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The Call to Renewal:
Religion in the Rhetoric of Barack Obama

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In the Department
of
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ABSTRACT

The Call to Renewal:

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Gregory Melchin

Barack Obama, like many American presidents, uses religious language extensively in his rhetoric. In order to communicate his ideas, Obama draws upon the rhetoric of his predecessors, the Civil Rights Movement, and his own personal experience. Using the thought of Charles Taylor and Paul Ricoeur as a guide, this thesis provides an analysis of Obama's rhetoric, placing it within the context of the religious-political belief systems of "American civil religion" and African-American Christian political theology. Obama makes reference to the founding documents of the country and "traditional American values" in order to further the argument that the "change" promised in his campaign amounts to a renewal of American society along the lines of the deepest ideals of the country's founding.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: <i>American Civil Religion</i>	5
1.1: <i>History of American Civil Religion Scholarship</i>	8
1.2: <i>Charles Taylor and American Civil Religion</i>	16
1.3: <i>Paul Ricoeur and American Civil Religion</i>	22
Chapter 2: <i>The Civil Rights Movement</i>	40
2.1: <i>Integration, Marginalization, and American Civil Religion</i> ..	42
2.2: <i>American Civil Religion and the African-American Struggle:</i> <i>A Brief Historical Outline</i>	48
2.3: <i>Myth, Ideology, and Utopia in the Rhetoric of</i> <i>Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.</i>	56
Chapter 3: <i>Barack Obama</i>	68
3.1: <i>Religion, Politics, and the Thought of Barack Obama</i>	70
3.2: <i>Barack Obama and American Civil Religion</i>	77
3.3: <i>Obama, King, and Utopia</i>	85
Conclusion	95
Bibliography	97

Introduction

Religion is an extremely important factor in American politics. Although the American Constitution prescribes a separation of church and state, the importance of religion in the lives of many Americans requires would-be political leaders to discuss their religious beliefs in detail and to relate to potential voters using religious language and imagery. The most recent presidential election proved to be no exception. During his election campaign, Barack Obama frequently used religious language and discussed religion, albeit in a different manner from many other American politicians. In keeping with his self-identification with the “historically Black church,” Barack Obama’s religious rhetoric adapts some of the ideological and utopian religious themes of the Civil Rights movement to the context of American civil religion.

This is not to say that no presidential candidate has ever used the language of the Civil Rights movement; the Reverend Jesse Jackson, a disciple of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., brought much of the movement’s ideals to mainstream American politics during his campaigns for the Democratic nomination in the 1980s. However, Obama’s rhetoric is specific to a different set of historical circumstances. Obama frequently invokes the myths, ideologies, and utopias of both “mainstream” American civil religion and its Black Christian counterpart, calling for a renewal according to the ideals of both of these.

In my thesis, I will draw upon the thought of philosophers Charles Taylor and Paul Ricoeur to guide my analysis of the context of Obama’s rhetoric. I have chosen these two thinkers because both discuss in detail a concept which I find to be immensely

fecund: the social imaginary. Each thinker uses the term in a different way, however. For Ricoeur, the social imaginary refers to the collection of beliefs, symbols, and narratives that individuals use, often unconsciously, to understand themselves and their cultures.¹ Taylor, however, speaks of social imaginaries as particular aspects of society, such as the economy, moral order, etc., which are constructed in the imagination of the society's members.² Thus, although Ricoeur speaks of the social imaginary in the general sense and Taylor refers to particular social imaginaries, both thinkers agree that society, to a great degree, exists within the imagination of its members. Another reason Taylor and Ricoeur are particularly useful for this project is that both men are renowned scholars of religion and Christian theological constructs. It is on the religious aspect of the social imaginary that I will focus, and each thinker offers different insights into religious aspects of the social imaginary. Ricoeur discusses the importance of myth, ritual, and belief in the social imaginary, while Taylor focuses on the importance of religion in cultural identity. I will use these two frameworks in a complementary manner in order to bring depth to my understanding of American religious-political thought.

I will begin my project by exploring American civil religion and define my use of this controversial term. I will then turn to the ideological and utopian structures associated with American religious-political rhetoric. In the first section, I will summarize the history of scholarship of the phenomenon of religious grounding of American patriotism, beginning with the thought of Enlightenment thinkers, notably Rousseau, and continuing into the contemporary period of civil religion scholarship; i.e., Robert Bellah and his interlocutors. In the second section, I will refer to Charles Taylor's

¹ Paul Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and John B. Thompson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 308-309.

² Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

concept of the neo-Durkheimian dispensation, articulated in *William James Revisited* and *A Secular Age*. I will use this as an explanatory framework in which to situate the insights of other civil religion scholarship. In the third section, I will use Paul Ricoeur's concepts of myth, ideology, and utopia to discuss particular belief structures of the American civil-religious paradigm. References will be made throughout the chapter to particular articulations of American civil-religious ideas by presidents and others.

I will then provide a brief history and outline of the Black Christian Civil Rights Movement, exemplified by Dr. King,³ and discuss the socio-religious imaginary associated with this movement. Like the first chapter, the second chapter will be divided into three sections. The first will explore the Eurocentric elements of civil religion and will discuss its role in both integration and marginalization within American society, making reference to the thought of Charles Taylor and others. The second section will provide a brief overview of the development of religious-political thought in the African-American community, examining the religious orientation of the UNIA, the Nation of Islam, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The third section will again refer to myth, ideology, and utopia as an explanatory framework for Civil Rights theological-political rhetoric. Again, frequent references will be made to the thought of King and others.

Finally, I will discuss the religious content of President Obama's speeches and writing in light of the topics discussed in the previous sections. The first section of this chapter will explore the religious and political thought of Barack Obama, exploring briefly such stated influences as Reinhold Niebuhr. The second will discuss the

³ It will be useful to focus on King due to the staggering array of approaches to African-American religious protest and since King is frequently cited by Obama as a source of inspiration.

similarities and differences of Obama's thought and rhetoric with American civil religion, using Taylor and Ricoeur's concepts as a guide. The third will compare and contrast the rhetoric and thought of Obama with the Civil Rights Movement, Taylor, and Ricoeur.

President Obama self-consciously adapts concepts from these imaginaries and from his own personal religious influences to produce a unique style of religious-political rhetoric that has proven appealing to many Americans. While stylistically similar to the rhetoric of his predecessors, Obama's language draws upon both the prophetic and priestly traditions within civil religion in order to communicate a message of change and reorientation of America towards its so-called "founding ideals." In doing so, Obama issues to America a "call to renewal" in order to more fully realize the vision of its founders. From this thesis, I hope to capture and express the insight that Obama's rhetoric belies a vision for America that draws upon American civil religion, the Civil Rights Movement, and Obama's personal experience. Following Taylor, I define American civil religion as a worldview that sees America as divinely commissioned to further God's purposes on Earth. King and other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement often framed their rhetoric in the language of American civil religion, challenging the nation to live up to the ideals articulated by its founding documents or face divine judgment. While Obama as a politician is strongly pragmatic, having been influenced by thinkers such as Niebuhr, his skilful framing of his policies within the context of the aforementioned traditions grants his rhetoric a persuasiveness that would not be possible if he avoided references to the transcendent.

Chapter 1: *American Civil Religion*

In other words, our form of Government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is.

- Dwight Eisenhower⁴

Since colonial times, many Americans have held beliefs about their country that are, in certain respects, religious. The French intellectual Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that early American pilgrims “brought with them into the New World a form of Christianity which I cannot better describe than by styling it a democratic and republican religion.”⁵ Many of these pilgrims, particularly the Puritans, understood the new settlements as constituting a covenant with God, with the well-being of the community contingent upon the moral conduct of its members. Some even ventured to compare the American colonies with biblical Israel, equating its liberation by God from Egypt with their own exodus from Europe. This comparison has had enduring appeal in America continues to be made frequently in official and unofficial rhetoric.

However, a number of the “Founding Fathers” of the American Revolution, including Thomas Jefferson, were Deists who doubted the claims of Christianity and other organized religions, yet who believed firmly in a Creator God and a natural moral order.⁶ The Declaration’s reference to the “Laws of Nature and Nature’s God” attest to

⁴ Dwight D. Eisenhower, “Address at the Freedoms Foundation” (New York City, NY: December 22, 1952), *The Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum Homepage*, http://www.eisenhower.archives.gov/All_About_Ike/Quotes/Quotes.html (accessed June 3, 2009).

⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1954), 311.

⁶ Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder, *Civil Religion & the Presidency* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1988), 72.

the influence of Deism in early American political thought. Deism is highly influenced by the philosophical thought of the Enlightenment, the ideals of which were central to the drafting of the American Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Indeed, the United States is sometimes called an “experiment” in republicanism and democracy. In this sense, America is seen as a polity whose fate is linked with the fate of republican democracy itself.

The twin heritages of Protestant Christianity and the Enlightenment inform much of American political self-understanding,⁷ which is often expressed in religious terms. That this is the case is attested by the frequent and persistent use of religious language and references to the transcendent by presidents to communicate with the American people. Such religious language seldom draws on elements of particular religious traditions, but instead focuses on a providential, general Deity who has a relationship with America and its people.

Religious language of this sort, along with the ritualistic elements in many American civic occasions, has led some scholars⁸ to posit the existence of an “American civil religion” which is distinct from Christianity, Judaism, or any of the other organized religious traditions forming part of American society. While the definitions of American civil religion vary dramatically, one of its central tenets as identified by a range of scholars is the belief that America is specially ordained among nations to fulfill God’s purposes on Earth. This belief may be seen as combining the Enlightenment-influenced understanding of America as an experiment, and the Puritan notion of covenant: God

⁷ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Cycles of American History* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1986), 3-14.

⁸ See works cited below by Bellah, Herberg, Mead, Pierard and Linder, and others.

desires the spread of democracy and government according to His laws, and has ordained America as the vehicle with which to fulfill this purpose.

Charles Taylor identifies this particular interpretive framework as the means by which many Americans, past and present, have understood the relationship between the religious and the political.⁹ Taylor contrasts this model with other religious-political paradigms. While it is not unique to America, he argues, it addresses the problem of social cohesion in the American climate of religious pluralism and church-state separation.¹⁰

After providing a brief overview of the history of scholarship on American civil religion, I will explore Taylor's thought on American religious-political self-understanding. Following Taylor, I see American civil religion in terms of its central belief structure; that is, the belief in America as the instrument of God in the world. Using this definition, I will explore its use in American rhetoric using Paul Ricoeur's concept of the social imaginary and its structures of myth, ideology, and utopia. This will demonstrate the functions of American civil religion and the reasons for its continued use in American presidential rhetoric.

⁹ Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 93.

¹⁰ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 449.

1.1: History of American Civil Religion Scholarship

There has been much recent debate surrounding the topic of “American civil religion.” The term, however, is an old one, dating back to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s 1762 work, *The Social Contract*. The fourth book of this work contains a chapter entitled “Civil Religion,” which formulates Rousseau’s theories of church-state relationships. Rousseau describes three models of church-state relationships. The first, which he terms “the religion of man,” is based on the earliest form of Christianity and demands loyalty to God and His laws alone. The second, “the religion of the citizen,” is based on the fusion of church and state into a national, theocratic cult. The third type is “priestly” religion, in which citizens owe a dual allegiance to king and pontiff. This was the prevailing system in Rousseau’s France, and since it is contrary to social cohesion, he describes it as “worthless.”

Rousseau prefers the second model, saying that

The second is good in that it unites the divine cult with love of the laws, and, making country the object of the citizens' adoration, teaches them that service done to the State is service done to its tutelary god. It is a form of theocracy, in which there can be no pontiff save the prince, and no priests save the magistrates. To die for one's country then becomes martyrdom; violation of its laws, impiety; and to subject one who is guilty to public execration is to condemn him to the anger of the gods...¹¹

¹¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* 4.8, trans. G.D.H. Cole, in *The Constitutional Society Home Page*, <http://www.constitution.org/jjr/socon.htm> (accessed March 12, 2009).

Such a religion is conducive to a strong, stable republic and is therefore desirable.

Rousseau describes the necessary precepts of such a religion:

The dogmas of civil religion ought to be few, simple, and exactly worded, without explanation or commentary. The existence of a mighty, intelligent and beneficent Divinity, possessed of foresight and providence, the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked, the sanctity of the social contract and the laws: these are its positive dogmas. Its negative dogmas I confine to one, intolerance, which is a part of the cults we have rejected.¹²

Other Enlightenment thinkers articulated ideas similar to Rousseau's: Locke articulated a concept of civil theology informed by Puritanism and reason, and Durkheim agreed with the concept of civil religion, discussing its existence in Classical societies.¹³ Rousseau's concept of civil religion inspired a number of twentieth-century scholars, who questioned whether such a civil religion was operational within American society. Several social scientists in the middle of the century published influential works positing the existence of such a religion. Three of the most influential of these are Will Herberg, Sidney Mead, and Robert Bellah.

In his essay, "America's Civil Religion: What it is and Whence it Comes," sociologist Will Herberg argues that all societies necessarily possess what he calls an "operative religion," which he defines as "the system of norms, values, and allegiances actually functioning as such in the ongoing social life of the community."¹⁴ Due to the

¹² Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, 4:8.

¹³ Pierard and Linder, *Civil Religion & the Presidency*, 36-46.

¹⁴ Will Herberg, "America's Civil Religion: What it is and Whence it Comes," *American Civil Religion*, ed. Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1974), 76-77.

fragmentary nature of the American religious landscape, Herberg rejects the notion that any one religious tradition may fulfill the role of the operative religion of American society in general, and asks:

What is it, then, that does serve that all-important function? What is it in and through which Americans recognize their basic unity with other Americans as Americans? What is it that provides that 'overarching sense of unity,' expressed in the system of allegiances, norms, and values functioning in actual life, without which no society can long endure?¹⁵

Herberg argues that the "American Way of Life" has all the attributes of an operative religion which unites Americans. As a belief system, it has its roots in Puritanism and Revival Protestantism, adapting qualities of both to a secular context.¹⁶ This "Way" is "celebrative of democracy, the constitution, and national unity, of free enterprise economics, of social egalitarianism and... of religion."¹⁷ It is what "Americans are admittedly and unashamedly intolerant about."¹⁸ Herberg even endorses this religion as "the best way of life yet devised for a mass society,"¹⁹ even if it has "grave defects."²⁰

Sidney Mead proposes a different view of American civil religion. Mead cites G. K. Chesterton's statement that "America is the only nation in the world that is founded on creed [which] is set forth with dogmatic and even theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence..."²¹ While Mead argues that being part of any nation implies a creed of

¹⁵ Ibid., 77.

¹⁶ Ibid., 83.

¹⁷ Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, ed., introduction to *American Civil Religion*, ed. Richey and Jones, 8.

¹⁸ Herberg, "America's Civil Religion," 77.

¹⁹ Ibid., 87.

²⁰ Ibid., 87.

²¹ Raymond T. Bond, ed. *The Man Who Was Chesterton* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image Books, 1960), 125.

some kind,²² he focuses on the particularity of the American nation. America's founders, being children of the Enlightenment, sought to create a cosmopolitan commonwealth. Many of them believed that general truth could be found within the particularity of individual religious sects.²³ And the sects themselves, being "about three hundred collectively incoherent religious institutions whose claims tend to cancel each other out,"²⁴ largely ceased to view themselves as the exclusive possessors of God's truth in the world.²⁵ Instead, these sects became denominations, or parts of a greater religious community, and the main protagonist in the *Heilgeschichte*, or salvation history, became not the denominations themselves but the nation.²⁶

While Herberg's civil religion is found in the values and traditions of ordinary Americans, Mead's is found in the high ideals of the founders of America. Its origins lie not in Puritanism and Protestant revivals but in the Enlightenment.²⁷ Furthermore, Herberg's civil religion is celebrative, but Mead's is prophetic, calling the actions of contemporary America to judgement based on the ideals on which it was founded.²⁸ Also subject to this judgement are the religious groups within America, whose excesses are regulated by the higher, more general religion of the Republic.²⁹

The most influential scholar in the study of American civil religion, however, is Robert N. Bellah, whose essay, "Civil Religion in America," received widespread attention upon its publication in 1967, in the midst of the social turmoil of that decade. In

²² Sidney E. Mead, "The 'Nation with the Soul of a Church,'" in *American Civil Religion*, ed. Richey and Jones, 45.

²³ *Ibid.*, 55-56.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

²⁷ Richey and Jones, introduction to *American Civil Religion*, 8.

