

ONE NATION ON THE AIR:
THE CENTRIPETALISM OF RADIO DRAMA
AND AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION, 1929-1962

by

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B.S., McPherson College, 1987
M.A., Emporia State University, 1989

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Abstract

During the 1950s, a decade scholars call the high point of American civil religion, journalist and historian William Lee Miller complained that the “popular religious revival is closely tied to a popular patriotism, of which it is the uncritical ally: religion and Americanism, god and country, Cross and flag.” If it bothered Miller that Americans too often “slipped unnoticing from one to the other,” he suspected that at least part of the problem had to do with mass media. “It is ‘salable’ religion,” he quipped, “quite clearly and often quite candidly cut to fit the requirements of Hooper ratings, box offices, and newsstand sales.”

This study examines the relationship between American civil religion and radio drama in the 1950s as well as the two decades that shaped the 1950s, the 1930s and 1940s. It argues that by adapting an earlier tradition of civil religion to the twentieth century’s popular, mass-mediated culture, radio drama reinforced the centripetalism of American public life in those decades. Radio was the right medium at the right time for a nation new to global leadership and eager to rebuild its economy. As a national medium, radio enabled civil religion to continue its role in helping to forge a national identity, and as an emotionally intense medium — or what media theorist Marshall McLuhan called a “hot” medium — radio connected individual Americans to an ethereal, imagined “community of the air.”

This study sheds light on constructions of the mid-twentieth century as an era of consensus in the United States by examining how centripetalism was constructed not simply by specific actors, such as the federal government and corporate broadcasting

networks, but also by the specific properties of the dominant national medium, radio, and by radio's ability to unite Americans around deep-seated civil religious understandings of their nation. It contributes to the scholarly conversation about civil religion by locating it not only in official pronouncements and public ceremonies, but also in commercial, mass-mediated cultural products, something most Americans consumed daily.

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Introduction — Radio, Civil Religion, and Consensus

Joe Smith, American, had a terrible day. He bickered with his wife at breakfast, his car was slow to start, and he traded insults with another driver on his way to work. At the end of the day, when he sat down in front of his radio, he hoped to forget his cares. He wanted a snappy tune, a couple jokes, and a dash of adventure. What he got was the Voice of God.

“I’ll be with you for the next few days,” the voice said, then went silent.

Puzzled, Joe walked upstairs to tell his wife, Mary, who helped their son with homework. She called it a gimmick.

“It must be one of those mystery voice shows. You know, you have to guess whose voice Or maybe one of those Orson Welles things,” she said.

Joe was unsatisfied. He dialed a friend, wondering if he had heard it. That fellow picked it up on a different network!

The next evening, Mary heard the voice for herself while Joe bowled with a group of co-workers. This time, God said he might perform miracles for those who did not believe. Mary found this even stranger than the first message, and she relayed it to Joe when he returned home. By now, the whole affair began to rankle him.

“The radio people ought to do something about this, you know. It’s just not right,” he said.

The third day was even odder. News reports described people hearing the voice in Europe, China, and Japan, and a Federal Communications Commission (FCC) official

admitted that no radio station could possibly have reached so many people in a single transmission. That evening, in a third message, the voice complained about the world's unbelief and unnecessary fear.

“Are you afraid because you believe that you have earned another forty days of and forty nights of rain? Must I perform such miracles in order to make you believe?” it asked.

On the fourth day, Joe learned that people around the world had not only heard the voice, but they had simultaneously heard it *in their own languages*, and the FCC admitted there was no scientific explanation for the broadcasts. Meantime, Joe noticed other changes. His relationship with his wife improved, and his car started on the first try. Was the car a miracle? he wondered. Or did it start because he pressed the starter more gently? Was that the point?

“Maybe that’s what he’s had in his mind all along, just teaching us to take it easy,” he mused.

That night, the fourth message was the most detailed of all.

“Each drop of rain that fell, each snowflake, each blade of grass, the sun, the moon, the air you breath, the earth you walk upon, the water you drink, the trees, the plains, the hills, these are my miracles. But look now for the miracles that you can create — the miracles of understanding and peace and loving kindness,” it said.

Similar messages arrived on the fifth and sixth days until, on the seventh day, people around the world gathered in their holy places with radios placed before them like altars. Joe, Mary, and their son sat silently in church — as did the rest of the congregation and clergy — in hopeful anticipation of a new message. They waited. They fidgeted.

They waited some more.

But nothing came. At length, a pastor rose.

“Children, we have forgotten it is the seventh day. Let us presume that God is resting,” he said.

The dominant theme of *The Next Voice You Hear*, a 1950 feature film produced by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer and starring James Whitmore and Nancy Davis (the future Nancy Reagan) was ecumenical and centripetal — it called on the people of the earth to recognize themselves as children of God and to treat each other accordingly. As Joe put it in his homely way, God was “teaching us to take it easy.”

But the film had two notable subtexts, as well. First, the brighter future it envisioned was unambiguously American. The story’s hero, “Joe Smith, American,” was identified as such on a title card, and the Smiths’ neighborhood was an idyllic corner of then-new middle-class suburbia. Joe worked at an aircraft manufacturing plant, a symbol of American industrial power and military might, and his pregnant wife stayed at home, where she was the picture of mid-century domesticity. The film had no poor, non-white, or non-English-speaking characters, and the one villainous figure — Joe’s boss — turned out to be an atheist. In short, if the voice from above urged people to look within themselves to improve the world around them, the rest of the film suggested that better world would look much like a prosperous and pious United States.

Second, the voice was on the radio. In 1950, God could have used television, newspapers, magazines, or the cinema. He could even have used space aliens — and apparently did in other films of that decade. But in *The Next Voice You Hear*, the author of the universe chose radio. Unlike a burning bush, it required no physical apparition, so

he could make his presence felt everywhere at once. Unlike dreams, it united millions of people in a common experience instead of speaking to them individually. Unlike newspapers and magazines, which could be picked up at leisure, radio followed an hourly schedule, so audiences could be trained to listen in at an appointed hour. And unlike television, nearly every home had a radio.

Whether or not they knew it, the producers, writers, and director who made *The Next Voice You Hear* hit upon a powerful combination — God, the United States, and radio. Or put less succinctly, they seemed to understand how powerfully radio could unify Americans by invoking their long-held self-identity as a people with a special relationship to God. Scholars often place this self-identity at the center of what they call “American civil religion” — a separate, secular, nonsectarian religion with its own language, symbols, saints, scripture, and ceremonies. American civil religion did not — and does not — worship the state, nor even the nation, but it does find transcendent meaning in the life of the nation much as ancient Hebrews found transcendent meaning in their national story.¹ It borrows language and symbols from Christianity, the nation’s dominant religion, but it is not the same as Christianity. American civil religion appropriates Christian symbols selectively, does not limit itself to Christian sources, and pursues objectives that often are more obviously national than Christian.² Because American civil religion must emphasize that the United States is a single, unified nation,

¹ “State” and “nation” are not synonyms. A state is a government, an administrative apparatus. A nation is an “imagined community” of persons, generally linked by some cultural attribute such as language or shared historical memories. For a brief discussion of these and related definitions, see Steven Grosby, *Nationalism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 7-26.

² As will be shown in several chapters, American religion in the mid-twentieth century increasingly was referred to as “Judeo-Christian,” thereby explicitly acknowledging that it was not exclusively Christian.

it remains as inclusive as possible. American politicians speak much about God but little about Jesus and never broach denominational differences.

Though civil religion is as old as the republic — and its roots are even older — its rhetoric in the twentieth century often was delivered in the form of broadcast entertainment. Not only were the cadences of its sacred phrases heard in political speeches, and its flags and solemn remembrances contemplated on Memorial Day, but it also infused the stories Americans told themselves about themselves in moments of leisure. During the Depression, war years, and postwar period, hundreds of thousands of those stories were broadcast over the radio, and it was in the so-called “radio days” of the 1930s and 1940s that radio learned how to use civil religion to build consensus. As the United States’ first truly national medium, radio enabled civil religion’s centripetal project of forging a national identity, and as an emotionally intense medium — or what media theorist Marshall McLuhan called a “hot” medium — radio connected individual Americans to an ethereal, imagined “community of the air.”³ Network executives tended to be skittish about sectarian religion because they feared it was divisive and would drive away listeners, but there were

³ Bruce Lenthall, *Radio’s America: The Great Depression and the Rise of Modern Mass Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 53-62; Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 22-32, 310-313. McLuhan classified as “hot” any medium that was “well filled with data” and as “cool” any medium of “low definition.” Generally, media that privileged one sense over the others, such as print did for sight and radio did for sound, were hot because excluding the other senses concentrated the recipient’s attention on that sense. By contrast, a medium such as television, which stimulated multiple senses more evenly, was cool because it required more active completion on the part of the recipient. It may seem counterintuitive to think of radio as requiring less completion since the “pictures” radio conjures up must entirely be constructed by the listener, but that is not what McLuhan meant. Radio was hot, he argued, because *what it transmits* comes to the listener relatively fully formed. Radio, therefore, is focusing and centripetal — McLuhan even went so far as to call it “the medium for frenzy.” The pictures and sounds television transmits, by contrast, must be pieced together by the viewer, so television has a distracting and centrifugal effect. McLuhan also argued that the fact radio followed another hot medium — print — was significant. Print had emphasized linearity, rationality, and individualism, he wrote, so radio came as a shock to the Western psyche. Like an unseen voice in the night, it reminded Westerners of long-forgotten tribal bonds. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), 18-19, 265-279.

certain, specific contexts in which religious themes were not only acceptable but popular, and these corresponded to the use of civil religion.⁴ They included historical dramas that contemplated the nation's character or destiny, war stories that depicted the United States as a defender of righteousness, Christmas stories that presented the American people as basically good, didactic stories that stressed moral lessons, and speculative fiction that chided the nation obliquely for straying from its moral moorings.

As radio's use of civil religion rose in tandem with the nation's international power and economic wealth, two themes emerged. One focused on war and pitted a "godly" United States against "ungodly" enemies such as the Axis and Soviet Union in conflicts that looked as if they might be Armageddon. The other centered on postwar abundance and more than hinted that the "American Way" of capitalism was "God's Way," as well. War and abundance, at least initially, reinforced a centripetal rhetoric of consensus built up during the New Deal and World War II. Civil religion featured in that rhetoric in order to define Americans as an exceptional people, infuse the country's liberal capitalism with redemptive power, and overcome racial and religious divisions in the body politic.

Radio was the right medium at the right time for a nation new to global leadership and eager to rebuild its economy. It was a centripetal medium with a centripetal message in an age that valued consensus — a handy tool for those who wanted to use civil religion to forge consensus. By adapting an earlier tradition of civil religion to the twentieth

⁴ Early debates about religion on the air are summarized in Louise M. Benjamin, *Freedom of the Air and the Public Interest: First Amendment Rights in Broadcasting to 1935* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), 89-107; and Tona J. Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, and Popular Culture in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 22-36.

century's popular, mass-mediated culture, radio drama reinforced the centripetal rhetoric that dominated American public life until the 1960s. The politically informed religious awakening of the 1950s — or what could be called the “civil religious awakening of the 1950s” — took the shape that it did, in part, because it followed decades of radio dominance. American radio listeners helped to create an unusually unified moment in the nation's history.

What is civil religion?

Despite an impressive literature probing American civil religion, few outside the circles of historians, sociologists, and religious scholars who write about it have ever heard the term. Asking an average American if he or she subscribes to civil religion likely will produce a puzzled stare. To a degree, this is deliberate, especially on the part of politicians. If civil religion selectively expropriates words or images from the nation's dominant religion, then it profits from keeping that relationship as vague as possible. Religions from which it borrows may have tenets that hinder state interests, and the more abstract civil religion's phrases and concepts are, the more easily they can unify a diverse population. Civil religion is that religion which dare not speak its name. It exists not because people subscribe to it consciously but simply because they subscribe to it. Understanding how they do so is useful both to students of American politics and religion. For the former, it highlights how Americans use religious rhetoric for political ends, and for the latter, it helps to distinguish between religion and politics.⁵

⁵ It also helps to distinguish between the religious and the secular, or rather to show how the two are not simple antimonies. If instead of thinking of religion and secularism as opposites, the “religious” is seen as pointing toward the transcendent and the “secular” is seen as pointing toward the here-and-now, then civil religion is one way the religious can be trained toward the secular and vice versa. The religious

If not from daily discourse, then, whence comes the concept of civil religion as a coherent religion? The term originated with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who described it in his 1762 treatise, *The Social Contract*. Rousseau began with the proposition that “no State has ever been established without having religion for its basis,” but he recognized that not all kinds of religion served the state equally well.⁶ In pre-Christian times, he argued, religion had not been separated from politics, and early societies were theocracies whose religions were tailored to state needs. When Jesus and his followers established a “spiritual kingdom,” they created a new kind of society that separated religious and political authority. The result was the emergence of two kinds of religion: a “religion of man” that was eternal and spiritual — a kingdom not of this world — and a “religion of the citizen” that was tribal and immanent like a Caesarean cult. Rousseau considered the religion of man to be “the pure and simple religion of the Gospel,” but he feared it was too meek for politics. “If the State flourishes,” he wrote, “he [the Christian] scarcely dares to enjoy the public felicity, lest he should become proud of the glory of his country; and if the nation falls into ruin, he blesses the chastening hand of God which is laid so heavily on His people.”⁷ The religion of the citizen posed problems because it was rooted

becomes more secular by becoming more closely associated with here-and-now distributions of political power, and the secular becomes more religious by being cast in transcendent terms. This is precisely why some religious Americans find civil religion objectionable. For example, religion scholar Richard T. Hughes, *Christian America and the Kingdom of God* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009), argues that American civil religion is not Christian in any traditionally Christian sense. For a more general discussion of the intertwining of the religious, the secular, and the modern mass media, see Hent de Vries, “In Media Res: Global Religion, Public Spheres, and the Task of Contemporary Comparative Religion Studies,” in *Religion and Media*, eds. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001): 3-42.

⁶ Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Charles Frankel (New York: Hafner, 1947), 119.

⁷ Ibid., 119-121.

in this world and elevated a particular state or tribe above all others. Rousseau accused it of multiplying false gods according to political expediency, equating foreigners with infidels, and setting each nation “in a natural state of war with all others.”⁸

Civil religion was meant to be a happy medium. Like the religion of the citizen, civil religion would orient its subjects’ religious feeling toward the nation, but it would limit its dogmas to those minimally necessary for political comity. On the religion of man, it would stand silent, allowing individuals to make their own decisions. In effect, civil religion was to be a third form of religion that would fix the common good as its object and then allow as much of the religion of man and as little of the religion of the citizen as possible. As Rousseau put it in a famous passage, “The dogmas of civil religion ought to be simple, few in number, precisely fixed, and without explanation or comment.” He identified four, each of which had clear political usefulness and little to no religious precision. The first acknowledged a “powerful, wise, and benevolent Divinity,” but did not name him, her, or it. The second recognized “the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked,” but made no distinction between eternal souls, resurrected bodies, reincarnation, karma, or any similar belief. The third asserted “the sanctity of the social contract and the laws,” but did not venture what those laws should be; and the fourth proscribed religious intolerance since, as Rousseau put it, “wherever theological intolerance is admitted, it is impossible for it not to produce some civil effect.”⁹

The most prominent expositor of American civil religion is the sociologist Robert

⁸ Ibid., 120.

⁹ Ibid., 123-124.

N. Bellah, who argued in a classic 1967 essay that the United States has an unofficial, meaning disestablished, civil religion.¹⁰ Like Rousseau's civil religion, American civil religion permits individuals and individual faith communities to follow their consciences privately while simultaneously calling them together in a nation that is seen as having a special relationship with God. "I would argue that civil religion at its best is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people," Bellah wrote.¹¹ Like Christianity and most other particular religions, American civil religion has sacred texts such as the Declaration of Independence and Gettysburg Address, cherished saints such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, holy sites such as the Lincoln Memorial and Pearl Harbor Memorial, and religious ceremonies such as presidential inaugurations and Memorial Day observances. It also has pastors, priests, and prophets, the most prominent of whom are its presidents. Unlike Christianity and other sectarian religions, however, American civil religion has no "exclusion clause." It does not demand its adherents' highest loyalty, and it permits — indeed, encourages — Americans to participate simultaneously in the particular religion of their choice.¹²

The key idea of American civil religion — or any civil religion — is the link it forges between the life of the nation and something transcendent. The "life of the nation" can mean its history, political structure, economic system, culture — whatever comes to

¹⁰ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in *American Civil Religion*, eds. Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 21-44. This article originally appeared in 1967. Rousseau, a Frenchman, seems to have assumed that civil religion would be established.

¹¹ Ibid., 33.

¹² Ibid., 26-30; Conrad Cherry, ed. *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*, rev. ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 8-18.

be seen as transcendently important. “Something transcendent” usually means God, but also can mean History, Progress, Freedom, Civilization, or some other capital-letter concept. American civil religion often has formed this link by asserting that the United States has an exceptional relationship with God, or that its leaders and people are guided by the hand of God. It also has seen the United States as a redeemer nation, a tool in God’s hands to bring freedom and democracy to other nations, and it has asserted that the “American way of life” is a fundamentally moral way of life, or a covenant between humans and God or among humans with the blessing of God.

Early American civil religion expressed the idea of exceptionalism by comparing the American story to that of Exodus. Great Britain became Egypt, and the United States became a “New Israel.” During the American Revolution, a Moses-like George Washington was said to have led his people away from British bondage, across the proverbial Sinai Desert of the American Revolution, and into a new land of republicanism. Americans of that period spoke of the new union as God’s “first born nation.”¹³

The idea of redemption addressed that nation’s role in history by asserting that the United States was meant to redeem other nations, or to share its blessing with them. “Redeemer nation” rhetoric did not originate with the Civil War, but as the historian of rhetoric Ernest Lee Tuveson has shown, the carnage of that war gave it special urgency. Americans went into the war suspecting that a great work of the Lord was at hand. They hoped that perhaps their tragedy was but the birth pangs of a new global order in which,

¹³ Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 32; Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: Crossroad, 1975), 39-44.

to paraphrase John Locke, all the world would be America again. “Are all nations communing?” asked Walt Whitman, “is there going to be but one heart to the globe?” As Christ died for the ungodly, so the Chosen Nation would purge itself of the original sin of slavery and thereby prepare itself to be a vessel of redemptive action. When Lincoln himself paid the supreme sacrifice, he entered the narrative as a Christ figure.¹⁴

Since colonial times, Americans also have believed their nation in some sense reflects a transcendent moral order and not simply a secular compact among its citizens. America was exceptional and worthy of redeeming other nations because, far from being “just another nation,” it represented a better way to live. In *The Broken Covenant*, Bellah traced civil religion’s interest in public morality back to Puritan covenant theology and eighteenth-century civic humanism. Both insisted, like Rousseau, that republics thrived upon moral foundations, and religion served as the usual vector through which moral training flowed.¹⁵ Colonial religion was diverse and fractious, however, so by the time of the United States’ founding, disagreements over which church should be established led to there being no established church, and Protestants wishing to construct a “Christian nation” had to find a way to do it through individual conversions and voluntary associations. Thus emerged the familiar American idea that God’s hand is present in American life, not from the top down, as through a king, but from the bottom up, through the hearts and labors of its citizens.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 187-196; Allen C. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 400-441.

¹⁵ Bellah, *Broken Covenant*, 1-35.

¹⁶ Edwin S. Gaustad, *Faith of the Founders: Religion and the New Nation, 1776-1826*, 2nd ed. (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004), 110-133; Robert T. Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant*

If narratives of exceptionalism, redemption, and covenant are drawn from American history, they represent the “life-of-the-nation” side of civil religion’s linking of nation to transcendence. Were this all civil religion did, it might better be called a grandiose form of history rather than a separate religion. What is it, then, on the “something-transcendent” side of civil religion that makes it a religion? There is no one answer to this question because there is no one type of civil religion. Scholars have proffered several taxonomies, but most recognize civil religion as employing at least three types of speech: words of comfort, words of confidence, and words of judgment.¹⁷

Hopes and Historical Realities (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 42-51. Of course, there always has been a “minority report” in America, as well — those who did not approve of civil religion and thought “Christian nation” an un-Christian concept. Among religious Americans who have taken this view have been many Baptists, Quakers, and Mennonites, among others.

¹⁷ Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder, “President and Civil Religion,” in *Encyclopedia of the American Presidency*, eds. Leonard W. Levy and Louis Fisher, vol. 1 (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 203-206, distinguished between pastoral, priestly, and prophetic civil religion. The first offers words of comfort, the second words of confidence, and the third words of judgment. David Chidester, *Patterns of Power: Religion and Politics in American Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988), made a somewhat similar distinction between “American culture religion,” “American religious nationalism,” and “the transcendent religion of America.” In his analysis, American culture religion is a religious feeling about American culture, or a common set of cultural properties about which the nation’s population has religious feeling. Like Pierard and Linder’s pastoral civil religion, it offers reassurance and affirmation. What Chidester called American religious nationalism makes the nation the ultimate point of reference and uses religious language to legitimate its “identity, purposes, and political policies,” but unlike priestly civil religion, does not distinguish between nationalism and civil religion. Chidester’s transcendent religion of America, like prophetic civil religion, judges the nation by a standard ultimately higher than and apart from the life of the nation itself. A third scheme was proposed by Martin E. Marty, “The Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion,” in Richey and Jones, 139-157. Instead of describing three types of American civil religion, Marty described four. On the one hand, he distinguished between “nation-under-God” and “nation-as-self-transcendent” civil religions, the first of which sees the nation in relationship with some sort of deity, be it theistic, deist, or whatever, and the second of which sees the nation itself as the transcendent object. On the other hand, he distinguished between “priestly” and “prophetic” styles of civil religion. Then he put the two distinctions together to form a two-by-two grid producing what he called “two kinds of two kinds” of civil religion appear. Priestly nation-as-self-transcendent civil religion described a diety which watches over and gives purpose to the nation. It can be compared to Pierard and Linder’s pastoral civil religion. Marty’s priestly style of nation-as-self-transcendent civil religion is similar to their priestly civil religion in that it emphasizes the nation’s own transcendent qualities. It tends to put the nation “in the place where God had once been,” as Marty puts it. His two prophetic versions of civil religion judge the nation from a transcendent standard, as does Pierard and Linder’s prophetic civil religion, the main difference being that the prophetic style of nation-under-God civil religion refers to the standards of an objective diety while the prophetic style of nation-as-self-transcendent civil religion calls the nation to be true to its own standards.

Historians Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder have distinguished between pastoral, priestly, and prophetic civil religion along these lines. Since sectarian religions, or “religious religions,” also offer comfort, confidence, and judgment, similarities between them and civil religion can be highlighted by examining these three types.

Pastoral civil religion offers words of comfort by reassuring a nation that it stands in God’s favor and that God is watching over it. It infuses the life of the nation with transcendent importance by depicting the nation as pleasing to that which is transcendent, and encourages the nation to live righteously to retain that blessing. In the mid-twentieth century, President Dwight Eisenhower was a pastoral civil religionist par excellence. He repeatedly told Americans that they were good and that because of their goodness — not least their religious piety — they would enjoy God’s blessing at home and protection abroad. When American civil religion deploys its language, symbols, saints, scripture, or ceremonies to pastoral effect, it can be thought of as playing a Durkheimian role. Émile Durkheim, a nineteenth-century French sociologist, considered religion a projection of society, and in a famous reference to Australian aboriginal religion, he located the roots of religion in the overpowering and god-like manner in which early societies presented themselves to individuals. Only in society did individuals forge self-identities and learn to distinguish right from wrong, and it was society that held the power of death over the individual, not the other way around, Durkheim wrote. To early humans, such power was awesome and terrifying — it produced “a feeling of perpetual dependence.”¹⁸ When these emotions were transferred onto a totem, often an animal, that object became the symbol

¹⁸ Émile Durkheim, *Durkheim on Religion*, ed. W. S. F. Pickering (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994), 123-133.

of a particular society, and the feelings of awe individuals had for society transferred onto images of the totem.¹⁹ In civil religion, similar feelings about a nation are transferred onto flags or other symbols. Like their ancient predecessors, these modern totems stimulate feelings of awe on the part of individuals toward the life they share in common with their compatriots.

Though nearly all civil religion is Durkheimian to some extent, a weakness of Durkheim's analysis has always been its one-way causation. Like Karl Marx before him, Durkheim operated with nineteenth-century positivistic assumptions that led him to treat religion as an epiphenomenon rising from society much as Marx saw it rising from economics. When religion is used to validate existing societies — that is, to sanctify the status quo — Durkheimian analysis fits best, but religion is used for other things, as well. Sometimes it is used to pursue interests that upset the status quo. In the case of civil religion, these may be national interests that require sacrifice on the part of individuals in order to defeat an enemy or that call for taxes to achieve a national project. A second type of civil religion, priestly civil religion, offers words of confidence to nations in pursuit of specific interests. It infuses transcendent importance into the life of the nation by arguing that the nation itself embodies something transcendent. This grants the nation justification and encouragement.

Consider, for example, the following comments U.S. Secretary of State John Foster Dulles made in 1956. In a speech outlining America's need to contain Soviet power, Dulles linked geostrategic interests with transcendent virtues:

This Nation was conceived with a sense of mission and

¹⁹ Ibid., 133-139.

dedicated to the extension of freedom throughout the world. President Lincoln, speaking at this very Independence Hall, said of our Declaration of Independence, that there was “something in that Declaration giving liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope for the world for all future time. It was that which gave promise that in due time the weights should be lifted from the shoulders of all men and that all men should have an equal chance.”

That has been the spirit which has animated our people since they came together as a nation. We have, it is true, acquired much for ourselves. But also we have had in large measure the greatest of all satisfactions — that is the situation which comes from creating and sharing.²⁰

Earlier in the speech, Dulles gave strategic and economic reasons for checking Soviet power, but in these lines, he made it a religious quest. If pastoral civil religion can be described as playing a Durkheimian role, priestly civil religion can be described as playing a Weberian role. German sociologist Max Weber, another founding contributor to the sociology of religion, saw religion as something people use to pursue public interests or meet personal needs. He did not reduce its relationship to society to a one-way street. In Weber’s analysis, religion could influence society as easily as society could influence religion. Priestly civil religion does this by making the nation itself an object of transcendence and then emboldening it toward action.²¹

Of course, critics of priestly civil religion have warned that it easily can slip into

²⁰ John Foster Dulles, “Freedom’s New Task,” in Cherry, *God’s New Israel*, 327.

²¹ Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion* (1922; repr. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), xxix-xl, 1-19. Weber’s most famous analysis of the interaction of religion and human interest was *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, published in German in 1905 and translated into English in 1930. Chidester, *Patterns of Power*, 84, added that American religious nationalism draws from Weber’s ideas about religion’s ability to authenticate the state. It is important to note, however, that priestly civil religion focuses on the nation, which is not the same as the state. The United States, more than some other countries — Prussia, for example — has historically insisted on that distinction.

national self-worship, or a kind of national idolatry. If any nation associates itself *too* closely with the transcendent, it may decide it *is* the transcendent and may simply define right and wrong according to its interests. Nations that go down this path generally exhibit the faults of Rousseau's religion of the citizen. For this reason, a third type of civil religion, prophetic civil religion, offers words of judgment to remind the nation of a standard of right and wrong that is not coterminous with national interest. Prophetic civil religion infuses transcendent importance into the life of the nation by holding national life up to a transcendent standard, ideally a creed the nation previously claimed to adore. Just as ancient prophets found they were not welcome in their hometowns, so practitioners of prophetic civil religion often find their words unwelcome. Martin Luther King, Jr., perhaps the preeminent practitioner of prophetic American civil religion in the twentieth century, paid with his life. His "Letter From a Birmingham Jail" provided an eloquent example of this tradition. Wrote King:

We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America's destiny. Before the pilgrim 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.²²

²² Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter From Birmingham Jail," in Cherry, *God's New Israel*, 353-354.

Prophetic civil religion can be compared to Swiss theologian Karl Barth's definition of religion as a human activity at the edge of human possibility, a grappling toward the divine at the point where human experience ends. Barth rethought religion after World War I when Western cultural superiority seemed a cruel joke and some in the West felt rattled by contact with other religions through imperialism. Barth sometimes is misquoted as arguing that Christianity is different than other religions because it is not a religion, but what he actually said was that all religion — including the Christian religion — should be distinguished from God's self-revelation in the life of Jesus Christ.²³ Barth's separation of religion, which always is a human activity, and revelation, which is beyond even religion, is similar to prophetic civil religion's distinction between the life of the nation and the transcendent standard by which it is judged. Whereas pastoral and priestly civil religion find transcendent meaning *inside* a nation's history, prophetic civil religion applies a standard ultimately beyond it.

Finally, a distinction should be made between civil religion, as practiced in the United States, and political religion, as practiced in other parts of the world in the twentieth century. In a recent book, Emilio Gentile, an authority on Italian fascism, described both of these phenomena as rival forms of the "sacralization of politics."²⁴

²³ Karl Barth, *On Religion: The Revelation of God as the Sublimation of Religion*, trans. Garrett Green (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 6-22, 34-36, 85-87, 116.

²⁴ Emilio Gentile, *Politics As Religion*, trans. George Staunton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006). Gentile presented a brief three-stage history of the sacralization of politics that somewhat followed Rousseau. Prior to Christianity, there was no separation of church and state, he argued. Political and religious leaders were one and the same. With Christianity, the two were separated, and from the dawn of the Christian era to the early modern period, church-state relations were dominated by a tug-of-war. In the early modern period, the state won as religion was divided and sidelined. This victory of secular authorities presented new possibilities for religious expression to be channeled through the secular, that is, for politics to be sacralized, and Gentile argued that modern secularism, far from ending religion, has proven to be an incubator of new religions. Citing mostly European sources, Gentile also suggested that scholars of civil religion have tended to favor one of three interpretations. The first he called the crowd

Civil religion, he argued, sacralizes politics in such a way as to arc over, or allow, other religions and multiple political parties, so civil religions view themselves as compatible with traditional, sectarian religions and with democratic political systems.²⁵ Political religion, by contrast, requires a political and ideological monopoly. It stands in direct conflict with traditional religions, either disallowing them or reinterpreting them to its own ends, and it is not compatible with liberal democracy. As Fascism, Nazism, and Bolshevism were the most obvious examples of modern political religions, most of American radio drama's war-related rhetoric focused not on a struggle between the sacralization of politics and the non-sacralization of politics, but rather on the differences between rival forms of the sacralization of politics, namely the openness of civil religion and the closeness of political religion. Indeed, Gentile was of the view that American civil religion was almost unique in its lack of an appeal to a specific religion. By so completely eschewing the long European tradition of official religious monopolies, it affirmed religion generally while simultaneously protecting individual religious liberty.²⁶

In brief, then, civil religion links the life of a nation to something transcendent, but not always in the same way. It may emphasize the nation's exceptionalism, unique relationship with God, or particular role in history. It may describe the nation as playing a

manipulation interpretation. It holds that civil and political religions are attempts by leaders to tame and control populations. Unfortunately, it gives too little agency to the populations themselves. The second he called the fideistic interpretation. It argues that secular religions are built around gods made by men who, in turn, remake men. As such, these religions are examples of collective human irrationality or frenzy. A third theory, which Gentile calls the functionalist interpretation, sees secular religion as something people use to "live a superior life" through participation in a collective identity. Basically Durkheimian, it is the leading interpretation among scholars today, Gentile wrote. xvi-xvii, 4-9.

²⁵ Of course, whether or not traditional religions reciprocate by seeing themselves as compatible with civil religion is their own affair.

²⁶ Gentile, xiv-xix, 20.

role in a divine pageant of history, or it may judge the nation according to some transcendent standard to which the nation claims fealty. Partly because it has its own language, symbols, saints, scriptures, and ceremonies, and partly because it can provide a lens through which sectarian religions are interpreted as easily as they can provide a lens through which it is interpreted, it is a separate, secular, nonsectarian religion. In the United States, American civil religion is not the same as the nation's dominant religion, Christianity, because it does not insist upon the same creeds, historical memories, rituals, or symbols, and it is not the same as political religion because it allows for — and even cherishes — political and religious liberty.

Why radio?

If American civil religion sought to unify the United States by giving its citizens common stories of transcendent importance, radio proved a useful means of promulgating those stories. Radio alone did not create consensus anymore than it created civil religion, but it was a centripetal medium that lent itself well to such a use. From the 1930s to 1950s, radio dominated the United States' national media environment, and it provided civil religion with two resources. First, as an aural medium, it invited individuals to identify themselves as citizens of a larger community. This flowed from the loss of dimensionality implicit in visual communication and the disembodiment of the source of sound. Visual communication tends to set the individual off from others while aural communication tends to support interaction and even interdependence. Second, as a national medium, radio provided a convenient means of national boundary setting. It reinvigorated what media theorist Marshall McLuhan called the West's atrophied capacity for "tribalism," it reinterpreted space and time, and

it resulted in the construction of new national institutions. All of these underscored differences between the United States and other nations and emphasized similarities among Americans.

