident. Americans, King says, have failed to render that which they owe; they are in violation of contract. Denouncing the nation for its failures, he reminds Americans that their country was to point beyond itself

to something higher, toward the promise of equality made in its Declaration of Independence. He spoke to them in the civil religious language that they recognized as authoritative, and *mirabile dictu*, he was heard. Sacvan Bercovitch has argued that “The ritual of the jeremiad bespeaks an ideological consensus—in moral, religious, economic, social, and intellectual matters—unmatched in any other modern culture.”¹⁴ King draws on this consensus, making it impossible for the nation to ignore the ways in which it had failed to uphold the sacred covenant that is its foundation. To scourge, not to comfort, is the political good of the American civil religious tradition.

Of any of the persons examined in this dissertation, only Abraham Lincoln is able to conceive of a God who does not celebrate and affirm human desires. It is Lincoln who among all of them has the most serious concept of God; only he who could say that to deny that God has his own purposes, distinct from those of human beings, “is to deny that there is a God governing the world.”¹⁵ As American civil religion has become more purely affirmative, its ability to speak to the nation in a way that drives it to realize its own ideals has diminished. As it has faded, no new common tongue has arisen to replace it that can fill its role. On the one hand, it may be that market individualism has replaced American civil religion as the shared language of American politics. This prospect seems to me to threaten the ends of political justice and equality on which the United States is founded, abandoning

¹⁴ Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*. University of Wisconsin. Madison, 1978.

¹⁵ In *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*. Roy P. Basler, ed. Vol. VIII, p. 356. Rutgers. New Brunswick, NJ, 1953-1954.

national political obligations in favor of individual advantage. On the other hand, it may be that a new force will emerge in American politics that fulfills the prophetic office once inhabited by Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, and the civil religious tradition will be revitalized. Prophets may arrive unexpectedly.

In 1967, during the Vietnam War, Robert Bellah wrote that “We have in a moment of uncertainty been tempted to rely on our overwhelming physical power rather than on our intelligence, and we have, in part, succumbed to this temptation. Bewildered and unnerved when our terrible power fails to bring immediate success, we are at the edge of a chasm the depth of which no man knows.”¹⁶ It seems to me that we as a nation stand again at such a precipice. I began this dissertation in 2004, shortly after the American invasion of Iraq. As I finish it, we are in the midst of two wars, each having lasted nearly a decade with no resolution yet in sight, and mired in the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. But what is to be done? Many of our leaders offer us scapegoats in the form of illegal immigrants and religious minorities, and we are told that all would be well if only real Americans had their way. This search for a scapegoat is nothing but an effort to push these groups outside of what we recognize as ‘the people’, saddling them with our own sins and thereby affirming our own essential goodness. It is then they, not we, who have erred, they, not we, who are guilty. It is a politically and religiously unserious act undertaken to avoid a meaningful confrontation with our own shortcomings as a nation. It is an act of bad faith in every sense of the term.

¹⁶ Bellah (1967/2005) p. 53

It seems to me that what is called for is not affirmation of our ways of life, but a forceful reminder of the responsibilities that belong to us as Americans. We as a people—not just a people, but this American people—need to be reminded of our obligation not only to act in the right as we have been given to see it, but to do so with the humility that comes from knowing that we do not see it in its totality. If we, chastened, keep alive our ancient faith, the promise of American government will be preserved. But, as John Winthrop warned, “If our hearts shall turn away” from that faith, and we are “seduced, and worship other Gods, our pleasure and profits, and serve them... we shall surely perish out of the good land.” As was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said: the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

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