²⁸ Mead, "The 'Nation with the Soul of a Church,'" 63-64.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

this essay, Bellah argues that a religion similar to the one described by Rousseau exists in American society alongside the more traditional religions such as Christianity and Judaism. He supports his claim by pointing to the speeches of various presidents, notably Lincoln and Kennedy, which mention God and call for His blessing.³⁰ It is often at inaugural speeches that references to God are made most explicitly, which is appropriate considering, according to Bellah, that inaugurations are an important ritual in American civil religion.³¹ Bellah then discusses the religious sentiments of the founding fathers and discusses a theological history of the American republic that incorporates such crucial events as the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, and the then-current “Third Time of Trial,” the social tumult of the 1960s.³² To conclude, Bellah discusses how this religion has been invoked with positive and negative consequences and suggests that it may be a useful framework for making morally sound decisions that are beneficial for America and the world at large.³³

Bellah’s thesis provoked an outpouring of scholarship relating to the topic of American civil religion, especially in the years surrounding the bicentennial anniversary of the Declaration of Independence in 1976. The idea of American civil religion was refined and critiqued in many ways by a wide range of scholars. James Mathieson, in his valuable article “Twenty Years After Bellah: Whatever Happened to American Civil Religion?”, identifies contributions by Martin Marty and by Russell Richey and Donald Jones as among the most important refinements to the concept of civil religion.³⁴

³⁰ Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96, no.1 (1967): 1-21.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

³² *Ibid.*, 6-20.

³³ *Ibid.*, 19-21.

³⁴ James A. Mathieson, “Twenty Years After Bellah: Whatever Happened to American Civil Religion?” *Sociological Analysis* 50, no.2 (1989): 129-146.

In “Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion,” Martin Marty differentiates four types of civil religion resulting from the overlapping of two dichotomies: priestly and prophetic modes of religion, and understandings of the nation as “under God” or “self-transcendent.”³⁵ The first distinction separates modes of speech that celebrate or criticize America and its policies from a civil religious standpoint, while the second differentiates between understandings of the nation as being blessed by God or assuming a transcendent role itself.

Richey and Jones, in the preface to their 1974 essay collection *American Civil Religion*, outline five overlapping definitions of civil religion typically employed by scholars. The first views civil religion as “folk religion” – a collection of commonly-held beliefs about the proper “way of life” that often have religious undertones. Herberg’s articulation of civil religion falls into this category. The second definition of civil religion is the “transcendent universal religion of the nation,” or, in Sidney Mead’s words, “the religion of the Republic”³⁶ – a prophetic, cosmopolitan corrective to institutional religion. The third definition is “religious nationalism,” in which the state is the proper object of adulation. The fourth is “democratic faith,” which is the belief in liberty, justice, and democracy as fundamental goods. The fifth is “Protestant civic piety,” or Protestant values and ethics secularized and adapted to American life.³⁷

Mathieson notes³⁸ that much of the early discussion concerning civil religion took the form of refinements to the concept, as in the case of the authors above, while during

³⁵ Martin E. Marty, “Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion,” in *American Civil Religion*, ed. Richey and Jones, 139-160.

³⁶ Mead, “The ‘Nation with the Soul of a Church,’” 45.

³⁷ All definitions from Richey and Jones, introduction to *American Civil Religion*, 14-18.

³⁸ Mathieson, “Twenty Years After Bellah,” 133.

the “Golden Age” of civil religion-related scholarship (1974-1977),³⁹ the debate regarding the existence of civil religion became more vigorous. The historian John F. Wilson was one of the most notable critics of the idea of civil religion, arguing that historical evidence does not support the continuous existence of civil religion of the type described by Bellah.⁴⁰

Others, including Ronald Wimberley, conducted empirical tests to determine whether statistical evidence supported the existence of a civil religion in America and elsewhere, often with positive results.⁴¹ Wimberley’s study concluded that many people in America held civil religious beliefs which could be articulated in statements such as:

-“I consider holidays such as the Fourth of July religious as well as patriotic.”

-“America is God’s chosen nation today.”

-“We should respect a President’s authority since his authority is from God.”

-“The flag of the United States is sacred.”⁴²

Similarly, Cynthia Toolin attempted to test the existence of civil religion using a study of presidential inaugural addresses. Based on a study of forty-nine presidential inaugural addresses from 1789 to 1981, Toomey drew several conclusions:

First, a majority of the addresses refer to a deity in some form; second, the republican virtues of duty and freedom, among others, are espoused in a majority of the addresses; and, lastly, a specific religious content was found in a majority of the addresses, not only in the form of a Judeo-

³⁹ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁰ John F. Wilson, “A Historian’s Approach to Civil Religion,” in *American Civil Religion*, ed. Richey and Jones, 133.

⁴¹ Ronald C. Wimberley, “Testing the Civil Religion Hypothesis,” *Sociological Analysis* 37, no.4 (1976): 341-352.

⁴² All statements taken from Wimberley, “Testing the Civil Religion Hypothesis,” 343.

Christian tradition but also in a unique American tradition that recalls the Constitution, the Revolution, and George Washington as parts of a mighty past or golden age. We can conclude, therefore, that an American civil religion can be found in the inaugural addresses of the presidents.⁴³

By the early 1980s, the debate surrounding civil religion ebbed, having reached its peak in the Bicentennial years.⁴⁴ However, by this time, civil religion had established itself as a legitimate focus of scholarly inquiry despite its often-legitimate criticism. Articles on civil religion continue to be published. American civil religion typically receives renewed attention during and after presidential elections, since every successfully elected president of the late twentieth century uses rhetoric similar to the type used by Kennedy and Eisenhower – the very rhetoric which suggested the existence of civil religion to Robert Bellah in 1967. Notable works have been published discussing civil religion and presidents Carter,⁴⁵ Reagan⁴⁶ and the “Christian right,”⁴⁷ Clinton,⁴⁸ and, recently, George W. Bush and the “War on Terror” rhetoric.⁴⁹

⁴³ Cynthia Toolin, “American Civil Religion from 1789 to 1981: A Content Analysis of Presidential Inaugural Addresses,” *Review of Religious Research* 25, no.1 (1983): 46.

⁴⁴ Mathieson, “Twenty Years After Bellah,” 137-140.

⁴⁵ Ronald B. Flowers, “President Jimmy Carter, Evangelicalism, Church-State Relations, and Civil Religion,” *Journal of Church and State* 25, no.1 (1983): 113-132.

⁴⁶ Pierard and Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*; David S. Adams, “Ronald Reagan’s ‘Revival’: Voluntarism as a Theme in Reagan’s Civil Religion,” *Sociological Analysis* 48 (1987): 17-29.

⁴⁷ N. J. Demerath III and Rhys H. Williams, “Civil Religion in an Uncivil Society,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 480 (1985): 154-166.

⁴⁸ Robert D. Linder, “Universal Pastor: President Bill Clinton’s Civil Religion,” *Journal of Church and State* 38, no.4 (1996): 733-750.

⁴⁹ Michael Angrosino, “Civil Religion Redux,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 78, no.2 (2002): 239-267; Michael T. Mazarr, “George Bush, Idealist,” *International Affairs* 79, no.3 (2003): 513-516.

1.2: Charles Taylor and American Civil Religion

One recent commentary on the concept of American civil religion comes from Charles Taylor. Taylor agrees with Bellah that among Americans there is and has historically been the widespread idea “that America [has] a vocation to carry out God’s purposes.”⁵⁰ America, he argues, embodies a unique approach to church-state relations peculiar to modernity. This approach is inextricably tied to what Taylor calls “the Modern Moral Order,” one expression of which is America’s Constitution.⁵¹ The American Revolution marked a break from the traditional, hierarchical societies of Europe, and this was tied to a gradual shift in the West to a new moral order that valued individual freedom and egalitarianism.⁵² Freedom was also extended to the churches through separation of church and state,⁵³ and this allowed for the development of what Taylor calls “denominationalism.” Taylor places denominations in the context of Ernst Troeltsch’s church/sect typology, which defines churches as groups that aspire to universality, and sects as groups that place themselves as a community of the faithful against society at large.⁵⁴ Both groups hold exclusive truth claims. Denominations, by contrast, tend to recognize the legitimacy of other denominations, even if viewing them as somewhat inferior.⁵⁵ Taylor explains that denominations

...exist in a space of other “churches”, such that in another, more general sense, the whole group of these make up “the church”. The injunction to

⁵⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 448.

⁵¹ Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 146-151.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 143-154.

⁵³ Taylor *A Secular Age*, 453.

⁵⁴ *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Troeltsch, Ernst.”

⁵⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 449-450.

worship in the church of your choice is an injunction to belong to the “church” in a broader sense, the limits of permitted choice defining its boundaries.⁵⁶

The broader “church” is the nation itself, understood through trans-denominational “consensus” as the instrument of God’s will on earth.⁵⁷ It is for this reason that one may appeal successfully to general “Christian” or “Judeo-Christian values” irrespective of the concerns of particular segments of Christianity or Judaism,⁵⁸ and that many churches may exist within the borders of America in a state of comparative harmony, in contrast to the state of often violent conflict between religious groups prevailing in Europe prior to the founding of the United States.

This model of denominationalism is similar to Mead’s concept of the relationship between denominations and the nation as “church.” Taylor argues that denominations don’t see their differences from (at least some) others as make-or-break, salvation or damnation issues. Their way is better for them, may even be seen as better tout court, but doesn’t cut them off from other recognized denominations.⁵⁹

Similarly, Mead states that

dogmatic insistence on the ultimate significance of any sect’s particular tenets or observances seems to have reached the vanishing point except in

⁵⁶ Ibid., 450.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 524.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 453-454.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 449.

citadels of impregnable isolation from the currents moving in the
unfolding history of our world.⁶⁰

Both thinkers claim that religious groups in America tend towards coexistence with one another within the greater context of the state, and that doctrinal differences are viewed as less significant for salvation than participation within the polity. While recent studies, such as those by noted sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, indicate that doctrinal differences between Protestant groups remain significant,⁶¹ it is possible to find support for the notion of denominationalism in the actions of several high-profile American religious figures who have influenced the political landscape in recent decades.

A prominent religious figure articulating a denominational outlook is the popular evangelical Protestant leader Billy Graham, who, in 1949, declared that “Communism is a religion that is inspired, directed and motivated by the Devil himself who has declared war against Almighty God”⁶² and that America “is engaged in a death struggle with it.”⁶³ In doing so, he framed the Cold War as an apocalyptic struggle between good and evil, with America, rather than any particular religious community, representing God’s purposes. A more recent example is Jerry Falwell, whose “moral majority” coalition of conservative religious forces helped propel Ronald Reagan to power. Falwell, who has claimed that God has historically protected America from external attack with a “veil of protection,”⁶⁴ constructed the coalition according to the shared values of socially conservative elements of a wide array of Protestant denominations, as well as elements of

⁶⁰ Mead, “The ‘Nation with the Soul of a Church,’” 68.

⁶¹ Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 226.

⁶² Quoted in Eric R. Crouse, “Popular Cold Warriors: Conservative Protestants, Communism, and Culture in Early Cold War America,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 2 (2002): 15.

⁶³ Quoted in Pierard and Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, 191.

⁶⁴ Billy Graham, quoted in “Falwell Apologizes to Gays, Feminists, Lesbians,” *CNN.com*, September 14, 2001. <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/14/Falwell.apology/> (accessed May 6, 2009).

Catholicism, Judaism, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints.⁶⁵ In Graham's rallying of American religious believers against communism and Falwell's coalition of socially conservative religious adherents, one can discern a denominational sensibility which rejects divisive doctrines in order to work towards "a scenario of world-historical change that requires an America reconstituted in righteousness."⁶⁶ Similarly, during the Civil Rights Movement, as I will discuss later, religious leaders figuratively and literally stood shoulder to shoulder with Martin Luther King, Jr., in the struggle for racial equality. All of this suggests that denominationalism does indeed play a significant role in American life, if only in the intersection between religion and politics.

The denominational model is an important component of a mode of church-state relations which, according to Taylor, is typified by the pre-1960s United States. Using the term "Durkheimian" to refer to "a link between adhering to God and belonging to the state,"⁶⁷ Taylor describes three cultural-religious "dispensations:" paleo-Durkheimian, which refers to societies in which the pre-Enlightenment concept of divinely prescribed hierarchies persists, often tenuously, in the face of modernization; neo-Durkheimian, in which the nation-state or community is generally understood to have a divinely mandated mission even though (often) no official connection between church and state exists; and post-Durkheimian, which is characterized by individualistic expressivism and has no political connotations.⁶⁸ It is to the neo-Durkheimian dispensation that denominationalism is integral. Denominationalism allows people of disparate religious

⁶⁵ Pierard and Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, 31.

⁶⁶ Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1986), 38.

⁶⁷ Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 94.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 93-97.

affiliations to identify as members of “one nation under God,” a “political entity with a providential role to play.”⁶⁹ Although Taylor regards America as typical of the neo-Durkheimian dispensation, he argues that the country also has a considerable non-Durkheimian current which has become more significant in the last five decades.⁷⁰

Taylor’s account of the church-state situation in America may on the surface seem at odds with Bellah’s theory of civil religion since Taylor does not posit the existence of a religion that is completely separate from institutional expression. However, it may be that Taylor provides a much-needed context for what scholars in the late 1960s and 1970s called civil religion. While it may not be that there “exists alongside of and clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America,”⁷¹ it is clear from research such as Wimberley’s and from the religious content of political rhetoric (and the political content of some religious rhetoric) that many Americans have beliefs about their country that may be called religious. If Taylor is correct, civil religious beliefs emerge from a neo-Durkheimian understanding of the state and its divine mandate, which is then tied to a denominational mode of religious being. No equivalent beliefs would be associated with a non-Durkheimian dispensation.⁷² It is perhaps no surprise that Wimberley found “civil religion to be highly associated with conservatism,”⁷³ since it is often conservatives in America, especially the religious right, who aspire “to reestablish something of the fractured neo-Durkheimian understanding that used to define the nation”⁷⁴ – not civil religion in the Rousseauian sense, but the civil

⁶⁹ Ibid., 93.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 88.

⁷¹ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 1.

⁷² Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, 95.

⁷³ Wimberley, “Testing the Civil Religion Hypothesis,” 350.

⁷⁴ Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, 97.

religion that allows one to view America as specially ordained as a “chosen people” with both strict moral requirements and a special destiny.

However, it would be mistaken to think that civil religion belongs exclusively to conservatism. Presidents Kennedy, Carter, Clinton, and Obama, all belonging to the more liberal Democratic Party, use religious language extensively during their campaigns and tenures. The neo-Durkheimian conviction articulated by these presidents can be seen in statements such as Kennedy’s declaration that “God’s work must truly be our own,”⁷⁵ and in Carter’s affirmation that “those who wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights in our Constitution did it under the aegis of, the guidance of, and with a full belief in God.”⁷⁶

These passages, and others which will be examined in the next section, express the neo-Durkheimian idea that America serves as God’s instrument in the world, “which alone makes sense of the passages Bellah quotes,”⁷⁷ as Taylor writes. This assessment of “American Destiny under God” being central to civil-religious belief is supported by Toolin, whose study of presidential inaugural addresses found that

[t]he theme of an overwhelming majority of the addresses was that the American form of government is the best yet formed and that it is the American destiny to show this form of government as an example for all other nations to follow.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ John F. Kennedy, “Inaugural Address” (Washington, D.C.: January 20, 1961), *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum*, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches> (accessed April 30, 2009).

⁷⁶ Jimmy Carter, “National Prayer Breakfast Remarks at 26th Annual Breakfast” (Washington, D.C.: February 2, 1978), *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/> (accessed April 30, 2009).

⁷⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 448.

⁷⁸ Toolin, “American Civil Religion from 1789 to 1981,” 46.

From this, the conclusion may be drawn that the belief in “American Destiny under God” is the core belief of American civil religion which distinguishes it from traditional religion within America. Although not a religion in itself, American civil religion makes use of imagery and language of traditional religion in order to lend a moral dimension to politics and to provide transcendent meaning to the American historical experience. Its continued presence in American presidential rhetoric testifies to an effectiveness in communicating with the American public at large, many of whom adhere to an understanding of religion and politics characterized by Taylor as “neo-Durkheimian.”

1.3: *Paul Ricoeur and American Civil Religion*

American civil religion is an important aspect in the American “social imaginary,” a central concept in the philosophy of society of Paul Ricoeur. A social imaginary for Ricoeur is the symbolic context in which all social action becomes intelligible. Richard Kearney explains that Ricoeur’s social imaginary

comprises the interplay of ideals, images, ideologies and utopias informing our political unconscious. Here we are concerned with ways in which a politics of imagination operates in our everyday lives, often anonymously, to produce collective narratives – stories we tell ourselves in order to explain ourselves to ourselves and others.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2004), 75.