That radio would renew, refresh, or reinvent the United States was a familiar trope among the medium's first observers. As early as 1922 — just before radio exploded in popularity — publicist and advertising executive Bruce Barton predicted the new medium would make Americans smarter, richer, and safer. Homes with radios receive information that “is almost a liberal education,” he wrote, and businesses can use it for daily advertising. Radio also will put America's criminals on the run: “Imagine what chance of escape a criminal will have when a complete description of him can be carried instantly, by the human voice, into every police station in the country.”²⁷ Most ambitiously, Barton claimed that radio would build trust between people. It would demonstrate that “the great majority of human beings are decent, generous, and eager to do the right thing,” and it would help to turn the country into a community. “One boorish or selfish radio owner, disregarding the rights and comfort of his fellows, can interrupt a church service in which twenty thousand homes are joined in worship. ... Yet it isn't done!” Barton wrote. In fact, he claimed to have witnessed two stations voluntarily cease broadcasting so that a popular comedian's show could go through — “and the request was granted with a hearty good will.”²⁸

However frothy Barton's predictions, he was neither the first nor last to spot radio's nation-building potential. It is important, however, to clarify what a nation is. In

²⁷ Bruce Barton, “This Magic Called Radio” *The American Magazine*, June 1922, 11-13, 70, 72.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

a classic study, Benedict Anderson defined “nation” as “an imagined political community — and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”²⁹ Anderson’s definition contained two elements — imagination and limitedness — to which radio contributed. By “imagined,” he meant a community that was mentally constructed. As Anderson put it, even in tiny nations, most co-nationals remain strangers to one another, since, were it not for their national identity, they would not likely have anything to do with one other. By “limited,” Anderson meant that every nation’s existence implies the existence of other nations — nation-constructing is a process of boundary-setting. “No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind,” he wrote.³⁰ Civil religion, by its very nature, does not demand a citizen’s highest loyalty as does nationalism, but they both seek to foster a sense of national unity and they both must contribute to identities that are simultaneously imagined and limited.³¹ For radio to be useful to nation-building — or, more specifically, to civil religion engaged in nation-building — it had to carry the nation’s imagined identity and it had to facilitate boundary setting.

Radio’s capacity for carrying the nation’s imagined identity was related to its aural character. It may not have been the “medium for frenzy” that McLuhan once called it, but it was a “medium for collectivization.” McLuhan argued in two books published in

²⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 6.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

³¹ Nationalism, like political religion, requires one’s highest loyalty and civil religion does not. It may be helpful to think of civil religion as a tool that can be put to nationalism’s use but which is not itself nationalism. As for nationalism and political religion, it is possible to imagine them becoming synonymous if a system were both built around a national identity and demanding of a political and religious monopoly, but it also is possible for political religion to be built around something other than nationalism. Bolshevism, for example, expressly rejected nationalism in favor of an internationalist, class-oriented worldview.

the 1960s that media act as extensions of the human senses, much as a hammer acts as an extension of a carpenter's arm. Media do not extend human senses in natural proportion, however, so when the primarily visual medium of print came to dominate Western culture in the early modern period, properties associated with vision became more dominant than properties associated with touch or sound. Most of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, published in 1962, was devoted to showing how print extended sight experience to the relative diminishment of tactile and aural experience. Phonetic symbols are spacial, objective, and distinct, McLuhan argued, and printed words, if they are to be meaningful, are ordered on a page according to established rules. Therefore, the print-dominated West learned to prize order, linearity, objectivity — and individualism. Print-dominated Westerners — McLuhan styled them “typographic men” — lived in two-dimensional worlds of straight lines and linear causation. The private act of reading made knowledge the possession of individuals, and in time, that led to a reconceptualization of society as an accumulation of individuals as opposed to an organic whole. Similarly, various aspects of human life were separated into distinct spheres such as “politics,” “economics,” and “religion.” Earlier societies had seen these activities as part of a seamless web of existence, both in the sense that they were not separate activities and in the sense that they were communal activities, but typographic people came to think of them as activities in which individuals engage according to ability or taste.³²

Radio encouraged collectivization, in part, because it challenged the

³² McLuhan, *Gutenberg*, 265-279; McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 297-307. Though McLuhan's insights into the relationships between media and human senses remain useful, he probably exaggerated the degree to which sound was “missing” in Western culture prior to the nineteenth century. For a corrective, see Peter Bailey, “Breaking the Sound Barrier,” in *Hearing History: A Reader*, ed. Mark M. Smith (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), 23-35.

individualization of this print-dominated world. Radio was the fullest expression of a technological reassertion of the aural that had begun in the second half of the nineteenth century and had previously produced the telephone, phonograph, and microphone. Even the telegraph, while primarily text-based, had taken a step toward aural communication with its Morse Code. As Steven Connor has argued, the reintroduction of sound disintegrated “the rationalized ‘Cartesian grid’ of the visualist imagination, which positioned the perceiving self as a single point of view.”³³ The world began to lose dimensionality, and communication became disembodied. In visual communication, individuals orient themselves by observing the spacial dimensions of the things around them. A woman examining a painting can tilt her head or step to the side to gain a different perspective, for example, or two men conversing can recognize each other as separate, embodied agents. They can see that their interlocutor clearly is an other, or a “not-I,” and they can locate the other’s body as the source of the “not-I’s” sound. Purely aural communication lacks this dimensionality and embodiment. Voices on the radio could be modulated as to volume but not much else, and they were not attached to observable bodies — indeed, they seemed to come from nowhere. For this reason, disembodied sound historically had been associated with nonhuman, divine, supernatural, or mysterious beings, and, as the Jesuit media scholar Walter Ong reminded his readers, even in Christian theology, the Word was spoken before it was written.³⁴ Connor argued that the reassertion of sound in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not simply alter the Western, visual self but, in fact, problematized the whole modern concept

³³ Steven Connor, “Sound and the Self,” in Smith, 56.

³⁴ Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1967).

of the self. As he put it,

Perhaps because of the very dominance of the visual paradigm in conceptions of the self, the auditory or acoustic has often been experienced and represented, not as a principle of strength, but as a disintegrative principle. Indeed, it was precisely this aspect of the aural which may have recommended it to the arts of dissolution practiced by futurism and dadaism.³⁵

Nation-building is hardly the same as dadaism, however, so disintegrating the individual was only the first step toward building collective, national identities. The second step was aided by aural communication's participatory quality. More than passively receiving disembodied voices, radio listeners entered into imagined relationships with the voices they heard — they were, to use an unfortunately visual metaphor — pulled into the process of storytelling. Radio historian Susan Douglas identified two types of listening that help explain why the medium was so personally involving. First, what she called “dimensional listening” recreated sound's absent external dimensionality inside the listener's head. To the person hearing a radio play, the mind became a stage and the listener imagined the sets, actors, and actions on that stage. Even tiny clues from dialogue, description, voice inflection, sound effects, or music transported listeners to ancient Rome, the Battle of Gettysburg, or a snowy Colorado mountain. As the stories unfolded, listeners unselfconsciously made set design, wardrobe, and staging decisions a film director would have made for them. A second way of listening, which Douglas called “associational listening,” evoked memories of other meaningful sounds and associated them with the sound that was broadcast. Douglas used the example of a song that took her back to her youth, but it is not difficult to imagine

³⁵ Connor, 61.

sounds that would be relevant to civil religion. A war story, for example, could have tremendous associational power for Americans who have experienced combat, or for families of fallen soldiers.³⁶

Walter Ong provided a more detailed explanation of sound's participatory quality by studying the "primarily orality" that preceded radio. Ong thought an examination of premodern, preliterate communication strategies could reveal that much of what seemed "natural" about modern communication actually was a legacy of print. In his classic study *Orality and Literacy*, Ong argued that sound is unusual in that "it exists only when it is going out of existence." Visual media such as books — and even the moving visual medium of film — have a permanence that sound does not. A reader can set a book down at leisure, and when she picks it up again, the words on the page are as she left them. Similarly, images on a motion picture screen appear to move, but actually are static images which, like the words in a book, stand undiminished after viewing. Print and film exist *as print and film* from one moment to the next, but sound does not. Like lightning, which cannot be captured in a bottle, sound cannot be captured in a moment, and even recorded sound only exists *as sound* when it is played. As Ong put it, "When I pronounce the word 'permanence,' by the time I get to the '-nence,' the 'perma-' is gone and has to be gone."³⁷

³⁶ Susan J. Douglas, *Listening In: Radio and the American Imagination, from Amos 'n' Andy and Edward R. Murrow to Wolfman Jack and Howard Stern* (New York: Times Books, 1999), 32-34. Douglas actually identified three ways of listening, but the third is less relevant to drama. It is listening for information, the way people listen to weather reports. Quoting physiological researchers, Douglas also suggested that the brain may establish neural connections to store repeated sounds and therefore, in a sense, shape itself around those sounds. This may explain why people find the same style of music pleasurable but have to "learn to like" unfamiliar styles. She directed her comments about brain physiology to musical listening, but perhaps familiar narrative structures, such as archetypes or repetitive themes, have similar effects.

³⁷ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Routledge, 1982), 32.

This fleeting quality of sound — Ong called it sound’s “effervescence” — presented a particular set of problems to preliterate, oral societies. Because sound was heard only as it was going out of existence, oral communication always was a performance rather than a proposition. For oral cultures to communicate across time, they could not rely on parchment or paper or DVDs. They had to rely on mnemonic devices. Yet making information easier to remember changed the way it was presented. Memorization favored storytelling because stories are easier to remember than propositions or equations, and it favored repetition and archetypes since repeated words and ideas are easier to remember than unique phrases or concepts. Oral performance also made knowledge public since information could only be imparted person-to-person. Together, these changes ritualized storytelling, Ong wrote. Preliterate storytelling performances, like religious ceremonies, represented a returning to the known to reinforce what already was known. People demanded that storytellers retell familiar stories, and they would correct or chasten those who veered from a familiar narrative. In effect, wrote Ong, the unique properties of sound led to social relationships in which storytellers and storyhearers entered into a kind of conversation. Unlike print authors, who create stories alone and present their creations fully formed, oral storytellers worked *with* their audiences during the creation process. Artists and audiences were co-creators.³⁸

Radio scholar and erstwhile British Broadcasting Corporation producer Tim Crook has offered empirical evidence that backs up Douglas’ and Ong’s descriptions of

³⁸ Ibid., 139-151. Ong did not equate the “primarily orality” he studied from the “secondary orality” of electronic media. Societies using “primary orality” have no inkling of print while societies using “secondary orality” live in the shadow of print, he explained. However, the characteristics of sound are the same for both. Even in modern societies, radio communication, and particularly radio storytelling, involves listeners in a more-than-passive way. Radio listeners may not correct radio storytellers in the same fashion as their ancestors, but they still make those stories partially their own.

the participatory nature of sound. Crook conducted a series of experiments while teaching radio writing workshops between 1992 and 1994. He played for his students a recording of comments made by the distraught mother of the victim of a fatal boating accident. The woman was not an actress, so it was an actual recording. Moments before it was made, the woman had learned that a court acquitted the man responsible for her daughter's death. The speaker's irregular breathing and anxious tone conveyed her emotional state, and her words expressed frustration with the legal system.

"I'm overwhelmed," she said. "Really. I can't. I just can't believe that, th' th' that that British Law allows this to happen."

Crook gave his students no other information about the recording — not even the fact that it was real as opposed to dramatized — then he asked them to visualize the woman they heard. One student described her as "small, squat with an angry face," while another called her "a very tall and noble lady ... Eva Perón." Someone thought she was "a beautiful middle-aged woman," while another saw her as "an old woman ... 60 plus ... Overweight." Students also disagreed about her apparel. One envisioned her "dressed in dark but elegant clothes," while another said she was an "ex-hippie but now draped in crystal." On no particular — not age, height, weight, class, clothes, cultural description, nor even psychological mood — did all the students agree. The images they created were their own. Like Ong's preliterate storyhearers, Crook's radio listeners were part of the creative process. For them, radio was not a blind medium, it was a medium in which the pictures were inside the listeners' heads. Or, as Crook concluded, "without accurate signposting the fictionalisation of the mind's eye or imagination has full reign."³⁹

³⁹ Tim Crook, *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 1999), 55-60.

At first, there may seem to be a contradiction between the way radio transported listeners to a non-dimensional world of disembodied sound, which tended to disintegrate the autonomous individual inherited from print culture, and the participatory nature of radio, which tended to elevate the individual's role to that of co-creator. Resolving this seeming contradiction points to another reason why radio had a collectivizing effect. When people listen to a radio play — suppose, for example, it is a dramatization of the opening scene of Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* — they conjure their own images of Pip and the “fearful man” in the churchyard. This is Douglas' dimensional listening. But as Crook's research showed, each individual's images are different from those of other listeners, and *radio hides the differences*. Should casual listeners discuss a radio play after they have heard it, they need not dwell on trivial differences such as the color of Pip's shirt or the shape of the fearful man's beard. Indeed, such matters probably will not be mentioned. But in a television or film adaptation of the same story, no viewer sees his or her images. Rather, they see a director's representations, and they may complain it is not “realistic” or it is “not as they would have imagined it.” They may even quibble among themselves about what they saw, rhetorically wondering if they watched the same film. Just as civil religion united Americans religiously by drawing their attention away from religious ideas that divided them, so radio united them rhetorically by inviting them into a common imaginary world and then obscuring differences in the way they imagined it.

To return, then, to the two things radio had to do to be useful to nation-building — carrying the nation's imagined identity and facilitating boundary setting — it can be recognized that its aural qualities aided the former. The disintegration of the individual

made collectivization easier, and the participatory nature of radio helped listeners identify themselves with national identities promulgated or implied in radio broadcasts. There remained the matter of boundary-setting. This involved both the erosion of sub-national boundaries dividing the nation's population and the erection of national boundaries distinguishing people inside the nation from people outside it.

McLuhan tended to see the reintroduction of sound as widening the possibilities of human social organization. In his view, typographic man's tidy thoughts and fenced-off mind had represented a declension from more holistic societies. Radio, McLuhan thought, was capable of reestablishing balance to the senses. Though it was a mechanical extension of the ear no less than print was a mechanical extension of the eye, it gave print competition, and he hoped it would remind Westerners that there was more to the world than lines and margins. Early in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, he quoted the psychiatrist J. C. Carothers and his comparison of Western and rural African child-rearing:

Whereas the Western child is early introduced to building blocks, keys in locks, water traps, and a multiplicity of items and events which constrain him to think in terms of spatiotemporal relations and mechanical causation, the African child receives instead an education which depends much more exclusively on the spoken word and which is relatively highly charged with drama and emotion.⁴⁰

The result, wrote McLuhan, was that the Western child grew up in a world "in which things move and happen on single planes and in successive order" whereas the African child grew up in "the implicit, magical world of the resonant oral word."⁴¹ Radio brought

⁴⁰ Quoted in McLuhan, *Gutenberg*, 18. Passages such as this have been criticized for their assumptions about non-Western cultures.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

the Westerner a step closer to this more open world because it effectively tapped the atomized individual on the shoulder and whispered, “You are not alone.” By restoring a sense of wholeness to human life, radio revived the West’s long-withered capacity for “tribalism.” It was a prime vehicle for the promulgation of national myths, and unlike propositions and equations that took causes and effects in discreet succession, “myth is the mode of simultaneous awareness of a complex group of causes and effects,” McLuhan wrote.⁴² In the early twentieth century, radio’s capacity to convey national myths was used to horrible effect by European dictators, but McLuhan saw no reason why radio had to belong to demagogues. Given the scars inflicted by print on typographic man, he thought electronic media could be used to heal, as well. In fact, his optimism was so strong that one reviewer likened his story of typographical fall and electronic redemption to a media version of Christian salvation.⁴³

McLuhan’s understanding of radio’s ability to reconfigure social boundaries — though not necessarily his sunny disposition — stemmed largely from the work of Harold A. Innis, a Canadian historian who came to communication studies via a circuitous path.⁴⁴ A student of the fur trade, Innis’ interest in the incredible geographical reach of the British Empire inspired him to compare it to other ancient, medieval, and modern empires. He became convinced that that the dominant form of communication within an

⁴² Ibid., 266.

⁴³ Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 174-175. The charge of technological determinism often has been leveled at McLuhan, and in careless moments, he did drift in that direction. However, he insisted he was not a determinist because he thought if people understood how media constitute a “media environment,” they can willfully alter both that environment and their behavior accordingly.

⁴⁴ Harold A. Innis, *The Bias of Communication*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

empire, or any society, influenced the nature of that society, and he posited a dichotomy between “time-biased” and “space-biased” media.⁴⁵ Time-biased media communicate well through time but not so well across space, he wrote. Stone tablets are durable and uneditable, so they are useful to societies who wish to preserve “timeless” truths across generations, but they also are bulky and hard to move, so time-biased societies tend to be local. Space-biased media communicate well across space but not so well through time. Newspapers are quicker to produce and cheaper to transport than stone tablets, but they are meant to have a shelf life of a day or a week, not all eternity. Societies dominated by space-biased media are capable of rapid geographical and economic growth, but they tend to be neophilic, or obsessed with the new and transient. Innis argued that the simultaneous conquering of time and space is difficult to achieve and even more difficult to maintain, but societies that pull it off dominate those that do not. If a society is too time-biased, it turns apathetic toward change and eventually is overcome by neighbors who develop superior agricultural or military techniques, and if a society is too space-biased, it loses historical perspective and falls prey to demagogues and charlatans. Societies often strike a balance by using different media for different purposes. For example, the post-Constantinian Roman Empire used cheap, light papyrus for administrative purposes (the conquest of space) and longer-lasting parchment for religious purposes (the conquest of time).⁴⁶

In the 1930s through 1950s, radio’s inherent space bias strengthened the American peoples’ identification of themselves as co-nationals while its lack of time bias

⁴⁵ Sometimes called “time-binding” and “space-binding” media.

⁴⁶ Innis, *Bias*, 33-60.

undermined more enduring, local identities. Most obviously, radio physically traversed space. Nearly everyone within the United States' geographical boundaries could hear the same programming, so when politicians such as Franklin Roosevelt or radio preachers such as Father Coughlin spoke to the nation, they literally spoke to the nation. But radio also eroded internal boundaries by undermining potentially divisive, local interpretations of time. Like the telegraph, telephone, and newspaper before it, radio moved Americans another step away from the continuous, natural rhythms of time-biased agricultural communities and toward the metered, standardized time of space-biased industry. Radio chopped time up into tiny pieces, then measured, packaged, and marketed the pieces. Quite literally did sellers of radio advertising speak of "selling time." By undermining local or traditional interpretations of time, radio undermined interpretations of the "timeless," as well — it smoothed out local variations in American culture by trying to make them all as "space-biased" as itself. In short, radio intensified what nineteenth-century publisher James Gordon Bennett described when he said his daily newspaper lived in "a one-day world." Radio lived in an "eternal now world." It urged diverse Americans to identify with each other across space, and it could change its appeal as needed.⁴⁷

At the same time, and less abstractly, radio established a set of new and truly national institutions. These included coast-to-coast networks, a wired infrastructure, national revenue streams, and federal regulatory agencies. As Susan Smulyan argued in her history of the commercialization of radio, *Selling Radio*, the United States' commercial broadcasting model was not inevitable, not accepted in all countries, and

⁴⁷ Ibid., 79.

never a simply binary choice of all-private or all-public. It came about as the result of consumer preferences, technology choices, and industry pressures. Listeners preferred national entertainment over local entertainment, even if it meant that regional variations gave way to homogenization. Demand for national programming then led to a wired system since radio equipment manufacturers knew that maintaining programming quality would be easier for a few national networks than for hundreds of independent stations, and that, in turn, favored a national, advertising-supported model. Meantime, industry lobbyists in Washington convinced regulators and Congressmen that giving consumers what they wanted was more “democratic” than worrying too much about public service, as the British and Canadians were doing.⁴⁸

Putting the two pieces together, then — the use of radio’s aural qualities to carry national identities and the use of its space-conquering or national qualities to reconfigure social boundaries — made radio listeners seem personal participants in the life of the nation. Bruce Lenthall argued in *Radio’s America* that Americans of the Depression era felt more involved than ever even as both the corporate and governmental institutions around them grew. They could choose what they listened to, they often listened in social groups — usually families or groups of neighbors — and they learned to associate their role as consumers with their roles as citizens. Buying came to be seen as a kind of voting, and, in fan letters, people often promised to support sponsors of shows they liked and

⁴⁸ Susan Smulyan, *Selling Radio: The Commercialization of American Broadcasting, 1920-1934* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994); Robert S. Fortner, *Radio, Morality, and Culture: Britain, Canada, and the United States, 1919-1945* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005). Fortner also brings out implications of the regulatory debates to religion. He notes that Great Britain rejected commercial radio, in part, because it feared it would undermine the Church of England’s centrality in British culture.

boycott sponsors of shows that annoyed them.⁴⁹

This supposedly “democratic” character of radio is what Franklin Roosevelt exploited to leverage American civil religion. Roosevelt approached radio as a salesman. He forged an intimate bond with his audience by imagining that he spoke to one person, and it worked. Simply by listening to the president’s speeches, Americans felt as if they were part of the democratic process even as they sat comfortably in the familiar context of their homes. In effect, Roosevelt was in there with them. Now, they felt, the democracy they had known in town halls and county courthouses was being replicated at the national level. Where once their forebears gathered in public squares, now they gathered in a virtual “national square” around their radios.⁵⁰

Historiography

This feeling of national unity, this impression that American institutions worked for all citizens and that a common “American identity” encircled the population, is what historians, social scientists, politicians, and artists often have called “consensus.” In historical literature, two points are at issue — did the 1950s constitute the high point of a consensus society forged in the 1930s and 1940s, and to what did this society consent? Ironical as it sounds, there never has been a consensus about whether “consensus” was real, but there is more agreement that the image of consensus was powerful and prevalent. Writers friendly toward viewing the postwar years as a consensus society describe it as exhibiting an American essence — somehow it was what the United States was supposed

⁴⁹ Lenthall, 53-81.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 81-114.

to be. Writers unfriendly toward the period have dismissed consensus as a self-serving, white, middle-class, pro-corporate sham, but they admit it was a beloved fiction. More recent scholarship has delved into how the image of consensus was constructed and whose interests it served. At the popular level, memories of consensus still resonate. Television newscaster and Baby Boomer Tom Brokaw recently hit the bestseller lists by claiming that mid-century America was built by a “Greatest Generation” who held firm to the values of “personal responsibility, duty, honor, and faith.”⁵¹ Even at the time, however, others wondered if all was as it seemed.

At its core, the 1950s’ “consensus society” was a centripetal society in which the things that united Americans were emphasized over the things that divided them.

Consensus was a collective concept — not in the sense that European dictatorships were collective, where individuals were expected to sublimate their interests into those of the state — but in the sense that individuals were thought to enjoy greater opportunity when Americans worked together to guarantee basic necessities, services, and standards.

Consensus meant common ground between New Dealers and their critics, common goals for labor and capital, and a common identity for the American people. In politics, consensus slowed the New Deal but did not reverse it. The Employment Act of 1946 scuttled Franklin Roosevelt’s goal of guaranteed full employment and made economic growth a federal priority by creating the Council of Economic Advisers, but even after Republicans captured the White House and House of Representatives in 1952, they left in place Social Security, the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Tennessee Valley

⁵¹ Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998), xx.

Authority, and most other New Deal programs.⁵² In economics, consensus pointed toward a public-private partnership sometimes called “corporate liberalism.” Instead of the pitched battles that sullied industrial relations before the war, unions, corporate executives, and politicians seeking consensus turned to fiscal policy, consumerism, and military spending as a way to lift profits and wages together. Finally, in the cultural realm, consensus emphasized that however divided Americans may be in terms of religion, race, ethnicity, and creed, they all were Americans. “Consensus historians” such as Daniel Boorstin emphasized the un-radicalness of the American Revolution vis-à-vis the hated Russian Revolution, and Jewish theologian Will Herberg announced that what once had been a Protestant nation now was “Protestant-Catholic-Jewish.”⁵³

Lurking beneath these pleasant words and outstretched arms were three assumptions historian Godfrey Hodgson laid out in *America In Our Time*.⁵⁴ First, consensus ideology asserted that the United States’ combination of liberal democracy and private enterprise (often simply called “the American Way”) had solved the age-old problems of political economy. The nation’s productivity and abundance were said to enable Americans to bypass questions of distribution and focus on questions of growth — instead of arguing who got the biggest piece of pie, Americans could simply expand the pie. High confidence led to a second assumption — that the nation’s real dangers were

⁵² The evolution of the New Deal is recounted in Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995); and Robert M. Collins, *More: The Politics of Economic Growth in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵³ Daniel Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953); Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1960).

⁵⁴ Godfrey Hodgson, *America In Our Time* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976), 67-98.

not within, but without. There were no problems inside America that the “American Way” could not address, but there were non-American Ways elsewhere in the world. The most dangerous was communism, a system whose one-party rule was anathema to America’s liberal democracy, whose state-planned socialism contradicted American free enterprise, and whose dialectical materialism offended American civil religion. In the late 1950s, a panel of economists including such distinguished participants as Milton Friedman, Paul Samuelson, and Herbert Stein issued a report titled *Prospect For America*. It concluded that the American system “is highly responsive to the demands of the people” but its main danger “is indicated by the phrase ‘Cold War.’”⁵⁵ Implicit in these first and second assumptions was a third premise that James T. Patterson made the title of a book — grand expectations. “This optimistic spirit — the feeling that there were no limits to progress — defined a guiding spirit of the age and, over time, unleashed ever more powerful popular pressures for expanded rights and gratifications,” he wrote.⁵⁶ So smoothly did the “American Way” of liberal capitalism seem to work, so obviously horrid were its enemies, and so unlimited was its potential that Americans lulled themselves into thinking it was almost *natural* that their moment in history had come.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Ibid., 69-71.

⁵⁶ James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 317.

⁵⁷ The idea that America’s political and economic arrangements are “natural” has deep roots. E. Ray Canterbery, *A Brief History of Economics: Artful Approaches to the Dismal Science* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2001), 40-42, argued that Adam Smith’s fascination with Newtonian mechanics strongly influenced his ideas about stable and rational markets. For the absorption of similar ideas into eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American religion, see Catherine L. Albanese, *Nature Religion in America: From the Algonkian Indians to the New Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Sidney Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), chaps. 8-9; and William G. McLoughlin, *The Meaning of Henry Ward Beecher: An Essay on the Shifting Values of Mid-Victorian America, 1840-1870* (New York: Knopf, 1970). Of course, the Soviets had their own “inevitability” narratives as they claimed Karl Marx had laid bare the irresistible laws of history.

A landmark call for consensus was Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.'s, 1949 treatise *The Vital Center*. Schlesinger argued that liberal democracy had a public relations problem. Millions of people around the world assumed, or were taught, that it could not work, so they fell for utopian alternatives he dubbed “totalitarianism.” The problem stemmed from industrialization, which had destroyed traditional bonds of family and village, but left little of permanence in their wake. Communism and fascism offered new ways of organizing society that were simple and compelling, but disastrously mistaken. The answers in the vital center, where Schlesinger placed liberal democracy, were durable but hard to ferret out. After all, wrote Schlesinger, the central idea of liberal democracy — majority rule checked by minority rights — is a paradox.⁵⁸

He worried that the simple versions of “democracy” proffered by the far right and far left in America skirted too close to illiberal alternatives. He did not call conservatives and progressives fellow travelers, but he did call them careless. Schlesinger argued that conservatives such as Senator Joseph McCarthy really want a business-run plutocracy, or something akin to republicanism without public virtue. Instead of finding inspiration in honor or the common good, as did eighteenth-century republicans (at least on their good days), plutocrats pursue the “naked accumulation of money” until, over time, defending their gains slides them into a police state.⁵⁹ For its part, the far left does no better. Progressives such as Henry Wallace are so single-minded in their pursuit of the public

⁵⁸ Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom* (1949; repr. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 3-5, 158. In a new introduction to the 1998 reprint, Schlesinger insisted that his focus in 1949 had been on the conflict between democracy and rival systems rather than conflicts within American democracy. However, given that he referenced contemporary American political figures to illustrate his points, it is not hard to understand why readers in 1949 took his book as a call for centrist domestic policies.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 11-34.

good that they forget the good of the individual and overlook the tyranny of well-meaning despots. “For the most chivalrous reason, he [the progressive] cannot believe that ugly facts underlie fair words,” Schlesinger wrote.⁶⁰ In the end, right and left both fall in the ditch. “Conservatism in its crisis of despair turns to fascism; so progressivism in its crisis of despair turns to Communism,” he wrote.⁶¹

By contrast, the vital center navigates the paradox of democracy by defending individual liberty while insisting upon individual virtue. Of course, this puts a large burden on the individual. So in his concluding chapter, Schlesinger called for turning democracy into a “fighting faith,” and he described in transcendent terms a devotion to American ideals that religious historian Martin E. Marty would later identify, in a different context, as the left-wing version of the priestly style of nation-as-self-transcendent civil religion.⁶² At the heart of Schlesinger’s appeal was an assertion that the centrifugal tendency of democracy to affirm the pursuit of individual interest must be checked by a centripetal “faith” in democratic society. “For all the magnificent triumphs of individuals, we survive only as we remain members of one another,” he wrote. “The individual requires a social context, not one imposed by coercion, but one freely emerging in response to his own needs and initiative.”⁶³ In other words, individuals are only fully free when they share responsibility for one another, and democracy will survive only if it assumes the burden of social cohesiveness that industrialization abandoned. Specifically,

⁶⁰ Ibid., 35-50.

⁶¹ Ibid., 50.

⁶² Marty, “Two Kinds,” 152.

⁶³ Schlesinger, *Vital Center*, 247-248.

Schlesinger argued that if democracy is to prevail against the forces of totalitarianism, it must provide its citizens with security against the “ravages of hunger, sickness, and want”; opportunities for strong civic involvement; and feelings of connectedness between the individual and the whole.⁶⁴

Not everyone — then or since — was convinced that postwar America achieved these consensus ideals. Some historians have argued that corporate liberalism gave more to corporations than to liberals. Alan Brinkley contended in *The End of Reform* that as early as 1945, most New Dealers gave up attempts to restructure corporate capitalism and instead hoped to use regulation and fiscal policy to make it livable.⁶⁵ Michael A. Bernstein similarly wrote that the politics surrounding the New Deal had less to do with capitalism and its enemies than with an inter-capitalist contest between older, nineteenth-century production-driven industries and newer, emerging consumer-driven industries. In his view, the New Deal represented the public sector’s retooling toward consumer capitalism.⁶⁶ Labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein added that “consensus” weakened organized labor because the more workers identified themselves as consumers, the less they thought of themselves as workers.⁶⁷ Also, a large literature exists on the consensus society’s social hypocrisies, including its racial exclusions and gender hierarchies.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Ibid., 249-254.

⁶⁵ Brinkley, *End of Reform*.

⁶⁶ Michael A. Bernstein, “Why the Great Depression Was Great: Toward a New Understanding of the Interwar Economic Crisis in the United States,” in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980*, eds. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 32-50).

⁶⁷ Nelson Lichtenstein, “From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining: Organized Labor and the Eclipse of Social Democracy in the Postwar Era,” in *Rise and Fall*, 122-145.

⁶⁸ For example, Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*,

Among the period's harshest critics have been those who cast it against the backdrop of the Cold War. Martin Jezer summarized his argument in his title: *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States, 1945-1960*. In Jezer's telling, a nation that may otherwise have built a progressive, egalitarian, democratic society instead deteriorated into a paranoid, feeble-minded playground of "a centralized, corporate controlled juggernaut."⁶⁹ Thanks to the Cold War, Jezer argued, government and industry fused into the military-industrial complex, and American culture and politics ossified into "us-versus-them" dichotomies. Lawrence Wittner hit a similar note in *Cold War America*, in which he essentially argued that the United States chose what Schlesinger had called plutocracy.⁷⁰ Not all consensus critics were on the left. In her study of the conservative movement in Orange County, California, Lisa McGirr found intellectuals and grassroots organizers who considered the vital center too statist to protect liberty and too materialistic to uphold virtue.⁷¹

Despite these fulminations, some on the part of historians and some on the part of their subjects, the notion that the decade and a half after World War II constituted a centrist, placid moment in American history will not go away. For this reason, recent scholars have examined how the image of consensus was — and continues to be —

rev. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1999), has shown that the 1950s' high marriage and low divorce rates were anomalous, and William H. Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), made the rising importance of class, race, and gender politics a major theme.

⁶⁹ Marty Jezer, *The Dark Ages: Life in the United States, 1945-1960* (Boston: South End Press, 1982), 110.

⁷⁰ Lawrence S. Wittner, *Cold War America* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974).

⁷¹ Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001).

constructed. In *Inventing the "American Way,"* Wendy L. Wall argued that postwar feelings of national unity, fears of Communism, and confidence in corporate liberalism were no more "natural" than the suburbs, but rather stemmed from deliberate political decisions stretching back to the 1930s. During the Depression, corporate interests were not satisfied to let Roosevelt's version of democracy stand, she wrote, so they launched a decades-long campaign to turn Americans away from "Freedom from Want," a slogan under which World War II was fought, to the more business-friendly "free enterprise." Instead of agreeing with Roosevelt that democracy cannot function without economic security for most of its citizens, they argued that democracy cannot function without private property — a bit of which could be had in the suburbs with an easy down-payment. At the same time, cultural reformers anxious about the nation's ever-diversifying population sought to construct a common American identity that did not require one to be white, Anglo-Saxon, or Protestant, and politicians anxious about communism used notions of a monolithic Red Menace as a spur to national unity.⁷²

Wall's argument overlaps with Elizabeth's Cohen's image of a postwar "consumer republic," in which Americans were bombarded with images and arguments driving home the point that buying things was good for America and frugality was "un-American." Unlike the producer's republic of the antebellum United States, in which Americans ideally owned their own means of production and identified themselves by what they produced — "I'm a wheat farmer," "I'm a tobacco planter," "I'm a fisherman" — the consumer's republic of the mid-twentieth century was populated by Americans

⁷² Wendy L. Wall, *Inventing the "American Way": The Politics of Consensus From the New Deal to the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

who mostly worked for large corporations and therefore turned to what they consumed to find individual expression — “I drive a Cadillac,” “I listen to Fred Allen instead of Red Skelton,” or “I root for the Cubs rather than the White Sox.” Not only did the consumer’s republic make a space in the mind for individualism even as the economy itself was dominated by large organizations, but it also spurred growth by encouraging spending. New houses were especially powerful stimuli since they needed to be outfitted with appliances, furniture, and carpets. Cohen, like Wall, has shown that this did not “just happen” but was influenced at every step by government policy and industry promotion.⁷³

The problem with consumerism, from the perspective of consensus, was that individualism and the increasingly private nature of American society that developed in the 1950s was fundamentally centrifugal. The United States may have become a land of company men and their stay-at-home wives, but dissatisfied voices increasingly expressed themselves in the language of individualism.⁷⁴ As Patterson mentioned, demands and expectations multiplied. In the 1960s, these centrifugal tendencies, combined with the voices of racial minorities and marginalized groups who never felt part of the consensus, would challenge consensus assumptions more openly, but in the 1950s, there still was a sense that it could be held together by the “common values” of civil religion. There also still were millions of Americans in government, business, education, entertainment, and other pursuits whose attitudes were formed in a media

⁷³ Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer’s Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003).

⁷⁴ Three of the most famous were David Riesman, William H. Whyte, Jr., and C. Wright Mills.

environment dominated by radio.

Historians of American civil religion have documented the 1950s' particularly prominent civil religion, and historians of radio have noted its centripetal qualities, but rarely have scholars of the one written about the other. Martin E. Marty devoted a chapter to civil religion in the third volume of his *Modern American Religion* trilogy and Robert D. Linder and Richard V. Pierard linked civil religion and the rhetoric of consensus in *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, but neither book focused on popular entertainment.⁷⁵ Radio histories containing large doses of content analysis, such as Douglas' volume and Michele Hilmes' *Radio Voices* have uncovered the nationalizing tendency of "golden age" radio, but they did not focus on religion or civil religion.⁷⁶ Likewise, radio histories that explored the institutions of broadcasting provide good background for the historian curious about radio and civil religion, but have said little about civil religion itself. In addition to Smulyan's and Lenthall's works, cited above, Gerd Horten's *Radio Goes To War* combined institutional history with content analysis to argue that war and privatization were the two themes radio hammered home.⁷⁷

Chapter descriptions

In the chapters that follow, radio's centripetal nature will be seen to have

⁷⁵ Martin E. Marty, *Under God, Indivisible, 1941-1960*, vol. 3 of *Modern American Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1988).

⁷⁶ Douglas, *Listening In*; Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922-1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977).

⁷⁷ Smulyan, *Selling Radio*; Lenthall, *Radio's America*; Gerd Horten, *Radio Goes to War: The Cultural Politics of Propaganda During World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

buttressed civil religion's centripetal rhetoric to underscore mid-century Americans' belief that they lived in one nation. The fifteen years after World War II represented the culmination of this process, but it began during the Great Depression. Therefore, the 1950s cannot be understood apart from the 1930s and 1940s. Major themes of American civil religion — notions of American exceptionalism, the identification of the United States as a redeemer nation, and the assertion that America was nearly synonymous with historical progress — all were brought to bear in promulgating the major premises of consensus. The idea that America had a special relationship to God could be used to explain why its political and economic systems were so superior; the idea of America as a redeemer nation could be used to explain why the United States had to lead a global fight against Communism; and eschatological hopes could support the view that American institutions were natural, inevitable, and what God intended.

Chapter 1, "Pastoral Civil Religion and a Nation Under God," begins the first part of the study by showing that radio inherited its civil religious themes from earlier periods of American history. Special attention is directed to dramas about the nation's past and to the so-called "golden age" of superheroes. Pastoral civil religion gave Depression-era Americans succor in their war against poverty. Among the major actors in this story was the then-new commercial broadcasting industry, which wanted to convince advertisers it could lift the nation out of the Depression by attracting audiences with stories they wanted to hear.

Chapter 2, "Priestly Civil Religion and Godless Enemies," examines programs that described America not only as exceptional, but as chosen for the purpose of redeeming itself and the world in the face of Axis aggression. Priestly civil religious

programs cast wartime suffering as proofs of chosenness and heightened eschatological expectations into a sense that World War II represented a “final” battle. The intimacy of radio listening unified Americans in a common experience of crisis. Contrary to popular memory, Vietnam was not the first war fought in American living rooms, but describing a war on the radio is different from showing it on television. World War II also witnessed an expanded role of government in radio broadcasting, and some of the best examples of radio dramas that used priestly civil religion were government productions.

Chapter 3, “Prophetic Civil Religion and Calls for Unity,” investigates radio’s appeal to American values as it urged the nation to overcome internal divisions, especially racism. Sometimes the appeal was straightforward — hatred and prejudice were judged “un-American.” At other times, prophetic appeals were combined with war language, and racism was depicted as wrong because it weakened the nation. In a country still dotted with ethnic neighborhoods, radio’s ability to “conquer space” meant conquering — or at least challenging — social divisions, as well. The story of radio’s use of prophetic civil religion to battle bigotry also highlighted the resourceful role African-Americans played in radio broadcasting. Excluded from the center of power in the industry, they found ways to empower themselves at the margins.

Chapter 4, “Pastoral Civil Religion and the Nation That Prays Together,” begins the second part of the study as it shifts the focus from the language of war to the language of abundance. Just as postwar government policy attempted to fit time-honored democratic ideals to consumerism, so postwar popular entertainment tried to square civil religion with the burgeoning suburbs. Apostles of consumerism such as broadcasters and advertisers, and apologists of the middle class, including some clergy, assured audiences

that because they were a people close to God, their basic goodness was sound enough to withstand the temptations of Mammon. Radio celebrities were cited as proof — they were rich, famous, and held up as moral examples.

Chapter 5, “Priestly Civil Religion and the American Way of Life,” examines shows that made the “American Way” of democracy, capitalism, and religion an object of transcendent value during its mid-century global struggle with communism. These shows renewed confidence in American institutions and described the nation as passing through an existential conflict of an exceptional nature. Radio writers and producers cooperated with law enforcement agencies, and an increasingly media-savvy business community marshaled the agonistic and personalizing qualities of sound communication to dramatize the conflict.

Chapter 6, “Prophetic Civil Religion and Voices of Dissent,” concentrates on two genres more famous in film than radio, but which produced some of radio’s most original programming — Westerns and science fiction stories. These genres allowed storytellers to depict a nation that was recognizably American, but sufficiently temporally removed from the present to be open to criticism. Owing partly to the onslaught of competition from television, radio drama displayed impressive creativity in its declining years. The medium’s latent capacity for social commentary and the potentially subversive nature of sound gave voice to those who used prophetic civil religion to dissent from what they perceived as America’s hubristic tendencies.

Finally, a note on methodology. In each chapter, the chief criterion for choosing which radio programs to include has been to concentrate on the content of their civil religion. Thousands of audio recordings were examined in preparing this study, and in a

small number of cases, scripts were used when audio recordings were not available. The specific shows mentioned were judged to represent a common strategy or trope in radio's use of civil religion. They may or may not have been part of a common or iconic radio series. If a particularly compelling example of an important civil religious theme happened to have aired as part of an obscure series, the play was cited anyway because its civil religion was not obscure.

PART I: WAR STORIES

Chapter 1 — Pastoral Civil Religion and a Nation Under God

When President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared in 1941 that he was transforming himself from what he called “Dr. New Deal” to “Dr. Win-the-War,” he could as easily have said he was shifting from one war to another. Eight years earlier, in his first inaugural address, Roosevelt deployed unmistakably martial language to describe the nation’s fight against poverty during the Great Depression. “Our greatest primary task is to put people to work,” the new president announced. “This is no unsolvable problem if we face it wisely and courageously.” He advocated “treating the task as we would treat the emergency of a war” by using the federal government to unify the nation’s population and to deploy the nation’s collective resources. Speaking over national radio networks on the first day of his presidency, Roosevelt chose another military metaphor for his audience. “I assume unhesitatingly the leadership of this great army of our people dedicated to disciplined attack upon our common problems,” he said.¹

Part of Roosevelt’s speech announced specific policy priorities such as creating jobs, improving farm incomes, and cracking down on the financial industry, but other passages wove metaphors of war into America’s rich tapestry of pastoral civil religion.

¹ Franklin D. Roosevelt, “Inaugural Address. March 4, 1933,” in *The Year of Crisis, 1933*, vol. 2 of *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt* (New York: Random House, 1938), 13-14.

Roosevelt presented himself as a wartime president calling his nation together, reminding it of its blessings, affirming what he called its “ancient truths,” and reassuring its people their nation and leader sought the counsel of God. Later, he would become a wartime president in the literal sense, but even in his 1933 inaugural address, Roosevelt pleaded for national unity by speaking of “a sacred obligation” and “unity of duty hitherto evoked only in time of armed strife.” In Biblical cadences, he condemned businessmen and bankers as knowing “only the rules of a generation of self-seekers.” Small in mind and smaller in heart, “they have no vision, and when there is no vision the people perish,” the president said. Having recast the nation’s economic crisis as a moral failure, he announced that “the money changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization [and] we may now restore that temple to the ancient truths.” First among those was a truth every army knows — that all soldiers are in it together, dependent not simply upon themselves but also upon their fellow men, their units, and their commanders. “We now realize as we have never realized before our interdependence on each other,” Roosevelt said.²

In short, the nation’s thirty-second president acted as a national pastor. Speaking to Americans gathered beside their radios — and via radio, gathered as a nation — he invoked the tenets and tropes of American civil religion. He described the United States as a virtuous community, he cast evil as an external conspiracy (if not geographically external, then external to American values), and he asserted that American victory over evil would be good for everyone — it would serve the common good. In his opening lines, Roosevelt declaimed that Americans have the moral and intellectual capacity to

² Ibid., 12-14.

overcome the challenge before them — that was the point of his most famous line, “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself” — and he left no ambiguity about who they would overcome — the moneychangers in the temple. He revealed a progressive view of history when he spoke of the “army” of the people moving forward, and he identified the United States with both a domestic and global common good when he asserted that the nation’s “true destiny” was “to minister to ourselves and to our fellow men.”³ These narrative structures undergirded the idea that the United States was an exceptional nation. It was pastoral rhetoric because it was reassuring, and it was reassuring because it suggested to Americans that they have been chosen by God, that their perceived tormenters were enemies of God, and that as a result of their suffering, a better world would emerge.

Roosevelt may have been the most famous radio personality of the 1930s, but he was not the only one to employ themes of war, calls to unity, statements of “belief” in America, or heroic imaginings of the nation’s past. These were staples of radio drama, as well. Sometimes radio’s use of pastoral civil religion was direct, and the United States was explicitly described as a chosen nation or American institutions were purported to be of divine origin. At other times, it was implied, as when ostensibly secular stories carried assumptions derived from more than a century of civil religious discourse or when theological questions were probed using secular language. Radio’s writers did not begin American entertainment anew — they freely appropriated ideas from literature, film, Broadway, and Vaudeville — and sometimes these sources already contained long-standing civil religious assumptions. Yet something new happened in the 1930s, as well.

³ Ibid., 11-12.

The nation's first electronically broadcast medium produced its first electronically broadcast civil religion, and patterns congealed that did not end with the Great Depression.

The Problem

If radio used civil religion to give succor to a suffering nation in the 1930s, that reassurance stood against the backdrop of two fears. The first was a nagging suspicion that the Depression was more than a financial, employment, and investment crisis, but was in fact the death knell of American capitalism. Elsewhere in the world, communist and corporativist systems seemed to have the momentum.⁴ In Europe, Stalin's first and second Five Year Plans turned Soviet pastures into cities like Magnitogorsk overnight, and Mussolini and Hitler restored their nations' self-confidence with nationalism and militarism. In Asia, Japan laid the foundation for what would be called the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Meantime, Western capitalist nations struggled. Once-mighty Britain and France creaked under heavy debt loads, and the United States saw its national income fall like a ruined broker out a Wall Street window. The Great Depression was not America's first depression — Martin Van Buren had the misfortune of presiding over that — nor was it the first since the rise of post-Civil War corporate capitalism. Prior to the Great Depression, the Depression of 1893 had been the nation's worst. But the crisis of the 1930s was deeper than any before it, so deep that even eighty years later, the numbers are impressive. From peak to trough, using inflation-adjusted figures, American civilian

⁴ "Corporativist" refers to the economic system of the fascist states. Most of the means of production remained in private hands, but investment and production decisions were made not on the basis of market considerations but on the basis of national interests and military needs.

employment fell by a fifth, the gross national product by a third, industrial production by half, and gross investment by nearly 100 percent.⁵ Business leaders, who seemed to hold the keys to permanent prosperity in the 1920s, now looked like “heels,” and that impression sharpened when Ferdinand Pecora and other investigators probed into Wall Street’s Byzantine dealings. Business leaders shot back by blaming the jobless for their own woes, but that did little to quell social unrest. As historian William E. Leuchtenburg recounted, harsh conditions led to protests in the countryside and riots in the cities. In the Midwest, farmers physically prevented goods from reaching market, stopped foreclosure auctions, and destroyed crops and livestock. In Detroit and elsewhere, shoppers grabbed what they needed from grocery stores and walked out without paying. In Chicago, an entire four-story building was carted off a brick at a time. In perhaps the most damning gesture of all, thousands of immigrant laborers decided the United States was not the land of opportunity and boarded ships back to Europe.⁶

The severity of the economic crisis prompted the second great fear of the 1930s — that not just America’s economic system, but its political system, too, could be lost. Business leaders, politicians, and millions of other Americans wondered if the experiment in self-rule launched in 1776 might come to an ignominious end.⁷ The social glue that held Americans together — the interdependence that Roosevelt spoke of and

⁵ Gary M. Walton and Ross M. Robertson, *History of the American Economy*, 5th ed. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 507-508.

⁶ William E. Leuchtenburg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal, 1932-1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 19-25.

⁷ Wall, 17-21. Wall quoted Rexford Tugwell, one of Roosevelt’s top advisers, opining in 1932 that America was “confronted with a choice between an orderly revolution — a peaceful and rapid departure from past concepts — and a violent and disorderly overthrow of the whole capitalist structure.”

that led most Americans to assume that capitalist democracy was best even if they owned little capital — now frayed. Noisy minorities condemned democracy as a rigged game in favor of the rich, and insisted that hitherto unthinkable alternatives become thinkable. In his study of American culture during the Great Depression, Alan Brinkley identified “rebellion” as a major genre of response. Intellectuals — including clergymen such as Harry F. Ward — idolized the Soviet Union as dynamic and exciting, and artists skewered American banality with a skeptical, modernist style. A few Americans, including Ernest Hemingway, traveled to Spain to fight for the left-leaning republicans, and the famous Abraham Lincoln Brigade saw American citizens fighting *for* communism on foreign soil.⁸ Meantime, on the right, similar ferment boiled. Leo Ribuffo has argued that right-wing firebrands such as William Dudley Pelley, Gerald B. Winrod, and Gerald L. K. Smith may have been fringe characters, but the “raw materials” from which they built their appeals had mainstream roots. The super-patriotism of World War I’s “One Hundred Percent Americanism,” the anti-immigration activism of the 1920s, and fears of white Protestants about wartime black migration were ripe for exploitation by extremists.⁹

Throughout the decade, a set of conversations emerged about whether or not there was a single American identity and, if so, what it was. Civil religion may not have been recognized as such, but linkages between the nation and the transcendent were not far

⁸ Alan Brinkley, *Culture and Politics in the Great Depression* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 1998), 23-30. A sampling of leftist Western theological writings — and some Soviet atheist responses — can be found in John Lewis, Karl Polanyi, and Donald K. Kitchin, *Christianity and the Social Revolution* (London: Gollancz, 1935).

⁹ Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right From the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983), xii.

from the surface. As Warren Susman has noted, American intellectuals began to move away from the Progressives' focus on knowledge and communication and adopted a more humanistic set of interests that included "symbol, myth, and language." Some speculated that "civilization," meaning technological and institutional progress, might differ from "culture," meaning a people's moral, spiritual, and creative resources. In a bestselling study of Mexico, Stuart Chase found much more than "backwardness" in traditional folk cultures, and in a classic history of the rise of Western technology, Lewis Mumford argued that industrialism and secularism were both products of an increasingly mechanistic attitude toward society.¹⁰ On a more popular level, as Martin E. Marty has shown, angst over the loss of American identity — and confusion over what it was — antagonized race relations. Marty quoted the sociologist E. A. Ross who described nativist and racist extremists of the 1920s and 1930s as reacting to what they perceived as "a menace to the mirrored self." Americans of Anglo-Saxon, Protestant stock had an image of themselves and of what it meant to be American, Ross wrote, and that seemed to be under threat by persons of other descriptions. The fact that Protestantism itself was in crisis thanks to the modernist-fundamentalist debates of that time only added to a sense that the nation was falling apart.¹¹

¹⁰ Warren I. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2003), 153-158; Lewis Mumford, *The Genesis of the Machine*, vol. 1 of *Technics and Civilization* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1934), 31-55. Also, Gary Gerstle, "The Protean Character of American Liberalism," *The American Historical Review* 99 (October 1994): 1043-1073, advanced a similar thesis with respect to the American left. Gerstle argued that American liberalism evolved through at least three major forms in the twentieth century — a technocratic Progressivism interested both in economic and cultural reform, a New Deal liberalism mostly interested in economic reform, and a postwar liberalism mostly interested in culture.

¹¹ Martin E. Marty, *The Noise of Conflict, 1919-1941*, vol. 2 of *Modern American Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 61-62, 155-164.

The Resources

If the crisis of the 1930s seemed exceptional, so did the United States, and much of radio's pastoral civil religion reminded Americans of that long-held assumption. To reassure the nation's citizens that things were not as bad as they seemed — or at least that the United States had sufficient resources with which to cope — politicians and entertainers alike found one of the deepest wells of inspiration to be the nation's view of itself. From it flowed a sense of the United States not only as being different from other nations, but as representing, in a palpable way, the hope of other nations, or even the culmination of the hopes of all humankind. Casting American identity in this light made present suffering seem less a fall from a mountain that had been climbed than a gaze upward from the foot a mountain yet to be scaled.

At a basic level, exceptionalism meant “uniqueness.” It asserted that American institutions — including political and religious institutions — were unlike those of other nations. In his book *American Exceptionalism*, sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset defined his subject essentially as “difference” and argued that American institutions are different because the things American citizens value are different. Lipset identified an “American Creed” of “liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire,” and he asserted that forms of the creed show up both in the nation's political systems and in its religious communities. “The United States ... is the only country where most churchgoers adhere to *sects*,” he wrote.¹² Instead of a state church, with a hierarchical clergy, politically appointed leaders, and tax-funded coffers, the United States contains a

¹² Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: Norton, 1996), 19.

mass of diverse congregations, voluntary in membership, privately funded, and more or less independent depending on the denomination. That the nation's political structure and dominant church polities should so closely resemble one another is more than coincidence, Lipset wrote. The two are mutually supportive. Democratic governance suits religious voluntarism because it prizes the right of individuals to make their own decisions about church participation and religious belief, and congregationalism suits liberty and equality because churches dependent upon state funding must be careful not to push *laissez-faire* too far, and hierarchical, state-administered churches are more likely to become suspicious of popular democracy.¹³

“Uniqueness” is a starting point for understanding American exceptionalism, but it does not go too far. What nation cannot claim to be unique? Moreover, when Americans speak of being exceptional, they do not simply mean the United States is different than other nations — they also claim its “way of life” to be better. If not superior to all alternatives, then at least it is said to outshine the European feudalism it initially rejected. In *The Broken Covenant*, Robert N. Bellah examined how American democratic republicanism and the free church tradition came to be seen not only as mutually reinforcing but as interdependent. Remove one, it was assumed, and the other must necessarily fall. Bellah argued that seventeenth-century Puritans and eighteenth-century planters, despite their many differences, arrived at surprisingly compatible conclusions. In New England, Puritans sometimes described their surroundings as an “Edenic paradise”

¹³ This is not to say that Lipset considered the American Creed an unblemished good. In fact, he called it “a double-edged sword.” The five values of the American Creed, if pursued blindly, can produce unexpected consequences. The Creed “fosters a high sense of personal responsibility, independent initiative, and voluntarism even as it also encourages self-serving behavior, atomism, and a disregard for communal good,” Lipset wrote. It also holds before Americans an almost utopian standard, which has led to overreaction and perpetual predictions of doom. Lipset, 60-64, 268.

and sometimes as a “howling wilderness,” but they always envisioned themselves as furthering the work of the Protestant Reformation. From the beginning, three not-always-compatible ideas intermingled — the idea of America as unsullied, the assumption of lurking dangers from without, and the presumption of a divinely guided mission of reform. America was seen by Europeans as a place to start over, but a place both of promise and peril. The Puritan strategy for addressing these tensions, wrote Bellah, was to hold in balance two goods — “conversion” and “covenant.” Conversion denoted an intensely personal act in which individuals were “made new,” and covenant described a public pact between humans and God or among humans in the presence of God. The two had to be held in balance because focusing too exclusively on one endangered the other. Puritans understood that conversion without covenant led to antinomianism, separatism, heterodoxy, and social disorder, and covenant without conversion produced nominal Christianity and a social order bound by external control. The Puritans resolved this tension by emphasizing personal responsibility to the public good. A high level of individual freedom and low level of external control was considered possible — but only if people behaved. Or put another way, by striking the right balance between covenant and conversion, the Puritans thought they could have all three things they wanted — sufficient individual liberty for godly men and women to follow their consciences, sufficient social cohesion to defend the community against natural and human perils, and enough of both to complete the work of reform they believed God began in the Reformation.¹⁴

What interested Bellah were parallels between these ideas and the civic humanism of Southern elites. The republican, or “Real Whig,” tradition that crystalized between the

¹⁴ Bellah, *Broken Covenant*, 1-35.

Glorious Revolution and the American Revolution was more likely to take as its model the Republic of Rome than Old Testament Israel, but Bellah argued it still had its own versions of conversion and covenant. The republican version of “conversion” was disinterestedness, the act of voluntarily and temporarily setting aside one’s personal advantage for the common good, and its version of “covenant” was liberty, or self-rule by virtuous individuals. Republicanism and Puritanism drew ideas from different materials, but they reached a similar political endpoint — free people can live with scant external constraints if they are personally virtuous. Bellah argued that the Puritan and republican versions of this vision worked hand-in-hand during the Revolutionary period. New Englanders tended to think in terms of Puritanism, and Virginians in terms of republicanism, but both could be used to explain why personal virtue made political freedom possible, why George III was intolerable, and why the new republic could look to its future with optimism.¹⁵

Taken together, Lipset’s and Bellah’s analyses help to explain the peculiar way Americans combined religion and politics by separating church and state.¹⁶ But American

¹⁵ Soon, a third idea emerged — Bellah almost made it sound like a snake in the garden — and that was the classic liberalism that could be traced to Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. It taught Americans that private interest *was* the public good, and it marked a change of thought. Whereas Puritans spoke of covenants in terms of Christian love and republicanism spoke of civic virtue, liberalism saw covenants as bulwarks against a war of all against all, or, in Locke’s slightly friendlier version, private interest became what covenants ultimately were about. In the nineteenth century, liberalism produced an economic system some of the founders had feared — industrial capitalism. But it did this by describing corporations as if they were virtuous individuals. For a discussion of the founders’ fear of liberal capitalism — especially the Jeffersonian republicans — see Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980).

¹⁶ “Separation of church and state” is not the same thing as “separation of religion and politics.” The former is a legal arrangement, rooted in the First Amendment of the Constitution, that guarantees individual religious liberty to all citizens and bars the establishment of a state church. It would perhaps better be understood were it called “independence of church and state.” The latter refers to a political philosophy that advocates that religion be kept private and not influence state policymaking. It is impossible to enforce in a participatory democracy since it ultimately involves every individual’s own

exceptionalism did more than baptize the United States' political and economic arrangements. It also claimed a divinely appointed role for the United States in history. The claim itself was ironically unexceptional given that similar statements were made about England before there was a United States, and other nations have claimed to do the work of God. Nevertheless, this notion proved a powerful shaper of thought in the British American colonies and grew even more powerful in the nineteenth century. At base, as Ernest Lee Tuveson has shown, it was an eschatological claim, a narrative not only about how history would end, but more importantly about the end toward which history was directed. In this narrative, the United States was exceptional because it was chosen by God to do exceptional work. However, the ideas that informed this notion were much older than America — indeed they were even older than Christianity. Tuveson saw the key text of Biblical eschatology, the Book of Revelation, as a Christian updating of an earlier Jewish literary tradition, and he saw the Protestant Reformation as a pivotal moment in the history of that book's interpretation. From the Reformation's re-reading of Revelation and related texts would flow, eventually, eschatological claims about the United States.¹⁷

There were four major steps along this path. The first was the Hebraic tradition. The apocalyptic books of Ezekiel and Daniel also conveyed pastoral messages by explaining their original audiences' Babylonian captivity and reassuring them that God

private motives. See John F. Wilson and Donald L. Drakeman, *Church and State in American History: Key Documents, Decisions, and Commentary From the Past Three Centuries* (New York: MJF Books, 2003), and Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008).

¹⁷ Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 1-12.

would restore their relationship with him. The Book of Revelation's author, John of Patmos, took the second step by combining that tradition with the early Christian church's this-worldly memory of Christ's physical presence and its expectation of his immanent return.¹⁸ Revelation gave succor to an oppressed people, but unlike the earlier narrative, in which human beings were pawns in and spectators to a battle in the heavens, John moved the apocalypse into the time-bound world of humans and gave them roles to play. He also presented a progressive view of history that saw it culminating, through a series of conflicts with an evil conspiracy, in a thousand-year reign of Christ called the millennium. "Progress, the book seems to teach, is the law of history; but it is to be attained not through regular, linear advancement but by successive defeats of the sources of all evil," Tuveson wrote.¹⁹

A third development occurred when the early church's expectation of an immediate apocalypse gave way to the Augustinian view that John's text was figurative and the "millennium" was a poetic reference to the church between the first and second comings of Christ. Augustine wrote as the then-Christianized Roman Empire met its defeat at the hands of non-Christian enemies, so language that seemed comforting to the early church seemed to Augustine preposterous. He developed a dualistic theology that described the fallen present world as a "City of Man" and a divine greater reality as the "City of God." Humans cannot expect a literal millennium in the City of Man, he argued. As Richard Kyle showed in his history of Christian eschatology, there were several reasons why Augustine's "amillennial" view prevailed in the Middle Ages. Most obvious

¹⁸ Ibid., 2-6.

¹⁹ Ibid., 5-12.

was the fact that the world did not end when the early church thought it would. Spiritualizing the millennium preserved the veracity of the text in light of this difficulty. In addition, when Rome adopted Christianity as its official religion, the church became institutionalized, and like all institutions, it began to think in terms of self-preservation. This led it to discourage radical or apocalyptic movements, though they did not disappear completely.²⁰

Kyle agreed with Tuveson that the Protestant Reformation marked the fourth major break in Christian eschatological thinking and was the development that most directly influenced the future United States. As a result of the Reformation, the Augustinian spiritualizing of the apocalypse was rejected. Once again, the view became widespread that the terrific calamities described by John of Patmos would occur inside human history, that the millennium was a literal future event in history, and that faithful Christians would play a role in these proceedings. In a few cases, most notably the career of Thomas Müntzer, this prompted radical groups to use violence or to adopt bizarre utopian schemes. More common was the Protestant claim that history's end was at hand and that in breaking from the medieval church, reformers had released the "true" church from its "Babylonian" (meaning medieval) captivity. Other, simultaneous events strengthened the conviction that history lurched forward. Christopher Columbus' arrival in the Western Hemisphere, rising capitalist activity, the first glimmerings of the Scientific Revolution, and new technological improvements enabled sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europeans to make a plausible case that the chaos around them was

²⁰ Ibid., 13-17; Richard G. Kyle, *The Last Days are Here Again: A History of the End Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 37-39.

but the birth pang of a literal millennium. Secular thinkers absorbed more of this than they may have realized. The Scientific Revolution and, later, the Enlightenment, ironically enhanced millennial expectations not by accepting Christian orthodoxy but by recasting the millennium as a predictable result of human technological and intellectual progress.²¹

Armed with the conviction that the new heaven and earth promised by God in Revelation would represent a place to start over *in this world*, Europeans who settled in America had little difficulty imagining the vast, new land before them as the fulfillment of that promise. The logic worked both ways: because they were the Elect, the land had been given to them by God, and because the land had been given to them by God, they were assured they were the Elect. Native Americans who resisted them, Laudians who vexed them, the French and the Spanish who competed with them, and even natural perils such as sickness and famine all could be characterized as external dangers perpetrated by Satan's evil conspiracy. Revelation's notion of a holy remnant holding fast to the true faith fit well with the self-perception of frustrated reformers determined to build a "city on a hill." In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Christianity and the Enlightenment learned to live amicably in America, political democracy and popular revivalism were added to Christian eschatology to depict a chosen United States not only enjoying the blessings of the Lord but also fulfilling his divine plan.²²

²¹ Ibid., 55-62; Tuveson, 17-19.

²² Ibid., 29-51; Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 315-324. Charles L. Sanford, *The Quest for Paradise: Europe and the American Moral Imagination* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), 36-55, traced the European prehistory of American chosenness. Martin Luther originally thought the German people were chosen, "militant Protestants" applied the idea to England, and English colonists transferred it to America, Sanford argued.

Finally, Tuveson also cited John Adams' 1765 pamphlet *A Dissertation on Canon and Feudal Law* as documentary evidence of this line of thinking. In it, Adams combined the Protestant "Babylonian captivity" theory of the Middle Ages with an eighteenth-century republicans' adoration of liberty to depict his fellow colonists as a virtuous community, English ministers as the latest in a long line of evil conspirators, progress as the inevitable work of the colonists, and "freedom" as a prerequisite of virtue. The most disastrous aspect of the medieval system, he wrote, was its mingling of "canon and feudal law," or its combination of church authority and feudal power. Such an arrangement was "framed by the *Romish* clergy for the aggrandisement of their own order," and it had the effect of keeping people in "a state of sordid ignorance and staring timidity ... infusing into them a *religious* horror of letters and knowledge."²³ Ending this attempt by the Medieval Church to stultify progress was the work of the Reformation, but even that was not the final battle. When reform was frustrated in the British Isles by the "*execrable* race of the *Steuarts*," New England's Puritan forebears entered a new phase of the struggle, and this time they realized the need to limit both ecclesiastical and monarchical power.²⁴ "[T]hey saw clearly, that popular powers must be placed, as a guard, a countroul, a ballance, to the powers of the monarch, and the priest, in every government, or else it would soon become the man of sin, the whore of Babylon, the mystery of iniquity, a great and detestable system of fraud, violence, and usurpation," Adams

²³ John Adams, "A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law, No. 1," in *Papers of John Adams*, ed. Robert J. Taylor, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1977), 112. Emphasis original.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

wrote.²⁵

Freedom, therefore, was a means of doing God's work. Though they did not believe that all people were saved, the Puritans did believe that saved people required the liberty to move history toward its millennial end. What Adams called "a government of the church more consistent with the Scriptures, and a government of the state more agreeable to the dignity of human nature" — in other words, popular government and congregational church polity — were related concepts. To them he added a commitment to improvement and reform — to using freedom to move history forward by advancing the common good. In the case of the Puritans, this was expressed through a commitment to public education. Adams praised them for establishing a public school system, levying fines on towns that failed to hire a schoolmaster, and taxing the rich to educate everyone. As a result, he wrote, "a native of America who cannot read and write is as rare an appearance, as a Jacobite or a Roman Catholic, i.e. as rare as a Comet or an Earthquake."²⁶

That Adams wrote this pamphlet in 1765 is significant. The Stamp Act crisis of that year was the first of a series of controversies between the American colonists and England that would prove fatal to their relationship. In urging his fellow colonists to reflect on their forebears' virtue, recoil at their enemies' perfidy, and take heart that their fortune was God's will, Adams did much the same rhetorical work that Franklin Roosevelt would do in his first inaugural address. In turning to the past for inspiration

²⁵ John Adams, "A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law, No. 2," in *Papers of John Adams*, 115.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 115, 119-120.

during a crisis, he pursued a strategy that radio also would put to use.

The Programs

Familiar genres of radio drama were not yet settled in the 1930s. Indeed, some of the first attempts at radio storytelling were more like recitations than dramas — actors simply read lines meant for the stage into a microphone. Experimentation with sound effects and music, often taking cues from film, eventually taught broadcasters how to invoke in listeners the “theater of the mind” McLuhan described, and print culture provided clues about the types of stories people liked.²⁷ As the 1930s progressed, two genres in particular offered rich possibilities for the pastoral form of American civil religion. These were historical plays and so-called “superhero” adventure stories. Both claimed antecedents stretching deep into the American past. Historical narratives had been used to inspire national feeling or construct national character at least as far back as the early Whig historians, and superhero stories were foreshadowed by nineteenth-century pulp writers and the Wild West shows of Buffalo Bill. Radio lent both a national audience and an intensely intimate medium. Both also were ideal vehicles for pastoral civil religious messages.

Historical dramas

Cavalcade of America was radio’s quintessential interpreter of the American past. The popular series aired from 1935 to 1953, and though at various times, it was heard on CBS, NBC, and the Blue Network, it was sponsored throughout by the chemical giant E.

²⁷ Louise M. Benjamin, *The NBC Advisory Council and Radio Programming, 1926-1945* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2009), 8.

I. du Pont de Nemours.²⁸ From beginning to end, those involved in the show's production insisted that it represented American values. "The program was originally conceived and steadily developed in patriotic faith, informed by understanding and responsible research, to remind us of the purposes and motives on which our fathers and mothers based and built this nation," said Dixon Ryan Fox, president of Union College and one of several professional historians who suggested show topics and consulted with scriptwriters.²⁹ There were other motives, as well. Dupont's motto, "Better living through modern chemistry," or some variant of it, graced every episode, and there is little mystery about the company's desire to retool its image from a gunpowder-peddling "merchant of death" to the maker of useful consumer products.³⁰

Nonetheless, *Cavalcade* uplifted, inspired, and celebrated America, and often invoked the tenants of its civil religion. Music had dominated broadcasting schedules when the show premiered in 1935, and even people optimistic about radio drama worried that such a "scholarly" series would prove short-lived. For the first two years, most episodes revolved around some general theme such as "The Will to Conquer Distance," "The Spirit of Competition," or "The Humanitarian Urge." Each half-hour episode began with about five minutes of orchestra music, often of a patriotic nature, and went on to present two ten- to twelve-minute plays. In the mid-1930s, the show briefly adopted an entirely musical format, but in 1938, the dramatic format resumed. In time, short plays gave way to single stories that took up the whole half hour.