Narratives provide a conceptual framework through which historical and current events become intelligible. They provide social groups with history, which is essential for community.⁸⁰ Myth, ideology, and utopia are all expressions of the social imaginary which shape individuals' understanding of themselves and their society. In this section, I will discuss the structures of myth, ideology, and utopia in American civil religion. While Ricoeur is silent on the topic of civil religion in America, his interpretive framework provides a unique perspective on the conceptual elements of political and religious identity in general. Since American civil religion is an expression of the intersection of political and religious identity within America, it is illuminating to apply Ricoeur's thought to examples of civil-religious rhetoric. In doing so, I will generally limit my inquiry to the statements of American presidents and to scholarship on this topic, both to focus my inquiry and to provide continuity with discussion of the religious rhetoric of Barack Obama.

The historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., argues that two major schools of thought inform American political history. One tradition is an understanding of America as an "experiment" in democratic, republican politics. This tradition is informed by the Enlightenment values of the Founding Fathers. A "counter-tradition" views America as an "elect nation" with a redemptive destiny.⁸¹ Raymond Bulman identifies both traditions as operational within contemporary America, but notes that the election of Ronald Reagan marked the counter-tradition "assert[ing] itself with a vengeance."⁸² Bulman associates this counter-tradition with Paul Tillich's "myth of origins," which provides a

⁸⁰ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, 249.

⁸¹ Schlesinger, *The Cycles of American History*, 3-14.

⁸² Raymond F. Bulman, "'Myth of Origin,' Civil Religion, and Presidential Politics," *Journal of Church and State* 33, no.3 (1991): 525-540.

population with a sense of integration and tradition based on factors such as ethnicity and geography.⁸³ Tillich outlines the concept of the “myth of origins” in *The Socialist Decision*, which was written in 1933, the tumultuous final year of the Weimar Republic. He identifies two impulses in human political behaviour: acceptance of the myth, which informs romantic and conservative politics; and rejection of the myth, which informs liberalism and socialism.⁸⁴

Tillich’s concept of the myth of origins is similar to Ricoeur’s understanding of the role of myth in the social imaginary. For Ricoeur, myth functions as “a foundational narrative of a community.”⁸⁵ Ricoeur refers to Mircea Eliade’s concept of the sacred time of origins – the mythical time, distinct from ordinary, profane time, in which the world was made, communities founded by heroic acts, etc. According to Eliade, individuals or groups can return to this sacred time through ritual.⁸⁶ For Ricoeur, the founding myth provides the beginning of the societal narrative which allows members of a society to identify themselves.⁸⁷ Like Tillich,⁸⁸ Ricoeur also seeks a critical recovery of myths guided by reason rather than an outright rejection, or “demythization,” of society, since myths are an inevitable part of the social imaginary.⁸⁹

In America, myths of foundation play a significant, if ambiguous, function in political rhetoric. Paul Ricoeur identifies the American Revolution as the founding event

⁸³ Paul Tillich, *The Socialist Decision*, trans. Franklin Sherman (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 13-18.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

⁸⁵ Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*, 68.

⁸⁶ See Mircea Eliade, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* (London: Fontana, 1968).

⁸⁷ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, 249.

⁸⁸ Tillich, *The Socialist Decision*, 68.

⁸⁹ Paul Ricoeur, “Myth as Bearer of Possible Worlds,” in Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*, 117-125.

in American consciousness⁹⁰ whose heroes include George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams. However, as Ricoeur argues,

Myths are not unchanging and unchanged antiques which are simply delivered out of the past in some naked, original state. Their specific identity depends on the way in which each generation receives or interprets them according to their needs, conventions, and ideological motivations.⁹¹

Thus, in discussing the role of myth in American society, it is insufficient to identify a particular historical event which is invoked in order to communicate a particular idea. Indeed, one of the problems with history addressed by Ricoeur is that “[t]here is no fixed noematic content to an action.”⁹² In other words, a historical event has no singular, intrinsic meaning that can be discovered or understood. Only by interpretation through narrative does action become infused with meaning for the interpreter.⁹³ As myth, the American Revolution becomes meaningful to the contemporary American social imaginary as a founding event with respect to which individuals understand themselves and history.

The American Revolution constitutes an important foundational event in the larger mythical drama of America itself, which takes the form of a narrative centring upon the struggle between good and evil, or sin and redemption. For Ricoeur, “myth performs its symbolic function by the specific means of narration because what it wants

⁹⁰ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, 249.

⁹¹ Ricoeur, in Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*, 121.

⁹² S. H. Clark, *Paul Ricoeur* (London: Routledge, 1990), 109. The word “noematic” is a phenomenological term distinguishing an object from the subjective processes apprehending it. The *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, in its article on Husserl, states that “the *noema* is the object as described phenomenologically, the *noesis* is the corresponding mental activity, also as described by phenomenology.”

⁹³ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, 125-141.

to express is already a drama.”⁹⁴ He identifies this drama as the creation, loss, and recovery of a wholeness that is “anterior to the division into supernatural, natural, and human.”⁹⁵ Such a drama is a response to the problem of evil. This problem constitutes

the enigma of human existence, namely, the discordance between the fundamental reality – state of innocence, status of a creature, essential being – and the actual modality of man, as defiled, sinful, guilty.⁹⁶

Generally, Christian thought views evil as an “irrational” entry into creation, and “salvation unrolls a new and open history on the basis of a creation already completed.”⁹⁷ This eschatological drama of salvation unfolding in a not-yet-completed history is also the basis for the American myth of origins. In it, the American Revolution becomes associated with the Exodus narrative, which is representative of humanity’s captivity in sin – a condition broken by God’s liberative action.⁹⁸ The early settlers of America thus become the ancient Israelites, escaping from the bondage of old Europe, as stated in Thomas Jefferson’s second inaugural address:

I shall need, too, the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessities and comforts of life...⁹⁹

This identification has been commented upon by many, including Bellah,¹⁰⁰ Taylor,¹⁰¹ and Raboteau.¹⁰² Perhaps more strikingly, the analogy has often been made by prominent Americans throughout history, including contemporary history.

⁹⁴ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1961), 170.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 167.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 163.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 172.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 93.

⁹⁹ Thomas Jefferson, “Second Inaugural Address” (Washington, DC: March 4, 1805), *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*, <http://avalon.law.yale.edu> (accessed April 30, 2009).

An early proponent of the analogy between settlers of the Americas and ancient Israel was John Winthrop, who served a number of terms as governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In 1630, Winthrop gave a famous sermon entitled “Modell of Christian Charity” which outlined his vision of a colony founded upon Puritan Christian principles. For Winthrop, the Massachusetts Bay settlers were entering into a new covenant with God:

Wee must delight in eache other; make other's conditions our oune; rejoyce together, mourne together, labour and suffer together, allwayes haueing before our eyes our commission and community in the worke, as members of the same body. Soe shall wee keepe the unitie of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as his oune people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our wayes... For 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.¹⁰³

In this covenant, prosperity as a colony was contingent upon faith in God and virtuous living. The “city upon a hill” image derives from Matthew 5.14: “A city built on a hilltop cannot be hidden.” The “founding myth” of America figures prominently in the rhetoric

¹⁰⁰ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 28-29.

¹⁰¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 448.

¹⁰² Albert J. Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African-American Religious History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 28-36.

¹⁰³ John Winthrop, “Modell of Christian Charity,” in *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd Series, vol. 7 (Public Domain: Boston, 1838), p. 47. Courtesy of Hanover Historical Texts Project, <http://history.hanover.edu/project.html> (accessed April 30, 2009).

of many American presidents, and the image of the “city on a hill” is frequently invoked as a metaphor for America, although use of the term is surprisingly varied. It has been cited by a range of contemporary politicians, notably John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan. Kennedy first used the expression in a 1961 speech to his former constituents in Massachusetts shortly before his presidential inauguration:

Today the eyes of all people are truly upon us – and our governments, in every branch, at every level, national, state and local, must be as a city upon a hill – constructed and inhabited by men aware of their great trust and their great responsibilities. For we are setting out upon a voyage in 1961 no less hazardous than that undertaken by the *Arbella* in 1630. We are committing ourselves to tasks of statecraft no less awesome than that of governing the Massachusetts Bay Colony, beset as it was then by terror without and disorder within.¹⁰⁴

Kennedy promises to govern with “courage, judgment, integrity, [and] dedication;”¹⁰⁵ values which he attributes to the Massachusetts Bay colony. Beyond these general values, however, Kennedy never delves more deeply into the implications of Winthrop’s covenant.

In his farewell address in 1989, Ronald Reagan also famously invoked the image of the “city on a hill,” this time to an audience not limited to citizens of Massachusetts:

¹⁰⁴ John F. Kennedy, “Address of President-Elect John F. Kennedy Delivered to a Joint Convention of the General Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts” (Boston: January 9, 1961), *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum*, <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches> (accessed April 27, 2009).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

The past few days when I've been at that window upstairs, I've thought a bit of the 'shining city upon a hill.' The phrase comes from John Winthrop, who wrote it to describe the America he imagined. What he imagined was important because he was an early Pilgrim, an early freedom man. He journeyed here on what today we'd call a little wooden boat; and like the other Pilgrims, he was looking for a home that would be free. I've spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don't know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace...¹⁰⁶

Like Kennedy, Reagan does not discuss the contingent nature of the city on the hill. Indeed, Reagan goes even farther in his simplification of Winthrop than Kennedy, reducing him to a "freedom man."

In his 1992 Thanksgiving Day Proclamation, George H. W. Bush outlines in greater detail the implications of Winthrop's covenant:

Since the earliest days of our republic, Americans have been deeply aware of our indebtedness to the Almighty and our obligations as a people he has blessed. Even in the course of long, difficult journeys to these shores, our ancestors gratefully acknowledged the sustaining power of God - and the faithfulness they owed in return. [John Winthrop recognized] their quest for freedom as an enterprise no less historic than the ancient Israelites'

¹⁰⁶ Ronald Reagan, "Farewell Address to the Nation" (Washington, DC: January 11, 1989), *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com> (accessed April 27, 2009).

exodus from Egypt... By remaining grateful for, and faithful to, that divine commission, America has become a model of freedom and justice to the world - as our pilgrim ancestors envisioned, a shining "city upon a hill."¹⁰⁷

Like Reagan, Bush highlights the centrality of "freedom" in the Puritans' expedition. While this may be debatable – the Puritans' quest for freedom to practice their religion is not the same as the freedom that Reagan and Bush associate with American-style democracy – some have argued that Winthrop's model of government included an early precursor to Locke's social contract theory.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, the importance of Winthrop's sermon and its equation of settlers of the New World with the ancient Israelites is evident from its continued use in American political rhetoric.

Myths frame societies' response to the concerns of the present by "relat[ing] tradition to the ongoing project of history understood as *history-making* [emphasis in original]."¹⁰⁹ It "seeks to redeem society from the crises of the present by justifying actions in terms of some sanctified past, some sacred beginning."¹¹⁰ Thus, according to Ricoeur, myth provides a form of theological foundation for social narratives which, in turn, are used to interpret and respond to events in a society's ongoing history. These social narratives are a key component of ideology.

¹⁰⁷ George H. W. Bush, "Thanksgiving Day Proclamation, 1992," *The Seattle Times Archive*, November 26, 1992, <http://community.seattletimes.nwsource.com/archive/?date=19921126&slug=1526708> (accessed April 27, 2009).

¹⁰⁸ Matthew S. Holland, "Remembering John Winthrop – Hawthorne's Suggestion," *Perspectives on Political Science* 36, no.1 (2007): 10.

¹⁰⁹ Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*, 68.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

Marxist thought uses the term “ideology” in a pejorative sense, defining it as a form of false consciousness that obscures the true nature of a society.¹¹¹ Ricoeur, however, uses the term in a broader sense, describing it as a symbolic structure that “mediat[es] and integrat[es] human action at the public level.”¹¹² All social action is symbolic, and thus infused with ideology.¹¹³ Therefore, while ideology is often used in the manner criticized by Marxists, Ricoeur questions whether it is possible to criticize ideology from a non-ideological standpoint – “the interpretive code of ideology is something *in which* men live and think [emphasis in original],”¹¹⁴ and thus informs all deliberation.

Ideology has three functions. The first is integration, or the binding together of a society through references to a common social narrative and, frequently, myth. For Ricoeur,

Ideology is a function of the distance that separates the social memory from an inaugural event that must nevertheless be repeated. Its role is not only to diffuse the conviction beyond the circle of founding fathers, so as to make it the creed of the entire group, but also to perpetuate the initial memory beyond the period of effervescence.¹¹⁵

It is in this function of ideology, the integrative function, that the myth of origins plays its most important role. Since America has been populated by emigration from diverse

¹¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, ed. George H. Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 4.

¹¹² Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, 316.

¹¹³ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 8.

¹¹⁴ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, 251.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

regions by diverse peoples since colonial times, integration is a particular concern. One of the primary functions of civil religion is to integrate. Cynthia Toolin writes that

American civil religion is a belief system that draws upon the religious ideologies and common historical experiences of the American people, unifying diverse peoples into one people and interpreting and giving meaning to their shared experience by putting that existence into a common frame of reference.¹¹⁶

The American historian Richard Hofstadler wrote that “[i]t has been our fate as a nation not to have ideologies but to be one.”¹¹⁷ This ideology functions in ways similar to that of the “creed” identified by Chesterton, the core values of which are articulated in the Declaration of Independence. Often, this document, or more simply, “freedom,” is invoked in rhetoric as a unifying force, perhaps even the definition of being American. Ronald Reagan famously described America as “a beacon... a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home.”¹¹⁸

Given the challenge of integrating immigrants from a diverse array of national and cultural backgrounds, great emphasis is placed upon the importance of ideology for integration. Examples of the integrative use of ideology can be found in the motto of the United States, “E Pluribus Unum” (out of many, one); the oft-invoked imagery of the “melting-pot” and the “American dream;” in the identification of America as “one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all” in the Pledge of Allegiance; and in

¹¹⁶ Toolin, “American Civil Religion from 1789 to 1981,” 39-48.

¹¹⁷ Richard Hofstadler, quoted in Michael Kazin, “The Right’s Unsung Prophets,” *The Nation* 248, no.7 (1989): 242.

¹¹⁸ Reagan, “Farewell Address.”

Emma Lazarus' poem, "The New Colossus," featured at the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor,/Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free..."¹¹⁹ These passages and many more reinforce the image of America as a polity mandated to embrace citizens of a diverse origin into an environment of freedom and opportunity.

The second function of ideology is dissimulation – ideology "conceals the gap between what is and what ought to be,"¹²⁰ preserving the status quo of a society from novelties and change. During times of cultural crisis and change, American civil religion has often been invoked in order to both oppose and support the status quo, corresponding to the prophetic and priestly uses of civil religion, respectively.¹²¹ The priestly form of civil religion can be used to rally citizens around "traditional" values, stigmatizing movements for social change as novelties which diverge from the core values of the nation. This technique is used by both the left and right in American politics,¹²² but there is perhaps no clearer example of the dissimulative function of ideology than in the civil religious rhetoric of Richard M. Nixon.

At the end of the tumultuous 1960s, a time of cultural crisis for the United States, Richard Nixon was elected president on a message of "comfort and national affirmation."¹²³ Like many other presidents, Nixon articulated a firm belief in America's God-given destiny. At the 1972 National Prayer Breakfast, he declared, "Let us remember that as a Christian nation, but also as a nation that is enriched by other faiths as

¹¹⁹ Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus" (Public Domain, 1883).

¹²⁰ Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*, 80.

¹²¹ Marty, "Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion," 144-145.

¹²² See, for example, President Obama's condemnation of the previous administration's use of torture against prisoners in his inaugural address: "we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals." (Barack Obama, "Presidential Inauguration Address" [Washington, DC: January 20, 2009], *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, <<http://www.americanrhetoric.com> [accessed May 4, 2009]).

¹²³ Pierard and Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, 228.

well, that we have a charge and a destiny,"¹²⁴ which is, as stated in his 1970 State of the Union Address, "being the world's best hope for liberty, for opportunity, for progress and peace for all peoples."¹²⁵

Unfailingly optimistic about the "goodness" of America, Nixon framed the controversies of the 1960s as "a crisis of the spirit."¹²⁶ Throughout his presidency, Nixon would return to such optimistic themes, proclaiming, in the words of Robert Bellah, "an American innocence that is awe-inspiring, stupefying, in its simplicity."¹²⁷ In his 1973 inaugural address, after defeating an opponent whose "prophetic" style of civil-religious rhetoric "challenged people to recognize they had sinned and were in need of redemption,"¹²⁸ Nixon lamented the fact that "Our children have been taught to be ashamed of their country, ashamed of their parents, ashamed of America's record at home and of its role in the world,"¹²⁹ and instead declared that "America's record in this century has been unparalleled in the world's history for its responsibility, for its generosity, for its creativity and for its progress,"¹³⁰ listing a series of accomplishments for which Americans should be proud.