²⁸ John Dunning, *On the Air: The Encyclopedia of Old-Time Radio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 141.

²⁹ Martin Grams, *The History of the Cavalcade of America* (Delta, PA: M. Grams, 1998), 2.

³⁰ Ibid.

All three of the civil religious tropes described in the preceding section — the identification of the United States as a virtuous community, the characterization of its enemies as evil conspirators, and the association of American progress with the common good — featured, in some respect, in every episode. War stories were especially useful for the first two, and stories of technological progress or Westward expansion stressed the third. War is a pregnant subject for civil religion, for as Jill Lepore noted in her history of one colonial conflict, it never simply is about the land or principle or ruptured diplomacy that began it. Each war also is a fight over narrative — over who gets to define the war’s purpose and significance. To the victors go not only the spoils, but also the history. Frontier wars, especially if they are fought along cultural as well as geographical borders, are perhaps the most radical of all since their victors define not only who is good and bad, but also who is civilized and uncivilized — in other words, what civilization is.³¹ War, like civil religion, is both an identity-forming and boundary-setting process, and identity increasingly has come to be understood by social scientists less as a thing than as a process. As John R. Gillis put it, identity and memory “are not things we think *about*, but things we think *with*.”³²

Because the American Revolution and Civil War were of particular importance to the formation of American civil religion, it is of little surprise that a series devoted to “the purposes and motives on which our fathers and mothers based and built this nation” so often dramatized stories from those periods. Two examples are biographical plays based

³¹ Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), xiv-xv.

³² John R. Gillis, ed., *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 5.

on the lives of Nathan Hale and Robert E. Lee. The Hale play, in standard fashion, began in an idyllic setting threatened by attack. In the opening scene, “green valleys dotted with the spires of sleeping Connecticut towns ... [and] lighted by a dazzling sun” witnessed a young schoolmaster contemplate the citizen’s obligation toward his nation and admit before his students that any man caught spying for his nation would forfeit his life. From the beginning, the script attached to Hale both a Puritan emphasis on moral strength and a republican love of liberty. “Devotion to a high ideal inspires men of all ages,” the narrator explained. “Often from the humblest walk of life, a man will respond to some driving inner conviction, will see beyond the margin of the world in which he lives, will envision a future far better than his own. Such a man was Nathan Hale.”³³

The play then followed Hale’s transformation from a country teacher to a national hero. Personally selected by General Washington to spy on British troop movements and battle plans, Hale sneaked away to Long Island where he met a cobbler and fellow spy named Simon Carter. The cobbler possessed information that Washington wanted, and he hid it on Hale’s person by nailing a note inside the heel of his boot. A short time later, however, Hale was captured by the British thanks to a tip from a sharp-eyed loyalist tavernkeeper. He was sentenced to death, and the scene shifted to the sturdy tree from which he was to hang.³⁴

Just before Hale’s execution, the kindest of the British officers, Captain John Montresor, granted the prisoner permission to write his sweetheart, Alice Adams. Hale began to compose a letter, but before he could finish it, Provost Marshal William

³³ “Nathan Hale,” *Cavalcade of America*, February 6, 1939.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Cunningham ordered him to stop writing and informed him that the time for his execution had arrived.

“Could I see a clergyman?” Hale asked.

“Absolutely not,” barked Cunningham.

“May I have a Bible?”

“You may not.”

Montresor tried to intervene, but Cunningham shouted him down.

“I’m in command here,” he said. “I’ll have no foolishness.”

Thus, *Cavalcade*’s biography of Nathan Hale separated its “virtuous” American from the “evil” British who hanged him by manipulating religious imagery.³⁵

A biographical play about Robert E. Lee, broadcast the following year, took a different tack in using war to emphasize American virtue. Based on a book about the general by Douglas Southall Freeman, it, too, attempted to find in one particular life transcendent qualities associated with the American character, but it did so from the perspective of a man who had known great disappointment, a man who had led thousands of others to their deaths for a lost cause. The play described Lee as contemptuous of secession — he called it “nothing but revolution” — but also deeply loyal to his native Virginia. Faced with the choice of fighting for or against his homeland, he fought for it, but it was a tragic choice. Throughout the play, Lee was a man torn between selfless devotion to a cause and heartbreak over a duty he loathed. Most of his lines were

³⁵ Ibid. Also emphasizing early American “virtuous communities” were a play about the Connecticut “Charter Oak” that found the colonists living in happy freedom until harassed by Edmund Andros, and a recreation of the Boston Port Act crisis that stressed the colonists’ bonds of fraternity. “Boston won’t starve, not while the rest of the colonies have food,” declared a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses in an early scene. “Yankee Independence,” *Cavalcade of America*, December 30, 1936; “Willingness to Share,” *Cavalcade of America*, November 20, 1935.

delivered slowly and in somber tones, and much of the music sounded funereal. At one point, he consoled a Southern mother who lost two sons and a plough horse to the war.³⁶

“I’ll see if I can arrange for a return of the plough horse, ma’am,” Lee said sadly. “I’m sorry I cannot return your sons.”

At Appomattox, he and Grant were professional, generous, and cordial. Later, a coda depicted Lee in retirement as a man who knew his days were few and who reflected on a career as unfortunate as it was heroic. He stood about as far from the war as the play’s original audience would have stood from the ravages of the Great Depression. A young Southern veteran approached, and Lee asked him about his home.

“I ain’t got no home no more,” the man said. “They burned it down. Took everything. Nothing left to work the fields even.”

Lee started to tell him there would be “hardships for all,” but the man lost patience and cut him off.

“I’m leaving the South,” he snapped. “I can’t stay here after what those Yankees have done to us. Just thought you might want to know that.”

“No, young man. I don’t want to know that,” Lee said. “We fought like men. Now let us accept defeat like men.”

The young man did not understand.

“How can we ever hold up our heads again?” he asked.

“By being proud,” said Lee. “Go and rebuild your home. Hew logs and put them together, if you must. Go back and rebuild your home. Promise you will and be tolerant.”

The young man calmed down. He said if the great General Lee felt that way, then

³⁶ “Robert E. Lee,” *Cavalcade of America*, April 23, 1940.

he could, as well. In *Cavalcade*'s rendering, the Civil War was a quarrel Americans once had and then got over. Both sides fought with valor, and both sides took pride in the unified nation that emerged from the war. Lee concluded his speech by pointing out that there remained much for the people of both sections to do.

“You can work for Virginia, to build her up again, to make her great again,” he added. “You can teach your children to love and cherish her.”³⁷

If stories of military conflicts such as the American Revolution and Civil War showcased American virtue, less marital *Cavalcade* episodes celebrated American progress. Often, these were framed as wars against poverty or nature, or as the conquering of nature. They fit well with Dupont's purposes and with the show's use of civil religion. Throughout, they prominently featured notions of the common good, sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly identifying American success as a divine blessing. Because Americans were depicted as a virtuous people committed to the common good, America's success was everyone's success.

In a play broadcast in April 1937, listeners met George Washington not on the battlefield but in his postwar role of “scientific farmer.” In the opening scene, he entertained a visitor to Mount Vernon, Governor Randolph of Virginia, who said the state assembly wished to give Washington large blocks of stock in the Potomac and James River companies. Washington refused because he said he did not need a “pension.” But when Randolph suggested he had “no profession,” either, it raised some hackles.³⁸

“I may not be a doctor or a lawyer, Randolph, but I do have a profession ...,” the

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ “George Washington, Farmer,” *Cavalcade of America*, April 28, 1937.

general said. “I intend to make it the most honorable profession in this land. I am a farmer, governor, and proud of it.”

“Farming a profession? But it’s so uncertain. One year, crops prosper and the next they fail.”

“I intend to spend the rest of my life learning why they prosper and why they fail.”

Of course, Washington’s “retirement” proved shorter-lived than he liked. Later in the play, another visitor, James Madison, reported that the general’s countrymen once again called him off his farm and into public service. Though Washington accepted and became the new nation’s first president, *Cavalcade* stressed that he always considered his achievements in scientific farming among his most satisfying.

Another play that forged a direct link between scientific progress and the common good also connected those themes to religious liberty and one of the most famous families in American religious history, the Winthrops of Massachusetts. “John Winthrop, Pioneer of Chemical Science,” broadcast on *Cavalcade* in October 1936, cast John Winthrop, Junior — son of the Massachusetts Bay Colony’s founder — as America’s first chemist. Much ridiculed by his neighbors, and even accused of impiety, Winthrop the younger discovered a way to produce the alum that was used to preserve valuable pelts as they crossed the Atlantic. No small stakes were involved. Without alum, the colony’s furs rotted on their way to England, and its merchants were ruined. Perhaps overreaching in its attempt to build dramatic tension, the play cast Winthrop’s quest for alum as an existential race against a clock, a scientific journey of discovery on which the life of the colony — and, by extension, the cause of religious liberty — depended.³⁹

³⁹ “John Winthrop, Pioneer of Chemical Science,” *Cavalcade of America*, October 21, 1936.

In what was supposed to be a nail-biting *dénouement*, just as Winthrop's neighbors concluded Providence had turned its back on the tiny colony, John Winthrop, Senior, noticed a strange substance in one of his son's containers.

"It seems to come from nowhere, like a miracle taking place," the elder said.

The substance, of course, was alum, and the younger Winthrop recognized it as such.

"Then our fur trade — our colony — is saved!" shouted the father.⁴⁰

Despite its focus on American history, a number of *Cavalcade* plays bore obvious marks of the era in which they were broadcast. For example, a dramatization of the 1927 Winooski River Valley flood in Vermont aired in 1940 and revealingly explored the concept of "common good." For the people of the Winooski River Valley, disaster had struck twice in two years — first the flood in 1927 and then the Depression in 1929. A heavy rain that began on November 3, 1927, did not let up until flooding killed 84 people, destroyed 300 homes, and damaged more than a thousand. One village was nearly completely demolished when the river cut a new course through it, and among the human victims was the state's lieutenant governor. The most intense two days produced an average statewide rainfall of seven inches and more than four inches pummeled Northfield, Vermont, in six hours.⁴¹

Seven years later, *Cavalcade* recreated the flood victims' plight. In a play titled "Community Self-Reliance," farmers downriver informed each other by telephone of the

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ William Elliott Minsinger, *The 1927 Flood in Vermont and New England, November 3-7, 1927: An Historical and Pictorial Summary* (East Milton, MA: Blue Hill Meteorological Observatory and Science Center, 2003), 13-15.

flood's progress, and state and local officials scrambled to respond. Later in the play, when thoughts turned to reconstruction, a *New York Times* reporter arrived in search of a "human interest story." He met a group of farmers at a general store in Williston, Vermont, but at first struggled to pry details from tight-lipped Yankees. Eventually, an old-timer spoke up.⁴²

"We lost our homes, we lost our stock, and our pasture lands and our buildings," the farmer said. "But you can go home, young man, and tell your paper that we certainly appreciate your interest, but nobody needs to worry about the folks of Vermont. We're still eating regular."

The same old-timer was heard in the play's final scene. There he spoke to his family and neighbors as they stood before a Thanksgiving feast provided for them by "more fortunate communities."

We've got a lot to be thankful for, you know, in spite of what happened. We've got fine medical care for those that's sick or injured. We've got up-to-date scientific knowledge to help us rebuild and get going again. We've got the assurance of financial backing, those of us that need it. The State of Vermont has worked out all that. And we've got friends all over the country wishing us well. Compared with our forefathers, who observed that first Thanksgiving, I'd say that we was might well off. Now let's all join together in singing the doxology.⁴³

What is most revealing about this episode is its timing and its title.⁴⁴ The former was November 27, 1935, two days before Thanksgiving and about three months after one

⁴² "Community Self-Reliance," *Cavalcade of America*, November 27, 1935.

⁴³ Ibid. The doxology is a short, widely used Christian hymn of praise, often sung before meals or on special occasions. The Protestant version is of seventeenth-century Anglican origin.

⁴⁴ Actually, it was one of two short plays presented under the collective title "Community Self-Reliance." The other dramatized the landing of the *Mayflower* and signing of the Mayflower Compact.

of the most energetic and transformative moments of the New Deal, the so-called “Second Hundred Days.” In 1935, the play’s original audience would still have suffered from the Great Depression and could easily have identified with the farmers’ ordeal. In presenting and listening to the play, both its writers and audience did what John Adams asked his readers to do — they looked to their past for inspiration. Indeed, some Vermonters still speak of the flood in that way. A book marking the seventy-fifth anniversary of the flood in 2002 compared its survivors to “past Vermonters such as the Green Mountain Boys or the Vermont Regiments in the Civil War.”⁴⁵

As for the title, “Community Self-Reliance,” the *Second Hundred Days* produced a flurry of far-reaching reform. It was during the spring and summer of 1935 that the Wagner Act, Emergency Relief Appropriation Act, Social Security Act, and Wealth Tax Act were passed. Given that *Cavalcade* was sponsored by DuPont — hardly a bastion of left-wing activism — it would be a stretch to conclude that the play constituted a conscious endorsement of the New Deal. But it clearly defined “self-reliance” not as libertarian individualism but as mutualism — as Americans helping Americans to achieve a common good. When the old-timer in the play told his New York visitor that Vermonters were “still eating regular,” he meant they could take care of their own because they looked after their own. The things he cited as proof — medical care, scientific knowledge, credit — were not things individuals provided for themselves. Moreover, some listeners may have known that in the days following the 1927 flood, the state’s governor, John E. Weeks, called a special session of the state Legislature to pass a recovery bond, and in Washington, Vermont’s senators and representatives sought \$2.6

⁴⁵ Minsinger, vii.

million in federal aid, an unusual request at the time.⁴⁶ Both the state and federal governments' responses foreshadowed the use of government for relief during the Great Depression, despite the penny-pinching reputation of the Vermonter in the White House, Calvin Coolidge. In 1935, when *Cavalcade*'s version of the disaster was broadcast, Americans of a centripetal frame of mind may well have drawn parallels not only between the flood and the Great Depression but also between the Vermonters' response and the New Deal. As neighboring farmers banded together to help each other recover, so the New Deal could have been cast as "community self-reliance" at the national level — Americans helping Americans rather than relying on help from abroad.

Superheroes

The 1930s also have been characterized as the golden age of the superhero, often by fans of the genre. It was during that decade that Superman, Batman, the Shadow, Jungle Jim, and among many others, premiered. Usually beginning life in comic books or syndicated newspaper comics, these fictional iconizations of American virtue headlined successful radio serials, theatrical cliffhangers, and feature films, as well. Given that their stories were simple, formulaic, and quite devoid of theological sophistication, their connection to civil religion — or any religion — may seem remote. But it is not. Viewed through the lens of myth, superheroes reveal much about America's view of itself, its values, its place in history, and its civil religion.

For one thing, they were not without religious origins. In a study of American superheroes that began as his dissertation, Peter Coogan found the genre's roots to be

⁴⁶ Ibid.

much older than the United States. He traced superhero literature to the myths and fables of the ancient world including the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Homeric sagas, and the Biblical story of Samson and Delilah. Oftentimes in ancient tales, the line between superhero and divinity was unclear. Either the superheroes were gods, or, as in *The Illiad*, the gods acted like superheroes.⁴⁷ Modern antecedents of the superhero typically had more secular concerns, but still consisted of far more than idle adventure yarns. For example, Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* pondered scientific and technological hubris, and Edgar Rice Burroughs' novel *Tarzan of the Apes* explored the possibilities of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, Coogan wrote.⁴⁸ When the classic American superheroes arrived, they did not claim to be gods, though some pledged allegiance to a vague god similar to that of civil religion, and if they spoke of political or social concerns, they reflected prominent themes of the time. New Deal-era superheroes championed the "common man," and Cold War superheroes pledged to "defend America."

Beyond the American superhero's religious origins, there was a more important connection between these characters and American civil religion, especially in its pastoral form. As Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence outlined in two books, the American superhero embodied an "American monomyth" that closely paralleled the stories of America studied by Seymour Martin Lipset, Robert N. Bellah, Ernest Lee Tuveson, and others. They were virtuous, they battled evil conspirators, and they rescued Americans in

⁴⁷ Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Austin, TX: MonkeyBrain Books, 2006), 116-125.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 127-128, 158-159. Tarzan became the subject of several successful American radio serials in the 1930s and a series of half-hour self-contained-stories in the 1950s. Versions, adaptations, or outright bastardizations of *Frankenstein* also were heard from time to time on horror anthologies, and the novel was serialized on Australian radio.

distress, but more importantly, they reminded Americans how they could rescue themselves.

Jewett and Lawrence began their analysis with Joseph Campbell's landmark 1949 text *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*. Reading from classical Greek and Roman sources, Campbell argued that beneath the many myths of Western civilization lay an archetypal myth, a sort of ur-myth he called the "classical monomyth." Its hero left his peaceful home to battle foreign and fantastic dangers, received valuable knowledge as a result, and returned home to share it with his countrymen.⁴⁹ Though some have claimed that Campbell's monomyth also undergirds most popular American entertainment, Jewett and Lawrence were of the view that it does not. The United States, they argued, has a monomyth of its own. Its hero arrives when a peaceful community is imperiled by evil and the community's normal means of battling evil have failed. Selflessly, the hero restores harmony and leaves. The differences between the classic and American monomyths have to do with more than plot: Whereas Campbell's classic monomyth ultimately was a story of initiation, the American monomyth is a story of redemption. In other words, superhero stories are miniature versions of the redeemer nation narrative Tuveson described, or, put another way, the redemptive message of American civil religion is a superhero story writ large.⁵⁰

Examined closely, the American monomyth can be seen to have four components,

⁴⁹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949; repr. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968).

⁵⁰ Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1977), xix-xxi. The counterargument that Campbell's monomyth does apply to the United States was advanced by Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structures for Storytellers and Screenwriters* (Studio City, CA: M. Wiese Productions, 1992). Vogler is a Hollywood producer.

and collectively, their parallels to American civil religion are easy to spot. The first component is its paradisiacal backdrop. As Jewett and Lawrence put it, “The American monomyth begins and ends in Eden.”⁵¹ Its story begins in an unpretentious, democratic-republican sort of place in which people are self-governing, cooperative, and basically good, and its story arc returns there, as well. The second component is the evil that befalls the paradisiacal setting. Evil is depicted as somehow atypical of the community. Villains either hail from another town, country, or planet, or they are marked in an obvious way — perhaps they snarl, wear black hats, or are deformed. Mary Rowlandson’s harrowing 1682 account of a Puritan community beset by Indians foreshadowed such a treatment. The third component is the failure of the peaceful community’s established institutions to defend its citizens from the evil at hand. This failing clears the stage for the fourth component, which is the intercession of the superhero himself.⁵²

It is the superhero, of course, who defeats the evil and, in so doing, serves the common good. Jewett and Lawrence found recurrent traits in his character. First, he performed his awe-inspiring tasks without regard for personal benefit. He was motivated instead by transcendent ideals — justice, fairness, peace, truth. Second, he was almost never married. Jewett and Lawrence called this “sexual segmentation” and regarded it not as a reflection of sexual Puritanism but as a kind of “de-privatization” of the superhero —

⁵¹ Jewett and Lawrence, 169.

⁵² Ibid., 169-185. In this period, the superhero was almost always a “he.” A few female superheroes appeared in comic books as early as the 1940s, but they did not number among radio’s popular superheroes. Probably the most famous female comic book superhero was Wonder Woman, who premiered in 1941.

if he were married, he would not belong to everyone.⁵³ Third, the superhero inspired a change of behavior in those he saved. Jewett and Lawrence called this “the Werther effect” in reference to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s 1774 novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which inspired actions up to and including suicide among its original readers. In American superhero stories, the Werther effect referred to the way minor characters (and presumably the audience) learned from the superhero and were improved and strengthened as citizens as the result of his intrusion.⁵⁴ The nearly ubiquitous ending of these stories, in which the hero exited the stage, or proverbially “rode off into the sunset,” was required by all three of these characteristics. Had the superhero remained in the community he saved, he would have benefited from his own Herculean efforts and his selfless devotion to transcendent ideals would not have been as clear. Had he married and started a family, he would have become too ordinary and private to be a public superhero. Likewise, had he stayed, the community he saved would not necessarily have learned anything. It may simply have become dependent upon him. Indeed, the Werther effect explains why superhero stories reflected a specifically pastoral form of American civil religion. Superhero stories were not about people sitting around and waiting to be saved. Instead, they reminded Americans that there were resources within the American character that could restore the nation even when its official institutions failed. They taught that even in the depths of the Depression, not all hope was lost.

Of all of radio’s superheroes, the Shadow was the most inventive in the way he took advantage of the medium’s dependence on sound. As was explained at the beginning

⁵³ Ibid., 58-64.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 33-36.

of each episode, the Shadow was the alterego of a “wealthy man about town” named Lamont Cranston. Years earlier, while living in Asia — a generic source of things mysterious for radio writers — Cranston learned how to “cloud men’s minds” so they could not see him. Through the use of special effects and dialogue, listeners were cued as to when Cranston appeared to his interlocutors as himself and when he was heard as the unseen Shadow. In the latter case, the audience found themselves at the same disadvantage. They, too, had to contend with a disembodied voice in the darkness.

In a 1937 episode titled “The Circle of Death,” the Shadow matched wits with an antisocial urban terrorist bent on killing as many innocent Americans as possible. The man seemed to come out of nowhere as heavily patronized theaters and nightclubs went up in flames. He always left behind a note that read, “I hate crowds.” In keeping with the monomyth’s formula, a group of the city’s business leaders calling themselves the Midtown Association lambasted the police commissioner for his inability to stop the mad bomber. At a meeting of the Association carried live on radio, the commissioner’s feeble attempt at self-defense was cut short by the Shadow, who challenged the bomber to walk across the city’s Central Arcade between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. the following day. The police commissioner protested, but the Shadow reassured him privately that “a dare is a powerful psychological magnet that no egotistical, crazed mind can resist.”⁵⁵

Listeners next heard the bomber himself. He had received the Shadow’s taunt, and he did find it irresistible. Not only would he walk across the Central Arcade, but to taunt the Shadow, he would drop a note there promising his next attack. In contrast to the Shadow’s suave, sophisticated voice — he was played at the time by Orson Welles — the

⁵⁵ “The Circle of Death,” *The Shadow*, November 28, 1937.

killer's spoke in a high-pitched, tinny tone, and his laugh was nervous and squeaky. These aural clues invoked the image of a small, feminized, and unsteady man, a social misfit lashing out at a world that despised his weakness. The following day, the killer went to the arcade, and the Shadow, unseen, spotted the evil in his eyes. The Shadow followed his quarry, discovered the man's identity, and eventually traced him to his place of employment.⁵⁶

His named was Anton Spivak, and he worked alone in the dark. He was the night watchman in an unfinished subway tunnel where, apparently, no one else worked at night. The Shadow slipped into the tunnel and surprised Spivak by calling his name. Rather than confronting him immediately, the Shadow played on his egotism by pretending to look up to him.

"I hate crowds, too ... ," he told Spivak. "I'm smart, but you're smarter. Let me stay. I can learn."⁵⁷

Flattered, the killer showed the Shadow how he carried out his terrorist attacks. He loaded underground railcars with dynamite and rolled them to crowded areas of the city. There they exploded, killing hundreds of people above the surface. The Shadow told Spivak he could kill even more people if he, too, learned the secret of invisibility. If he could not be seen, he could walk past policemen with no fear of being apprehended.

"Hypnotize them! Hypnotize them! Look straight at them!" the Shadow said. "Stare at them. And then, they won't be able to see you!"

Spivak hesitated at first, but his eagerness and ego overcame his qualms. He

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

climbed back up to the surface where two city cops were waiting, and predictably walked straight into their clutches. The terrorist who hated crowds had been undone by his own illusions of grandeur. Meantime, the Shadow slipped back into obscurity and allowed the police to take the credit.⁵⁸

Both the messages of the play and the way it reflected the American monomyth were obvious. True to the monomyth's edenic setting, and civil religion's image of the United States as a virtuous community, the city was assumed to be placid were it not for the horror foisted upon it by the terrorist. Evil came from a social outcast, a man aurally marked as an oddball by an unpleasant voice and verbally rendered suspicious by a foreign-sounding name. The Shadow recognized that the man had to be challenged cleverly because the city's normal method of apprehending criminals had failed. Finally, in keeping with both the monomyth's and civil religion's interest in the common good, strength and decency were associated with the Shadow's public spiritedness while weakness and selfishness were associated with Spivak's antisocial narcissism. In every particular, Spivak was associated with private interest at the expense of common good — his motives were selfish, his trust and faith were only in himself, his life was lonely, and his job was literally in the dark.

"The Circle of Death" did not make use of overt religious imagery, but a similarly monomythic episode a few months later did. In "The Bride of Death," the Shadow rescued a minister's daughter from a deluded old woman in a house rather symbolically perched at the edge of a cliff. The old woman, Mrs. Ackley, came under the spell of a religious con man in her quest for what might be called the ultimate private interest —

⁵⁸ Ibid.

eternal life. In addition to the usual monomythic tropes (an idyllic fishing village, and so on), the story juxtaposed the minister's non-denominational, cultural Christianity with the con man's Far Eastern origins. At one point, the minister even accused Mrs. Ackley of bringing the con man "to a Christian place from some Asiatic sinkhole of the godless."⁵⁹ Similarly, during a confrontation between the con man and the Shadow, the former expressed surprise that a Westerner could make himself invisible. The Shadow admitted that he learned the trick in the East, but he added that Westerners had improved the process with modern science.⁶⁰ In short, though "The Bride of Death" mentioned Christianity by name, it did so only as a marker for Western and, by implication, American culture.

Perhaps the most remarkable use of religion in a superhero story was heard in a twenty-five-episode *Jungle Jim* story titled "The Bat Woman." Primarily aimed at a juvenile audience, *Jungle Jim* brought to radio a character listeners first met in newspaper comics syndicated by the Hearst publishing chain. Like *The Shadow*, it premiered during the Depression and lasted until the 1950s.⁶¹ The show was unusual in that it was set in Malaysia rather than the United States, but the American title character combined the character traits of an eighteenth-century republican with the pathfinding daring of Daniel Boone. He was described as a "gentleman of leisure" devoted to battling crime and aiding those in peril, and as such, he represented an adventurer bringing civilization and justice to a wild land much like the heroes of the mythological American frontier. Listeners were

⁵⁹ "The Bride of Death," *The Shadow*, March 6, 1938.

⁶⁰ This was left completely unexplained.

⁶¹ Dunning, 378.

told that Jim originally had traveled to Asia to hunt wild animals, not for the purpose of killing them but to capture them alive (presumably so they could be sent to the United States and receive good homes in zoos), but along the way, he became a “crusader.” He met his faithful native sidekick, Kolu, when the latter saved his life from a lunging wildcat.⁶²

The plot of the “The Bat Woman” revolved around a mysterious religious cult that had just appeared in the jungle. Another Westerner, a minister with the highly genderized name of Manly Chalmers, announced his intent to travel upcountry to investigate the cult. Jim and Kolu offered to travel with him, but he refused.

“While I realize I’m taking my life in my hand, I feel the cloth will prove more effective than a gun,” the clergyman told them.⁶³

His faith notwithstanding, the reverend soon was betrayed by a native guide and taken to the leader of the cult, who kept him a prisoner. That leader was a third Westerner, an alluring femme fatale named Lilly Devriel, better known by her nickname, “Shanghai Lil.” Her motives for creating the cult combined greed and revenge — greed because she knew that by controlling the natives through a fake religion, she could command the jungle’s natural resources, and revenge because she was sure Chalmers would investigate a new cult and she had an old score to settle with him. As a girl, she was a student at the reverend’s Shanghai mission, and she had come to detest his religious teaching. Later, when she was tried for murdering a lover, Chalmers testified against her, and now she blamed him for ten years spent in prison. Her chief henchman in

⁶² “The Bat Woman, Episode 2,” *Jungle Jim*, November 9, 1935.

⁶³ “The Bat Woman, Episode 1,” *Jungle Jim*, November 2, 1935.

the jungle was a brutish Canadian thug named Jacques Labat, who had his own grievance with Jungle Jim. He vowed to kill Jim for a humiliating beating Jim gave him in a supply post saloon.⁶⁴

Shanghai Lil entranced the natives with an elaborate religious ritual know as “the Mumbo Jumbo,” during which she donned a vampire bat costume. In keeping with the parameters of the American monomyth, the jungle was not itself evil and its natives were receptive to the redemption Jim and Chalmers offered. Though perhaps more unformed than paradisiacal, the jungle was nonetheless capable of becoming paradisiacal through Western influence. For example, during a long conversation between Jim and Kolu about cannibalism, Kolu admitted that he used to think eating other men was acceptable, but now that he followed the “Big Fellow Master On Top In Sky,” he realized it was a sin.⁶⁵ On another occasion, Chalmers opined that the “black magic” the cult employed was not native to that region, but was drawn instead from African voodoo.⁶⁶ Like the United States of mythic and civil religious lore, the jungle of *Jungle Jim* was beset by an outside evil, in this case by Shanghai Lil and Jacques Labat.

In the course of the story, Jim became suspicious when Chalmers did not return, and Jim and Kolu set out after the reverend. Jim was captured and soon joined Chalmers as one of Lil’s prisoners.⁶⁷ Much of the second half of the serial took place at her jungle

⁶⁴ Ibid.; “The Bat Woman, Episode 2,” *Jungle Jim*; “The Bat Woman, Episode 3,” *Jungle Jim*, November 16, 1935; “The Bat Woman, Episode 9,” *Jungle Jim*, December 28, 1935; “The Bat Woman, Episode 10,” *Jungle Jim*, January 4, 1936.

⁶⁵ “The Bat Woman, Episode 7,” *Jungle Jim*, December 14, 1935.

⁶⁶ “The Bat Woman, Episode 14,” *Jungle Jim*, February 1, 1936. Voodoo is not really African, a point elided.

⁶⁷ “The Bat Woman, Episode 6,” *Jungle Jim*, December 7, 1935; “The Bat Woman, Episode 7,”

compound, where the two men underwent various threats, torments, and humiliations.⁶⁸

The most remarkable feature of “The Bat Woman,” however, was its conclusion. Instead of defeating Shanghai Lil by killing or banishing her, Jim and Chalmers *reformed* her, and in subsequent *Jungle Jim* adventures, she actually took Kolu’s place as the hero’s key crime-fighting accomplice. It was a plot development as interesting for its manipulation of gender as its use of religion. Lil was shown to have a soft and vulnerable heart beneath her hardened exterior, and as she fell deeply in love with Jim, she rethought her objections to the reverend’s religious teachings.⁶⁹

The first sign of an inward change in Lil came when she traded in her “riding breeches” for a dress and ordered Jim to come to her quarters. There she confessed that she loved him and asked him to marry her. When Jim refused, she reverted to a tyrannical mien. She told Jim she would marry him that evening whether he wanted to or not, and moreover, she would force Chalmers to perform the ceremony even if she had to torture him to do it. Later, however, in a private moment of self-reflection, she admitted to herself that her love for Jim was real.

The final episodes built up to a climactic wedding scene. On learning of Lil’s

Jungle Jim; “The Bat Woman, Episode 8,” *Jungle Jim*, December 21, 1935; “The Bat Woman, Episode 9,” *Jungle Jim*.

⁶⁸ “The Bat Woman, Episode 11,” *Jungle Jim*, January 11, 1936; “The Bat Woman, Episode 12,” *Jungle Jim*, January 18, 1936; “The Bat Woman, Episode 13,” *Jungle Jim*, January 25, 1936.

⁶⁹ “The Bat Woman, Episode 14,” *Jungle Jim*; “The Bat Woman, Episode 15,” *Jungle Jim*, February 8, 1936; “The Bat Woman, Episode 16,” *Jungle Jim*, February 15, 1936. Though the question of gender and radio lies beyond this study, a contrast should be drawn between radio’s use of civil religion with respect to gender and its use of civil religion with respect to race. The latter was more common. As will be shown in Chapter 3, radio in general did much to perpetuate racial stereotypes, but its use of civil religion included prophetic protests against racial marginalization. Similarly, radio in general did much to perpetuate gender stereotypes and sometimes tried to “teach women their place,” but civil religion was less often used to protest society’s treatment of gender.

intention to marry Jim, Labat became infuriated and revealed that he was secretly in love with his employer. She laughed at him, and this sent him raging into the jungle. There, he vowed that if he could not have her, no one could. He purchased a high-powered rifle and returned to her camp to murder her.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, Chalmers told Jim he would happily accept torture before marrying them, but Jim insisted he perform the ceremony partly because he knew the marriage could be annulled later and partly because he did not want to see the reverend harmed. Standing before the altar, Jim reluctantly said, "I do," but before Lil could utter the same words, Labat fired a bullet through a window and struck her down.⁷¹ During her recovery, she definitively recognized the error of her ways. She softened her hostility toward the reverend's faith and altered her romantic approach toward Jim.

"I tried the only way I knew, by force," she said of her first attempt to win him. "I know now that was the wrong way to go at it. From now on, I'll, I'll make you fall in love with me. Then we'll be married."

Unfortunately, Lil did not seem to understand the monomythic formula.

"I'm not the marrying kind, Lil," Jim responded. "You're stalking the wrong game."

Still, she came to a better end than Labat. Erroneously convinced that he had killed his one true love, he cringed at the monstrosity of his own wickedness and threw

⁷⁰ "The Bat Woman, Episode 17," *Jungle Jim*, February 22, 1936; "The Bat Woman, Episode 18," *Jungle Jim*, February 29, 1936; "The Bat Woman, Episode 19," *Jungle Jim*, March 7, 1936.

⁷¹ "The Bat Woman, Episode 20," *Jungle Jim*, March 14, 1936.

himself off a cliff.⁷²

In “The Bat Woman,” the unnamed but generically Western “true” religion of Jim and Chalmers was pitted against the obviously fraudulent “Mumbo Jumbo” of Shanghai Lil. Jim and the reverend represented not sectarian religious figures but idealized forces of civilization. Unlike Lil before her conversion, they acted not out of self-interest, but in the common good of the people of the jungle, and they were able, ultimately, to overcome an evil presence that sought to exploit those people both economically and religiously. Yet part of what made “The Bat Woman” so interesting from the perspective both of the American monomyth and the pastoral, or reassuring, form of American civil religion was the fact that redemption came not simply by destroying the villain but by discovering the latent goodness within her. Jim’s ultimate refusal to marry Lil demonstrated Jewett and Lawrence’s notion of “sexual segmentation,” but the change he inspired in her — and, more tragically, the despondency that arose in Labat — were examples of “the Werther effect.” The superhero did not simply deliver the other characters from evil. He also reminded them that they have the power to deliver themselves.

The Medium

Marshall McLuhan famously wrote that “the medium is the message,” by which he meant that media shape the messages they contain.⁷³ In some ways, it was an unfortunate metaphor because it sounded more technologically deterministic than it

⁷² “The Bat Woman, Episode 21,” *Jungle Jim*, March 21, 1936.

⁷³ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 7.

was.⁷⁴ More accurate but less pithy would have been “the medium is part of the message” or “the medium influences the message.” McLuhan’s essential point was that media are more than neutral transporters of data. They are, in fact, *mediators* between human beings and the world around them. For this reason, when studying the influence of mass media, more than content is at issue, and when defining what a mass medium is, more than a simple definition is required. In the case of American radio during the 1930s through 1950s, “radio” refers not only to boxes that emit sounds or to the sounds they emit. It also refers to the institutions and relationships that were set up to emit those sounds.

In the United States, these institutions and relationships, for the most part, constituted a national, privately-owned, commercial broadcasting model. Therefore, radio’s usefulness for and influence upon the promulgation of American civil religion reflected not only the specific properties of aural communication — the disintegration of the individual, the disembodiment of sound, and so forth — but also things like the hierarchical nature of corporate organization, the relationship of business and government, and the profit motive. The fact that pastoral American civil religion was reassuring — and that suffering people generally like to be reassured — was important on one level because it strengthened a national sense of “being in it together” and because it served as a source of inspiration. But it was important on another level because it attracted audiences to radio programs, which, in turn, attracted advertisers. In effect, commercial network radio gave civil religion three and not two objectives. In addition to civil religion’s civil objective of national unity and its religious objective of finding

⁷⁴ Jewett and Lawrence, for example, complained that they were “not at all convinced by Marshall McLuhan’s facile claim that the medium alone is the message.” Jewett and Lawrence, xxi.

transcendent meaning in the life of the nation, a third, commercial objective emerged — giving people what they want in order to generate profits.⁷⁵

Considerable literature exists on how and why the United States adopted a commercial broadcasting model and why that arrangement was not “inevitable.” In broad outline, as Susan Smulyan has shown, it came down to the audience, the technology, and the resistance to public financing.⁷⁶ Audiences gravitated toward national performances when given a choice between national and local programming, because while the latter could be colorful it also could be amateurish, infantile, and boring. For example, veteran North Carolina radioman Charles H. Crutchfield recalled once frying an egg on the sidewalk and broadcasting the sizzle.⁷⁷ The ability to attract larger advertisers, and to deploy bigger budgets, gave networks an edge in snapping up the most melodious musicians, the cleverest comedians, and the wittiest writers, but it also created technological challenges. These led to a wired network since the other two options, super-power broadcasting and shortwave rebroadcasting, were not feasible at the national level. The expense of a wired network required large-scale capital formation, and given resistance to public broadcasting both inside and outside of Congress, that eventually led to a for-profit, advertising-driven model. Smulyan found that audience resistance to advertising

⁷⁵ During the Depression, generating profits was itself hailed as a way that radio helped the nation recover from its crisis. Broadcasting industry magazines loved to interview businessmen who claimed that were it not for their advertising programs, their companies would be much worse off. Martin Davey, “Radio Increased Our Sales 20% During a General Depression,” *Broadcast Advertising*, July 1930, Library of American Broadcasting, Hornbake Library, University of Maryland, College Park, MD (hereafter, LAB); Manly Wright Conant, “GOODRICH Picks Radio to Fight Hard Times,” *Broadcast Advertising*, August 1930, LAB.

⁷⁶ Smulyan, 1-10.

⁷⁷ Interview with Charles Crutchfield, 1986, transcript, Charles H. Crutchfield Collection, Series IV, Box 3, Folder 8, LAB, 20.

ironically helped to pave its way. It forced broadcasters to “sell” the advertising system before they sold the advertising, and in time they were able to frame private broadcasting as “democratic” because it gave people what they wanted. Compared to the publicly financed British and Canadian systems, advertising was said to be “American.”⁷⁸

Commercial broadcasting also meant that historical dramas such as *Cavalcade of America* had to hold historical accuracy in balance with audience appeal — if they bothered with historical accuracy at all. In April 1949, the advertising firm Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn studied a test group’s reaction to six episodes of *Cavalcade*, selected as representative of the series’ fare. About a hundred people were interviewed over the space of a week in Syracuse, New York. Their approval or disapproval of the selected programs was recorded on a minute-by-minute basis, and they were asked to compare their impressions of *Cavalcade* with those of several other dramatic series. *Cavalcade* received high marks from the survey’s participants, but it was not their favorite program. That honor went to *Lux Radio Theater*, a Hollywood-based dramatic anthology that adapted popular movies to radio, usually with a star or two of the film’s original cast. *Lux* was introduced each week by noted film director Cecil B. DeMille and was given a lavish budget, even going so far as to employ a live orchestra in the sound studio. The two other programs that ranked above *Cavalcade* — *Theatre Guild of the Air* (better known by its popular nickname, *The United States Steel Hour*) and *Screen Guild of the Air* — also adapted fictional stories from another medium to radio. *Theatre Guild* drew from Broadway and *Screen Guild* from Hollywood. Of the seven shows

⁷⁸ Fortner, 92, also cited “collusion” between national broadcasting interests and the Department of Commerce.

tested, *Lux* received an 89 percent approval rating from Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn's test group; *Theatre Guild* received a 79 percent rating; *Screen Guild*, 70 percent; *Cavalcade*, 69 percent; *Ford Theater*, 63 percent; *Hallmark Playhouse*, 55 percent; and *The Prudential Hour*, 46 percent.⁷⁹

More telling were the reasons people gave for these rankings. *Lux* received praise for its liberal use of film stars, and *Theatre Guild* and *Screen Guild* were noted for their compelling stories. *Cavalcade* was praised for being “educational” — the only show of the seven so described — but it was chided for being less consistent than the shows ranked above it. To improve *Cavalcade*, producers should choose “more interesting stories — with more action, more suspense, deeper plot, more excitement or adventure, more play on emotions, with action right from the beginning,” the test group suggested. Some listeners asked for more music or wanted shorter dramas, and there even were calls to de-emphasize history and present “more modern stories.” In short, the survey's subjects said they appreciated *Cavalcade*'s high-toned content, but they wanted entertainment more than education. Their comments and suggestions focused on how the show presented its stories more than on the stories' historical or moral lessons, or, put another way, they preoccupied themselves with the medium rather than the message. For all the prestige listeners attached to *Cavalcade*, the things they most wanted were good acting, brisk pacing, intriguing plots, and pleasing music.⁸⁰

Interoffice correspondence at NBC in the wake of the report indicated that

⁷⁹ Batten, Barton, Durstine, and Osborn, *A Study of Audience Reaction to Cavalcade of America*, n.d., Kenyon Nicholson Papers, Box 3, Folder 12, Mass Communications History Collections, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI (hereafter, WHS).

⁸⁰ Ibid.

the network took Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn's findings seriously — and, as a result, the people responsible for the show perceived a dilemma. "Every radio guy," wrote one, faces the same conundrum. Improving a show artistically and increasing its rating are two different things "not in the slightest synonymous." What's worse, doing one often harms the other. In a meandering, rambling memo, he responded to the advertising agency's report by suggesting that *Cavalcade* had to choose between doing "a good clean show ... with gentle words and gentle music and gentle sounds, kind to all, hurting no one, and keeping our regular listeners happy" or taking "a tip from the *Mr. D. A.*'s and *FBI*'s," a reference to two gritty police dramas then on the air. Obviously torn between these choices, he tellingly suggested a third possibility: "We should, for our own peace of minds, get together with the client [meaning the advertiser] and set our goal."⁸¹

The following day, a colleague's response to the Batten, Barton, Durstine & Osborn report was similarly befuddled. "*Cavalcade* seems to have created its own followers — an audience conditioned to Better History through Dupont. And in general to depart from this policy seems unadvisable," he wrote. On the other hand, "I have this conviction: given a potentially dramatic story, it's the treatment that counts. Dramaturgically, what makes an effective one-act play makes an effective *Cavalcade*." He also referred to some minute-by-minute charts provided by the advertising agency that showed when audience interest rose and fell during each of the episodes tested. It rose during moments of action or suspense and flagged during slower periods. His final

⁸¹ John Zoller to Harold Blackburn, et. al., June 20, 1949, Kenyon Nicholson Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, WHS.

recommendation was remarkably clipped and businesslike for a show that soared with high ideals and flights of imagination. If nothing else, he said, the first act should end on a note of suspense: “It’s insurance to protect ourselves from the tuner-outers.”⁸²

Cavalcade’s promoters could claim as loudly as they wished that the show was designed, as Dixon Ryan Fox had put it, “to remind us of the purposes and motives on which our fathers and mothers based and built this nation.” The fact remained that it also was designed to make money for the broadcasters and build prestige for DuPont. In deciding what went on the air, higher goals could not be inoculated from commercial considerations or the shows’ entertainment aspects, and scripts that seemed likely to appeal to audiences were preferred over those deemed less promising. Stories that depicted the United States in an unfavorable light were flatly rejected.⁸³ In short, commercial radio, as a medium of delivery both for historical narrative and civil religion, was not a neutral container. Comforting messages of a pastoral nature fit nicely with broadcasters’ own goals, but annoying messages did not, and even messages that were thematically appropriate were only commercially acceptable when presented in an entertaining way. In radio’s version of American history, education had to bend toward entertainment, but entertainment did not necessarily have to bend toward education.

In effect, broadcasting’s mixed motives, a byproduct of its commercial model, redefined what radio “education” was. The closer “historical truth” could be identified

⁸² Kenyon Nicholson to Harold Blackburn, June 21, 1949, Kenyon Nicholson Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, WHS. Similar views were expressed in Bill Millard to Harold Blackburn, June 23, 1949, Kenyon Nicholson Papers, Box 1, Folder 2, WHS.

⁸³ One example of a script that was rejected recounted the unfortunate career of the court-martialed Civil War general, Fitz John Porter. As Martin Grams put it, the script was not accepted “because of the implied criticism of Army brass.” Grams, 36.

with what the public wanted to hear, the more broadcasters could give audiences stories that sounded reassuring and then tell audiences those stories were true, which made them more reassuring. That audiences already had amorphous notions about what they were hearing only made this easier. Years earlier, in 1934, NBC commissioned a report that surveyed audiences in Columbus, Ohio; Ames, Iowa; Madison, Wisconsin; Norman, Oklahoma; New Orleans, Louisiana; and Corvallis, Oregon, to ask them which radio programs they considered “educational.” Researchers found that while people liked to think their favorite shows were educational, their definitions of “educational” were eclectic. For example, about a fifth of those who listened to *Death Valley Days*, a popular Western adventure series, considered it educational, and between a third and a half of those who listened to the soap operas *Ma Perkins* and *One Man’s Family* lent them the same description. Six percent of *Amos ‘n’ Andy*’s fans thought that show taught them something, though it is not clear what, and even *The Funny Paper Hour* was considered educational by a few listeners.⁸⁴

Blurring the distinction between education and entertainment was but the first step in a larger phenomenon of trumping history with myth, or more accurately, of encouraging Americans to use commercially produced myths as their standards for judging which historical presentations are true and which are not. In *The American Monomyth* as well as their later book, *The Myth of the American Superhero*, Jewett and Lawrence considered what they called “technomythic critical theory,” or the proposition that mass electronic

⁸⁴ Psychological Corporation, The, *A Study of Radio Listening Habits* (New York: The Psychological Corporation, October 11, 1934), LAB.

media lend greater verisimilitude to mythic stories.⁸⁵ In this view, the rugged individualist of lore became even more believable when the Lone Ranger fulfilled the role on radio or when John Wayne portrayed him on screen. Mass-mediated myths became hermeneutics through which people assessed which narratives were “historically accurate.” Not only were they apt to believe that John Wayne portrayed a typical American frontiersman, but when confronted with the probably-less-exciting facts of actual frontier life, they disbelieved them because those facts did not conform to the mythic image.

Taking the argument a step further, Jewett and Lawrence continued that when stories transfer from one mass medium to another (usually from print to an electronic medium), they tend to drive even deeper into myth. In other words, they tend to emphasize even more strongly those elements that conform to a monomyth. Sporting yet another neologism, they dubbed this “mythical alchemy,” and illustrated it with a startling example from the 1970s. In the popular 1974 film *Death Wish*, actor Charles Bronson starred as an unassuming, peace-loving man named Paul Kersey, who was traumatized when his wife was raped and murdered by three attackers. The police told him the crime probably would go unsolved, so when a business relationship brought him into contact with a tough-talking, gun-toting Arizonan who spouted the take-no-prisoners ethos of the mythological Old West, Kersey took the Arizonan’s words to heart. He bought some guns, learned how to shoot them, and for the rest of the picture, dispensed rough justice on a parade of ne’er-do-wells. Kersey was presented as a sympathetic figure, and the audience was led to understand, if not applaud, his vigilantism. Yet,

⁸⁵ John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 8.

incredibly, the original novel had presented the opposite message. Its author, Brian Garfield, had not celebrated Kersey as a reincarnated Wyatt Earp, but instead created him as a warning to Americans of what they might become if they did not rethink their glorification of violence. So distorted was Garfield's story in the film that at one point, he actually petitioned the Federal Communications Commission not to allow it to be shown on television!⁸⁶

Franklin Roosevelt was onto something when he praised the nation's founders and pioneers for their optimism and "belief." He understood the pastoral power of inspiring stories, and he understood the religious nature of American self-identity. Radio drama picked up on familiar civil religious themes — the image of the United States as a virtuous nation fighting for the common good but beset from without by evil conspiracies — and amplified them in historical dramas and rousing adventure stories. With the onset of war in Europe and Asia, however, broadcasters found that the comforting tones of pastoral civil religion were not enough. A second style of American civil religion, the priestly style, provided a stronger message for a deadlier crisis.

⁸⁶ Jewett and Lawrence, *Monomyth*, 40-57, 120-121. An example of mythical alchemy in radio drama, though not as shocking as Paul Kersey's transformation, was the alteration of Hopalong Cassidy from the tough-talking, hard-drinking cowhand of Clarence Mulford's novels to the paragon of clean-cut American manhood portrayed by William Boyd.

Chapter 2 — Priestly Civil Religion and Godless Enemies

A fire-breathing patriarch named John Brown lumbered into a ragged inn along the Kansas border on a windy evening in 1855. He wanted a place to sleep, but the innkeeper was leery of his new guest. Perhaps it was Brown's Moses-like beard or perhaps it was his stern countenance, but something about the man spelled trouble, so the innkeeper inquired of his business.

"You a preaching man?" he asked Brown.

"Hang the preaching. The word's in the book for all to read."¹

Thus began *Cavalcade of America's* depiction of the great abolitionist — and an illustration of the priestly form of American civil religion. A moment later, the innkeeper complained there were "too many hypocritical, Bible readin' free-staters in these parts," making it clear that Brown had walked into a nest of armed and agitated border ruffians. Brown did not wither. Boldly and loudly, he announced that he had come to make Kansas a free state and that he would begin in Osawatomie.

The ruffians laughed at first, but when they realized he was serious, the innkeeper pointed to his rifle and asked if that would change Brown's his mind. Brown said it would not.

"Listen to the word as it's written in the book," he thundered. "The Lord is a man

¹ "John Brown," *Cavalcade of America*, December 11, 1940.

of war. The Lord is his name. Thy right hand hath been glorious in power! Thy right hand, oh Lord!”²

Brown and the innkeeper came to blows, and when the innkeeper could fight no more, Brown uttered a line that could as naturally have fallen from the lips of Clint Eastwood.

“You best get a doctor for that man,” he said. “I fear he may be badly cut.”

If the essence of pastoral American civil religion was comfort, the essence of the priestly form was confidence. Pastoral civil religion gave succor to the nation by reminding it of its chosenness, but priestly civil religion gave it strength by praising its righteousness. Or put another way, in pastoral civil religion, the United States enjoyed the blessings of God, but in the priestly form, the United States embodied his will.

Cavalcade’s John Brown illustrated this distinction. After beating the innkeeper to a bloody pulp, he did not say, “I, John Brown, have defeated the Lord’s enemy!” Rather, he stood up and said, “Thy right hand, oh Lord, hath dashed in pieces the enemy!” In the pastoral mode, Brown may have spoken of the Lord’s right hand, but in the priestly mode, he became it.

Two scenes later, Brown reinforced the point at a meeting of free-state farmers. When he proposed the “systematic” killing of pro-slavery night riders, some of the free staters balked.

“Killing?” one asked. “Why, Mr. Brown, I’m afraid you don’t quite understand. We come here as peace-loving men to till the soil.”

The man’s wife agreed. “There’s no blood on the hands of our men, and we don’t

² Brown quoted Exodus 15:3, 6.

want it,” she said. “It says in the book, ‘Thou shalt not kill.’”

“Aye, the book. An eye for an eye,” said Brown. “I put on righteousness and it clothe me. I broke the jaws of the wicked. My judgment with the robe and the diadem.³ Who is it? Who is there to say we are not righteous if we act?”

He ordered his son to open a box of sabers brought from Ohio.

“The sword,” Brown said, “the weapon of the Lord.”

Priestly civil religion in radio drama followed the main contours of the mythic structure outlined in Chapter 1 — the virtuous community overcoming an external threat and moving history forward as the result of its victory — but the focus changed in each of these elements. Priestly civil religion linked the nation to something transcendent by shifting the focus to the nation itself. For example, in the priestly form, the virtuous community often became the holy suffering community, or the virtuous protagonist became a holy sufferer. Near the end the play, when Brown was sentenced to hang for his raid on Harper’s Ferry, he addressed the court:

Had I interfered in the manner which, I admit, has been fairly proved, had I so interfered in behalf of the powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of any of their friends, and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, it would have been deemed all right. Every man in this court would have deemed it an act worthy of reward rather than of punishment. But because I did what I have done in the name of those who are helpless and oppressed, it has been called by another name.⁴

In effect, Brown said, “I shall hang *because* I am the right hand of the Lord, for those who prefer evil will try to stop me.” In this way, he recast his execution as proof of his

³ An allusion to Job 29:14, 17.

⁴ “John Brown,” *Cavalcade of America*.

righteousness and not simply as a punishment for excess and violence. Tuveson showed that similar themes were much used during the Civil War. “The most responsible millennialists had always warned that a chosen people would be subjected to more severe tests than other peoples,” he wrote, “for, as [Protestant clergyman Josiah] Strong said later, the ‘leverage’ both of good and evil must be greater in this country than anywhere else.”⁵

In similar fashion, the idea of an outside evil conspiracy often intensified in priestly civil religion to an immediate, existential threat. The implication was that an evil had emerged that was so great that only violence could remove it. John Brown illustrated this when he spoke to the peace-loving Kansas farmers. The way of peace had proved sterile, he argued — the time had come for the “weapon of the Lord.” Because the threat was existential, and because the United States had been chosen — perhaps even created — for the purpose of this work, the fight had to be fought and won, no matter the cost or suffering. To give the argument still more force, the progressive view of history was heightened into a notion of history “breaking,” or passing from one recognizable era into another. The United States would play the role of history’s redeemer. Not only were its battles existential; they were in some sense final. This combined the deeply-embedded Puritan idea of a people standing before a supernatural intervention in history with an eschatology that saw history progressing through a series of confrontations with evil. The implication was that America’s wars, far from simply defending the nation’s shores, in fact represented a “starting over” for the world — a final victory over at least a certain type of evil and the dawning of a better age.⁶

⁵ Tuveson, 188-189.

⁶ For the Puritan sense of participating in a divinely guided historical moment, see Edmund S.

American propaganda used the priestly style of civil religion more subtly in World War II than in World War I. Franklin Roosevelt and other members of his administration consciously avoided the excesses of Woodrow Wilson's "One Hundred Percent Americanism" or the crudities of George Creel's infamous United States Committee on Public Information. Nuance may have been easier because the enemy was nastier. Most of the Western world recoiled at Nazism, but Kaiser Wilhelm II's imperial designs had never been much different from those of Britain and France. Yet when the priestly style was used in World War II, its message was clear, and the question *Cavalcade's* John Brown posed to Kansas farmers was asked of the United States: "Who is there to say we are not righteous if we act?"

The Problem

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor found the United States preparing, but not yet prepared for war. Suddenly a nation that sought to avoid war turned its face toward battle. It was not a comfortable transition. The nation's founders had not approved of large, standing armies, and prior to World War II, the typical pattern had been to stand down when hostilities ended. The dismantling of the military after World War I followed this tradition. As historian James Patterson has noted, as late as 1938, tiny Romania had a larger military than the United States,⁷ and throughout the 1930s, Roosevelt had been loathe to redirect America's industrial capacity toward war. He knew most Americans had no taste for it, some German and Italian Americans sympathized with Hitler and

Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1958).

⁷ Patterson, 83.

Mussolini, and major industrialists, including the automakers, reaped greater profits by selling consumer goods.⁸

Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939 led Roosevelt to direct more resources toward rearmament and intensified discussion about radio's role in war. The medium's military usefulness and propaganda value were obvious, but how best to exploit them was not. Also unclear was *who* would exploit them. Only a few years earlier, a breathless article in the popular magazine *Radio Mirror* warned Americans that the innocent-looking receiver in their living rooms could become a treacherous beast in wartime. Claiming to offer a "startling exposé of secret government and military plans for radio" the article warned that "your loudspeaker may suddenly turn into a demoniacal chanter of enemy propaganda" and "your favorite stations may be dominated by stern censors." Radio may even become "as grimly silent as the death which is hovering over the battlefields," the article continued, or it could be "seized by determined troops."⁹ More sober were the assessments of Colonel R. Ernest Dupuy, of the War Department's Bureau of Public Relations, who spoke at a National Association of Broadcasters convention a few months after Pearl Harbor. Dupuy listed radio, airplanes, and submarines as the "trio of weapons" that would make World War II unlike any previous conflict, but without radio, the other two would be hampered. Avoiding *Radio Mirror*'s hysterics, he too agreed that information was a weapon. At one level, that fact called for censorship because the government had to be certain that critical information was denied to the enemy. At

⁸ John Morton Blum, *V Was For Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 117-118.

⁹ Jean Pelletier, "Will War Guns Silence Radio?" *Radio Mirror*, December 1935, LAB, 16-17.

another level, it called for propaganda, or taking the war to the airwaves. “A skillful enemy, well-versed in the art, today sets trap after trap to catch our press and our newscaster,” Dupuy warned. Because the enemy knew how to make radio compelling — and understood the deadline pressure under which American journalists operated — damaging information could sneak undetected into the otherwise harmless reports. Dupuy said he believed Americans were smart enough to ferret good information out of bad, but only if they received what he called “a complete presentation” — that is, only if the American case were presented with comparable skill.¹⁰

The task of using radio to construct wartime unity was therefore partly institutional and partly informational. It posed the institutional problem of hammering out a relationship between radio and government conducive both to the government’s need to fight the war and the broadcasting industry’s desire to maintain a private, national broadcasting system. It posed the informational problem of selling the war and keeping it sold. A 1942 digest of intelligence surveys that circulated among officials of the Office of War Information’s Radio Bureau warned what could happen if radio failed. The report stated that “one out of every ten Americans” was prepared to accept a peace with Hitler and about a third would accept a peace with the German army sans Hitler. Such people, warned the report, constitute “the reservoir of divisionist and defeatist strength in the United States today.”¹¹ More widespread, however, were fears of what would be left of the United States after the war. “A decided majority of Americans actively fear a postwar

¹⁰ Col. R. Ernest Dupuy, *Total War — What it Means* (Washington, D. C.: National Association of Broadcasters, 1942), LAB, 3-5.

¹¹ William B. Lewis to Douglas Meserve, et. al., June 11, 1942, “Digest of Recent Intelligence Surveys,” Office of War Information, Records of the Radio Bureau, NC-148, Entry E-95, Box 626, William B. Lewis Folder, National Archives II, College Park, MD (hereafter, NARA), 3.

depression,” the report warned, and “about two-thirds of the public think that they will be worse off when the war is over than they are today, that there will be fewer jobs, lower wages and some measure of inflation.” The danger to the war effort was clear:

In such an atmosphere of widespread individual insecurity, divisionist tactics may seriously impair the morals of the Nation as a whole, may undermine the readiness of Americans to pay the costs requisite to uncompromising victory and may abort a potential eagerness to join with other nations in effective postwar collaboration.¹²

One of the tools radio would use to quell these fears was the priestly form of American civil religion. At the same time that broadcasters and government agencies explored methods of institutional coordination, radio’s writers and producers drove home the points that the United States was a righteous actor, that nothing could matter more than the battle before it, and that victory would bring a better world and not a new depression.

The Resources

In aid of this were three resources: a generally cooperative relationship between government and business, a broadcasting industry that saw much to gain by supporting the war, and the crumbling of interwar antiwar sentiment within the nation’s sectarian religions. Publicity-oriented government agencies designed to work with broadcasters, such as the Office of Facts and Figures and the Office of War Information, and industry organizations designed to liaise with the government, such as the Broadcasters’ Victory Council, had centripetal effects not only because they sought to build national unity but also because they laid aside the government-versus-business polemics that surrounded the

¹² Ibid.

New Deal in the 1930s. For their part, broadcasters and advertisers knew that business' reputation had taken a drubbing in the Depression, and patriotic war-making posed a chance to repair the damage. By demonstrating that advertising could "sell" war, they strengthened the case that it could sell other things, as well. Finally, the brief flourishing of pacifism among American churches after World War I dribbled away in the 1930s, and especially after Pearl Harbor, survived mostly in the historic peace churches.

Conversations between broadcasters and the government quite literally began at the beginning. By coincidence, CBS newscaster Edward R. Murrow and his wife had been scheduled to dine with President and Mrs. Roosevelt at the White House on the evening of December 7, 1941. When news of the attack in Hawaii broke, Mrs. Murrow called the White House expecting to find the dinner date had been cancelled, but to the contrary, she was informed that Roosevelt wanted to speak with her husband. After dinner, the two men chatted privately deep into the night in a conversation neither spoke about later.¹³ Famous for his "fireside chats," Roosevelt long had recognized the political power of radio, so it was no surprise he spotted its usefulness in war, as well.

The wartime relationship that emerged between the federal government and the broadcasting industry was fundamentally cooperative. The government agreed to preserve the nation's private broadcasting model and handed the industry an enormous perk when it exempted advertising from the wartime excess-profits tax. The industry adopted supportive broadcasting guidelines, served as mouthpiece for much government information, and put up with inconveniences such as a halt in the manufacture of radio

¹³ Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web, 1933-1953*, vol. 2 of *A History of Broadcasting in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 152.

receivers and a delay in the development of television. Before the war, relations between the Roosevelt Administration and American business — including both broadcasting industry and its advertisers — had sometimes been frosty. Perhaps most hated was Leon Henderson, head of the consumer-oriented Office of Price Administration, whom industrialists considered “a minion of Satan,” as one historian put it.¹⁴ In general, however, much of the animosity expressed in public — on both sides — was rhetorical gloss, and the wartime relationship of government and radio is best understood in light of New Deal historiography which has seen the public and private sectors growing closer during the war.¹⁵ Indeed, Gert Horten made the privatization of America the central theme of his book-length study of radio and World War II.

From this perspective, it is easy to see why the broadcasting industry, whose fortunes rose with private-sector consumerism, should want to play ball. The softest pitch the government threw was the advertising exemption to the excess-profits tax. Roosevelt was determined not to repeat Wilson’s errors during World War I, and one of them had been allowing American industrialists to enrich themselves while ordinary Americans sacrificed life and treasure. In order to prevent a “war profiteers” scandal such as that which followed the First World War, a 90-percent excess-profits tax was levied on business. Profits used to purchase advertising were exempt, so every dollar business spent

¹⁴ Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 247.

¹⁵ For example, Michael A. Bernstein has argued that rather than thinking of New Deal controversies in terms of “government versus business,” it is more useful to focus on divisions within business. In his account, the New Deal came to terms with a shift, already underway, away from nineteenth-century labor-intensive, production-oriented industries and toward capital-intensive consumer-oriented industries. The latter held a firm hand over labor, but the former wanted to turn workers into consumers. Bernstein, 32-54.

on advertising saved it ninety cents of taxes.¹⁶ The exemption applied to print advertising, too, but publishers struggled with paper shortages, so radio gained a comparative advantage. Stickier was the problem of what to sell. Due partly to scarce materials and partly to the production of war materiel, some of radio's biggest advertisers had nothing to offer consumers. They took advantage of the tax exemption by buying institutional advertising, or advertising design to bolster their reputations rather than flog their products. By weaving war information into paid airtime, businesses established their patriotic bona fides, and by hinting at what they could do for America after the war, they helped to establish the ideological foundations of postwar consumerism.¹⁷

If broadcasters received from government a commitment to private broadcasting and a profitable tax break, what the government expected from broadcasters was outlined a few months after Pearl Harbor by Archibald MacLeish, then head of the Office of Facts and Figures, a public relations office inside the War Department. MacLeish said the government wanted "cooperation not in terms of facilities, but in terms of men." It would not seize control of radio stations, as might be the case under authoritarian regimes, but it did ask the men and women who worked in radio to direct their talents toward the war. "If it were simply a question of facilities, simply a question of hours on the air, the Government would do far better to provide its own facilities," MacLeish suggested. But "what the Industry can really give that Government cannot readily and immediately supply is the brains and the hearts and the energy of the men who run it." In effect,

¹⁶ There were additional conditions and exceptions, but this generally was the case.

¹⁷ Christopher H. Sterling and John Michael Kittross, *Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcasting*, 3rd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 232-233; Horten, 102-109.

MacLeish asked to turn wartime broadcasting into a public-private partnership. “We have not asked for the partial loan of your facilities, we have asked for the performance of a job, and you on your part have agreed to perform it,” he said.¹⁸

Specifically, this public-private coordination meant the government streamlined its information flow to local stations, and broadcasters helped to set up an allocation plan for air time devoted to war messages. Local station managers complained that too many government agencies sent them too many press releases with too much duplication. Officials in the Roosevelt Administration knew this, and in October 1941, the Office of Facts and Figures (OFF) was established as an information clearinghouse. At first, the OFF was to provide the press and public with objective data — facts and figures — and it was assumed that reasonable people, given accurate information, would draw the right conclusions. It proved naive. The press complained it was not given enough data and frequently used what data it had to criticize the administration and engage in speculation. Meantime, the president’s political opponents complained the OFF, far from being as objective as claimed, actually was a front for New Deal politics. The OFF was superseded in June 1942 by the Office of War Information (OWI), and by then, as will be shown below, officials had begun thinking more seriously about the power of radio drama. For its part, the radio industry also scrambled when the war began. It set up umbrella agencies to speak for the whole industry either to the government or to the public. The War Advertising Council, forerunner of today’s Ad Council, was established

¹⁸ Archibald MacLeish, *Radio and War: An Address By Hon. Archibald MacLeish, Director, Office of Facts and Figures, Before 20th Annual Convention, National Association of Broadcasters, Hotel Statler, Cleveland, Ohio, May 11, 1942* (Washington, D. C.: National Association of Broadcasters, 1942), LAB, 3-5.

in the early days of the war by representatives of the media industry, leading advertising agencies, and major purchasers of advertising. It created and coordinated massive projects such as publicity drives to urge Americans to buy war bonds or to help the U.S. Treasury to sell a payroll deduction plan that took money from workers' wages to buy bonds.¹⁹

The radio industry saw in the war an opportunity to establish its importance — and to raise the reputations of its clients — by serving both as a wartime source of information and a booster of national morale. Simultaneous to discussions about the relationship between government and the broadcasting industry were conversations within the industry about what should and should not go on the air. Many of these discussions were predictable — newscasters learned how not to aid the enemy, and advertising writers turned their talents toward selling war bonds. Beyond that, there was a sense that radio also must also inspire. Dick Dorrance, who worked for the Broadcasters Victory Council, another industry group, and later accepted a position with the Office of War Information, called on radio to build Americans' "determination and spirit." "American radio is a weapon for home defense ...," Dorrance wrote to broadcasters. "We've said before, we say again ... do all that you can and never fear it will be too much."²⁰

As editor of the *Broadcast Victory Council Newsletter*, Dorrance offered more concrete suggestions, as well. One of them was "boost production." He reiterated MacLeish's remarks about government presenting radio with a job to do.

Broadcasting has been called upon to sell the American

¹⁹ Blum, 21-24, 30-32; Wall, 107-109.