Nixon's insistence on the goodness and innocence of America and his continued invoking of the "spirit" of America in his speeches framed his government as the guardians of American values. According to Pierard and Linder, "He functioned as a

¹²⁴ Richard M. Nixon, "Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast" (Washington, DC: February 1, 1972), *The American Presidency Project*, <<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>> (accessed May 4, 2009).

¹²⁵ Richard M. Nixon, "Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union" (Washington, DC: January 22, 1970), *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/> (accessed May 4, 2009).

¹²⁶ Richard M. Nixon, "First Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC: January 20, 1969), *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com> (accessed May 4, 2009).

¹²⁷ Robert N. Bellah, "American Civil Religion in the 1970s," in *American Civil Religion*, ed. Richey and Jones, 261.

¹²⁸ Pierard and Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, 228.

¹²⁹ Richard M. Nixon, "Second Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC: January 20, 1969), *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com> (accessed May 4, 2009).

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

priest comforting his people, forgiving their sins, assuring them of their inherent goodness, enhancing their self-esteem, and sanctifying their national institutions.”¹³¹ In addition to masking Nixon’s notorious abuses of power, which were dramatically exposed during the Watergate scandal and would force him from office, Nixon rhetorically rejected calls for social change, and instead appealed to the “great majority of Americans, the forgotten Americans – the non-shouters, the non-demonstrators.”¹³² His civil-religious rhetoric, through its emphasis on the goodness of America, exemplifies the dissimulating function of ideology.

The third function of ideology is domination, providing a solution to the problem of authority – that is, the necessity of a population to believe in the legitimacy of their rulers, given that no ruling class can govern through force alone.¹³³ In the United States, such legitimacy comes from the democratic process. Toolin argues that the civil-religious belief that “God blesses this nation’s superior form of government, which God wants all nations to imitate”¹³⁴ is widespread within presidential inaugural speeches. Angrosino agrees that in America, “civil religion has been based on the elevation of the democratic system to a sacred status.”¹³⁵ Bellah writes that “In American political theory, sovereignty rests, of course, with the people, but implicitly, and often explicitly, the ultimate sovereignty has been attributed to God.”¹³⁶ As mentioned above, “democratic faith” is one of the definitions given by Richey and Jones of civil religion.¹³⁷

¹³¹ Pierard and Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, 223.

¹³² Richard M. Nixon, “Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Miami Beach, Florida” (Washington, DC: August 8, 1968), *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/> (accessed May 4, 2009).

¹³³ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 17.

¹³⁴ Toolin, “American Civil Religion from 1789 to 1981,” 47.

¹³⁵ Angrosino, “Civil Religion Redux,” 249.

¹³⁶ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 4.

¹³⁷ Richey and Jones, introduction to *American Civil Religion*, 17.

Ricoeur places ideology and utopia as two poles in the social imaginary.¹³⁸

Ideology justifies established cultural-political systems, while utopia challenges them with visions of alternate systems.¹³⁹ Both can have positive and negative dimensions.

Ricoeur places the central issue in both ideology and utopia as the problem of power, as discussed above. Ideology provides this legitimacy, while utopia questions it.

Ideology is crucial to social cohesion but can also lead to intolerance of difference and stagnation,¹⁴⁰ and when this happens, utopia can provide an alternative to ideology, and similarly, the positive, integrative functions of ideology can serve to check the negative, “pathological” dimensions of utopia.¹⁴¹ Like ideology, utopia is often used as a pejorative term for a perfect society that exists in some unattainable future; “an island that is nowhere,”¹⁴² which functions as little more than an escape from reality. Ricoeur acknowledges this negative dimension of utopia, but defines it in a broader sense. By providing a vision of a political or social order that is informed by a transcendental imperative, it calls into question established power structures and their inherent injustices:

From this ‘no place,’ an exterior glance is cast on our reality, which suddenly looks strange, nothing more being taken for granted. The field of the possible is now opened beyond that of the actual, a field for alternate ways of living.¹⁴³

¹³⁸ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 1.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁴⁰ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics*, II, 250-252.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 309.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 318.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

However, it can also become escapist fantasy that discourages social change¹⁴⁴ – an opiate for the masses. Additionally, a utopia may also ignore the positive or necessary elements of a status quo, advocating an uncritical rejection of established social structures or simplistically dividing societies into dialectically opposed factions with no chance of reconciliation. Thus, both ideology and utopia have positive and negative dimensions, but each has the potential to correct the other's excesses.¹⁴⁵ Both are prominent features of American civil-religious rhetoric; indeed, investigation of such rhetoric serves to suggest that much political and religious language contains ideological and utopian characteristics which are inextricably linked and cannot be easily differentiated.

The American myth of origins has a strong teleological bent. As the “city on a hill,” America functions as the guardian and guarantor of freedom and democracy, which is viewed as a divine gift. In the words of Richard Nixon, who “recognize[ed] that America is a Nation under God,”

We do have a destiny, not a destiny to conquer the world or to exploit the world, but a destiny to give something more to the world simply than an example which other nations in the past have been able to give of great military strength and great economic wealth, to give to other nations of the world an example of spiritual leadership and idealism which no material strength or military power can provide.¹⁴⁶

However, teleology does not necessarily equal utopia. This view of a future based on American ideals often plays a more ideological than utopian role in American society,

¹⁴⁴ Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, 281.

¹⁴⁵ Ricoeur, *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics, II*, 323-324.

¹⁴⁶ Richard M. Nixon, “Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast” (Washington, DC: February 5, 1970), *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/> (accessed May 4, 2009).

reinforcing the legitimacy of those in power who espouse this vision¹⁴⁷ and fulfilling a priestly function. The function of utopia, however, is to call existing power structures into question, and therefore utopia tends to be more closely associated with “prophetic” than “priestly” civil religion. The prophetic use of civil religion makes use of the myth of origins and the teleological utopia to call the nation to judgement according to its own ideals.

The prophet *par excellence* of civil religion is the hero of the American civil war, Abraham Lincoln.¹⁴⁸ As Bellah recounts, Lincoln’s task was “to save the union – not for America alone but for the meaning of America to the whole world.”¹⁴⁹ Believing in the significance of the American experiment and conscious of the contradiction between the ideals of the Declaration of Independence and the practise of slavery, Lincoln framed the Civil War as a moral conflict: “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.”¹⁵⁰ In doing so, he challenged the nation to live up to the utopian vision upon which it was founded. By these standards, the reality of slavery appeared strange and alien, an aberration of the ideals for which America purportedly stood.

Perhaps the clearest articulation of the hidden utopian vision of American civil religion comes from Bellah himself. In concluding his essay, “Civil Religion in

¹⁴⁷ Such a vision of the future, as communicated by the globally pervasive American media, might function as utopia in other nations with different systems of government, and an early version of it may have partially inspired the American Revolution. However, it is not the purpose of this paper to explore these issues.

¹⁴⁸ Richey and Jones, introduction to *American Civil Religion*, 10.

¹⁴⁹ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 11.

¹⁵⁰ Quoted in Pierard and Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, 99-100.

America,” Bellah prophesies “American civil religion becoming simply one part of a new civil religion of the world.”

A world civil religion could be accepted as a fulfillment and not a denial of American civil religion. Indeed, such an outcome has been the eschatological hope of American civil religion from the beginning. To deny such an outcome would be to deny the meaning of America itself.¹⁵¹

Whether or not this utopian, internationalist dimension of civil religion is acknowledged or even recognized by many Americans, it is clear that America was founded upon a set of ideals, and thus, when America does not appear to be living up to these ideals, the power of utopia is invoked in order to spur change and renewal. This shall be the focus of the next chapter, which will investigate the use of religious-political rhetoric during the Civil Rights Movement.

Religious rhetoric is an inescapable element of American politics. Some of this rhetoric makes use of the symbols of particular religious traditions, but it sometimes takes the form of general religious sentiments concerning the United States. Bellah’s assertion that there “exists alongside of and clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America”¹⁵² touched off a wave of scholarship on the nature of the relationship between religiosity and nationalism in America, with some arguing for the existence of a civil religion similar to the type described by Rousseau. While the exact nature and particular details of American civil religion are difficult to determine, Taylor argues that it is based on the belief that America has a

¹⁵¹ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 20.

¹⁵² Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 1.

providential role to play in world history. It is through this belief that many Americans interpret their country's historical experience, and American politicians often make use of such a belief in their rhetoric in order to communicate with the American people and to provide a moral dimension to political deliberation.

American civil religion often takes the form of an equation of America with biblical Israel. This belief is exemplified by the image of the "city on the hill," and it serves to unify the American people, to justify government policy, and to reinforce the legitimacy of the democratic process. It provides an origin and a telos for the American polity, which can sometimes be used as a powerful tool to spur renewal and change and to address injustice, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 2: *The Civil Rights Movement*

*O, let America be America again –
 The land that never has been yet –
 And yet must be – the land where every man is free.
 – Langston Hughes,
 “Let America Be America Again”¹⁵³*

American civil religion is often criticized for representing only white America. Michael Angrosino notes that there exists in civil religion “the tendency to identify a particular constellation of Americans (traditionally white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxons) as the exclusive representatives of a uniquely American community of righteousness.”¹⁵⁴ As such, its myths and ideology can be exclusionary to individuals and communities not belonging to the historically majority culture of America even as it seeks to integrate them within the state. This tension is fundamental to many multicultural societies seeking social cohesion. In the first section of this chapter, I will explore the nature of this tension before discussing its particular manifestation in the relationship between America and the African-American community.

The relationship between American civil religion and the African-American struggle for freedom has been complex. As a schism within the Civil Rights Movement developed between those seeking integration and equal rights within American society

¹⁵³ Langston Hughes, “Let America Be America Again,” *Poets.org: From the Academy of American Poets*, <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15609> (accessed May 28, 2009).

¹⁵⁴ Angrosino, “Civil Religion Redux,” 253.

and those advocating independence from America, religious differences emerged. Within this movement, attitudes towards Christianity sometimes, but not always, mirrored attitudes towards American civil religion. To demonstrate this connection, I will examine of the religious perspectives of the Universal Negro Improvement Association, the Nation of Islam, and the Southern Christian Leadership Convention, which express different attitudes towards civil religion and America itself.

I will then focus on the rhetoric of Dr. King, analyzing its content and techniques according to Ricoeur's categories discussed in the previous chapter. A master rhetorician, King situated the African-American civil rights movement within the American civil-religious narrative, thereby framing it as a moral issue. This technique proved effective in achieving the legal goals of the movement, and after his assassination, King came to be included within the canon of civil-religious martyrs alongside Lincoln, Kennedy, and others – a fact attested by the designation of King's birthday as a national holiday. However, like any ideology, civil religion also has a dissimulating effect, and King's use of civil religion has, to a certain extent, had the unintended side-effect of promulgating the impression that the Civil Rights Movement brought about the end of racism in America. A critical remembrance of King's utopian vision is thus necessary, since "[w]e still have a long road to travel until we reach the world that was his dream."¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ Stevie Wonder, *Hotter than July* Liner Notes, Tamla, 1980.

2.1: *Integration, Marginalization, and American Civil Religion*

References to American destiny can be used to justify policies, such as racial discrimination, which run contrary to the egalitarianism espoused in the country's founding documents. Bellah himself cites Winthrop's famous sermon, declaring that

[f]rom that seed would grow the terrible sense of righteousness in the face of our enemies that would allow Americans with a clean conscience to use the most dreadful weapons and tactics of the day – from the massacre of Indians to the lynching of Negroes to the atom-bombing of Japanese to the napalming of Vietnamese children.¹⁵⁶

In response to critics who accused him of uncritically advocating civil religion, Bellah argues that any appropriation of civil religion must include subjecting traditions “to the most searing criticism, something that goes far beyond simply distinguishing the good tradition from the bad tradition, but a criticism that sees the seeds of the bad in the good and vice versa.”¹⁵⁷

Adam Gamoran follows Bellah in identifying the ambivalent nature of civil religion. In his study of civil religion in American public schools, Gamoran argues that civil religion can be both divisive and integrative. Since “public schools play a key role in producing and transmitting American civil religion,”¹⁵⁸ Gamoran's investigation is extremely useful in gauging the use of civil religion in the integration of children into American society. Gamoran contends that while civil religion is a dynamic entity that changes frequently in response to new challenges, it nevertheless encourages assimilation

¹⁵⁶ Bellah, “American Civil Religion in the 1970s,” 269.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

¹⁵⁸ Adam Gamoran, “Civil Religion in American Schools,” *Sociological Analysis* 51, no.3 (1990): 235.

to the dominant culture and marginalizes other cultures. Observance of the American calendar of holidays exemplifies this ambivalence:

[Schoolchildren] learn that Americans celebrate Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Memorial Day every year. This produces a paradox for non-Christian children who, seeing themselves as Americans and adopting the full range of norms, values, and beliefs corresponding to their emerging citizenship, do not take part in a holiday that is defined as one in a sequence of civil holidays. These students are placed in a position of “marginality.”¹⁵⁹

While tolerance and respect for other cultures is encouraged in many contemporary public schools, many of the basic myths of Euro-Americans, such as that of America as a “promised land,” are preserved and disseminated in the public school curriculum.¹⁶⁰

Charles Long calls civil religion to account for its Eurocentrism. Like many accounts of American history, Long argues, much of civil religion focuses exclusively on the experience of white, Christian America, and renders other ethnic and religious communities “invisible” in this master narrative. Long states that

a great deal of the writings and discussions on the topic of American religion has been consciously or unconsciously ideological, serving to enhance, justify, and render sacred the history of European immigrants in this land.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 249.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 245-246.

¹⁶¹ Charles H. Long, “Civil Rights – Civil Religion: Visible People and Invisible Religion,” in *American Civil Religion*, ed. Richey and Jones, 212.

As previously discussed, civil religion is built upon the mythologized history of America, upon “the telling and retelling of the mighty deeds of the white conquerors.”¹⁶² The continuous repetition of such accounts “has created a normative historical judgment and ideology of the American experience,”¹⁶³ which has “meant that all *other* peoples and cultures had to remain *in their places* – places allotted to them by this centered reality of the European tradition of immigrants.”¹⁶⁴

In this way, American civil religion functions as a dissimulative ideology, a “hermeneutic mask” which “conceals the true experience of Americans from their very eyes”¹⁶⁵ and renders invisible the cultural and religious groups which do not share in the mythological master narrative of American culture. It sanctifies the dominance of white American culture by giving it the central place in the telling of American history, with the experience of minority cultures functioning as “addenda.”¹⁶⁶

However, ideology serves a function of integration as well as dissimulation and domination. Indeed, integration is cited by many writers as the primary function of American civil religion.¹⁶⁷ Taylor writes that religion is an important factor for integration in America:

[A] way that Americans can understand their fitting together in a society although of different faiths, is through these faiths themselves being seen

¹⁶² Ibid., 214.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 219.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 220. Emphasis in original.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 214.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 213.

¹⁶⁷ See Herberg, “America’s Civil Religion,” 77; Mead, “The ‘Nation with the Soul of a Church,’” 46; Angrosino, “Civil Religion Redux,” 246; Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 59.

as in this consensual relation to the common civil religion. Go to the church of your choice, but go.¹⁶⁸

Participating in one's own religion, and by extension, the civil religion of the nation, can serve an integrative function. As Taylor explains,

this relatively positive experience sits alongside that other dimension of diversity, race, which has continued to be deeply problematical. Indeed, the notion of "whiteness" has evolved in American history. Some previously excluded groups, like "swarthy" South European Catholics, eventually enter the category precisely because their faith becomes included in the consensual civil religion.¹⁶⁹

Thus, the integrative aspect of civil religion is tied to its ability to expand and include new cultures, who are "invited into the consensus"¹⁷⁰ made possible by a denominational, neo-Durkheimian understanding of religion and the state, in which confessional differences are subordinate to the overarching divine commission of the nation at large.

Since integration into the civil religious consensus is often effected through one's particular religious identity, civil religion is necessarily protean in nature. Angrosino observes that "an important element in American self-identity is the tradition of righteous dissent and the obligation to speak out against mindless homogenization."¹⁷¹ Noting that civil religion has at numerous junctures throughout history "expanded to include a greater diversity of American meanings,"¹⁷² Angrosino expresses optimism that civil religion can

¹⁶⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 524.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 524.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 524.

¹⁷¹ Angrosino, "Civil Religion Redux," 253.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 254.

provide social integration while accommodating diverse interpretations of what it means to be American.