²⁰ Dick Dorrance, *Broadcasters Victory Council Newsletter* No. 8, March 24, 1942, LAB, 4.

people a supercharged program of war production. Our people are faced with a schedule of work that would tax a gleaming Superman in seven league boots. Radio has to get this realization inside the public's collective skull. Radio has to spur on, shame, shock, inspire, cajole and actually hammer this country into producing more tanks, planes, guns and a million unsung essentials than anyone ever thought could be produced in so little time.²¹

In addition to shocking, inspiring, and cajoling, radio also could fight rumors. Dorrance considered Americans uniquely vulnerable to rumors since they were “a bit too open and gullible and accustomed to honesty.” Radio had to squash rumors before they spread, he wrote. Much of this rumor-busting took place at the local level as station managers — sometimes with his help — tracked down false stories and set their listeners straight. At the national level, entire series were devoted to rumor-busting. *Our Secret Weapon* aired on CBS from April 1942 to October 1943, and thanks to a polyglot staff, gleaned rumors directly from German, Italian, and Japanese broadcasts before ridiculing them on the air. The series is perhaps best remembered for its host, the mystery novelist Rex Stout.²² Mutual's answer to *Our Secret Weapon* was *Troman Harper, Rumor Detective*, also heard in 1942 and 1943. Though some of the rumors tackled by these shows probably did have wide currency, others were so preposterous they must have been chosen for amusement. A December 1942 episode of *Troman Harper*, for example, attacked the searing question, “Are American G. I.'s served alfalfa as a vegetable?” More serious was a question about Winston Churchill and the allegation that he secretly owned shares of I. G. Farben, the German industrial giant. It was said that because of this connection,

²¹ Dick Dorrance, *Broadcasters Victory Council Newsletter No. 6*, March 10, 1942, LAB, 1.

²² Dunning, 529.

Farben's factories had been spared destruction. *Troman Harper* blasted the rumor by confirming that the Royal Air Force had not spared Farben, but in fact already had bombed all eight of its plants.²³

In addition to urging production and fighting rumors, still another way the broadcasting industry aided the war effort while simultaneously demonstrating its own patriotism was in organizing and broadcasting patriotic programs. Dorrance's comment about "determination and spirit" came while encouraging local stations to cover and promote "civic events, parades, bands and speeches" for Army Day 1942. On another occasion, he suggested marking the first anniversary of the occupation of Norway by recounting stories of Norwegian suffering and heroism under Nazism.²⁴ Local stations followed up on his suggestions or created their own programming, perhaps by giving extra coverage to local Fourth of July celebrations or by interviewing G. I.s or the families of G. I.s. Such programming was designed not only to build support for the war, but also to build the stamina to see it through. "The public must understand — and God knows it's a fantastic enough thought to grasp — that our way of life may pass," Dorrance wrote. "Its security is hinged upon the determination, the sweat, sacrifices and the spirit of the men and women of America. Radio can create that spirit — the rest will stem from it."²⁵

Finally, changed attitudes in the nation's religious communities made it easier to use priestly civil religion to sell the war because, if for no other reason, it undermined potential resistance in the nation's churches. Though Pearl Harbor swept away most of

²³ "Do G. I.'s Eat Alfalfa?" *Troman Harper, Rumor Detective*, December, 20, 1942.

²⁴ Dick Dorrance, *Broadcasters Victory Council Newsletter No. 10*, April 7, 1942, LAB, 4.

²⁵ Dick Dorrance, *Broadcasters Victory Council Newsletter No. 6*, March 10, 1942, LAB, 2.

what remained of post-World War I-era pacifism, principled opposition to all war had been weakening since the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931. By 1939, as Ray H. Abrams has shown, the nation's religious communities stood "hopelessly divided." During much of the interwar period, pacifism had been a widespread, almost mainstream, option for American Christians, and in 1932, the Federal Council of Churches went so far as to declare officially that churches "should neither sanction nor bless war." By the end of the decade, vigorous debate ensued between so-called "non-interventionist" Christians and their critics. A major non-interventionist voice belonged to Charles Clayton Morrison, editor of *Christian Century*, who became increasingly critical of Roosevelt as the president became increasingly supportive of Great Britain. Among those who challenged non-intervention was the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, who launched a rival magazine, *Christianity and Crisis*, in part to challenge Morrison. In Niebuhr's view, "the essence of immorality is the evasion or denial of moral responsibility" — something he accused non-interventionists of doing.²⁶

Except among historic peace churches, pacifism and non-interventionism collapsed in the United States after Pearl Harbor. Yet, as Abrams noted, few clergymen went so far as to speak of a "holy war" partly because they wished to avoid the excesses of World War I and partly because the mass destruction of life in any context seemed un-Christian. The fulcrum on which they swung from the prewar view that all war was un-Christian to the wartime view that this war was an exception was the assumption of being able to speak "the mind of God," wrote Abrams. "Once having discovered the 'mind of

²⁶ Ray H. Abrams, "The Churches and the Clergy in World War II," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 256 (March 1948): 111-113.

God' on this subject, the major premise can be stated. The rest of the syllogism, or line of logic, is comparatively easy," he wrote.²⁷ In other words, it was the priestly assumption of being the right hand of God — the same claim *Cavalcade's* John Brown made when he smote the proslavery innkeeper— that made it possible for American Christians in 1941 to view an attack on the United States not simply as an attack on their country but on God himself, or at least on "Christian civilization."

If Roosevelt had acted as the nation's pastor when he delivered his first inaugural address in 1933, he acted as the national priest in his annual message to Congress on January 6, 1942. The president touched directly on the idea of the United States as an embodiment of righteousness, the existential nature of the evil it faced, and the finality of its hoped-for victory. He began with the nature of the enemy. Japanese designs on East Asia and the Italians' plan for North Africa were bad enough, he warned, but they paled in comparison to Nazi evil. "Destruction of the material and spiritual centers of civilization — this has been and still is the purpose of Hitler and his Italian and Japanese chessmen," the president said. Nothing less than world domination is their goal. Were America's enemies triumphant, victory would threaten much more than a group of humans who happened to live between Canada and Mexico. It also would threaten the transcendent values that group embodies.

They know that victory for us means victory for freedom.

They know that victory for us means victory for the institution of democracy — the ideal of the family, the simple principles of common decency and humanity.

They knew that victory for us means victory for religion.

²⁷ Ibid., 115.

And they could not tolerate that. The world is too small to provide adequate “living room” for both Hitler and God. In proof of that Nazis have now announced their plan for enforcing their new German, pagan religion throughout the world — the plan by which the Holy Bible and the Cross of Mercy would be displaced by “Mein Kampf” and the swastika and the naked sword.²⁸

By contrast, the United States’ sword — like the swords John Brown handed out to free-state farmers — was “the weapon of the Lord.”

Our own objectives are clear: the objective of smashing the militarism imposed by war lords upon their enslaved peoples — the objective of liberating the subjugated nations — the objective of establishing and securing freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear everywhere in the world.²⁹

Lest anyone doubt the stake at hand, Roosevelt cast the war as a historical culmination, a conflict different than all previous struggles. “The mood [of America] is stronger than any mere desire for revenge,” he said. “It expresses the will of the American people to make very certain that the world will never suffer again.” It was a message Americans would hear again and again in the years that followed.

The Programs

Some of World War II’s most iconic radio programs were not dramatic at all. Musical programs, such as Glenn Miller’s weekly orchestrations on *Chesterfield Time* or the Andrews Sisters’ *N-K Eight-To-The-Bar Ranch*, while perhaps forgotten as programs, left enduring memories of their music and performers. Likewise, the radio vehicles of wartime comedians such as Bob Hope and Abbott and Costello, while sometimes more

²⁸ Cherry, 291.

²⁹ Ibid., 290.

like variety shows than dramas, were among the medium's most popular. Some non-dramatic wartime shows brought the war into U.S. homes through patriotic tunes or timely jokes, while other shows, such as *Command Performance*, took the sounds of the homefront to the troops.³⁰

Nevertheless, drama powerfully conveyed the “determination and spirit” Dorrance wrote of, as well as American patriotism and civil religion. Drama was emotional, personal, concrete, and by then a well established presence on the dial. It also was easy to adapt to wartime purposes. Plots could be reconfigured, and public service announcements could be planted in dialogue. Thus, Fibber McGee was dressed down when he attempted to bypass meat rationing, and Nazi spies were chased down by radio detectives.³¹ In general, wartime radio drama could be divided into two categories: government-produced programs and network programs. Some of the first dramatic shows devoted exclusively to war issues were created by federal agencies, but after 1943, most wartime drama was produced by the private sector.

Government programs

Some in Washington initially resisted the use of radio drama. Even if it was clear that radio attracted listeners by entertaining, it was not clear that the government was in the entertainment business. “Facts and Figures” do not obviously connote rich characterizations and intriguing plots. Pearl Harbor, however, softened this opposition. Military planners such as Colonel William Donovan of the Office of Strategic Services

³⁰ Dunning, 2-3, 36-37, 67, 105-109, 173-174.

³¹ “Black Market Meat,” *Fibber McGee and Molly*, April 27, 1943. An example of a dramatized pursuit of an Axis spy is discussed below.

thought that information was a weapon, and victory, not a “strategy of truth,” should be the nation’s first objective. Communication theorist Harold Lasswell went further and blatantly called for propaganda with “a large element of fake in it.”³²

Six war-fighting themes broached by President Roosevelt in his speech of January 6, 1942, served, in slightly modified form, as the basis of program planning. Americans must know why they fight, the president said. They must know the depths of the enemy’s evil, and they must be familiar with the other nations that stand beside America in its fight against that evil. They must understand that domestic production is the lifeblood of the war effort, and that means they must prepare themselves for personal sacrifice. Finally, they must learn about America’s military and the job it faces, he said.³³ At an interdepartmental meeting of government officials approximately ten days after the speech, former CBS executive William B. Lewis, employed by the OFF during the war, cited “instruction” as only one of three ways radio would get these messages across. The other two were “inspiration” and “selling.” “Radio is valuable only because of the enormous audiences it has created,” he reminded his listeners. To bore them would be to

³² Blum, 22-24, 26, 34.

³³ Roosevelt did not enumerate the six themes in a point-by-point list, but his speech was built around them. He said America fought for freedom, democracy, and religion. He described its enemies in the starkest terms. He warned that Hitler would try to sow discord between the United States and its allies. He announced new arms production goals. He braced Americans for personal and economic loss, and he commented on the task before the U.S. Armed Services. Franklin Roosevelt, “Annual Message to Congress, January 6, 1942,” in *The War Messages of Franklin D. Roosevelt, December 8, 1941, to April 13, 1945* ([Washington, D.C.]: United States of America, n.d.), 26-30. W. B. Lewis and Ulrich Bell to Archibald MacLeish, “Memorandum — Attachment A,” February 3, 1942, Office of War Information, Records of the Radio Bureau, NC-148, Entry E-95, Box 628, “Themes” Folder, NARA, 2-3, 5, described a slightly altered version of the six themes. Lewis and Bell collapsed Roosevelt’s items — issues, enemy, allies, production, sacrifice, and fighting forces — into five questions that radio programs could address: What is the fight about? (issues), Who is the enemy? (enemy), Who are our allies? (allies), How do we win the fight? (production, sacrifice, and fighting), and what will we have if we win? (postwar planning with an emphasis on the Four Freedoms).

lose them. “Let’s not ever forget that radio is primarily an *entertainment* medium, and must continue to be if it is to continue to deliver the large audiences we want to reach,” he said.³⁴

Lewis and journalist-turned-OFF official Ulric Bell made an even stronger case for drama to Archibald MacLeish a few days later. Reaching the people, they said, means speaking in the “language of the people.”³⁵ In a perfect world, it might be possible to lecture to everyone at a high level of intellectual sophistication, but that is not relevant to the present crisis. “And in pitting the strategy of truth against the strategy of terror, we cannot stop to educate — we must win a war,” they said. “We must state the truth in terms that will be understood by all levels of intelligence. Further we must dramatize the truth.”³⁶ Lewis and Bell argued that World War II was not a battle between countries so much as ideas, and because those ideas amounted to “slavery and freedom,” it was a war about how people should live. Because some of those people would die in war, it was vital that those who live know why it must be fought. In a colorful passage that, perhaps intentionally, illustrated how compelling dramatic language could be, they invoked specific images of individual people in concrete circumstances:

Somebody has got to man the tanks, guns, ships and planes
we produce. Somebody has got to wear the woolen clothes
we are going without. Somebody has got to stand or crouch
in an open field and pray to Christ the lead from a Stuka
dive-bomber lands somewhere else. Somebody has got to
stick at his battle station knowing full well the new

³⁴ W. B. Lewis, “Minutes of Interdepartmental Meeting,” n.d., Office of War Information, Records of the Radio Bureau, NC-148, Entry E-95, Box 626, “Meetings, Minutes, and Agenda” Folder, 6, NARA. Emphasis original.

³⁵ Lewis and Bell, “Memorandum — Attachment A,” 1-2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

superiority of air power over sea power. Mothers of these somebodies have got to know why *their* sons must do all this, and not contribute just as much by screwing bolt four on unit six in production line eight.³⁷

Later that month, the OFF released *This is War*, the first of several radio dramas to be produced by a federal agency. Later series included *Your Army*, *This is Our Enemy*, *Uncle Sam*, *Hasten the Day*, and, from the Office of Emergency Management, *You Can't Do Business With Hitler*. Of these, *This Is War* was not only the first but one of the most memorable. Six of its thirteen episodes were written by the talented Norman Corwin; major Hollywood stars including Robert Montgomery, Douglas Fairbanks, Tyrone Power, and James Stewart starred in it; and, most unusually, instead of being heard on only one network, it was simulcast at 7 p.m. Saturdays by NBC, CBS, Mutual, and the Blue Network. Corwin, who was employed by CBS at the time, was in California when he received a call on New Year's Day 1942 urging him back to New York. There he was asked to help the Office of Facts and Figures develop a new radio series to convince Americans of the war's objectives and to prepare them for the sacrifices ahead. Because of the national emergency, the government wanted to broadcast the show without delay, and Corwin finished the first episode in time to broadcast on Valentine's Day.³⁸

Titled simply "America at War," *This Is War*'s inaugural episode did not tell a

³⁷ Ibid., 3-4. Emphasis original.

³⁸ R. LeRoy Bannerman, *Norman Corwin and Radio: The Golden Years* (University, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 93-101; Blum, 27-28; Dunning, 666. Dick Dorrance of the Broadcasters Victory Council promoted *This Is War* to station managers. He recommended it both as a source of information and as a model from which they could "take some very helpful cues." He had no patience with critics who sniffed at its duller episodes. "It's an educational message from the American government to the American people. Anybody who questions its entertainment value and ignores the somber importance of what *This Is War* conveys in plain language deserves to be called a puffwit," Dorrance snapped. Dick Dorrance, *Broadcasters Victory Council Newsletter* No. 7, March 17, 1942, LAB, 1.

story in the unusual sense since the story was the war. Rather, through a combination of sound effects, music, and short monologues stitched together by Robert Montgomery's narration, it made the case that the United States would finish a war it did not start and did not want. Most remarkable were *This Is War*'s inventive aural techniques. Though most of what was verbalized was spoken directly to the audience (instead of being presented in dialogue between characters), and though the language at times waxed poetic, it was the mixture of other aural elements with the spoken word that produced an effect far different from a lecture, stump speech, or sermon.³⁹

One of the first sounds listeners heard was the rumble of an engine. For five or six seconds, they puzzled over what it was, then they were told it was a new, secret aircraft engine capable of running faster than any other in the world. This new technology could not be shown, Montgomery said, but it could be heard, and its sound was the distant rattle of a giant waking.

Here that Americans? That's the first of a hundred thousand noises like it. Here that, London? We're making enough to go round. Here that, Moscow? It flies wonderfully well in cold weather. Here that, Chungking? That sound is a new American slogan. Here that, Batavia? Melbourne? Cairo? Ottawa? A lot of friendly horsepower there!⁴⁰

To a world in peril, America had arrived! To Americans, both the virtue and the community of the virtuous community were described as interlocking, and they were juxtaposed to the tyranny and egotism of the Axis.

"You want to hear something ridiculous?" Montgomery asked. "Listen."

³⁹ "America at War," *This Is War*, February 14, 1942.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Jackboots strode across the floor and stopped with the click of heels.

“Hail, Jefferson!” said the first voice.

“Hail, Jefferson!” said a second.

“The United States of America over all!”

“Today, the United States of America is ours. Tomorrow, the entire world!

“Hail!”

“Hail!”

Montgomery laughed. “No, we’ve never been that way,” he said.⁴¹

Instead, Americans have always focused inward — and upward. They concentrated on the private pursuits of owning homes and farms and raising children, but they also dreamed of a better society where everyone shared in the abundance. That was what they were doing when war broke out.

We were busy educating our people, giving them a decent slant on things, trying to see that the hungry got fed and the jobless got work, trying to remember the forgotten man, trying to deal out a better deal around the table. A sentimental people? A sympathetic people? We make no bones about it. We show it and we act it, and sometimes we even sing about it.⁴²

The opening bars of “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime” reinforced his point. But then Pearl Harbor changed the music. Some minutes later:

We singing people sing a different kind of tune now, a battle hymn made up of strains of music from a thousand whirring dynamos and working locomotive bells and tractors groaning in low gear. An orchestration all the

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid. Passages such as this one led some Republicans to complain that the show was propaganda, but less for the war than for the New Deal. Horten, 47.

world will listen to. A hundred thousand airplanes for wind instruments, heavy guns for timpani, the melody you know already — sung in the key of V! V for vindication! V for victory!⁴³

This time, Beethoven's Fifth Symphony followed.

When Montgomery turned his attention to the enemy, he alluded alternatively to the Germans, Japanese, and Italians, but all were described in terms antithetical to those used applied to the United States. "The enemy is murder international, murder unlimited," he said. Ominous string melodies punctuated by brass fortissimos and the marching of more jackboots reinforced the effect. Then airplane engines returned, this time from a distance, at full roar in flight, and above them the jovial banter of Italian pilots having "exceptionally good fun" destroying homes and families and factories below.⁴⁴

In addition to establishing the United States as a virtuous community and the enemy as a conspiracy of evil, "America at War" also brought home the existential nature of the crisis. This was not a war simply to defend the American homeland, listeners were told, but to liberate all humankind — it was an ultimate or final war so that other people could cultivate the best in their lands, too. In one of the show's most revealing passages, Montgomery admitted that this meant the virtuous community must become the holy sufferer, as well.

We've tasted blood, and we've shed some blood, and there will be more of both. There will also be anger. And there will be the solemn word and the parting of the loved one. And the troopships slipping away in the dark. And at home,

⁴³ "America at War," *This Is War*.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

the machine turning, and the flaming forge, and the
weapons coming out clean, and the work going on by day
and the work going on by night until the big job is done,
until the big job is done and over with and finished so's it'll
stay that way.⁴⁵

In the show's closing moments, Montgomery switched to the second person and addressed listeners individually. What were they doing to get the "big job" done? he asked. Those who thought it was not their fight were asked to think again. "The fight is on and you are in it, in it all the way," Montgomery said. "If it goes down, then you go down. Don't kid yourself about that. You and your family and your friends and your church and your job and your savings and your ambitions."⁴⁶

Though this and subsequent episodes of *This Is War* reinforced the priestly civil religious view that the United States was a righteous nation called to battle, religion was more overtly used in two episodes of the series *You Can't Do Business With Hitler*. Inspired by a book of the same name by Douglas Miller, a fifteen-year veteran of the American embassy in Berlin, much of the series, like much of the book, primarily was aimed at a business-oriented audience, but it dabbled in other topics, as well.⁴⁷ Two episodes that touched on religion, "Anti-Christ" and "Pagan Gods," did not mention the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, but their messages corresponded with both ideas about religion enshrined in that document — religious liberty and disestablishment. Both made the same point Franklin Roosevelt made before Congress in January 1942: "The world is too small to provide adequate 'living room' for both Hitler and God."

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Douglas Miller, *You Can't Do Business With Hitler* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1941).

Citing Hermann Rauschning's then-popular book, *The Voice of Destruction*, "Anti-Christ" argued that while Hitler's persecution of Jews was well-known, he intended the annihilation of Protestants and Catholics, as well. "Instead of worshipping the blood of the savior," an actor playing Hitler said, "we shall worship the pure blood of the German people." The episode reported on or dramatized scenes of Christian persecution in Germany, including the trials of the Catholic clergy for "immorality" and the imprisonment of Protestant minister Martin Niemöller.⁴⁸

"Pagan Gods" turned its attention to the establishment of Nazism as Germany's new religion, the very thing the series predicted would happen when religion as Americans knew it was destroyed. In an early scene, two German officials plotted a new faith in which the German state was the ultimate object of adoration and Hitler was its prophet. Christianity was a foreign import, one official sniffed. The centerpiece of "Pagan Gods" was a later scene in a forest. A young German couple and their baby attended a christening (or, as the Nazis called it, "naming") ceremony performed by a Nazi "priest." With wind howling in the background, a sound effect common to radio horror stories, the priest spoke in a slow, ritualistic monotone.

"In the name of the Führer, who is ever present in the sight of our honest dead, your little lives are the next step of our race into the future," he told the parents. "What is the word?"

"Germany," said the father.

⁴⁸ Hermann Rauschning, *The Voice of Destruction* (New York: Putnam's, 1940), 47-57; "Anti-Christ," *You Can't Do Business With Hitler*, n.d. Rauschning was a German politician who claimed to have known Hitler. During the war, he wrote a series of anti-Nazi books that enjoyed a wide popular readership in the United States.

“Guard your blood that those who come after you may thank you. What is the symbol?”

“The swastika.”

“God is only in pure blood.”

Similar lines followed, then the priest turned to the baby.

“You are called Wolf ... ,” he said. “May he become like his model, brave and strong, ruthless and cunning, hard and cruel.”⁴⁹

In a 1941 newspaper column, Miller identified the Nazis’ peculiar morality as their “Achilles heel” and argued that American propaganda could undermine Hitler’s regime by cultivating the Germans’ already widespread view that the Nazi state was corrupt. He described German society in terms diametrically opposed to the “common good” typically applied to American society — sentiments repeated by Corwin in *This Is War*. Nazi schools, Miller argued, may teach the “formal body of party dogma,” but that is not what young Germans really learn. What they learn is nihilism and selfishness. “This new generation sees and believes that there is no difference between right and wrong,” Miller wrote. “If you can get away with anything, it is all right. Every one must appear intensely patriotic and, at the same time, try to grab all he can for himself.”⁵⁰

Miller’s faith in American media was shared by many in Congress, but that did not necessarily translate into support for the OFF or OWI. By 1943, Congress largely abandoned the production of domestic wartime drama, turning that responsibility over to

⁴⁹ “Pagan Gods,” *You Can’t Do Business With Hitler*, n.d.

⁵⁰ Douglas Miller, “The Achilles Heel of Nazi Germany,” *The New York Times*, Magazine Section, August 24, 1941, 3-4, 22.

the commercial networks. From its beginning in 1941, the OFF had been viewed with suspicion by the press and by Roosevelt's political opponents, two groups who were not always mutually exclusive. The replacement of the OFF with the OWI, headed by veteran CBS newsman Elmer Davis, was partly motivated by an attempt to improve the quality and persuasiveness of government-produced radio programs, films, and print publications, but it did little to calm the agencies' critics. When the elections of 1942 brought anti-Roosevelt majorities to both houses of Congress, the die was cast, and by June 1943, appropriations for the OWI's domestic activities ended. By then, the agency's critics accused it not only of producing what one New York Congressman called "fourth-term propaganda," but also fulfilling a function better filled by the private sector. Republican Representative John Ditter of Pennsylvania said finding officials with "established reputations as publicists or producers" in the OWI was "like finding Eskimos in Tunisia."⁵¹ Thereafter, the production of war-related radio drama inside the United States would primarily be a network responsibility.⁵²

Network programs

If wartime radio drama can be categorized in terms of government and network productions, the latter category can be further divided into three broad categories. The first consisted of regular series not exclusively focused on wartime issues but capable of incorporating those themes on an episode-by-episode basis. Thus, for example, two popular comedies, *Fibber McGee and Molly* and *The Jack Benny Show*, occasionally

⁵¹ "Ditter Asserts OWI is 'Running Wild'," *The New York Times*, March 22, 1943, 8.

⁵² Blum, 30-45.

worked wartime themes into their plots, such as an episode in which Benny turned his aged Maxwell in for scrap.⁵³ Series of this type often pre-existed the war. A second category consisted of new series created specifically to deliver wartime information. *Words at War* was an acclaimed and literate example. Though topical, these series aired in fixed weekly time slots. Finally, a third category consisted of special, one-time war-related broadcasts, the sort of programs the British call “one-offs.” Two of the most celebrated were written by Norman Corwin: *We Hold These Truths*, broadcast just after Pearl Harbor on December 15, 1941, and *On a Note of Triumph*, broadcast on V-E Day, May 8, 1945. In all three categories, the networks’ use of the priestly form of civil religion followed the familiar pattern: American sacrifice was explained as the price of American virtue, the world was described in Manichean terms of good and evil, and conflict was nothing short of existential.

Series that wove the war into familiar settings were well positioned to explore how some Americans felt the conflict had invaded a placid nation. One such program was the folksy drama *Mayor of the Town*. Starring Lionel Barrymore in the title role, the series premiered on NBC in September 1942 and bounced around the networks for the rest of the decade.⁵⁴ Unabashedly sentimental, the series portrayed the mayor of the fictional burg of Springdale, U.S.A., as a father to his people. He was as apt to help them with an illness or love interest as with garbage disposal or water service. The show frequently depicted Springdalers marching off to war or welcoming loved ones back, and in its premier episode, “Tom Williams Wants to Enlist,” the son of a local judge

⁵³ Horten, 132.

⁵⁴ Dunning, 443.

announced his intention to join the Navy.⁵⁵ His father was horrified — he said Tom would be more useful to the country in law school — but it was obvious to the mayor that the judge was being selfish.

“Confound it, man,” he said. “This is a last desperate war for survival. The country has to be defended and held at any cost.”

The judge relented and young Tom joined. Before he departed, he married his childhood sweetheart, Janie. The mayor performed the ceremony and with the rest of the judge’s family, saw Tom off as he went to war. Later, the mayor also shared their grief when a telegram announced that Tom went down in the Coral Sea. The family turned its anger on the mayor and blamed him personally for Tom’s death. The most remarkable exchange occurred between the mayor and Janie several hours after the telegram arrived.

“I remember his eyes and the warmth of his lips, and I keep telling my heart, ‘all over and done with,’ but my heart won’t listen!” she said.

He clumsily told her to drink some milk and not let herself “go to pieces,” but she exploded.

“No, don’t go to pieces, Janie!” she shouted. “Keep walking the same pattern! It isn’t hard to live without your heart once you get used to it! Drink some milk, Janie, it’s warm and soothing! It’ll quiet your nerves and drown your memories!”

The mayor tried again to calm her. He called Tom’s death “brave and gallant,” but her anger would not subside. She accused the mayor of killing of her husband.

“I loved you all my life. But I hate you now,” she said.

“Well, go ahead and hate me, Janie. ... It’s your democratic privilege to hate or

⁵⁵ “Tom Williams Wants to Enlist,” *Mayor of the Town*, September 6, 1942.

like the mayor. But, girl, do you think I wanted to send Tom to war? Do you think I wanted to send any of them? I saw another war. I know how the bodies look face-down in the mud. And something inside me weeps that these things must be again.”

She still would not be satisfied.

“Why did you let him go?” she asked. “Why didn’t you stop him?”

“Because he said he was an American! And because being an American is being a free man! And, unfortunately, freedom must be bought in blood. It was purchased that way once at Valley Forge, and it must be kept.”

The mayor then turned on her. Appealing to an idealized version of American history, he said he was not proud of her in that moment, and suggested she think of other women who had made similar sacrifices.

How can you bear it? How did the women bear it who stood listening to the guns of Yorktown with death in their hearts? How did those white-faced women who opened the first dispatches from Gettysburg bear it? And the women who wore Gold Stars in 1918? It wasn’t easy, Janie, to keep the level eye and the grief held in stern check and the head erect. Their men died for America, and regardless of the swift, sharp pain, they went on living and working and fighting to keep America so those dead didn’t die in vain. Theirs was the courage and the faith that kept the flag of freedom in the wind. Can you live in their country and lack the same stamina? Are you unworthy to follow in their footsteps? Well, Janie?⁵⁶

The mayor’s speech was civil religious because it equated the United States with the transcendent value of “freedom,” and it was priestly because it justified America’s willingness to sacrifice human life with an appeal to that transcendent good. It was centripetal on two levels. First, it sublimated Janie’s, the judge’s, and the mayor’s

⁵⁶ Ibid.

personal grief within the higher purpose of a national cause, and, second, it paralleled the life of tiny Springdale with the life of the nation. At one point, Janie accused the mayor of inhumanity. “You aren’t a man, you’re an institution,” she said. To this, he responded:

Well, perhaps, Janie. Everything I do is done in the name of the city. That’s the way it has to be. But what is the city? It’s you and the judge and the Larson boy and the Uptons on the next street. The city is the people, and I’m its voice. The danger of each and every one is my personal danger, and their sorrow is my sorrow. The sacrifices I ask are in its name and for its preservation.⁵⁷

If “Tom Williams Wants to Enlist” explored the priestly notion of sacrifice as the burden of a chosen nation, another play echoed Dick Dorrance’s notion that Americans were especially vulnerable because they were exceptional. *Counterspy* was a typical espionage thriller from the prolific producer Phillips H. Lord. Radio encyclopedist John Dunning called it “slightly above the juvenile,” and that is about right, but it was typical of a vast number of programs and its popularity with sponsors and listeners kept it on the air for fifteen years.⁵⁸ The show centered on a fictional brigade of “United States Counterspies” that seemed to be amalgam of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Central Intelligence Agency. Its lead character was the ace of the department, David Harding, and the show’s opening described each adventure not as a “story of David Harding” but as a Counterspy “report to the American people.”

Premiering in 1942, *Counterspy* regularly battled the Axis powers in its early seasons, and in the 1950s, it took on communists. An episode broadcast on June 8, 1942, titled “Washington Woman Spy,” set the tone by combining sacrifice with a sense of

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Dunning, 181.

lurking danger.⁵⁹ In the opening scene, millionaire William Terrace shot himself to death in his penthouse apartment. Inquiries with Terrace's doctor and broker revealed no medical or financial troubles, and an illicit affair seemed unlikely since Terrace was not married, was not known to have a girlfriend, and was said to be "old-fashioned in ideals." Nonetheless, a perusal of his checks revealed that he had recently purchased an \$8,000 diamond ring. Three days later, a ring of the same description was insured by Avery Rollins, a young, attractive Washington, D. C., socialite.

Other information led Harding to believe Rollins was part of an Axis spy ring, so he set a trap. He arranged for her to meet another eligible bachelor, Colonel Reynolds, who also sat on a board overseeing new aircraft formations. Were she a spy, Harding reasoned, the colonel would prove irresistible. He did. The problem was, she also proved irresistible to him. Though told from the beginning that his "romance" with Rollins was part of a Counterspy operation, Reynolds could not help but lose his heart. He desperately hoped Harding's suspicions were unfounded, and he clung to every feeble indication that they might be. When, in the final scene, Harding proved that Rollins was a Nazi spy — she actually was a Hungarian named Maria Schmidt — the colonel was crushed.

"I didn't know a person could be hurt quite this much," he told Harding in his penthouse apartment. As he spoke, a contingent of Marines marched on the street outside his building, and faint bars of "The Halls of Montezuma" sounded in the background.

"Come over here by the window for a minute, would you, Colonel? ...," Harding said. "Look at those Marines swing along. You've done them and the boys like them a great service, Colonel Reynolds. No one will probably ever know about it. But you will.

⁵⁹ "Washington Woman Spy," *Counterspy*, June 8, 1942.

And I will. Let's open the window."

The music swelled to full volume.

"Doesn't that send a thrill through you?" Harding asked.

"It does. Yes, I'm glad I was able to help, Harding. Every one of us has got to sacrifice, some one way and some another. I guess this way is mine."⁶⁰

Though lacking the polish of Norman Corwin's plays, or even of *Mayor of the Town*, "Washington Woman Spy" made its priestly point not only by thrilling audiences with Harding's apprehension of a dangerous spy, but also juxtaposing the colonel's honest tender heartedness with Rollins' cunning and perfidy. The American colonel was a friendly and loving man, and he was vulnerable because he was decent. The European posing as an American was only too happy to take advantage.

Yet another strategy of shows that wove wartime themes into familiar homefront settings was to associate evil not with foreigners but with Americans who failed to live up to wartime expectations. In effect, this was a priestly extension of the civil religious interest in the common good. Because these characters put private interest above public service, and the United States embodied divine action in history, these characters' disservice to the United States rendered them little different from the Nazis and Japanese imperialists so offensive to that divine plan. An episode that aired in the closing months of World War II on *This Is Your FBI* took aim at Americans who aided draft dodgers.⁶¹ *This Is Your FBI* was an early offering of the newly created American Broadcasting

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ "Draft Dodgers," *This Is Your FBI*, May 25, 1945. This series is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Company and was one of several police procedurals to feature FBI agents. An episode broadcast in May 1945 began with two defense plant workers, Rick and Chubb, bemoaning the fact they had just been drafted.

“It ain’t fair, Chubb,” Rick said. “We got good jobs here. We’re making real dough. Why don’t they give us a break?”

Chubb knew one way they could give themselves a break. A friend of his beat the draft by taking some pills the night before his physical. Though they caused no lasting effect, they fooled the Army doctors into thinking he had a bad heart, and was given a 4-F, or certificate stating he was unfit for service. Chubb said his friend bought the pills from a “Mr. Butler” known to frequent a local bowling alley.