Differing interpretations of American civil religion can be observed in various ethnic communities within the United States. In her study of the civil-religious practises of Japanese Americans, Jane Naomi Iwamura notes that many Japanese Americans, in light of their historical experience, have responded to American civil religion by adopting a “critical faith,” which

does not abandon civil religious principles (equality before the law, due process, and so on), but finds it necessary to reinterpret these ideals in relation to the Japanese American experience and to make known that experience.¹⁷³

This reinterpretation, which centres upon the experience of internment during the Second World War,¹⁷⁴ demonstrates the flexibility of American civil religion as a force for integration. Iwamura writes:

Marginalized communities have long since taken up the work of retrieval and engaged in the process of articulating their own civil religious visions—visions that draw upon, yet exceed institutionalized forms of religious practice. If repression occurs, it is primarily for the dominant culture, who fails to recognize the ways in which these groups have developed their own sets of rituals, symbols, and beliefs born from

¹⁷³ Jane Naomi Iwamura, “Critical Faith: Japanese Americans and the Birth of a New Civil Religion,” *American Quarterly* 59, no.3 (2007): 942.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 942-944.

historical experience and spiritual necessity and marked by their own integrity and resourcefulness.¹⁷⁵

Such variants of civil religion are exemplary of the neo-Durkheimian dispensation, in which “confessional allegiances have come to be woven into the sense of identity of certain ethnic, national, class, or regional groups.”¹⁷⁶ While the neo-Durkheimian worldview is often important for identity and integration into the cultural mainstream of large, well-established nations such as America, Taylor argues that “this kind of identification often happens with oppressed or marginal populations”¹⁷⁷ as well, citing Ireland, Poland, and Quebec as examples.¹⁷⁸ In such cases, rather than serving an integrative function, the neo-Durkheimian dispensation serves the function of “defending a threatened identity against power of another religious stripe (including atheism in the case of recent Poland).”¹⁷⁹

The African-American community has historically been marginalized rather than integrated into American society, and this creates a tension between the religious-political understanding of African-Americans and the dominant American civil religion, and also within American civil religion itself. Framed in Taylor’s terms, Black Christian protest belies a neo-Durkheimian outlook, with the black community taking the place of the state as the “chosen community” of God. During the Civil Rights Movement, a split emerged within the African-American community between those who advocated integration within American society and those who sought independence and autonomy. For the

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 960.

¹⁷⁶ Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, 77.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁷⁸ Although each of these nations is primarily Catholic, and Catholicism tends to be identified more with the paleo-Durkheimian dispensation, Taylor argues that these cases are neo-Durkheimian since the political hierarchy under whose dominion these communities exist belongs to a different religion than the oppressed group. See Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, 70-78.

¹⁷⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 491.

former, a solution was possible included the application of a prophetic use of civil religion to challenge America to live up to its stated ideals,¹⁸⁰ while for the latter, a new civil-religious understanding, separate from that of white America, was necessary. A brief historical outline of the religious-political thought associated with the African-American struggle will be provided in the next section.

2.2: American Civil Religion and the African-American Struggle:

A Brief Historical Outline

Religion, traditional and civil, has played a significant role in the historic struggle for African-American rights. However, its use has been varied, being used by white Americans to both justify oppressive policies and argue against them, and by black Americans to encourage both integration and nationalism. This is the case for both organized religion and civil religion. Indeed, the two are intrinsically linked, and African-American approaches toward Christianity often mirror approaches towards civil religion. As such, an overview of the relationship between the African-American struggle and Christianity will offer a great deal of insight into the relationship between the political movement for black rights and civil religion.

Christianity has been an ambivalent force in the history of African-American struggle. Although the church has tended to be a vital, independent force within the black community, many black leaders point to Southern Christianity's support of slavery in the

¹⁸⁰ Far from originating with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, the practise of framing the project of African-American equality within the American project as a whole has been a tactic of activist since the abolitionist period, with Frederick Douglass being a notable proponent of this view.

years prior to the American Civil War, when southern church leaders used biblical passages such as the letter to Philemon to justify slavery,¹⁸¹ and by arguing that slavery was an effective means of teaching the Gospel to African-Americans.¹⁸² Raboteau describes the divergent attitude of African-Americans throughout history towards Christianity:

From slavery days, black Christians had resisted the temptation to identify Christianity as a religion “for whites only” by distinguishing “true” Christianity, which preached the equality of all races, from “false” Christianity, which countenanced slavery and discrimination against blacks. There were always those, however, who failed to see the distinction and who scorned Christianity as the religion of the oppressors.¹⁸³

Christianity has faced more challenges during the twentieth century, when many African-Americans grew disillusioned with religious protest along American Christian lines. At this time, there was a schism between two ideological schools: Black Nationalists, who sought racial separation and an independent state for African-Americans, and integrationists, who sought equality for African-Americans within America. By the mid-1960s, the most identifiable leader for the latter camp was the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; the “face” of the former group was Malcolm X of the Nation of Islam. Although it would be an oversimplification to equate acceptance of Christianity with support for integration, the majority of black preachers and devout

¹⁸¹ Lewis V. Baldwin and Stephen W. Murphy, “Scripture in the African-American Christian Tradition,” in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin S. Holcombe (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 287.

¹⁸² Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 19-20.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 111.

Christians rallied behind King, drawing the criticism of some, including the Nation of Islam, who did not believe that the use of Christian symbols and language was an effective means of opposing the racist elements of society.

The twentieth century saw the rise of a variety of organizations dedicated to the struggle for black rights and empowerment, and each took a distinctive approach to religion. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, led by W. E. B. Du Bois, pursued a largely secular, legal approach to protest,¹⁸⁴ while both Marcus Garvey's ostensibly secular Universal Negro Improvement Association and the Nation of Islam strived to develop self-consciously African forms of Christianity and Islam, respectively, in order to work towards Black Nationalism.¹⁸⁵ Both the NAACP and the UNIA, although secular, had connections with mainstream African-American religion. As Raboteau writes:

Although neither the NAACP or the UNIA developed any formal relationship with religious bodies, they did justify their goals by appealing to religious ideals. It was republican or civil, rather than biblical religion, however, on which they based their appeal.¹⁸⁶

Although a large number of black clergy were involved in the NAACP, it did not take an explicitly religious stance, pursuing a secular approach to social change.

In its long struggle to desegregate the nation, the NAACP attempted to get the republic to practise its faith by using the guardians of the faith, the courts of law. To the degree that it succeeded, the NAACP preserved the

¹⁸⁴ Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 64-65.

¹⁸⁵ See Edmond David Cronon, *Black Moses: The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969) and C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

¹⁸⁶ Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 64.

religion of the republic for black citizens still denied full participation in the civic rituals of voting and public education.¹⁸⁷

Marcus Garvey's UNIA, although it liberally utilized Christian language (Garvey often presented himself as a Moses-like figure), was not explicitly religious in its thrust. However, the volume of religious and ritual content associated with the UNIA has led some to describe its practices as "Black civil religion."¹⁸⁸ Additionally, Garvey and George Alexander McGuire, the chaplain-general of the UNIA, sought to develop a uniquely Afrocentric Christianity uncontaminated by white influences.¹⁸⁹

This Afrocentric Christianity broke from the civil religious consensus by focusing on a different "promised land" and spiritual centre: Africa, or, more specifically, Ethiopia. Given the limited scope of Biblical geography, references to Africa in Scripture are limited to Ethiopia and Egypt. For Garvey and others, however, these cultures came to represent the forefathers of all people of African descent, and it became a tradition to use the name of Ethiopia to refer to Africa as a whole rather than the contemporary state.¹⁹⁰ Nevertheless, it was not lost on Garvey and others that contemporary Ethiopia was the only nation in Africa that had escaped the clutches of colonialism.¹⁹¹ Belief that Ethiopia/Africa is the spiritual centre for those living in the African Diaspora is called Ethiopianism, and it is a central feature of some strains of Afrocentric Christianity¹⁹² as well as Rastafarian belief.¹⁹³

¹⁸⁷ Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 64-65.

¹⁸⁸ Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 124.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 124-125.

¹⁹⁰ Leonard E. Barrett, *The Rastafarians* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 74.

¹⁹¹ Ennis Barrington Edmonds, *Rastafari: From Outcasts to Culture Bearers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 34-36.

¹⁹² Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 46.

¹⁹³ Edmonds, *Rastafari*, 34-36.

Some, however, felt that Christianity should be rejected entirely in favour of alternate religious traditions, including Islam. The influential Nation of Islam proposed a radical rejection of both American church and state, coupling nationalist politics with a religious outlook that was strictly sectarian in its tension with society.

The Nation of Islam was founded in 1930 in Detroit by the enigmatic W. Fard Muhammad, a salesman of ambiguous ethnicity whose early life and background are not known.¹⁹⁴ Fard Muhammad taught that Islam was the religion of Blacks, God's chosen people, using "Black" as a blanket term that included not only those of African descent, but also Asians, natives of Australia and North and South America, Arabs, inhabitants of the South Pacific islands – in short, all non-Europeans.¹⁹⁵ The Nation of Islam called for "economic independence from white people, as well as the creation of a separate nation for Blacks consisting of several southern states."¹⁹⁶

Elijah Muhammad assumed the mantle of leadership in the Nation in 1934. He advanced a strict creed that placed the Nation in tension with mainstream America:

In order to be saved, Elijah taught that Blacks must discard their "slave names" and refrain from the evil practises of the whites. Elijah, moreover, rejected any efforts to reform white-dominated American society. Instead, Muslims should prepare themselves for the day of judgment... [when] a Black Nation governing under the guidance of Allah will emerge and the chosen will inherit the power of the earth.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Jeffrey Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 13.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁹⁶ Baer and Singer, *African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century*, 120-121.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

Under Muhammad's leadership, the Nation's membership swelled to a peak of one hundred thousand individuals in the 1960s,¹⁹⁸ many of whom came from the lowest strata of society. Muhammad believed that it would be some time before an independent Black nation could exist, and African-Americans should "engage in economic self-help, exercise the values of hard work and thrift, eschew violence except in self-defence, and develop a separate educational system."¹⁹⁹ In a challenge to the civil religion consensus, Muhammad "taught his followers to reject the rituals of American civic piety, such as saluting the flag, voting, and registering for the draft."²⁰⁰

Raboteau describes the rationale behind the rejection of Christianity in favour of Islam:

The black Muslims, most notably Malcolm X, castigated black Christians for accepting the "white man's religion" and denounced the black church for keeping black Americans ignorant of their true selves. They pointed to their successful record in rehabilitating criminals, drug addicts, and alcoholics as proof that Islam was better fitted than Christianity to save the outcasts of America's society.²⁰¹

In this way, groups such as Garvey's Ethiopianist Christians and the Nation of Islam simultaneously rejected America and its version of Christianity. In doing so, they also rejected American civil religion wholesale in favour of a new religious-political consciousness. In Garvey's case, this civil religion took the form of an Exodus-inspired longing for the "promised land" of Africa, while the Nation of Islam eschewed the

¹⁹⁸ Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, 106.

¹⁹⁹ John T. McCartney, *Black Power Ideologies: An Essay in African-American Political Thought* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 177.

²⁰⁰ Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 111.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 110-111.

symbols of Christianity for an alternative mythic framework mixing Black Nationalism with an adaptation of Islam.

By contrast, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, led by Martin Luther King, Jr., worked for racial integration within America. King and his followers structured their protest using the language and symbolism of Christianity and civil religion. Their Christianity was that of the “historically Black church,” the southern Baptist congregation, rather than the Ethiopianist Christianity advocated by some of their contemporaries. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference belonged to a long tradition of Black Protestant protest. Baer and Singer describe the historical roots of Black Christian activism:

modern Black politics is rooted in the protest activities of Black ministers during the nineteenth century. Particularly in the antebellum North, representatives of African-American churches were involved in abolitionist and proto-nationalist movements. Conversely, although hundreds of Black Methodist and Baptist preachers participated in electoral politics during Reconstruction, the routine activities of the church and the struggle for its survival in the face of meager funds and white hostility prevented greater attention to vital social issues of the day.²⁰²

Thus, while individual members of the churches were often involved in politics, the churches themselves did not always focus on political matters. In the twentieth century, like the nineteenth century, much of the day-to-day activity of African-American religion was not of an explicitly political nature. Indeed, Baer and Singer argue that, with some notable exceptions, “Black mainstream churches often function as hegemonic institutions

²⁰² Baer and Singer, *African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century*, 98-99.

that legitimize existing structures and social relations by inadvertently providing them with an aura of inevitability.”²⁰³ Based on research concerning the social activism of

mainstream Black Christian clergy, congregations, and denominations, they assert that at various critical junctures in American history, certain Black religious leaders, congregations, and even denominations have participated in the struggle against racism and other social injustices. Nevertheless, the African-American mainstream churches, especially at the denominational level, have remained for the most part at the periphery of this struggle.²⁰⁴

In spite of the “peripheral” nature of many mainstream churches, members of the African-American Christian community often proved to be extremely effective proponents of civil rights. Adam Fairclough describes “a basic fact about leadership in the Southern black movement of the 1950s and 1960s: ministers wielded influence out of all proportion to their numbers.”²⁰⁵ However,

[t]he appearance of church leadership in movements against segregation reflected a shift in black attitudes rather than a bold initiative by preachers; the relationship between clergy and community was one of symbiosis rather than leaders and led.²⁰⁶

As public attitudes turned, the church became an important focal point of black protest. Fairclough describes the effectiveness of the church in the Civil Rights Movement:

The church... extended throughout the community, bridging political factions and spanning political classes. As an organizational tool it was

²⁰³ Ibid., 101.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 101.

²⁰⁵ Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 13.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 14.

second to none. In a city with neither a black radio station nor a widely read black newspaper, the church provided the information network. It also provided the meeting places, the fundraising machinery, and the means of organizing an alternative transportation system.²⁰⁷

It is within this context that King and his organization worked for civil rights. Using the church as a networking tool and the teachings of Christianity to cast prophetic judgment upon an unjust system, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference led a successful movement to defeat legal justifications for segregation and disenfranchisement. In the next section, the content of their rhetoric and their use of civil religion shall be examined.

2.3: Myth, Ideology, and Utopia in the Rhetoric of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In discussing the use of religious rhetoric by King and the SCLC, it is useful to return to Ricoeur's concept of the social imaginary. King's rhetoric was steeped in the language of Christian theology and civil religion. Myth, ideology, and utopia are all significant features of his rhetoric, although they are used in different ways. Since King's rhetoric was oriented towards both black and white Americans, one can detect elements of two related but distinct types of civil religion. An examination of King's use of the Exodus narrative will illustrate the distinctive nature of African-American civil religion.

The focus on Dr. King in this essay is not meant to give the impression that the Civil Rights Movement owes its success to him alone. Indeed, none of the successes of

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 17.

the movement would have been possible without the courage and dedication of such figures as Rosa Parks, Ralph Abernathy, the Greensboro Four, Hosea Williams, James Lawson, Diane Nash, John Lewis, James Meredith, Clyde Kennard, James Bevel, the St. Augustine Four, Fannie Lou Harner, James Reeb, Coretta King, and countless others. However, for the purposes of this thesis, it is necessary to limit the scope of inquiry to King's rhetoric for space considerations, since King has the most significant place in the narrative of civil religion. It is from King and the SCLC that Barack Obama borrows much of his utopian language when discussing matters of racial equality.

As a disadvantaged minority within the dominant white culture of the United States, many African-Americans found that their experience was at odds with mainstream American civil-religious views. However, theological interpretations of history have historically been important components of African-American religious life, comprising the mythical foundation for a distinctive brand of civil religion. Like the founding myths of Euro-American Christians, African-American mythology tends to be founded upon the Bible.

Use of Judeo-Christian Scripture in the struggle against racial oppression is not uncommon; the Bible has played a very important role in Black Rights movements throughout history. This was in part because it was one of the only books to which potential civil rights leaders, who were often preachers, had access.²⁰⁸ However, its content also held great appeal for African-Americans living in oppressive conditions. The Old Testament, in particular, is replete with the lamentations of a people who were taken from their homeland into foreign captivity. Both the Exodus narrative of the Torah and the Babylonian Captivity literature of the Kethuvim detail the plight of the Israelites, who

²⁰⁸ Ronald Segal, *The Black Diaspora* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1995), 438.

were enslaved by foreign powers and forced into servitude far from their homes.

Raboteau highlights the importance of the Exodus narrative in both black and white American religious self-understandings. However, while white Americans have often followed the pilgrim John Winthrop in seeing America as the New Israel, founded by faithful pilgrims fleeing the oppression of the Old World,²⁰⁹ black Americans have historically been more inclined to see white America as Egypt, holding God's people in bondage:

Slaves and free blacks... located themselves in a different part of the Exodus story than white Christians. From their perspective America was Egypt, and as long as it continued to enslave and oppress black Israel, America's destiny was in jeopardy. America stood under the judgment of God, and unless it repented, the death and destruction visited upon biblical Egypt would be repeated here.²¹⁰

This religious identification with the Israelites of the Exodus narrative, Raboteau argues, is fundamental to much black religious protest during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²¹¹ It was frequently utilized by King, who used biblical language to interpret the African-American struggle for freedom in a way that had significant civil religious overtones:

Many years ago the Negro was thrown into the Egypt of segregation, and his great struggle has been to free himself from the crippling restrictions and paralyzing [sic] effects of this vicious system. For years it looked like he would never get out of this Egypt. The closed Red Sea always stood

²⁰⁹ Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 28-31.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 31-32.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 60-64.

before him with discouraging dimensions. There were always those Pharoahs [sic] with hardened hearts, who, despite the cries of many a Moses, refused to let these people go.²¹²

For black Americans, such rhetoric appealed to an age-old civil-religious myth; for whites, it reversed one of their most cherished myths. Referring to the American “national myth” that “America had been singled out [by God] to save (or help save) the world,”²¹³ Raboteau states that

King, and those he spoke for, invoked the national myth. But at the same time, he reaffirmed another set of beliefs that arose out of the profound ambivalence that African-Americans felt towards the selfsame myth. Denied at first freedom and then equality in America, blacks had protested by decrying slavery and discrimination as fundamental violations of American ideals.²¹⁴

Framing the civil rights movement as a moral issue that challenged white America to live up to its stated ideals,²¹⁵ King’s rhetoric exemplifies the prophetic use of civil religion at its most potent. This use of civil religion stems from the realization that the goal of equal rights required winning over much of white America – indeed, it has been argued that “much of the Civil Rights Movement was an appeal on the part of southern African Americans to northern whites.”²¹⁶ As such, King deftly structured his rhetoric in order to

²¹² Martin Luther King, Jr., “The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore,” *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, Vol. 3, Clayborne Carson et al., eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), <http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/kingpapers/index> (accessed May 27, 2009).

²¹³ Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 59.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 59.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 70.

²¹⁶ Darrin Hanson, “The Civil Rights Movement and American Civil Religion” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, New Orleans, LA, January 09, 2008), http://www.allacademic.com/meta/p212535_index.html (accessed May 27, 2009).

situate the black struggle for freedom within the civil religious narrative of American history, as his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” demonstrates:

[T]he goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America's destiny. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence across the pages of history, we were here. For more than two centuries our forebears labored in this country without wages; they made cotton king; they built the homes of their masters while suffering gross injustice and shameful humiliation-and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.²¹⁷

This quote makes use of several aspects of civil religion. It references the founding myths of America, situating within them the experiences of slavery as a challenge to the divinely-mandated telos of the nation. The invocation of America's destiny is tied in a contingent manner to the conduct of America towards its people, and freedom is identified with the will of God, who stands above the nation in judgment.

Such a prophetic use of civil religion resembles the rhetoric of the exemplary prophet of civil religion, Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln framed the abolition of slavery as a

²¹⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (Birmingham: April 16, 1963), *MLK Online*, <http://www.mlkonline.net/jail.html> (accessed May 25, 2009).

moral imperative, and even interpreted the Civil War as God's retribution for the sins of America:

Fondly do we hope – fervently do we pray – that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man'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 it must be said "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether."²¹⁸

Like King, Lincoln situated the nation as standing under the judgment of God for its failure to comply with His will. The Civil War entered into the civil religious narrative as a "time of trial," in which a basic tension between creed and reality, the question of "whether that nation [founded upon the ideals of liberty and equality], or any nation so conceived, can long endure,"²¹⁹ was addressed.

Like Lincoln, King sought to justify his cause by appealing to the civil-religious sensibilities of many Americans. Unlike his Black Nationalist contemporaries, King sought to address injustices within the context of civil religion, rather than by rejecting it, as evidenced in his final speech:

All we say to America is, "Be true to what you said on paper." If I lived in China or even Russia, or any totalitarian country, maybe I could understand... the denial of certain basic First Amendment privileges,

²¹⁸ Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address," (Washington, DC: March 4, 1865), *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com> (accessed May 28, 2009).

²¹⁹ Abraham Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address," (Gettysburg, PA: November 19, 1863), *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com> (accessed May 28, 2009).

because they hadn't committed themselves to that over there. But somewhere I read of the freedom of assembly. Somewhere I read of the freedom of speech. Somewhere I read of the freedom of press. Somewhere I read that the greatness of America is the right to protest for right.²²⁰

Arguments for civil rights within the context of civil religion did not originate with King. *An American Dilemma*, written in 1944 by the Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal, was an important work on race relations in America. In it, Myrdal describes the "American Creed" – a concept similar to that of civil religion. The American Creed consists of the "ideals of the essential dignity of the individual human being, of the fundamental equality of all men, and of certain inalienable rights to freedom, justice, and a fair opportunity,"²²¹ which is "identified with America's peculiar brand of nationalism, and it gives the common American his feeling of the historical mission of America in the world."²²² For Myrdal, the "American dilemma" of racial inequality constituted a fundamental tension within American society between the founding creed and actual conditions.²²³ As Donald LaMagdeleine states,

the book eloquently argued that because of America's popular notion of itself as *the* place where people were legally free to pursue their own interest, blatant racial inequity threatened to destroy America just as it achieved world status.²²⁴

²²⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., "I've Been to the Mountaintop" (Memphis, TN: April 3, 1968), *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com> (accessed May 25, 2009).

²²¹ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 20th anniversary ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 4.

²²² *Ibid.*, 5.

²²³ *Ibid.*, lxxviii.

²²⁴ Donald R. LaMagdeleine, "The Healing of Progressivist America: The Premises of School Desegregation within U.S. Civil Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35, no.3 (1996): 309.

Myrdal's work was used extensively by the NAACP during their legal battles for integration, including the successful *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* case of 1954 which made segregation illegal in public schools.²²⁵ Over the course of the next decade and a half, a concerted effort on the part of the NAACP, King, and a large number of committed and courageous individuals resulted in major legal reforms that resulted in an end to legal segregation and massive black enfranchisement. This struggle also resulted in the expansion of the civil religious narrative to include the experience of African-Americans. Currently, King is typically viewed as a martyr and a hero of the American narrative, as evidenced by the designation of his birthday as a national holiday.

Gamoran discusses the potential of the "annual ritual calendar"²²⁶ to emphasize the integrative function of civil religion:

The establishment of a holiday in remembrance of King represents a victory for a subordinate group in American society, a group that includes primarily black and disadvantaged citizens, but also those who have spoken out for civil rights over the years. King was a "Moses" for black men and women, but in recognizing him as a national hero and martyr on par with Washington, Lincoln, and Columbus (the only others to be remembered with national holidays), the nation has accepted him as a symbol of peace and sacrifice for all citizens. The apparent addition of his holiday to the civil religious calendar exemplifies the potential of civil religion to provide unity in a diverse society, for it reflects the hopes and gains of a subgroup that has been alienated from many of the traditional

²²⁵ Ibid., 309.

²²⁶ Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," 13.

civil religious themes, such as immigration to the promised land, freedom and tolerance, and equality under God. Acceptance of King's birthday thus enhances the integrative work of American civil religion.²²⁷

Thus, civil religion can serve to integrate diverse groups into a single society and can inculcate values of tolerance and respect for difference into citizens, thus providing a response to the challenge of social cohesion in an increasingly multicultural society.²²⁸

Even as civil religion serves to integrate the African-American community into American society as a whole, it may also provide an ideology of dissimulation which can lead some to believe that racism has been eradicated from American society.

LaMagdeleine argues that *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education*, the legal case that led to the ending of school segregation, also served as a civil-religious "healing ritual" which obscures continuing problems with the American public school system for minorities.²²⁹

In a similar fashion, the civil-religious interpretation of King's life and struggle can lead to the belief that all racial problems have been overcome and America exists as a "post-racial nation,"²³⁰ obscuring persistent racial issues within society such as housing and income inequality, of which Obama writes:

To say that we are one people is not to suggest that race no longer matters... We know the statistics: On almost every single socioeconomic indicator, from infant mortality to life expectancy to employment to home ownership, black and Latino Americans in particular continue to lag far

²²⁷ Gamoran, "Civil Religion in American Schools," 253.

²²⁸ See Angrosino, "Civil Religion Redux," 254.

²²⁹ LaMagdeleine, "The Healing of Progressivist America," 312-314.

²³⁰ George Shulman, "Politics and prophecy as vocations," *The Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere*, posted June 12, 2009, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2009/06/12/politics-and-prophecy-as-vocations/> (accessed June 12, 2009).

behind their white counterparts... To suggest that our racial attitudes play no part in these disparities is to turn a blind eye to both our history and our experience – and to relieve ourselves of the responsibility to make things right.²³¹

As such, it is important to approach ideologies such as that of civil religion with a critical perspective in order to avoid its dissimulating effects.

In Ricoeur's thought, the corrective against the excesses of ideology is utopia. Utopia is a vision of a better world, and can provide a powerful motivation to action by calling into question corrupt and unjust systems. King's rhetoric describes a "promised land of personal and social integration."²³² He declares that "[t]here is a Red Sea in history that ultimately comes to carry the forces of goodness to victory, and that same Red Sea closes in to bring doom and destruction to the forces of evil."²³³ The utopia described in speeches such as "I Have a Dream" casts judgment upon the prevailing conditions in America while simultaneously envisioning a better world based on the telos of American civil religion: a global society based on peace, justice, and equality. Indeed, for members of the "historically Black church," the African-American experience was one of redemptive suffering with soteriological ramifications for the entire world.²³⁴ Although grounded in the particular experience of oppression of the African-American community, King believed that "[t]he particular history of black Americans represented the suffering of the poor and oppressed everywhere. And the lesson of black history for

²³¹ Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006), 232-233.

²³² King, "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore."

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones*, 72.

the world was that suffering could be redemptive.”²³⁵ There is perhaps no better example of this utopian ethic than the final lines of his stirring “I Have a Dream” speech:

And when this happens, when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when *all* of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:

Free at last! Free at last!

*Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!*²³⁶

Such utopias function as a corrective to dissimulating ideologies which justify domination and oppression. So long as such conditions exist, they are necessary to motivate individuals to cast judgment upon corrupt systems and work for a better world.

The legacy of Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement continue to affect the American consciousness dramatically. The African-American experience constituted a fundamental tension between America's founding ideals and its lived reality. Faced with this contradiction, some African-American leaders rejected the idea of integration within America entirely, seeking to create an alternate political entity and, often, an alternate religious system to that of the United States. Others, including many of the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, sought equal rights within America, and often based their argument upon America's founding documents. The Civil Rights Movement constituted a transformative moment in the historical narrative of race relations in

²³⁵ Ibid., 72.

²³⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream” (Washington, DC: August 28, 1963), *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com> (accessed May 28, 2009).

America with ongoing relevance to the American consciousness. At this time, skilled rhetoricians such as Dr. King utilized the language of civil religion in order to frame the struggle as a moral, religious issue upon which America's destiny was contingent. The importance of the struggle to American self-understanding is evidenced by the inclusion of Dr. King's birthday in the cycle of national holidays, commemorating him as a prophetic "martyr" who challenged the country to live up to its stated ideals.

The transformation of race relations brought on by the Civil Rights Movement allowed for the successful election of the first African-American president, and his victory was due in part to the skill with which he placed himself within this narrative. The next chapter will deal with Barack Obama's use of American civil religion in his election campaign, and will explore the extent to which he appealed to the structures of myth, ideology, and utopia of different communities within the country in order to gain the support of a majority of Americans.

Chapter 3: *Barack Obama*

...I love America. I know that for more than two centuries, we have strived – at great cost and great sacrifice – to form a more perfect union; to seek, with other nations, a more hopeful world.

- Barack Obama²³⁷

The election of Barack Obama to the presidency of the United States has been a significant event in the early twenty-first century. Obama is a formidable public speaker, a practising Christian, a former professor of constitutional law, and the first African-American to occupy the highest office in American politics. His election has provided the occasion for much scholarly and public reflection on such topics as the ideals and destiny of the country, the Civil Rights Movement and contemporary racial situation in America, the relationship between religion and “liberal” and “conservative” politics, and the ongoing relevance of American civil religion. This chapter will explore the thought of Barack Obama, his use of civil religion, and his relationship with King and the Civil Rights Movement.

Barack Obama demonstrates an awareness of the religiosity of the American people. Obama laments the fact that since the election of President Reagan, religion is often thought to be most compatible with political neo-conservatism. By contrast, he seeks to appeal to the communitarian, “progressive” values associated with such traditional religions as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, as well as with America itself.

²³⁷ Barack Obama, “Address to the People of Berlin” (Berlin: July 24, 2008), *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com> (accessed June 8, 2009).

Obama's personal experience of Christianity is closely linked to the "historically Black church," which has a tradition of social activism, and his thought is also informed by the political philosophy of John Rawls²³⁸ and the "Christian realism" of Reinhold Niebuhr.

In order to communicate values to a wide audience of Americans, Obama often presents his arguments using the language of American civil religion. Such language provides Obama with a strong basis for values common to many Americans while avoiding excluding any potential supporters on the grounds of particular religion. Obama defines "American-ness" as an inclusive ideology which is capable of integrating citizens of any ethnic or religious background, and presents American values as the values of humanity. In this way, Obama defines America's place in the world as a prototype of a unified, peaceful world – a stance similar to that of many of his predecessors.

The history of the Civil Rights Movement loomed large during the election of the first African-American president. Elements of the rhetoric characteristic of the Civil Rights Movement occur with some frequency in Obama's speeches, including those which use the language of civil religion. The overlap between civil-religious and Civil Rights language is not new, but Obama reconciles the two in his own distinctive fashion in order to communicate his values.

In his recounting of civil religious narratives, Obama has referred frequently to the movement and to Dr. King, with whom he shares some similarities in oratorical style. However, it would neither be politically expedient nor credible for Obama, a successful candidate for the American presidency, to mount the same prophetic critique of America

²³⁸ Daniel DiSalvo and Jerome Copulsky, "Faith in the Primaries," *Perspectives on Political Science* 38, no.2 (2009): 102.

as did King. Nevertheless, the utopian vision of King appears to drive Obama's politics to some extent, and it will remain to be seen to what extent it affects his policies.

3.1: Religion, Politics, and the Thought of Barack Obama

Like many American presidents in recent decades, President Obama speaks frequently and passionately about religion. In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama voices concern that the liberal camp in American politics is hesitant to discuss religion, allowing others with "the most insular views of faith" to "cynically use religion to justify partisan ends."²³⁹ For Obama, in order to engage in a productive dialogue between religion and the political sphere, it is necessary to identify the values implicit within religion. One such value to which Obama continually refers is the connection between religion and social responsibility:

In the end, then, what is called for is nothing more and nothing less than what all the world's great religions demand: that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Let us be our brother's keeper, Scripture tells us. Let us be our sister's keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well.²⁴⁰

In this excerpt from Obama's "A More Perfect Union" speech, delivered on March 18, 2008 in response to a controversy involving his former pastor, Obama paraphrases Scripture to illustrate his understanding of the fundamental link between religion and social responsibility. The first scriptural passage cited in this excerpt is the famous

²³⁹ Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 214.

²⁴⁰ Barack Obama, "A More Perfect Union" (Philadelphia, PA: March 18, 2008), *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com> (accessed April 8, 2009).

Golden Rule (Matthew 7.12, Luke 6.31). Obama's assertion that this ethical principle is "what all the world's great religions demand" echoes the "Declaration Towards a Global Ethic" produced by the Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions in 1993.²⁴¹

Like the Council, Obama interprets the Golden Rule in terms of social solidarity, and thus interprets social solidarity as a moral issue.

Similarly, Obama refers to Cain's rhetorical question in Genesis 4:9: "Am I my brother's keeper?" He affirms that, the wicked Cain notwithstanding, human beings are indeed called to be "keepers" of our brothers and sisters. As with the Golden Rule, Obama interprets "keepership" as requiring solidarity and political action to empower the less fortunate. For Obama, such solidarity entails addressing social problems by

investing in our schools and our communities; by enforcing our civil rights laws and ensuring fairness in our criminal justice system; by providing this generation with ladders of opportunity that were unavailable for previous generations.²⁴²

Thus, political action aimed at ensuring a just society is a moral issue. George Lakoff explains that Obama "us[es] his enormous skills as a communicator to express a moral system."²⁴³ Lakoff argues that all of Obama's policies are tied to a coherent moral vision, which he calls "The Obama Code," using the term "code" to refer to "a system of either communication or morality."²⁴⁴ This code is based on American values, as embodied in the American Constitution. In *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama laments the paucity of values-talk in his Democratic Party, and states that

²⁴¹ Hans Küng et al., "Declaration Towards a Global Ethic" (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1993), 2.

²⁴² Obama, "A More Perfect Union."

²⁴³ George Lakoff, "The Obama Code," *Truthout*, February 24, 2009, <http://www.truthout.org/022409R> (accessed April 8, 2009).