The boys visited the bowling alley that evening. Butler’s price was high — \$100 for a box of three pills to be taken in six-hour intervals. But he guaranteed they would beat the draft, and he assured the boys there would be no ill effects.

“They’ll fool any doctor you go up against,” he said.

He lied. Rick and Chubb became so violently ill they collapsed during their physicals and had to be hospitalized. The Army doctors were suspicious, so they called the FBI. When an agent visited the boys in the hospital, he spoke to them in patient, fatherly tones. He did not excuse what they had done, but it was clear he really wanted Butler. One of the boys asked if they would go to jail.

“You’ve broken the law,” the agent said, but he added, “How do you feel about going in the Army now?”

“Mister, we’d love it.”

“Well, I’ll talk to the U.S. attorney. I won’t promise you what the decision will

be, but you might have another chance.”

Pursuing leads, FBI agents traced Butler to a tacky, fly-by-night business called “Dr. Woodbury’s Health Club.” Dr. Woodbury turned out to be Butler’s wife, and the second half of the play followed their attempts to avoid capture. Along the way, the pair produced other mayhem for other customers, but when they finally were captured, the narrator made no bones about the play’s message:

In times like these, there is little difference between a spy and a criminal who aids draft dodgers because both are fighting this war not for us, but for the enemy. . . . A spy case may be more sensational, may get more space in the newspapers, but the FBI devotes as much time, as much resource, as much energy to a lesser case if necessary because every federal case is a case against the people of this entire country, and the FBI is a protector of the people.⁶²

The second category of wartime network shows — a new series developed for the express purpose of conveying wartime information — tended to revolve around the same themes Roosevelt identified in January 1942: What is the fight about? Who is the enemy? Who are our allies? How do we win the fight? What will we have if we win? *Words at War* was a joint production of NBC and the Council on Books in Wartime.⁶³ Each episode centered on a then-current book about the war. Some were works of reportage, some commentaries by journalists or military figures, and others were novels. Occasional episodes dramatized the letters of ordinary servicemen. Although *Words at War* was unflinchingly propagandistic, it generally was well-written, and it pushed boundaries,

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ NBC aired it on sustaining time, or air time for which there was no advertising support. Typically, sustaining programs were meant to satisfy FCC requirements for “public service” or were thought to enhance the prestige of the network.

especially regarding violence, that would not likely have been crossed in the networks' other fare. A few of the books it dramatized went on to become minor classics, such as John Hersey's *A Bell for Adano* and H. E. Bates' *Fair Stood the Wind for France*. Other episodes dramatized little-known stories of sacrifice, such as the tale of Red Cross nurses on Bataan, or lauded America's allies, such the Russian troops who held out at Sevastopol.⁶⁴ In late 1944 and 1945, the show devoted an increasing number of episodes to postwar planning, asking questions about how Germany should be treated or what sorts of challenges would face returning American G. I.s.⁶⁵

Prominent in *Words at War* was the Manichean division of good and evil typical of the priestly form of American civil religion. The wider the gulf between American virtue and the enemy's evil, the clearer would be the motive to act on behalf of U.S. interests. Two episodes broadcast in December 1943 gave listeners a taste of each side of the Manichean divide. On December 14, an episode based on Filipino author Carlos P. Romulo's *Mother America: A Living History of Democracy* argued that Filipinos gladly fought under the American flag because America gave them something to fight for.⁶⁶ "Mother America" juxtaposed the United States' benevolent rule over the Philippines with the earlier cruelty of the Spanish, and it explained Filipino resistance to the United States as the brave patriotism of a people who did not realize how free and generous the United States really was. As if to prove its bona fides as a redeemer of nations, the United

⁶⁴ "A Bell for Adano," *Words at War*, March 28, 1944; "Fair Stood the Wind for France," *Words at War*, June 28, 1944; "I Served on Bataan," *Words at War*, February 28, 1944; "The Last Days of Sevastopol," *Words at War*, July, 17, 1943.

⁶⁵ Dunning, 776-778.

⁶⁶ "Mother America," *Words at War*, December 14, 1943. This episode was billed as being broadcast in honor of Bill of Rights Week.

States had promised the Philippines independence in 1946, and much of the second half of the play looked forward to that day. Independence would not mark a rejection of U.S. rule, but a fulfillment of U.S. values, the play argued.

On the other hand, a *Words at War* episode broadcast three weeks later described Nazi Germany as the embodiment of evil. “The Ninth Commandment,” based on a story by the Dutch children’s writer Hendrik Willem van Loon, almost suggested a genetic moral defect among the German people.⁶⁷ The story began in 1933 and involved a German orphan named Johann who was raised in the Netherlands. From the beginning, the boy was as proud and headstrong as he was devious. In an early scene, other children called him a “Little Mutt” because he was not Dutch, but he chose to take the epithet as a compliment.

“I *am* a little mutt . . .,” he said. “They are just plain Dutchmen.”

When Johann’s father accused him of stealing sugar, the boy falsely accused his foster brother of the theft. Knowing this was false, the father gave Johann the strap and warned him about the sin of bearing false witness. Defiant and dishonest, the boy walked to the town hall and accused his father of starving and beating him. The burgermeister and police chief doubted his story, but they also feared an international incident given the boy’s nationality. They said it would not happen again and gave him a coin to buy chocolate if he promised to say no more of the matter. He took the coin, but promptly told the whole town his version of events. Soon the father was shunned even by townspeople who had respected him for years.

When he grew older, Johann left the Netherlands and moved back to Germany,

⁶⁷ “The Ninth Commandment,” *Words at War*, December 28, 1943.

but he returned during the war as a Nazi spy. He used his knowledge of the little Dutch village to gain information that would be useful to Germany, and when the Germans occupied the Netherlands, he took sadistic pleasure in beating his foster father and teaching him “German justice.” Johann insisted his actions were payback for that long-ago childhood thrashing, but his superior — who suspected Johann of angling for his job — saw an opportunity to transfer his troublesome subordinate to the Eastern Front. He told Johann’s father that because he struck a German, even though it was years ago, the law said he must die. However, the matter could be dropped if he signed a statement denying that he punished the child. Then it would appear that Johann beat him unjustly.

The father refused. “I punished the boy for bearing false witness,” he said. “I could not now bear false witness myself merely to save my life.”

In the end, the father chose to die rather than to break the commandment he had tried to teach the boy.⁶⁸

The final category of wartime network programs, special one-time broadcasts, contained some of the most innovative uses of priestly civil religion. *These Four Men* was a special presentation of NBC that aired four biographical plays about Winston Churchill, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, and Franklin Roosevelt on consecutive Sundays in 1941.⁶⁹ The Churchill and Roosevelt plays used civil religion obliquely, but the Stalin and Hitler plays were more inventive. Stalin’s play was obviously “sanitized” for American audiences in terms of its subject matter, and Hitler’s play was remarkably

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ *These Four Men: Winston Churchill, Joseph Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Series of Radio Dramatizations* (New York: National Broadcasting Co., 1941), LAB.

creative in way it leveraged the specific properties of radio.

Stalin's play took pains to dramatize the Soviet leader's youthful desire to be an Orthodox priest but never mentioned Karl Marx. Instead, the Soviet leader was cast as a self-made man, "a nobody out of nowhere" who today "sits in the ancient Kremlin of the Russian Czars." Flashbacks from various points in Stalin's life were framed by the story of a visit to his mother's house in Georgia. At the beginning of the play, Stalin's mother and her friend discussed the premier's impending arrival. Her friend admitted she would be terrified to host "the great Stalin."

"Oh, but that is so *foolish* — that I should be afraid of Stalin!" his mother said. "He is no Stalin to me — he is Soso — that is still my name for him. ... I put him in his place — this Stalin!"⁷⁰

Born Josef Vissarionovich Djugashvilli, Stalin was her fourth child, but only the first to survive. When she was pregnant with him, she prayed for a son and promised St. Joseph that if the boy lived, she would make him a priest. In time, Stalin accepted this future, and when he was old enough, he entered a seminary. There, two strange things happened. First, he was shocked by the rudeness of his imperious instructors. Second, he met other students with daring ideas.

"You are revolutionists?" he asked a group of them in a transitional scene.

"Call it that," one said.

"But here — in a seminary?"

"You will find our comrades in every school and seminary in Russia, my friend."

The students laughed when Stalin expressed astonishment that they did not really

⁷⁰ Ibid., 22. Emphasis original.

intend to be priests. He was serious about his studies. His mother saved for years to make them possible, and he did not wish to dishonor her.

“So, Djugashvili, you do not wish to make your mother unhappy — how happy can you make her as long as we continue to be exploited? Chained in poverty?” another student asked.⁷¹

As the play delved into Stalin’s political career, it described him in terms that, with little editing, could have applied to an American Founding Father. He hated injustice, willingly suffered imprisonment and exile for the sake of overcoming tyranny, waited patiently for the right moment to strike, and understood the power of ideas. In one scene, he ran a gauntlet of Czarist soldiers while clutching a book — a symbolic gesture that would have made education-loving John Adams proud.⁷²

At the end of the play, Stalin finally arrived at his mother’s house. The door swung open, and the two greeting each other warmly.

“People say you have done much for Russia,” she said. “But I cannot help but be disappointed ... I still wish you had been a priest.”⁷³

On first impression, Hitler’s play may seem to have had less to do with civil religion than any of the others. Except for a brief comment in the opening narration, it made no reference to religion of any kind, and unlike the Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin plays, it drew no parallels between its subject and iconic American figures. Yet when the medium of radio is considered in addition to the rhetoric of the play, Hitler’s story

⁷¹ Ibid., 23-25.

⁷² Ibid., 27-30.

⁷³ Ibid., 37.

arguably made the clearest civil religious statement of them all. It represented an American charge of falsehood against the Nazis' civic faith.

The play's single, two-word reference to a religious concept — “a god” — came in the opening monologue:

He is a man. Millions have been taught to regard him as a god, but nonetheless he is a package of flesh and blood and nerve and bone. He is not an impressive man — his dark brown hair matted down over one eye and his clipped mustache alone make his face memorable. He is not tall and he is not strong. He takes no exercise. He eats almost nothing. His voice grates unpleasantly on the ear. He is subject to wild, hysterical, unreasoning rage. Often he weeps like a woman. Yet this strange contradiction carried a burden that no mortal has borne before. He has intoxicated and hypnotized a whole race of men. Men elsewhere in the world have long since ceased to laugh at him or dismiss him lightly. And the world knows now that in the eyes of Adolf Hitler burns a fire that threatens to engulf humanity.⁷⁴

Using a combination of belittling physical descriptions, psychological red flags, and gender stereotypes, this passage set up the play's thesis — that the god of Nazism, namely Hitler, is a false god. He is not even much of a man.

In the scenes that followed, Hitler bounced from disappointment to disappointment. As a child, he was savagely beaten by his father. As a student, he failed to make any friends. As a struggling artist, he was told by a professor that he had no talent. As a bricklayer and housepainter, he annoyed his fellow workers with mad political theories. Finally, one of his employers confronted him.

“Look, Hitler, I give you a piece of advice. Try to be a human being once, eh? Try to get along with people. Don't be all the time *hating* things. I am sorry, Hitler. You are

⁷⁴ Ibid., 39.

not good for the other men here,” he said.⁷⁵

But World War I created a new and deeply troubled Europe — a Europe in which Hitler suddenly found other people who thought as he did. He discovered and joined the German Worker’s Party and gave it a new name — the Nazi Party. He published and sold his theories in a book titled *Mein Kampf*. The play’s listeners followed Hitler’s rise to power from the failed Munich Beer Hall Putsch of 1923 to the Night of the Long Knives in 1934, but there was one thing they did not hear — *they did not hear Hitler speak*. In fact, they heard nothing at all from Hitler except the sounds of sobbing and fleeing footsteps. In the opening scene, when the child Hitler was beaten, he was heard crying on his mother’s knee. In a scene in jail after the Beer Hall Putsch, Hitler sobbed uncontrollably beside Rudolf Hess who reassured him that mistakes were to be expected and a setback in Munich would not end the Nazi movement. When the art professor told him he was not meant to be an artist, he did not defend himself, but stomped out of the room. Most dramatically, he did not speak when, during the Night of the Long Knives, he was confronted with evidence that his old friend Ernst Röhm had betrayed him.

An officer placed a revolver in Röhm’s hand, a signal that he was expected to commit suicide.

“No! No! I will not kill myself!” Röhm shouted. “If I am to be shot, you must do it, Adolf! You must kill your friend! Can you do that?”

A long moment of silence followed, then fleeing footsteps. Later, the sound of a firing squad.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Ibid., 40-43. Emphasis original.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 51.

Because radio has no visual component, a character who is not heard has no real presence. He is a cipher. Depending on the context, this could enhance a character's stature, if, for example, gongs sounded when the character entered a room or other characters addressed him in awestruck tones. But when *These Four Men* depicted Hitler, the opposite occurred. Neither god nor man, Hitler was a void, and the other characters either treated him contemptuously or clearly were stronger or smarter than he. The few pitiful sounds that issued from the void — the sobbing and footsteps — only reinforced a negative impression. The god of the Nazis was a fraud.

One of the most famous broadcasts of World War II — and one of the best examples of the priestly form of American civil religion from that era — aired eight days after Pearl Harbor. Norman Corwin's hour-long celebration of the Bill of Rights, *We Hold These Truths*, like his later contributions to *This Is War*, began as a project of the OFF and proceeded with the cooperation of the four networks, who simulcast it. From the beginning, the show was meant to be a major media event. Top talent was recruited both in front of the microphone — Jimmy Stewart, Lionel Barrymore, Walter Huston, Edward G. Robinson, Edward Arnold, Orson Welles, Majorie Main — and behind it. In addition to Corwin's script, it featured Bernard Hermann's score.⁷⁷ The most famous voice was heard last — Franklin Roosevelt, who delivered a short address at the end of the broadcast. The show was meant to mark the sesquicentennial of the ratification of the Bill of Rights, *not* to call the nation to war, at least not a war that already had begun. When planning began earlier that fall, the United States had not been at war, and at one point,

⁷⁷ The composer Bernard Hermann was a leading contributor to film music. Though he is best remembered for his long collaboration with Alfred Hitchcock, that was but a portion of his total output.

some involved actually worried that it might offend antiwar Americans. On December 7, Corwin learned of the bombing while on a cross-country train, and he telegraphed the OFF from Kansas City to ask if the show had been cancelled. He was told that that was the last thing the government wanted — "we believe it is of even greater importance now than before," came the reply.⁷⁸

The play began with the narrator, Jimmy Stewart, taking listeners on an imaginary tour of Washington, D.C.⁷⁹ Along the way, various idealistic inscriptions on the buildings were noted, until Stewart found one by Vergil that merited particular contemplation. "The noblest motive is the public good." It appeared on the Library of Congress, so Stewart took his listeners up some marble steps until he came upon the case containing the U.S. Constitution. "Its words are worn, as if from use," he said. "The writing's dim. It's hard to make it out." From there, listeners were transported to the Constitutional Convention of 1787, where they heard the delegates first congratulate themselves on their achievement and then feel frustrated by the people's fears. But not all Americans were convinced the Constitution was finished.

A pious man warned that while it did not create a state church, it did not bar one, either.

A suspicious man said he wanted to see his liberties in black and white before he agreed to any government's "order and authority."

The widow of a fallen Revolutionary War veteran asked if the Englishmen who had killed her husband had a bill of rights, why could not Americans have one, too?

⁷⁸ Bannerman, 78-79.

⁷⁹ *We Hold These Truths*, December 15, 1941.

In framing the origins of the Bill of Rights in this way, Corwin emphasized the first of the play's three most important civil religious themes — the idea that the freedom enshrined in the Bill of Rights was not a gift bestowed upon the nation by great men such as Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, but was the product of the blood and sweat of the “little men,” the “men who left their bloody footprints in the snows of Pennsylvania and buried their comrades in a clearing back of a clump of evergreens,” in other words, the ordinary, good folk, who paid for that freedom in the most precious coin of all, their blood.

The play's second civil religious theme was expressed in a powerful monologue delivered by Orson Welles. It was the eschatological supposition that the Bill of Rights represented a culmination of history, a final deliverance from the agony felt by those who quested for freedom in centuries past. Welles asked his listeners to imagine America's founders encircled by the ghosts of tortured men and women, people who had been garroted, burned, or hanged because they dared to remark that all men were equal or that a commoner was as good as a king. They were there, said Welles, and once again, Corwin leveraged not only soaring rhetoric but carefully selected sounds for effect.

The murdered men, the lopped-off hands, the shattered limbs, the red welts where the whiplash bit into the back. Must you know what they said? Must you know how they argued? Must you be told the evidence? ... Listen then!

[Woman screams]

That was an argument for an amendment!

[Man groans under torture]

That was a speech in favor of an article of freedom!

[An agonizing scream]

That praised the passage of a bill of rights!⁸⁰

They all were there, said Welles, and they wordlessly testified to the horrors that the Bill of Rights would stop. Yet even they were not the Constitutional Convention's only witnesses. There was another there, as well.

He, too, sat in the Congress. The mild man with the scars in his hands and feet where the spike went through. He was a consultant in the business at hand. Had he not died because the rulers of a realm denied free speech? Was he not nailed up on a cross between two thieves because his preachments were considered treason?⁸¹

Having established that the Bills of Rights was paid for with the American peoples' blood, that the shedding of their blood redeemed a race that had been enslaved for centuries, and the work at hand ultimately was the work of the "mild man with the scars," the play drove home its third civil religious theme — that freedom, once won, would have to be defended.

In a scene late in the play, one of the "little men" who acceded to the Constitution only after the Bill of Rights was added expressed dismay that the Revolution might have to be fought again.

"I hope it don't get to be a habit," he said.

"I hope it does!" shouted another. "Pretty good habit to get into, fighting for your rights. Always somebody waiting for a chance to steal valuables, and if freedom ain't a valuable, I don't know what is."⁸²

Years later, asked about his frequent use of civil religion, Corwin expressed

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

dismay at how it sometimes was received. He even said he considered it “the weakest areas of my work.” He said that in alluding to God in “high or concluding passages,” he really meant “to appeal to man’s higher instincts.”

I actually feel hostile to all organized religions that regard themselves as uniquely inspired to the point of holiness or sacerdotal superiority. Indeed I am hostile to the major religions for their history of cruelty and persecution of non-believers. So when I call upon God, I am really addressing each listener’s higher circuitry. That intention does not let me off the hook, however, because the average listener believes I am alluding to the average God, which I ain’t.⁸³

Corwin also had worried about the show’s reception the night it was broadcast. He need not have. Letters of praise poured in by the thousands, President Roosevelt joked that it had made him an “actor,” and the composer Jerome Kern, whom Corwin did not know, pronounced it a “miracle program.” Ironically, William B. Lewis, the OFF official who spearheaded its planning, missed it due to poor reception!⁸⁴

The Medium

If commercial radio’s institutional properties enhanced its use as a promulgator of pastoral civil religion, some of its aural properties could be put to priestly use. What Susan J. Douglas called dimensional listening, or the audience’s conjuring up of a mental stage to follow radio’s stories, meant that listening to radio plays was more participatory than watching them in a theater or on television. Radio’s imaginative quality is what people nostalgic for it miss, Douglas opined. “They miss the mental activity, the

⁸³ Norman Corwin, email message to author, December 21, 2008.

⁸⁴ Bannerman, 86-87.

engagement, the do-it-yourself nature of radio listening,” she wrote.⁸⁵ When the war was experienced through radio drama, it became less something people *looked upon* than something they *already were in*, and the fact that this could influence their attitude toward it was what Lewis and Bell alluded to in their February 1942 letter to Archibald MacLeisch: “Mothers of these somebodies have got to know why *their* sons must do all this.” Radio could teach them — because it was *their* fight — and since the priestly form of American civil religion offered transcendent justification for their sacrifice, its message, too, became more powerful with a centripetal medium that blurred the line between the individual’s and the nation’s experiences.

In his study of radio’s effects on the islanders of Papua New Guinea, the anthropologist Edmund Carpenter described radio as turning action into artifact, by which he meant it freezes fluid experience into something easier to behold. When discreet experiences are described over the air, they are abstracted from their original contexts and take on a new explicitness, he wrote. That is why people who are careless in their own speech feel offended when they hear curse words on the radio or in film.⁸⁶ It also is why scenes experienced through radio can be so emotionally compelling. Consider, for example, a listener moved by the radio broadcast of a young aircraft mechanic’s wedding on July 27, 1942. “It was all so real so human and yet so impressive and inspiring,” wrote Phily H. Eichler of Bayshore, New York. Though he and his wife were “just two humble participants” in a listenership that constituted a “congregation [in] one of the largest

⁸⁵ Douglas, 4.

⁸⁶ Edmund Carpenter, *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me!* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), 132-133, 161-162.

cathedrals imaginable,” Eichler said the wedding brought forth “a wealth of emotions” in both of them by reminding them of their own ceremony 48 years earlier. “We both wish the young couple long life, contentment, and a full measure of happiness with the help of God, and to you our sincere gratitude for the pleasure we derived,” he wrote.⁸⁷

It is telling that the Eichlers felt this way while listening to a religious ritual. If radio is a participatory mass medium, ritual is a participatory religious experience — it involves action on the part of religious adherents and not simply mental assent to beliefs or thoughts.⁸⁸ In the American civil religion — or, indeed, in most other civil or political religions — few human activities are as highly ritualized as war. As both social scientists and theologians have observed, human violence is socially destabilizing, so societies ritualize it to channel it in group-solidifying ways. Nations with state churches typically use ritual to sanctify a monopoly of violence given to the state’s police and military forces, but in the United States, there is no state church and allowing violence to be perpetrated by every religious sect would not be group-solidifying. So the American civil religion becomes the sole religion authorized to destroy human life and the ritualization of legitimated violence revolves around it.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Phily H. Eichler to Parks Johnson, July 28, 1942, Vox Pop Collection, Series I, Box 1, Folder 10, LAB. The series that broadcast this wedding, *Vox Pop*, was an early “reality show,” broadcasting person-on-the-street interviews from various locales. This episode originated from Kiesler Field, Biloxi, Mississippi. The way the broadcast reminded the Eichlers of their own wedding also illustrated what Douglas called “associative listening.”

⁸⁸ For general discussions of the scholarly approach to ritual, see Catherine Bell, “Ritual,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Study of Religion* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 397-411; and Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 13-29.

⁸⁹ Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, “Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Revisiting Civil Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64 (Winter 1996): 767-780, have examined the role of violence in American civil religion in some detail. They argue that religions mark their ultimate values by setting them apart as those things that merit “shedding blood.” In the United States, sectarian gods, or sectarian understandings of God, are permitted, but the power to kill is denied to churches and

The mass media's role in this, as Carol Marvin and David W. Ingle have argued, is to assemble the nation in an imagined congregation and report blood sacrifices made in its name. It may seem counter-intuitive to most Americans, but it is not the deaths of the enemy but the deaths of compatriots that give the nation group solidarity. Destroying the enemy may remove an external threat, but that is not the same as building national unity. When Americans visit war memorials or gather in cemeteries on Memorial Day, they do not remember the deaths of German and Japanese soldiers, but the deaths of Americans. Or put another way, it is not what America's fallen veterans did *to* German and Japanese soldiers that is praised, but what those veterans did *for* the United States.⁹⁰

During the 1930s through 1950s, and especially during World War II, radio fulfilled the function Marvin and Ingle described by helping "civil priests" organize and perform community priestly ceremonies and by reinforcing the priestly ideas described

reserved only for the state. American civil religion thus gives the state and not the churches guardianship over the nation's ultimate values. It is the one religion Americans are expected not to dismiss, and it views with greatest reverence those branches of the government that dispense violence, namely law enforcement agencies and the military. In times of war, Marvin and Ingle continued, group boundaries are breached or threatened and the destruction of some members of the nation's own group becomes necessary to maintain national solidarity. Since the state's ability to unify the group would be undermined if its citizens bluntly recognized it as "killing its own," violence is instead presented as a last resort, a ritual effort is made to exhaust other alternatives, and civil priests including the president, elected officials, and military leaders utter public expressions of regret. Meantime, soldiers are segregated from the rest of the population and, as Marvin and Ingle put it, "live apart in monastic orders that discipline and purify" them for sacrifice. After the sacrifice is made, national totems such as the flag symbolically resurrect them in the nation's memory and reunify the nation in admiration of their sacrifice.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 771-772, 776-777. Marvin and Ingle's work overlapped with the work of an earlier sociologist, W. Lloyd Warner. In his 1953 book *American Life: Dream and Reality*, Warner described Memorial Day as "a cult of the dead which organizes and integrates the various faiths and national and class groups into a sacred unity." He argued that Memorial Day accomplishes this by invoking symbols of national unity, symbolically overcoming death by folding it into something transcendent and enduring, and reconstructing earlier wartime feelings of unity. W. Lloyd Warner, *American Life: Dream and Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 3. A moving play that reported the sacrifices of four U.S. Army chaplains was "The Bid Was Four Hearts," *Words at War*, February 27, 1945. Penned by Father Timothy Mulvey, who later worked with Father Patrick Peyton on *Family Theater*, it dramatized the ecumenical camaraderie and ultimate deaths of two Protestant ministers, a Catholic priest, and a Jewish rabbi aboard the *U.S.S. Dorchester* in 1943. The play was performed again for *Family Theater* on August 8, 1951. Father Patrick Peyton and *Family Theater* are examined in Chapter 4.

above, namely the necessity of sacrifice, the Manichean worldview, and the existential nature of the threats to the nation. The most obvious priestly rituals radio facilitated were at the local level. Preparations for Army Day 1942, the first such day after Pearl Harbor, were especially energetic because, as Dick Dorrance put it in the *Broadcasters Victory Council Newsletter*, “an Army that feels the pride and faith of its people behind it can do incredible things” and radio’s job is to “create and stimulate and provide that faith.”⁹¹ His appeal did not fall on deaf ears. A Detroit station manager wrote back to say his station aired fifteen Army Day-related shows between 6 a.m. and midnight.⁹²

A Cincinnati station saw no need to limit public rituals to Army Day. Jerry Belcher of WCKY reported that the august ceremony of “retreat,” which involved lowering the flag at sundown, provided an occasion for a more elaborate civic ritual. The station renamed the ceremony “Call to Colors” and backed an initiative to make it a daily moment of areawide solemnity. “Each evening at 6 o’clock a color guard, supplied by either the Navy or Marines, appears at the flagpole on Fountain Square in the center of downtown Cincinnati,” Belcher wrote. “All traffic lights go red. Every auto, trolley, bus and pedestrian in the vicinity halts at attention while the flag flutters down the mast.” He said the ritual lasted about 40 seconds and was described on the air to radio listeners in and around Cincinnati.⁹³

In addition to organizing and promoting priestly rituals in local American communities, radio ritualized the actions of others in its national programs. Drama was

⁹¹ Dick Dorrance, *Broadcasters Victory Council Newsletter No. 9*, March 21, 1942, LAB, 2.

⁹² Harry Bannister, WWJ, Detroit, to Dick Dorrance, n.d., quoted in Dick Dorrance, *Broadcasters Victory Council Newsletter No. 10*, April 7, 1942, LAB, 3.

⁹³ Dick Dorrance, *Broadcasters Victory Council Newsletter No. 22*, June 30, 1942, LAB, 2.

useful because it is, by definition, about specifics. The depiction of American benevolence and Axis evil in *Words at War*'s "Mother America" and "The Ninth Commandment" reinforced national mythology by telling stories about specific people in specific contexts, and Lionel Barrymore's character in *Mayor of the Town* emphasized the necessity of sacrifice in a way that millions could relate to their own circumstances. Listeners who heard these programs were immediately involved in the characters' lives without the mediate intervention of visual stimulation. This specificity and immediacy — the raw material of what Douglas called dimensional listening — conjured the characters on an imagined stage no less than broadcast civil religious rituals transported listeners to Army Day or Memorial Day observances.

Pastoral civil religion, which gave succor to the nation, and priestly civil religion, which lent it confidence, both found ways to put radio to use in attaching something transcendent to the life of the United States. But they did not exhaust American civil religion's potential. There remained a third type of civil religion, the prophetic style. It would find new uses after the war as Americans struggled to define the meaning of the conflict and worried about the emergence of what might become an even bigger one.

Chapter 3 — Prophetic Civil Religion and Calls for Unity

John Brown was not the only anti-slavery insurgent on American radio. Eight years after *Cavalcade of America* recounted his exploits in Kansas and at Harper's Ferry, another series dramatized the career of Denmark Vesey, a South Carolina slave arrested for allegedly plotting an insurrection in 1822. *Destination Freedom*, broadcast on Sunday mornings between 1948 and 1950 on WMAQ of Chicago, was jointly presented by that station and *The Chicago Defender*, a newspaper serving a predominantly African-American readership. Like *Cavalcade*, *Destination Freedom* reached into American history for stories that would be meaningful to the present generation, but it distinguished itself by paying special attention to "the great democratic tradition of the Negro people."¹

The Denmark Vesey play was broadcast on July 18, 1948, and its first scene opened at a carnival.² Vesey had purchased a \$40 lottery ticket, and when his number came up on a roulette wheel, he was delighted to learn he had won. The carnival barker told him to look at his ticket, which said "100-1," but the man hesitated before handing Vesey his \$4,000 in winnings.

"You gambled heavy," he said.

"I always gamble heavy," Vesey said.

¹ Dunning, 196. After the first season, the purview of the show was expanded to include other minorities.

² "Denmark Vesey," *Destination Freedom*, July 18, 1948.

Recognizing him as Captain Vesey's slave, the carnival barker took a confrontational tone.

"I wonder what'd happen to me, say if I just refused to pay off a slave," he said.

"I wonder if the courts would bother."

Vesey spoke slowly to contain his anger.

"Well, I wonder what would happen to me, say if I should take a barker's neck between my fingers like this broomstick, and snap it like that," he said.

"They'd hang you, you know it!" the barker shot back.

"I gambled once, I'll gamble again."

Rattled, the man paid Vesey the \$4,000. Vesey took his winnings home and confronted the captain. He asked his master what he was worth, and when the captain answered \$2,000, Vesey offered him the money. The captain resisted at first and complained that Vesey "read too much," filling his mind with funny ideas.

"You tell the slaves they're born equal. It's nonsense," he complained.

But he also wanted the money. A few minutes later, he relented, took the \$2,000, and signed Vesey's release papers. The two men shared a drink, and Vesey asked him what he'd do with the money. The play then drew the classic republican distinction between private interest and public good.

"I'll use it help to me and my family," the captain said.

"Well, I'll use my freedom to help others become free," Vesey said.

In time, Vesey decided his work would take the form of a slave insurrection, and he constructed a circle of compatriots. Among them were two religious figures he hoped would provide divine justification for his rebellion. The first was Peter Polius, "the

Gospel Man.” Polius also refused Vesey at first, arguing that he was a “man of peace,” but Vesey brought him around by quoting martial passages from scripture much as John Brown had done in the *Cavalcade* play. However, when “the Gospel Man” agreed to join Vesey — to “march in Gideon’s Army,” as he put it — he warned that his support would not be enough. Some in the community followed a “sorcerer” named Gullah Jack, and Vesey would need his approval, as well. In becoming the second religious figure Vesey visited, Gullah Jack also established — in typical civil religious fashion — that his would be a nonsectarian uprising.

As the play progressed, Vesey’s rebellion was undone when he was betrayed by a Judas among the slaves. The conspirators, including Vesey, were arrested and placed at the mercy of a furious court. In the hour before his hanging, Vesey addressed the court and laid bare the source of his inspiration.

“You speak of my crimes,” he said. “I feel no guilt. I felt to be idle while other men fought to be free was a crime. I was not idle. Others talked, I acted. I’d act again.”

The crowd’s anger boiled at this, and the judge had to restore order.

“Is that all you can say to explain your treachery?” he asked.

No. My treachery began when I read the Declaration of Independence. It said all men are created equal. It grew when I read that black Crispus Attucks died to help the colonies become free. Did he die just to free white men or all men? Then I read what Ben Franklin, Tom Paine, Lafayette, and Jefferson had said, and their words warmed by blood. They wanted their revolution to make all men free and equal. But they stopped with some men free and some men slaves. I took up where they left off. I found my price when I was a slave. I paid it. If my life is the price I

pay to be free, take it. I'll pay it. But until all men are free
and equal, the revolution goes on!³

Destination Freedom's dramatization of the career of Denmark Vesey exhibited the prophetic style of American civil religion. The essential component of this style was the application of a transcendent standard that the nation championed but that ultimately was not coterminous with the life of the nation. As a result, prophetic civil religion tended to be both critical and affirming. It was critical in the sense that when it judged the nation according to a transcendent standard, it found the nation wanting. Models for this type of speech within the Judeo-Christian tradition were the Old Testament prophets and their critiques of the Israelite kingdoms. Prophetic American civil religion was affirming in that its use of the nation's own ideals as a standard of judgment highly valued those standards. The message of prophetic civil religion, even at its harshest, was not "America is evil," but "America is failing to be as good as it ought to be."⁴

Prophetic civil religion often acted as a brake, or counterweight, to the potential excesses of priestly civil religion. Because priestly civil religion linked the life of the nation to something transcendent by viewing the nation as an embodiment of the transcendent, it ran the risk of identifying the transcendent with the nation's own interests. Instead of seeing America doing God's work, it simply defined God's will as whatever America was doing. Or put another way, it risked lapsing into a moral relativism that conflated actors and acts and wound up judging acts not according to a transcendent standard but simply on the basis of who performed them. Prophetic civil

³ Ibid.

⁴ To judge the United States by a completely foreign standard might be prophetic but it would not be American civil religion.

religion attempted to correct this by reminding the nation that it and the “something transcendent” with which it identified were not identical. Two of the most common strategies were to point to ways the nation had failed to live up to its ideals or to speak of the nation as “unfinished.”