²⁴⁴ Ibid.

shared values – the standards and principles that the majority of Americans deem important in their lives, and in the life of the country – should be the heart of our politics, the cornerstone of any meaningful debate about budgets and projects, regulations and policies.²⁴⁵

Obama then lists a number of fundamental American values, including “self-reliance and self improvement and risk-taking... drive, discipline, temperance, and hard work... thrift and personal responsibility,”²⁴⁶ summarized as the belief that “so long as individual men and women are free to pursue their own interests, society as a whole will prosper.”²⁴⁷ To these individual-oriented values, he adds a set of “communal” values including patriotism and “neighborliness.”²⁴⁸ It is to these community-oriented values to which Obama referred in his inauguration address:

It is the kindness to take in a stranger when the levees break, the selflessness of workers who would rather cut their hours than see a friend lose their job which sees us through our darkest hours. It is the firefighter's courage to storm a stairway filled with smoke, but also a parent's willingness to nurture a child, that finally decides our fate.²⁴⁹

In this way, Obama endeavours to emphasize that such communal, “empathy-oriented” values are fundamental American values.²⁵⁰ In this way, he strives to re-introduce values talk into the rhetoric of the Democratic Party and the “liberal” establishment in America.

²⁴⁵ Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 52-53.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 54.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 55.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 55.

²⁴⁹ Barack Obama, “Presidential Inaugural Address” (Washington, DC: January 20, 2009), *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, <<http://www.americanrhetoric.com>> (accessed April 10, 2009).

²⁵⁰ Lakoff, “The Obama Code.”

Thus, the connection between social responsibility and morality is an important feature of Obama's rhetoric. While Obama frequently articulates this moral vision in terms of "American values," he also invokes religious language to discuss morality. Such use of religious language is explained in *The Audacity of Hope*:

[T]he discomfort of some progressives with any hint of religiosity has often inhibited us from effectively addressing issues in moral terms. Some of the problem is rhetorical: scrub language of all religious content and we forfeit the imagery and terminology through which millions of Americans understand both their personal morality and social justice.²⁵¹

However, Obama warns against the transparency of using religious language in an opportunistic manner, deriding "the politician who shows up at a black church around election time and claps (off rhythm) to the gospel choir or sprinkles in a few biblical citations to spice up a thoroughly dry policy speech."²⁵² Instead, Obama calls for partnerships between religious and secular America in "the larger project for American renewal."²⁵³ Obama's insistence on the importance of religion in the discussion of morality is reminiscent of Reagan's declaration that "politics and morality are inseparable. And as morality's foundation is religion, religion and politics are necessarily related."²⁵⁴ However, the particular values emphasized by religion for Reagan and Obama are somewhat different, in keeping with the markedly different experiences of religion of the two men.

²⁵¹ Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 214.

²⁵² Ibid., 216.

²⁵³ Ibid., 216.

²⁵⁴ Reagan, quoted in Pierard and Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, 278-279.

Although raised in a secular household, Obama worked extensively with religious groups during his tenure as a community organizer in inner-city Chicago for the Developing Communities Project.²⁵⁵ Obama relates that his experience working with the “historically black church” impressed upon him “the power of the African American religious tradition to spur social change.”²⁵⁶ His baptism at Trinity United Church provided him with a deeper sense of community in the environment in which he worked, as well as addressing profound personal questions in his life.²⁵⁷ As such, social activism and religious life are intertwined in Obama’s life.

R. Stephen Warner notes that since African-American religion tends not to draw a line between public and private morality common in white Protestantism, Obama is able to articulate his views on social justice in religious terms with greater ease than many of his colleagues.²⁵⁸ Obama recognizes the relationship between personal faith and the collective good in the Black church:

Out of necessity, the black church rarely had the luxury of separating individual salvation from collective salvation. It had to serve as the center of the community’s political, economic, and social as well as spiritual life; it understood in an intimate way the biblical call to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and challenge powers and principalities... In the day-to-day work of the men and women I met in the church each day, in their

²⁵⁵ Martin Dupuis and Keith Boeckelman, *Barack Obama, The New Face of American Politics* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2008), 7.

²⁵⁶ Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 207.

²⁵⁷ See Barack Obama, *Dreams from my Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004).

²⁵⁸ R. Stephen Warner, “Civil Religious Revival,” *Religion in the News* 11, no.1 (2008).

ability to... maintain hope and dignity in the direst of circumstances, I could see the Word made manifest.²⁵⁹

However, Obama is sceptical of monopolistic truth-claims, particularly in the realm of politics. Stating that “there's an enormous amount of damage done around the world in the name of religion and certainty,”²⁶⁰ Obama argues that religious convictions must be articulated as rational arguments in order to be usable in politics.²⁶¹ Daniel DiSalvo and Jerome Copulsky identify in Obama's rhetoric the influence of John Rawls,²⁶² whose concept of justice is based on a system of deliberation in which participants must set aside particularistic convictions in favour of rational discourse.²⁶³ In this way, Obama argues, a pluralistic democracy may be able to accommodate claims of value while not privileging any one religious or philosophical perspective over others.²⁶⁴

Obama's approach to the intersection of religion and politics belies the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr, to whom Obama was exposed during his undergraduate years.²⁶⁵ Niebuhr's Christian Realism offers a theological basis for politics that seeks not to realize a perfect “Kingdom of God” on Earth, but instead strives to balance competing interests in order to create a tolerable political situation within the context of the fundamental contingency of politics and the world at large. Charles Brown lists a number of “axioms” of Niebuhr's Christian Realism:

²⁵⁹ Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 207.

²⁶⁰ Cathleen Falsani, “Obama's Fascinating Interview with Cathleen Falsani,” *Beliefnet*, <http://blog.beliefnet.com/stevenwaldman/2008/11/obamas-interview-with-cathleen.html> (accessed April 13, 2009).

²⁶¹ Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 219.

²⁶² DiSalvo and Copulsky, “Faith in the Primaries,” 102.

²⁶³ *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., s.v. “Rawls, John.”

²⁶⁴ Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, p. 219. Such a stance may belie Obama's roots in the field of law.

²⁶⁵ Paul Allen, “The Obama Niebuhr connection,” *The Toronto Star*, June 18, 2008.

One is that love and justice are complementary, implying that both government action and voluntary efforts are needed for human welfare, whether in housing, nutrition, education, or other areas. Another is that organism and artifact, best combined in the British social order, are both essential to healthy democratic communities. Other axioms include ways to achieve a tolerable world community, including the pursuit of a concurrence of interest among nations, the use of force when necessary to counter threats to legitimate national or international interests, and the importance of meeting present exigencies without the illusion that final solutions are possible.²⁶⁶

Obama's balancing of political pragmatism and religious principles is reminiscent of Niebuhr. Such "realism" characterizes the thought of the president and allows him to speak in religious terms while responding to the nuances of political life. As such, Obama is equally comfortable speaking the languages of values and reason, making him a very compelling public figure with broad appeal.

The next section will focus on the rhetorical language in which Obama presents his thought and vision. While Obama's policies are informed by a measured balance of political shrewdness and constitutional and Christian values, his presentation of these often utilizes the language of American civil religion so favoured by his predecessors. That he uses such language with sincerity testifies not only to his oratorical skill but also to the fact that for Obama, the values of American civil religion are similar to his own values.

²⁶⁶ Charles C. Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 247-248.

3.2: Barack Obama and American Civil Religion

“Change” was an inescapable theme of Barack Obama’s presidential campaign. Against the backdrop of economic uncertainty, war, and an unpopular sitting president, Obama’s speeches continually call for a change in policy and direction for the United States. In his acceptance speech for the Democratic presidential nomination, Obama promises that his election will be seen by future generations as “the time when we came together to remake this great nation so that it may always reflect our very best selves and our highest ideals.”²⁶⁷

Obama’s rhetoric is steeped in the imagery of American civil religion and in the language of values. Lamenting the fact that values-talk has been the exclusive province of conservative forces within American society, Obama seeks to re-inscribe liberal politics with a moral sensibility, arguing that “our communal values, our sense of mutual responsibility and social solidarity, should express themselves... through our government.”²⁶⁸ In order to do so, Obama draws upon the language of American civil religion in order to communicate and give weight to his policies in the eyes of the American general public.

The national myth of origins figures prominently in Obama’s rhetoric. Like many of his predecessors, Obama makes reference to the American Revolution, the founding event in American consciousness. For example, in his inaugural address, Obama describes the event in graphic, dramatic terms: “In the year of America’s birth, in the coldest of months, a small band of patriots huddled by dying campfires on the shores of

²⁶⁷ Obama, “Change We Can Believe In” (St. Paul, MN: June 3, 2008), *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com> (accessed June 11, 2009).

²⁶⁸ Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 63.

an icy river. The Capitol was abandoned. The enemy was advancing. The snow was stained with blood.”²⁶⁹ Quoting George Washington, described as “the father of our nation,”²⁷⁰ Obama compares the perils faced by the revolutionaries to contemporary problems facing America in order to inspire his audience to the same heights of heroic bravery as the Americans of that mythical time. Civil religion allows “something of Washington’s sacred-leader, father-figure role [to be] transferred to each of the presidents,”²⁷¹ and Obama invokes Washington in his typical role as “symbol and secular saint”²⁷² in order to situate America’s current challenges within the context of civil religion.

The image of the revolution in the founding myth of America is convenient for Obama’s purposes, corresponding well to his message of change. As such, Obama casts both his own policies and the American Revolution as being motivated by the same values. In Obama’s rhetoric, the American Revolution consisted of “a small band of farmers and shopkeepers in revolution against the army of an empire, all for the sake of an idea.”²⁷³ Historians may dispute the motivating factors of the American Revolution, but in Obama’s version of the founding myth of America, it was driven exclusively by “an idea.”

This idea, the “American creed” as discussed by such figures as Chesterton, Mead, Myrdal, and King, constitutes the essence of America in Obama’s rhetoric:

²⁶⁹ Obama, “Presidential Inaugural Address.”

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Pierard and Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, 86.

²⁷² Angrosino, “Civil Religion Redux,” 250.

²⁷³ Barack Obama, “Pre-Inauguration Address at the Lincoln Memorial” (Washington, DC: January 18, 2009), *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com> (accessed June 8, 2009).

Our pride is based on a very simple premise, summed up in a declaration made over two hundred years ago: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*²⁷⁴

Thus, for Obama, status as an American is based on assenting to certain “simple” ideas, rather than being founded on ethnic grounds. It is, in the words of Sacvan Bercovitch, “a consensual term,”²⁷⁵ based on an inclusive ideology that appeals to a set of universal values in order to generate social cohesion. America is seen “as embodying ideals that now transcend... any particular nation and that are, in principle, global.”²⁷⁶

For Obama, the ideals driving the founding of America are of universal import, and he often hails the integrative power of American ideals by emphasizing the unity that exists despite the ethnic diversity within America:

We were founded upon the ideal that all are created equal, and we have shed blood and struggled for centuries to give meaning to those words — within our borders, and around the world. We are shaped by every culture,

²⁷⁴ Barack Obama, “2004 Democratic National Convention Keynote Address” (Boston: July 27, 2004), *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com> (accessed June 8, 2009).

²⁷⁵ Sacvan Bercovitch, “The Rites of Assent,” in *The American Self: Myth, Ideology, and Popular Culture*, ed. Sam B. Girgus (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), 19.

²⁷⁶ Robert Bellah, “What Holds Us Together,” *The Immanent Frame*, posted January 11, 2008, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2008/01/11/what-holds-us-together/> (accessed June 26, 2009). The quotation is taken from a discussion between Bellah and Charles Taylor about the nature of Canadian citizenship sparked by Taylor’s publication of *A Secular Age*, based on Bellah’s interpretation of Taylor as arguing “that the common consciousness that must undergird any viable society can no longer be limited to the boundaries of that society.” A similar universality must accompany American citizenship.

drawn from every end of the Earth, and dedicated to a simple concept: E pluribus unum: “Out of many, one.”²⁷⁷

In describing the ideal that “all are created equal,” Obama paraphrases the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...” Obama omits the word “men,” but retains the word “created,” thus enhancing the inclusivity of the famous quotation but retaining its strongly theistic flavour. The cosmopolitan ethic articulated in this excerpt exemplifies the integrative function of ideology.

Many previous civic figures within the United States have celebrated the ethnic diversity within the United States, with some, as we have seen, describing the country as a “beacon” for immigrants in search of a better life.²⁷⁸ While Obama has not used the motif of the “city on the hill” in his rhetoric, he alludes to it in a description of his father’s emigration to the United States: “Through hard work and perseverance my father got a scholarship to study in a magical place, America, that shone as a beacon of freedom and opportunity to so many who had come before.”²⁷⁹ The image of America as “shining” recalls Reagan’s farewell address, in which the adjective was added to the “city on the hill” analogy. The motif of the “beacon of freedom and opportunity” symbolizes America as a home to immigrants seeking the “American Dream,” defined as the “faith that anything is possible in America.”²⁸⁰ In discussing the appeal of the “American Dream” to individuals around the world, Obama reinforces the universality of American ideals:

²⁷⁷ Barack Obama, “A New Beginning,” *CBC World News*, June 4, 2009.
<http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2009/06/04/f-obama-egypt-speech004.html> (accessed June 5, 2009).

²⁷⁸ See, for example, Reagan, “Farewell Address.”

²⁷⁹ Barack Obama, “2004 Democratic National Convention Keynote Address.”

²⁸⁰ Obama, “Pre-Inauguration Address at Lincoln Memorial.”

And I believe that America holds within her the truth that regardless of race, religion, or station in life, all of us share common aspirations — to live in peace and security; to get an education and to work with dignity; to love our families, our communities, and our God. These things we share. This is the hope of all humanity.²⁸¹

Similarly, Obama draws attention to the religious diversity within the United States in order to highlight the cosmopolitan nature of the country: “Whatever we once were, we are no longer just a Christian nation; we are also a Jewish nation, a Muslim nation, a Buddhist nation, a Hindu nation, and a nation of nonbelievers.”²⁸² Furthermore, Obama declares that such a “patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness.”²⁸³ As such, Obama does not recognize any incompatibility between acknowledging religious plurality and speaking of “American values,” and argues that religious beliefs often provide an important grounding for such values.²⁸⁴ Such a proposition corresponds to Taylor’s argument that integration in American society occurs through participation in one’s religious denomination, regardless of what that might be.²⁸⁵ Religious tolerance has historically been an important value in America,²⁸⁶ but the possibility of rhetorically constructing an American religious landscape that includes non-Judeo-Christian religious traditions would have met with much scepticism until recently. While the seeds of religious tolerance were sown during the Puritan era and nurtured under disestablishment, continuing suspicion towards non-Protestant, and then non-Christian religions meant that

²⁸¹ Obama, “A New Beginning.”

²⁸² Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 218.

²⁸³ Obama, “Presidential Inaugural Address.”

²⁸⁴ Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 214.

²⁸⁵ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 524.

²⁸⁶ Mead, “The ‘Nation with the Soul of a Church,’” 71.

full “membership” within the civil-religious consensus for all religious believers is largely a recent proposition. Pierard and Linder argue that it was under President Reagan that “civil religion not only transcended all boundaries of particular religion, but also every American who ‘believes in God’ now was included under its benevolent wings.”²⁸⁷ That such a consensus of values may be reached by so many different religions (and atheism) serves to lend further credibility to Obama’s thesis that American values are the values of humanity.

Thus, for Obama, all of humanity shares a common set of aspirations, and these aspirations are embodied by America. Emphasis upon the cosmopolitan nature of America serves to underscore this point:

What has always united us, what has always driven our people, what drew my father to America’s shores -- is a set of ideals that speak to aspirations shared by all people: that we can live free from fear and free from want; that we can speak our minds and assemble with whomever we choose and worship as we please.²⁸⁸

To underscore the cosmopolitan nature of America, Obama “identifies himself specifically as an immigrant who embodies that American dream of self-making.”²⁸⁹ Cosmopolitanism is a central theme of Obama’s take on civil religion, and is linked to its eschatology.

In the conclusion of “Civil Religion in America,” Robert Bellah wrote that “the eschatological hope of American civil religion” is “the attainment of some kind of viable

²⁸⁷ Pierard and Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, 282.

²⁸⁸ Barack Obama, “Address to the People of Berlin.”

²⁸⁹ Shulman, “Politics and prophecy as vocations.”

and coherent world order.”²⁹⁰ A strong eschatological current runs through Obama’s brand of civil religion, which frequently presents America as a microcosm of a future world of peace and tolerance. Obama’s inaugural address draws a connection between America’s historical experience and eschatological hope:

because we have tasted the bitter swill of civil war and segregation, and emerged from that dark chapter stronger and more united, we cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass; that the lines of tribe shall soon dissolve; that as the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself; and that America must play its role in ushering in a new era of peace.²⁹¹

According to Ricoeur, “genuine myth goes beyond its role to found a particular community and speaks to man as such.”²⁹² Obama’s insistence that America’s values are the values of humanity is certainly intended to speak to “man as such,” particularly in a global climate of distrust of America. The “new era of peace” of which Obama speaks has overtones of utopia. However, if the function of utopia is to question structures of power and ideology, Obama’s American teleology is conveyed with different intent. One might compare Obama’s version of civil religion with that of his predecessor, who framed armed intervention in the affairs of other countries as the eschatological imperative of civil religion:

America’s vital interests and our deepest beliefs are now one. From the day of our Founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights, and dignity, and matchless value, because they bear

²⁹⁰ Bellah, “American Civil Religion,” 20.

²⁹¹ Obama, “Presidential Inaugural Address”

²⁹² Quoted in Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*, 123.

the image of the Maker of Heaven and earth. Across the generations we have proclaimed the imperative of self-government, because no one is fit to be a master, and no one deserves to be a slave. Advancing these ideals is the mission that created our Nation. It is the honorable achievement of our fathers. Now it is the urgent requirement of our nation's security, and the calling of our time.²⁹³

While the policies of Presidents Bush and Obama may have significant differences, the previous excerpt illustrates that the differences in their use of civil religion are subtle and ambiguous, since Bush's use of civil religion in the above quotation frames policy in the language of values in a similar fashion to Obama. Obama criticizes the previous regime's "false" choice between "our safety and our ideals;"²⁹⁴ if his judgment is accurate, Bush's use of civil religion constitutes a dissimulative ideology, obscuring the real divide between America's ideals and the policies of its government. In condemning the Bush administration's policies during his election campaign, Obama cast himself as the voice of change, calling for a renewal of America according to its ideals. However, since both men articulate similar myths, values, and ideals, one might question whether the America painted by Obama's rhetoric differs in any fundamental way from that presented by Bush.

The similarities in language between Bush and Obama may be construed as inevitable, given their operation within the rhetorical language of civil religion. Such discourse constitutes "a ritual of consensus that defuse[s] all issues in debate by restricting the debate itself, symbolically and substantively, to the meaning of

²⁹³ George W. Bush, "Second Inaugural Address" (Washington, DC: January 20, 2005), *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com> (accessed June 8, 2009).

²⁹⁴ Obama, "Presidential Inaugural Address."

America.”²⁹⁵ It may be that Obama’s emphasis upon America’s cosmopolitanism and the struggle for equality, as exemplified by the Civil Rights Movement, is a definitive distinguishing characteristic. However, as discussed in the previous chapter, much of King’s utopian vision could be communicated in civil-religious terms as well, and Obama sometimes borrows the language and imagery of King in his speeches. King’s civil-religious rhetoric may be described as prophetic, as it calls the nation to the judgment of a higher power; and utopian, since it describes a different, better order than the status quo. By contrast, successive presidents, as discussed earlier, tend to articulate a priestly, ideological civil religion. In order to determine whether Obama’s rhetoric advances a utopian vision of America in the manner of King, it is necessary to explore the influence of King and the Civil Rights Movement on Obama.

3.3: *Obama, King, and Utopia*

In the conclusion of his famous “Yes We Can” speech, Obama lists a number of crucial historical junctures in American history:

For when we have faced down impossible odds; when we’ve been told that we’re not ready, or that we shouldn’t try, or that we can’t, generations of Americans have responded with a simple creed that sums up the spirit of a people: Yes we can.

It was a creed written into the founding documents that declared the destiny of a nation – Yes we can.

²⁹⁵ Bercovitch, p. 21.

It was whispered by slaves and abolitionists as they blazed a trail toward freedom through the darkest of nights – Yes we can.

It was sung by immigrants as they struck out from distant shores and pioneers who pushed westward against an unforgiving wilderness – Yes we can.

It was the call of workers who organized; women who reached for the ballot; a President who chose the moon as our new frontier; and a King who took us to the mountaintop and pointed the way to the Promised Land.²⁹⁶

Seven periods in history are named: the American Revolution and the drafting of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution; the “darkest night” of the antebellum period and the struggle for abolition; the westward expansion; the labour movement of the early twentieth century; the suffrage movement; the Space Race; and the Civil Rights Movement. In his juxtaposition of each of these eras, Obama constructs a narrative of progress in which America steadily realizes the vision contained within its founding documents, described as the “Promised Land.”

By contrast, in the introduction to *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama traces a tradition that stretched from the days of the country’s founding to the glory of the civil rights movement, a tradition based on the simple idea that we have a stake in one another, and that what binds us together is greater than what drives us apart...²⁹⁷

²⁹⁶ Barack Obama, “Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: New Hampshire Primary” (Nashua, NH: January 8, 2008), *Organizing for America* | *BarackObama.com*, <http://www.barackobama.com/speeches/index.php> (accessed June 26, 2009). Format adjusted for space.

²⁹⁷ Obama, *The Audacity of Hope*, 2.

It is significant that this passage, which appears in the second paragraph of the book, names only these two events in America's history, in contrast with the longer account of American history provided in his "Yes We Can" speech. In this passage, Obama juxtaposes the mythical origin of America with the more recent event of the Civil Rights Movement – a defining time, as discussed above, in American civil religion. Describing the latter event as "glorious," Obama skilfully implies a civil religious narrative that incorporates the African-American experience as a key component of the story of America as a whole.

For Obama, the Civil Rights Movement, despite its importance in American history, is a project that is yet to be completed. At a commemorative event for the march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, for voting rights, Obama describes, using the symbolism of the Exodus narrative, the need to finish the work of the Civil Rights Movement:

I thank the Moses generation; but we've got to remember, now, that Joshua still had a job to do. As great as Moses was, despite all that he did, leading a people out of bondage, he didn't cross over the river to see the Promised Land... We're going to leave it to the Joshua generation to make sure it happens... at they don't still have a burden to shoulder, that they don't have some responsibilities. The previous generation, the Moses generation, pointed the way. They took us 90% of the way there. We still got that 10% in order to cross over to the other side.²⁹⁸

²⁹⁸ Barack Obama, "Selma Voting Rights March Commemoration at Brown Chapel" (Selma, AL: March 4, 2007), *Organizing for America* | *BarackObama.com*, <http://www.barackobama.com/speeches/index.php> (accessed June 26, 2009).

In addition to making use of biblical symbolism similar to that of King's rhetoric, Obama opts for a more informal mode of speaking reminiscent of that of King. Obama draws upon the fertile analogy between Exodus and the Civil Rights Movement in order to place the current generation within the narrative, articulating the important role still to be played.

During his campaign, Obama strove to situate himself within the tradition of the Civil Rights movement. Citing King as a major spiritual influence,²⁹⁹ Obama frequently refers to King in his rhetoric and "his speaking style has been compared to King's."³⁰⁰ Intimately familiar with the speeches and rhetorical style of King, Obama refers to specific motifs from King's speeches in his own rhetoric. At a speech at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, where King and his father preached, Obama declares: "We can't celebrate Dr. King's dream, and yet still have insufficient funds to cash that promissory note that was promised at the beginning of this nation."³⁰¹ The motif of the cheque refers directly to King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech, in which King states that

When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir... It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note, insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation,

²⁹⁹ Falsani, "Obama's Fascinating Interview with Cathleen Falsani."

³⁰⁰ David Donke, "Grasping King's Mantle," *The Immanent Frame*, posted January 21, 2008, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2008/01/21/grasping-kings-mantle/> (accessed June 26, 2009).

³⁰¹ Barack Obama, "Ebenezer Baptist Church Address" (Atlanta, GA: January 20, 2008), *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com> (accessed June 8, 2009).

America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds."³⁰²

Obama's reference to King's speech criticizes contemporary America for honouring King through formal celebrations but allowing systemic racism to continue within society. By utilizing the style and idioms of King, Obama seeks to present himself as a successor who continues the work of the "Moses generation." This technique met with a certain amount of success; public perception of Obama's place in the historic struggle for African-American rights is attested by the popular quote, "Rosa sat so Martin could walk; Martin walked so Obama could run; Obama is running so our children can fly!"³⁰³

However, as one who sought and now holds the office of the American presidency, Obama does not, and cannot, mount the same prophetic critique of America as that articulated by King, as in his "Declaration Against the Vietnam War:"

I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values... [W]e must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.³⁰⁴

³⁰² King, "I Have a Dream."

³⁰³ Taken from Khari Mosley, "Vote for Hope," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, November 2, 2008, <http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/08306/924702-109.stm#ixzz0HriqZ1PV&D> (accessed June 26, 2009). The origins of the quote are obscure.

³⁰⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Beyond Vietnam – A Time to Break Silence" (New York: April 4, 1967), *American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank*, <http://www.americanrhetoric.com> (accessed June 13, 2009).

While Obama is critical of individuals within the United States for moving the country away from its founding ideals, he does not call for a “radical revolution of values.” As Shulman observes,

rather than abolish imperialism, he is taking on war in Afghanistan; rather than abolish capitalism, he is saving the banks in ways that provoke considerable populist skepticism; rather than abolish poverty, he talks only about helping the middle class, and does not talk about the poor at all. He does not stand with King against American power, but wants to make American power more effective by making it morally credible in world public opinion.³⁰⁵

Of course, it would be without precedent for America’s head of state to adopt such a radical stance. Indeed, it may be impossible for one who holds the highest office of a world superpower to credibly adopt a prophetic stance, and the candidate for this office will probably find himself with no choice but to restrict the terms of his discourse to the accepted boundaries of dialogue, including an affirmation of “the essential goodness of inherited American values.”³⁰⁶ As such, Obama’s rhetorical style owes more to the King of civil religious canon, champion of the American ideals of civic equality, than the latter-day, radical King who calls God’s judgment upon America.³⁰⁷

In observing the conscious effort made by Obama to situate himself within the tradition of the Civil Rights Movement, the cynic may be tempted to dismiss Obama’s invocations of King as unscrupulous electioneering. However, such a dismissal would

³⁰⁵ Shulman, “Politics and prophecy as vocations.”

³⁰⁶ Ibid.

³⁰⁷ See King, “Beyond Vietnam – A Time to Break Silence,” for an illustration of King’s increasing radicalism late in his life.

overlook the profound impact of King upon Obama. Naïve as it may be to argue that there is no political calculation involved in Obama's invocation of King, the president's rhetoric demonstrates a depth to his appreciation of King that is not reducible to mere politicking. Ronald Thiemann describes the president's affinity with King:

President Obama stands in the tradition of African American intellectuals who freely employ theological reasoning in their political and public arguments. Like Martin Luther King, Jr. he uses biblical quotations and theological gestures to appeal to our common humanity and the hopes and aspirations we share. But like King he recognizes that such speech is "ideal" and does not simply correspond to the facts on the ground. King could write, "we will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands," even as dogs and fire hoses assaulted freedom riders in the Jim Crow south. What I have called Obama's "cautious realism" and "measured hope" combine utopian ideals and sober assessment in equal measure in a way characteristic of the best of African American political reflection.³⁰⁸

In light of all of this, how are we to judge whether Obama's telos of the American polity belies a truly utopian ethic rather than dissimulative ideology? There is no straightforward answer to the question, as is often the case in matters of politics and religion. However, some light may be shed on the issue upon one last look at the interdependency of ideology and utopia within the context of America itself.

³⁰⁸ Ronald F. Thiemann, "Obama as Public Theologian: Old Wine in New Wineskins," *The Immanent Frame*, posted May 28, 2009, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2009/05/28/obama-as-public-theologian-old-wine-in-new-wineskins/> (accessed June 26, 2009).

In all cultures, but especially in the United States, ideology and utopia exist in a dialectical relationship. The country was founded after a revolution, and a rallying-cry of this revolution was a utopian vision which called into question the established power structures of the time, envisioning a society based on egalitarian relationships between its citizens. As the nation came to be established, the principles of America's founding came to be an ideology ensuring social cohesion based on adherence to the founding principles of the country: individual liberty, a sense of divine mission, a common culture transcending ethnic differences, and the like. Within the context of Ricoeur's ideology-utopia model, such a transition is perhaps inevitable in such transitions of power as the American Revolution, and the new American ideology sometimes obscured the real inequalities within American society. Nevertheless, throughout the history of the country, influential spokespersons found ample resources within the myths and ideals espoused by the country to challenge the established order to judgment for its hypocrisy. As such, the language of the "civil religion" of America has proven sufficiently fertile for activists like King to construct utopias challenging ideological structures based upon the same myths and vocabulary. Based on the language and imagery used by Obama in his speeches, it would not be unsafe to say that this utopian vision underlying the American project has deeply influenced the president, and has been helpful in providing him with the resources with which to articulate his successful call for change and renewal of America.

Within civil religion exists the two poles of King's radical, prophetic critique and the priestly blessing of militaristic ventures given by presidents such as George W. Bush. That Obama does not (yet) fit neatly into either polarity may be due in part to the influence of Niebuhr. For Niebuhr, human destiny "is truly found not in efforts to escape

the flux of nature and history or to find premature fulfillment within it, but in acceptance of historical striving as meaningful because of God's suffering involvement in it."³⁰⁹

When Obama declares, "Yes we can," he affirms that the eschatology found in his brand of civil religion cannot be brought forth through government policy or military intervention, but instead comes to be realized through the struggle of a people oriented towards the common good. Such an eschatology is quite distinct from that of Christianity or any other traditional religion, and unlike Niebuhr, Obama's ultimate utopia is to be ushered in not by God, but by humanity acting according to strongly-felt values (possibly corresponding to belief in God). Nevertheless, Obama speaks of this utopia only in the most distant, futuristic terms, as something that cannot be fulfilled "prematurely." This may be due to a Niebuhrian humility – an understanding that historical struggle has meaning even if it cannot be fulfilled by the means of those engaged in the struggle.

President Obama is a masterful orator who skilfully combines the practical and the ideal. He is a religious believer who understands the usefulness of articulating moral issues in religious terms, yet is wary of absolute truth claims within the political sphere. He identifies strongly with the "historically Black church," yet has no difficulty in articulating the "new Israel" myth held dear by white America. He is able to present his own particular experiences and values as identical with those of America as a whole, while speaking the language of the presidents before him with ease and conviction. Most significantly, he is able to articulate a vision of America which is informed by the utopian dream present within American political thought from the revolutionary era to King and beyond, but is nonetheless willing and able to work as president within the confines of

³⁰⁹ Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 89.

the American ideological system. The extent to which Obama will be able to adhere to this utopian vision in the face of the demands and exigencies of politics remains to be seen.

Conclusion

Barack Obama's religious language employs similar themes and concepts as that of his predecessors, albeit with different emphases in keeping with his vision for the country. Obama makes reference to the founding documents of the country and "traditional American values" in order to further the argument that the "change" promised in his campaign amounts to a renewal of American society along the lines of the deepest ideals of the country's founding. In his rhetoric, the president articulates a vision of America as a cosmopolitan republic based upon a set of ideals which are "the hope of all humanity." The president constructs a historical narrative in which America, through the perseverance of its people, has gradually realized its ideals. Though great strides have been made, the project is yet to be completed, and Obama calls upon the American people to join him in making America fully live up to its promise.

A major event in Obama's narrative is the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Obama refers to this movement frequently, identifying it as being particularly significant for him as an African-American deeply influenced by Dr. King. In doing so, Obama firmly places himself within the integrationist, Christian tradition of African-American protest. Rather than rejecting American ideals and religion as hopelessly tainted by a history of injustice, this tradition calls America to judgment based on the egalitarian ethic articulated by its founding documents. Obama's speeches show a debt to King in terms of both imagery and style, but as president, he cannot and does not mount as radical a critique of American empire as does King. Nevertheless, Obama, like King, calls for a more just and equitable society using the language of American civil religion and

African-American Christianity, and views the elimination of racial injustice in America as a moral imperative upon which the nation's destiny is contingent.

The concept of a national destiny is a tradition within American history that dates back to such early Puritan settlers as John Winthrop. The religious understanding of America has intertwined throughout the country's history with a secular understanding of America as an "experiment" in Enlightenment philosophies of nation and governance. Both understandings continue to be extremely important within the American social imaginary. The concept of America as divinely commissioned to further God's designs in history constitutes an overlap between religious and political understanding in America which has been identified by scholars such as Robert Bellah as "American civil religion." Nearly all contemporary presidents articulate some variation of American civil religion within their rhetoric, understanding that it serves to offset the challenges of a culturally and religiously plural republic, to interpret events in terms of a religiously-influenced historical narrative, and to grant even the most questionable policies the veneer of divinely-mandated moral legitimacy.

The continuing appearance of civil-religious language in the rhetoric of President Obama and others illustrates the continuing tension within the United States of America as its people struggle to apply the revolutionary ideals of its founding to its current situation as global superpower. In the 2008 election, Americans responded favourably to a candidate who spoke the language of values and community. It appears that many within the country remain committed to the project to fully realize America's promise – to form "a more perfect union."

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