Abraham Lincoln gave the United States its most celebrated expression of prophetic civil religion in his Second Inaugural Address. Lincoln reminded his audience that when he delivered his First Inaugural Address four years earlier, Northerners and Southerners alike had feared the coming of war, and since then everyone had been surprised by its length and fierceness. Both sections claimed that God was on their side, but neither had been permitted to win. Perhaps, said Lincoln, God’s plan was his own and conformed neither to the wishes of the North or the South. “Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God,” he said, “and each invokes His aid against the other. ... The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.” Acting in the role of national prophet, Lincoln urged Americans to look to the Lord’s purposes and not to assume he looked to theirs. Even if “every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword” — even if the price proves crippling to both sides — let it still be declared that “the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether,” Lincoln said.⁵

The Problem

In the years following World War II, the United States was not as divided as it had been during the Civil War, but the rising expectations of racial and religious

⁵ Cherry, 201-202.

minorities threatened much of the unity built up (or apparently built up) during the war. At the same time, a new global conflict with the Soviet Union presented an added imperative for national cohesion. Prophetic civil religion, while critical of the United States on one level, rooted its appeals in the very ideals and historical narratives otherwise used to bring Americans together. As such, prophetic civil religion provided Americans with a distinctly American language of symbols and memories that they could use to argue about their nation while remaining American. In the postwar years, prophetic civil religion was called upon for two overlapping purposes. The first was the construction of social comity, or peaceful relations between racial and religious groups, and the second was the construction of national solidarity in the face of a new conflict with communism.

Postwar interracial and interreligious relations grew more explosive after the war thanks in part to the boundless optimism felt by white Americans. Millions of returning G. I.s assumed that peace meant a return to “normal,” by which they meant a world of white Protestant privilege.⁶ “Normal” America before the war had been a nation where millions of blacks could not vote, women did not work except in a few traditional fields, Jews were barred from country clubs, and the Spanish-speaking population was small and invisible except in the Southwest. All that changed with the war, though at first the effects were subtle enough that whites who did not want to notice did not have to — especially if they left for the suburbs. But the changes were clear enough to minorities. Millions of them lived in different places, held different jobs, and most importantly, had different expectations than they had before the war. Blacks knew that before the war,

⁶ Patterson, 13-14.

Northern manufacturers refused to hire them, but during hostilities, a combination of labor shortages and federal policy opened new jobs up to them, and more than a million blacks moved from the South to the North to fill those jobs. The number of blacks living in Chicago alone rose from fewer than 300,000 to more than 500,000 in the 1940s.⁷

Women knew that before the war, they, too, were barred from employment in most fields, but when their husbands, fathers, and brothers left for the front, they moved into the factories themselves and built everything from airplanes to ammunition.⁸ American Jews became more politically active knowing their coreligionists in Europe were among the war's worst-treated victims, and Mexican immigrants knew the United States needed their labor in its agricultural fields. They may not have known the details, but these immigrants experienced the effects of the Bracero Program, a joint effort of the U.S. and Mexican governments that allowed American employers to hire Mexicans to replace American laborers who went to war.⁹

People in these groups also knew that during the war, they, too, contributed honorably to America's war effort. If not in uniform, then in work clothes, they did what had to be done where they were. At war's end, they expected to share in the peace — and they did not expect to go back to America's prewar ways. If the optimism they felt was tempered by doubts, these were less doubts about what America could be than what it was likely to do. Black Americans, including returning G. I.'s, still found themselves

⁷ Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Knopf, 1991), 70.

⁸ Chafe, 83-85.

⁹ Manuel García y Griego, "The Importation of Mexican Contract Laborers to the United States, 1942-1964," in David G. Gutiérrez, *Between Two Worlds: Mexican Immigrants in the United States* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1996), 45-55.

refused service in cafes and diners, and millions of women who wanted to keep their wartime jobs lost those jobs due to policies that favored returning veterans.¹⁰ Mexican immigrants were allowed to stay because their employers had become addicted to cheap labor, but working conditions remained poor. American Jews became more politically active — as Will Herberg would argue a few years later, the more Jews integrated into middle-class American culture, the more they turned to their distinctive religion to distinguish themselves from everyone else — yet they too were barred from many private institutions.¹¹ The frustration all these groups felt at the disconnection between their postwar expectations and the white assumptions about returning to “normal” were pointedly expressed by a black colonel from Alabama. “I spent four years in the Army to free a bunch of Dutchmen and Frenchmen,” he said, “and I’m hanged if I’m going to let the Alabama version of the Germans kick me around when I get home.”¹²

Simmering interracial and interreligious relations were not exclusively a “domestic” problem, however. The more the postwar United States fancied itself “the leader of the free world” — another representation of its “redeemer nation” status — the more its internal divisions became embarrassing if not outright counterproductive. As Mary L. Dudziak has observed, it was not a coincidence that the Supreme Court’s landmark desegregation ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* should arrive in 1954, a year otherwise marked by intense anticommunist rhetoric.¹³ The collapse of the wartime

¹⁰ Chafe, 83, 86-91; Blum, 190-191.

¹¹ Herberg, 200-205.

¹² Quoted in Patterson, 23.

¹³ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War, Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 6-13, 107-112.

U.S.-Soviet alliance and the rise of the Cold War gave the United States several new reasons to patch up its domestic tensions. Most obviously, the wartime need for national unity in standing up to Germany and Japan had to be transferred to the Soviet Union. Americans were warned that any division that weakened them at home strengthened their enemies abroad. Senator Joseph McCarthy famously made a meal of rooting “communists” out of the federal government, but anticommunism could be used by more progressive actors, as well. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People used the language of liberty to call for racial equality, and then stressed that both strengthened the United States in the “world struggle against dictatorship.”¹⁴ There also was concern about the nation’s image abroad. As Dudziak showed, federal officials watched with concern as newspapers in such places as Fiji, Ceylon, nationalist China, and the Philippines published negative stories about American race relations. Especially annoying was the Soviet press, which reveled in such tales. One issue of the Soviet newspaper *Trud*, for example, described in lavish detail a 1946 incident in Lindin, Louisiana, in which “a crowd of white men tortured a negro war veteran, John Jones, tore his arms out and set fire to his body.”¹⁵ The point of *Trud*’s article was clear — it was meant to undermine the United States’ claim that it represented values of universal appeal, and it aimed to do this by showing that Americans did not even practice democratic values at home.

¹⁴ Ibid., 29.

¹⁵ Ibid., 29-39.

The Resources

Because prophetic civil religion looks for a correlation between the transcendent truths espoused by a nation and the actual life of the nation, transcendent ideals such as American exceptionalism, redeemer nation ideology, and eschatological expectations about the nation do not exhaust its resources. Equally important are the aspirations of its people — that is, their notions of what it ought to be like were it true to the ideals it espouses. In the latter years of World War II and the early years of the Cold War, Americans gazed hopefully at a world — yet again — made new. They asked themselves, if the United States is chosen, how then should we live? What then should we do?

As Wendy L. Wall has shown, these debates could be quite fundamental. They employed centripetal language, but they did not agree what centripetal meant. Unity, wrote Wall, was “a double-edged sword.”¹⁶ To liberal and leftist intellectuals such as Robert Sherwood and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., it connoted Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms. They argued that Americans would not unite in the face of hunger, fear, and discrimination, and they cited a long history of labor, racial, and other strife as evidence. To them, unity became a call for reform. Conservatives, on the other hand, argued that a national emergency required all Americans to put their differences aside. Business interests such as the National Manufacturers Association and U.S. Chamber of Commerce called on union members to show more “unity” toward their employers, and Martin Dies of the House Special Committee on Un-American Activities began his long crusade against allegedly subversive elements in the entertainment industry.¹⁷ Liberals

¹⁶ Wall, 105.

¹⁷ Ibid., 103-111, 128-129.

and conservatives both cast World War II and the Cold War as battles for American values, but conservatives tended to see the United States as already embodying those values while progressives tended to see the United States as not yet being “American” enough. The difference between the priestly and prophetic styles of American civil religion cannot be reduced to conservative and progressive politics — social conservatives, for example, often used prophetic civil religion to declaim a perceived general decline in morality — but as the United States assumed its mantle as leader of the free world, prophetic civil religion tended to be favored by those who emphasized the difference between the nation’s rhetoric and its reality.

This dichotomy was illustrated by a high-profile debate between two titans of public opinion — *Time-Life* founder and publisher Henry A. Luce and U.S. Vice President Henry A. Wallace. A lifelong Republican, Luce frequently criticized the New Deal, but he saved his harshest wrath for fascism and communism. In February 1941, at a time when Americans hoped they would not be dragged into the war, Luce penned an editorial in *Life* that announced “the American Century” had arrived. He compared America’s nervousness about the war with the British population’s acceptance. The difference lay in the fact that Britain knew why it fought, he wrote. The struggle against fascism, while brutal and horrific, was a fight that had to be waged, yet Americans “have failed to play their part as a world power — a failure which has had disastrous consequences for themselves and for all mankind.”¹⁸ Luce saw an America that embodied the values the world needed, and a world that yearned to be more American.

¹⁸ Henry A. Luce, “The American Century,” *Diplomatic History* 23 (Spring 1999): 165. Luce’s editorial originally appeared in the February 17, 1941, issue of *Life*.

We have some things in this country which are infinitely precious and especially American — a love of freedom, a feeling for the equality of opportunity, a tradition of self-reliance and independence and also of co-operation. In addition to ideals and notions which are especially American, we are the inheritors of all the great principles of Western civilization — above all Justice, the love of Truth, the ideal of Charity.¹⁹

By contrast, Wallace argued in a speech thirteen months later that “the love of Truth” and “the ideal of Charity” were not uniquely American and if the United States were really true to its values, a “Century of the Common Man” would follow World War II rather than an “American Century.” Wallace saw the war as the latest chapter of a universal quest for individual freedom and empowerment that stretched to Biblical times:

The prophets of the Old Testament were the first to preach social justice. But that which was sensed by the prophets many centuries before Christ was not given complete and powerful political expression until our nation was formed as a Federal Union a century and a half ago.²⁰

Yet it was not the union itself but the things it did that advanced that time-honored quest, he argued. These included universal education to teach people about justice, the ability of small farmers to buy land at “reasonable prices” so they could live and work independently, and the ability of workers to bargain collectively so they could bargain effectively.²¹

Luce and Wallace both employed civil religious rhetoric because both interpreted American history in transcendent terms. Both also assumed a progressive, or teleological, view of history. Yet Luce closely identified the expansion of American influence with

¹⁹ Ibid., 170.

²⁰ Henry A. Wallace, *The Century of the Common Man* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1943), 14.

²¹ Wallace also argued this from the opposite side — that uneducated people easily fall prey to demagogues. In so doing, he echoed a very old republican argument.

historical progress while Wallace emphasized that even the United States stood in history's judgment. Wallace adopted a prophetic style because he cast America's involvement in the war, and expectations after the war, in light of a larger, global quest for freedom and justice. His notion of a "Century of the Common Man" was one of many prophetic appeals — they could be called prophetic imaginings — heard in the 1940s and 1950s.

Another prophetic imagining was "National Brotherhood Week," a weeklong annual observance initiated by the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ). Neither the Conference nor Brotherhood Week originated in the postwar period, but their national presence grew to new prominence. The NCCJ was founded in 1928 to promote peace and understanding among Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, and its founders included such weighty names as soon-to-be Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes, former Secretary of War Newton Baker, and Congregational clergyman S. Parkes Cadman.²² At first, Brotherhood Week was little more than a theme for sermons, but corporate support for the NCCJ bloomed after the war, and in 1946, Brotherhood Week literally and proverbially "went Hollywood" when movie mogul David O. Selznick served as a co-chair. As Wall noted, both the NCCJ and the business community saw something to gain. The NCCJ enjoyed new funding, and business decided that promoting racial comity made economic sense. Since the Conference was viewed as less "left-wing" than other groups promoting social harmony, it seemed a safe choice.²³

²² Brotherhood Week was one of many of the NCCJ's projects. The organization also prepared ecumenical educational materials for American schools; helped to organize local "roundtables" where Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish clergypeople and neighbors could meet and converse; provided speakers for civic groups; and operated a Religious News Service. "The Purpose and Program of the National Conference of Christians and Jews," *Journal of Educational Sociology* 16 (February 1943): 324-326.

²³ Wall, 179-181.

Brotherhood Week's media barrage combined prominent mentions on network programs with spot announcements on the nation's local stations. Ultimately, individual station managers decided what went on the air, but support from the Advertising Council made it easier. It prepared and distributed Brotherhood Week media kits containing spot announcements edited for time. The spots associated national unity with racial and religious tolerance.

"Isn't it funny how folks forget the basic principle on which our democratic way of life is built?" said one. "That is, that every human being is an individual, different from every other human being." Intolerance "doesn't make sense on the basis of our Constitution and our history, which was made by people of all religions, all colors, from all over the world."²⁴

Another spot employed the language of business to warn that religious division weakened the United States in the face of its enemies. It associated individualism with tolerance, and, by extension, both of them with the common good.

Most important of all, intolerance and discrimination are a fearful waste of energy, manpower, and achievement, especially at this crucial time. Since this is American Brotherhood Week I'd like to make this one point emphatically. In our own interest and for our children's sake, let's avoid careless generalizations about human beings. Let's judge every person we meet by his actions alone, and treat him accordingly. That, in essence, is what American Brotherhood means. It's Americanism. And it pays big dividends.²⁵

Like *Destination Freedom*, Brotherhood Week often turned to American history.

²⁴ National Conference of Christians and Jews, *Brotherhood Week Radio Kit*, 1948, LAB, 3.

²⁵ Ibid.

One spot praised George Washington Carver, “a great agricultural scientist whose work has benefited every one of us — added millions to our national income.” Carver accomplished what he did, in part, because of the “five women [who] helped him to educate himself and become great,” it continued.²⁶ Another announcement was unusually blunt: “Are you rearing your children to be thieves?” it asked. “Silly question, isn’t it? But have you ever stopped to think that you might be rearing your children to be bigots?”²⁷

Another prophetic imagining came from an unlikely source — former Republican presidential candidate Wendell Willkie. Before entering politics, Willkie served as chairman of the New York-based Commonwealth & Southern utility giant, and, at least as the Democrats described it, he had not made the language of common good the centerpiece of his campaign. After the election, Roosevelt asked Willkie to circle the globe as a “presidential representative” to gain insights valuable for postwar planning. When he returned, he wrote a book titled *One World*, and it rapidly became a bestseller.²⁸

In the book’s concluding chapters, Willkie summarized what he had learned. “The biggest political fact of our time,” he argued, is the reservoir of good will the United States had built up around the world — the Soviet Union had nothing like it. The biggest question of the time was what the United States would do with that good will. “All the people of the earth know that we have no sinister designs upon them ... And they know that, now we are in this war, we are not fighting for profit, or loot, or territory, or

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ National Conference of Christians and Jews, *Brotherhood Week Radio Kit*, Spot No. 3, 1951, LAB.

²⁸ Barnouw, 181.

mandatory power over the lives or the governments of other people.” But “if we permit ourselves to become involved in the machinations of Old World intrigue and religious, nationalistic and racial blocs, we will find ourselves amateurs indeed.”²⁹ In short, Willkie argued that because the United States was seen as fighting for high ideals and not its own aggrandizement, because it was perceived not as a new colonizer but as the world’s great anticolonialist, it had, at least for the present, won the world’s confidence. “[T]he water in this reservoir is the clean, invigorating water of freedom,” he wrote.³⁰

Like Henry A. Wallace and the NCCJ before him, Willkie appealed to a prophetic interpretation of the American past. For example, he compared the American Revolution to World War I.

We did not fight the Revolution because we hated Englishmen and wanted to kill them, but because we loved freedom and wanted to establish it. I think it is fair to say, in the light of what that freedom has meant to the world, that the victory won at Yorktown was the greatest victory ever won by force of arms. But this was not because our army was large and formidable. It was because our purpose was so clear, so lofty, and so well defined.³¹

By contrast, World War I was handled badly.

But when the time came to execute [its high purpose] in a peace treaty, a fatal flaw was discovered. We found that we and our allies were not really agreed upon that purpose. On the one hand, some of our allies had entangled themselves in secret treaties; and they were more intent upon carrying out those treaties, and upon pursuing traditional power diplomacy, than upon opening up the new vista that Mr. Wilson had sought to define. And, on the other hand, we

²⁹ Wendell Willkie, *One World* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1943), 160-162.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

ourselves were not so deeply dedicated to our declared purposes as we had led the world to believe.³²

The test, Willkie continued, the proof to the world that World War II would be another American Revolution and not another World War I, would come at home. America would demonstrate its anticolonial bona fides not simply by asking the Dutch to bolt the West Indies or the French to leave Indochina, but by destroying the colonialism that still existed between the races of its own population. “Freedom is an indivisible word,” he wrote,

If we want to enjoy it, and fight for it, we must be prepared to extend it to everyone, whether they are rich or poor, whether they agree with us or not, no matter what their race or the color of their skin. We cannot, with good conscience, expect the British to set up an orderly schedule for the liberation of India before we have decided for ourselves to make all who live in America free.³³

Aside from Americans who resisted his appeal, a few were inclined to resist Willkie. Or put another way, they were not sure they believed their ears. Reviewing *One World* in *The Nation*, Reinhold Niebuhr said he liked the book and even called it a “spiritual pilgrimage.” He agreed with Willkie’s conclusion that, as Niebuhr put it, the United States “cannot find its rightful place ... if it does not become fully aware of the vast interdependence which a technical civilization has achieved.” What he was not sure about was whether Willkie really meant to bring his prophetic vision to fulfillment or whether he simply expected it to emanate from what he already was doing. “Has he learned anything about economic life which would prompt him to disavow the *laissez*

³² Ibid., 164-165.

³³ Ibid., 188.

faire nonsense which he talked in the presidential campaign?” Niebuhr asked.³⁴ Given that *One World* sold a million copies in eight weeks and, as will be shown below, inspired a radio series, what Willkie would have done had he not died suddenly the following year may not have been decisive, anyway.³⁵

Finally, American minorities asserted their own prophetic imaginings. In keeping with historiography that locates the origins of the postwar civil rights movement prior to 1945, Barbara Dianne Savage has shown that African-Americans realized if they wanted to change the way Americans thought about race, they also had to change the way the media depicted it. As early as the 1930s, black intellectuals and activists understood that radio was “a new institutional force that elevated the symbolic play of politics and imagery into an influential new art form performed for a body politic of millions of listeners.”³⁶ Its ideology was consumerism, and its “institutional force” lay in the command of the networks, the advertisers, and to a lesser extent, government regulators.

In effect, radio was a castle of money that minorities, for the most part, could not storm from the front, Savage argued. So they found other ways to be heard. During the war, this meant pressuring government agencies such as the Office of War Information to address race in its programming, and both during and after the war, it meant demanding

³⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, “Mr. Willkie’s Two Odysseys,” *The Nation*, April 24, 1943, 605. Another reviewer was kinder. “He has gone a great distance since the campaign of 1940,” wrote Lindsay Rogers for the *Saturday Review of Literature*, “such a great distance that sometimes he may think of Lord Eldon’s remark, ‘If I were to begin life again, damn my eyes, I would begin as an agitator.’” Lindsay Rogers, “The 3,000-Mile Odyssey of a Humanist,” *Saturday Review of Literature*, April 17, 1943, 11.

³⁵ Barnouw, 181.

³⁶ Barbara Dianne Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938-1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 16-17. On the New Deal and race, see Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights As a National Issue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

discussions of race on public affairs programs. It also meant looking for non-network opportunities. Two of the most important shows to examine race, *New World's A-Comin'* and *Destination Freedom*, aired in New York and Chicago, respectively. When radio perpetuated racial stereotypes, minorities leveraged their roles as consumers to require more thoughtful programming, and when whites laughed at constructions of “black” on shows such as *Amos 'n' Andy*, blacks protested that these were, in fact, white constructions. Most profoundly, as the United States’ struggled against foreign dictators, minorities used “democracy’s rhetoric against itself,” as Savage put it, to lead a civil rights movement that would produce momentous change.³⁷

The Programs

Network radio drama’s record regarding racial and religious minorities was less than pristine. In fact, the networks’ typical treatment of race could be described as willful obliviousness tempered by stereotype. The few non-white parts that existed in radio drama almost always fell into familiar categories — the black housemaid, the Indian brave, the shiftless Mexican — and even some white ethnic groups had stereotypes, such as the Irish policeman. As Michele Hilmes has explained, there were both cultural and technological reasons for radio’s abundant use of stereotype. The medium emerged in a culture long fascinated by minstrel shows, ethnic jokes, and racist newspaper cartoons, and because radio relied on sound, it had to find an easily recognizable aural means of marking character identity. Visual clues such as skin color and distinctive dress could not be conveyed by sound, so entertainers amassed a repertoire of accents, exaggerations, and

³⁷ Ibid., 9-16, 274.

malapropisms to clue listeners in to their characters' identities.³⁸

The most famous ethnic comedy was the long-running and highly popular *Amos 'n' Andy*. When the show's two white creators, Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll launched the concept in 1926 on WGN in Chicago, they originally called it *Sam 'n' Henry*. Blackface routines were popular at that time, and Gosden and Correll were hardly the only comedians to adapt them to radio, but they insisted their characterizations were based on "real life."³⁹ Gosden said he learned black patterns of speech while growing up in Richmond, Virginia, and cited the influence of an African-American childhood friend nicknamed "Snowball." Years later, when a fan magazine interviewed his and Correll's private secretary, she claimed Gosden always remembered Snowball when searching for a phrase. "His memory of his little friend, along with other vivid boyhood memories, plus his wonderful understanding of the Negro people, have all been priceless to the boys," she said.⁴⁰ *Sam 'n' Henry* found its audience quickly, and in 1927, Gosden and Correll moved it to WMAQ to take advantage of an offer to distribute it by transcription disk. Since WGN owned the name *Sam 'n' Henry*, they had to find a new title and eventually adopted *Amos 'n' Andy*. Two years later, NBC picked up the show, and though it drifted between networks a couple of times, it stayed on the air almost continuously until 1955.⁴¹

Historians have debated *Amos 'n' Andy*'s legacy. Critical reviewers emphasize its

³⁸ Hilmes, 87-96.

³⁹ Chester Lauck and Norris Goff, who played the radio hillbillies Lum 'n' Abner, avoided a blackface routine because there was so much competition. Randal L. Hall, *Lum and Abner: Rural America and the Golden Age of Radio* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007).

⁴⁰ Louise Summa, "My Bosses: Amos 'n' Andy," *Radio Mirror*, November 1950, LAB, 79-80.

⁴¹ Dunning, 31-36. Less well remembered was the show's final incarnation as *The Amos 'n' Andy Music Hall*, a variety show in the late 1950s.

social and historical context. Hilmes and Melvin Patrick Ely have argued that the show was really about what Hilmes called “cultural incompetence.” The title characters were rural Southern bumpkins who moved to New York and always seemed out of place. They reinforced in the audience preexisting stereotypes about blacks as less intelligent, less industrious, and less honest than whites.⁴² That these images were conveyed in whimsical ways did not detract from the effect. Defenders of the show tend to focus on the recordings or scripts themselves. Elizabeth McLeod, for example, noted that Gosden and Correll did not make crude racial jokes or depict blacks as despicable and dangerous as D. W. Griffith had done in *The Birth of a Nation*. She also argued that while a racial subtext existed, it was not the source of the show’s humor. The character’s foibles were human, not distinctively black, and the situations would have been funny had the characters been white, she wrote.⁴³

In the end, it is impossible not to see the racism in *Amos ‘n’ Andy* if racism is understood, as it should be, as a system of social organization and not simply a category of distinct actions and utterances. Even if it is true that most *Amos ‘n’ Andy*’s scripts adapted for white characters still would be funny — and such a rewritten show probably would resemble *Lum ‘n’ Abner* — it would not be the *Amos ‘n’ Andy* that existed, and it certainly would not replicate the social institution that the show became. A discussion of radio’s use of prophetic civil religion must therefore begin with the observation that radio did more to perpetuate the attitudes against which prophetic voices struggled than it did

⁴² Hilmes, 87-96; Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos ‘n’ Andy: A Social History of an American Phenomenon* (New York: Free Press, 1991).

⁴³ Elizabeth McLeod, *The Original Amos ‘n’ Andy: Freeman Gosden, Charles Correll and the 1928-1943 Radio Serial* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009), 115-126.

to give those struggles voice. *Amos 'n' Andy* topped the ratings, but it contributed little to radio's use of civil religion and still less to the prophetic style of civil religion. When radio did treat race or minority religion seriously, prophetic civil religion was a tool it used to ground its appeals in language, images, and collective memories cherished by mainstream audiences.

Network programs

Race was impossible to ignore in the summer of 1943 when riots broke out in Detroit and, a few weeks later, in New York. The spark that lit the Detroit riot is obscure, but racial tension was nothing new thanks to wartime migration, a housing shortage, and the federal government's aloofness.⁴⁴ By the time it was over, 34 people were dead, hundreds were injured, and President Roosevelt had called in federal troops to restore order. In the days and weeks following the riots, African-American leaders including an emergency committee organized by the NAACP urged the President to use his well-known radio skills to speak to the nation frankly about its race problem. Roosevelt refused. So they appealed to the networks for thirty minutes of free national airtime. NBC also refused, but CBS's owner, William Paley, agreed to provide the time if CBS produced the show.⁴⁵

Open Letter on Race Hatred, one of radio's first serious national programs about race, was the result. It was written and produced by radio veteran William N. Robson, a man of liberal political views who had proved his capacity for serious radio years earlier

⁴⁴ Blum, 199-203.

⁴⁵ Savage, 177-181, 333. In a footnote, Savage noted that it is difficult to compare NBC's and CBS's decisionmaking process as there is no CBS archive.

in the experimental *Columbia Workshop*. Though Paley approved the project, he worried about it — in fact, it was cancelled twice during production, and at one point, Paley blurted out to Robson that he should make it clear “the Negroes started the riot.”⁴⁶ The suggestion did not sit well. When broadcast day arrived, CBS gave its affiliates permission to skip the program if desired, and a closed circuit was set up so station managers could hear it in advance. Only a few chose not to carry it. In the final version, the script blamed no race exclusively and focused instead on the nation’s resources for overcoming racial hatred. Links between antiracism, the war, and American ideals were stressed.

The riot itself was dramatized in a series of vignettes. Since its exact proximate cause was unknown — a fact disclosed to the audience — the play imagined what “might have happened” and began with a routine fender-bender on a sweltering June summer day. The accident became a racial incident when the drivers, one white and one black, exchanged epithets. From this flew rumors that exaggerated the incident and fed hatred across the city.

WHITE: What’s the trouble?

SECOND WHITE: I dunno. Tangled bumpers, I guess.
That’s the white guy’s gal sittin’ in the car.

[Orchestra up.]

THIRD WHITE: Fightin’ over a white gal on the Belle Isle Bridge.

[Orchestra up.]

FOURTH WHITE: There’s plenty of trouble over on Belle Isle — Negro and a white gal —

[Orchestra up.]

⁴⁶ Barnouw, 182-183.

FIFTH WHITE: Negro attacked a white gal over on Belle
Isle — call up the guys — ⁴⁷

Wild rumors and violence harmed America by harming the war effort, the play continued. A city that fancied itself the “Arsenal of Democracy” had been idled by its own population’s inability to coexist.

“From bloody dawn to bloody dawn, in that single day these insurrectionists wasted one million man-hours. . . .,” the narrator said. “How many of your sons will die for lack of the tanks and planes and guns which Detroit did not make that day?”⁴⁸

Another scene depicted race hatred as unpatriotic. Three white hooligans beat a defenseless black man as a trio of American sailors approached. A testy exchange between the thugs and the sailors followed. One of the thugs asked the sailor why he cared if a black man suffered.

“I’ll tell you, bum,” the sailor said. “I’m just payin’ off a debt. There was a colored guy on my ship that saved the life of one of my buddies.”⁴⁹

One of the last scenes listened in on the commencement service of Northeastern High School’s Class of 1943. Students of the Detroit school graduated a few days after the riot, and the unnamed speaker’s address echoed themes familiar to American civil religion — themes of common good, centripetalism, and progress. It even cribbed a phrase from Abraham Lincoln.

See if you can analyze the problems of today. See if you
can work out your own destiny through democratic

⁴⁷ William N. Robson, “An Open Letter on Race Hatred,” in *Radio Drama in Action: Twenty-Five Plays of a Changing World*, Erik Barnouw, ed. (New York: Rinehart, 1945), 64-65.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

processes. You must if democracy is to survive. The world cannot go on half free and half slave ... Democracy is more than just casting your ballot. It is something that must be lived twenty-four hours each day. It is learning to live collectively.⁵⁰

Two scholars who examined radio's capacity for national unity a few years after *Open Letter on Race Hatred* cited Robson's script as "one of radio's most timely efforts to lessen tension by speaking plainly." They argued that while it was "axiomatic" that radio programs had to be entertaining for people to listen to them, merely appealing to "hedonistic interests" ignored radio's centripetal potential in overcoming social problems. For educators, the challenge was training people to listen critically, but for broadcasters, it was presenting something worth listening to. It was a challenge they felt *Open Letter* performed admirably.⁵¹

Robson's script was a special, one-time broadcast that veered from normal programming, but prophetic civil religion tackled race and religious hatred in regular series, as well. One for which it was standard fare was the unusual and short-lived *One Out of Seven*. Unadorned and straightforward in its semi-documentary style, *One Out of Seven* dramatized a newspaper story from one week's headlines — that is, one story out of seven days. The show began with the disclaimer that it was presented "without editorial comment," and the narrator's stern tone conveyed the impression of reportage. In addition, *One Out of Seven* marked an early effort — and a remarkable tour de force — of its star and sole performer, Jack Webb. Best known on radio and television as

⁵⁰ Ibid., 72. Following the play, a short commentary by Wendell Willkie revisited themes he explored in *One World*.

⁵¹ Lyman Bryson and Dorothy Rowden, "Radio as an Agency of National Unity," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 244 (March 1946): 141.

Dragnet's Sergeant Joe Friday, Webb become synonymous with the world-weary narrator who had seen it all and heard it all but still had not lapsed into cynicism. Before *Dragnet*, he honed the persona in lesser known radio shows such as *One Out of Seven*, *Pat Novak for Hire* and *Jeff Regan, Private Investigator*.⁵²

On February 27, 1947, *One Out of Seven* paid tribute to Brotherhood Week.⁵³ Webb narrated, in first person, the story of a chance encounter at a bus stop. While waiting in the rain for a ride, the narrator noticed a hatless man in a frayed coat approach him, a man with "a wide ugly cut on his forehead, still bleeding, [and] a monstrous bruise covering the side of this face." The second man stopped beside the narrator and broke the awkwardness in a vague European accent.

"You ... you are wondering about me? Is that not so? This cut on my head and this bruise on my face?" he said.

"Why, yes, as a matter of fact, I was wondering about ... well, it looks like a pretty nasty cut, mister. Tell me, how did you get it?"

The injured man said he had come from a meeting hall where "the people who are of my race," meaning the city's Jewish people, gathered on Wednesday evenings.

"We all meet together to learn about our new country, to study the language, and to try to be better Americans," he said. But that night, the meeting was interrupted. A gang of bigots stormed the hall and told the man and his friends the city had no room for them. They were told to leave. They refused. A fight ensued.

"They tell us in loud voices, 'Get out! Stay out!' But we fight back because we

⁵² *Dragnet* is discussed in Chapter 5.

⁵³ "Brotherhood Week," *One Out of Seven*, February 27, 1947.

know the laws. The law says these men are wrong. Oh, but the laws, they are not everything, are they?” the man said.

“Well, ah, no, they’re not, mister. You’ll find that out,” said the narrator.

“Yes, yes, we have found it out already. There are many things different about America than first I thought.”

The Jewish man said he felt like visiting the church across the street, and he asked if the narrator would join him.

“I do not pray, you know, but I like to stand there in the church and stay these things. It makes me feel better inside here after what has happened tonight,” the injured man said.

They crossed the street together and found a pew near the rear of the church. The narrator noted a candle burning “uncertainly up by the altar.” Then the Jewish man turned to him and rose above the ugliness of the night.

I do not hate these men who do such things. I am not bitter against them. Only I have so much pity for them. For, is it not true, they are like frightened little children? Afraid, running around, looking for an enemy to fight. Anybody. But they do not see. The real enemy, he is inside them. Oh, they hate us, yes they hate us. But really they do not know why. They would kill us and then they would look down at our bodies and they would feel like little children who had just broken their toys. They see only the difference of color or language, and they become angry because we are not as they. Oh, it is so sad. And that is why I have so much pity for them. So blind. They are so blind. The sun is there waiting for them, shining warm and full over everybody. But their eyes are still closed, and all they can see is the darkness.⁵⁴

Another short series was *One World Flight*, inspired by Wendell Willkie’s best

⁵⁴ Ibid.

seller. It represented a postponed desire for Norman Corwin. He had wanted to accompany Willkie in 1942 to build a series of documentaries about the countries Willkie visited, but unfortunately, Corwin's proposal was nixed for logistical reasons, and in 1944, Willkie died. However, in 1946 the Willkie Memorial Fund and the Common Council for American Unity jointly sponsored a "One World Award" that included an expenses-paid, around-the-world trip recreating Willkie's original voyage. Corwin was named the first recipient, thus giving him a second chance. His employer, William Paley, endorsed the project and provided him with an assistant and traveling companion, the production technician Lee Bland.⁵⁵

One World Flight aired in thirteen half-hour episodes from January to April 1947. The first and last episodes offered introductory and summarizing overviews, and other episodes described Corwin and Bland's visits to Europe, Egypt, Australia, New Zealand, and several countries in Asia. Interviewees ranged from the powerful, such as Clement Attlee, to men and women in the street. Corwin said he left New York hoping to find Willkie's one world in embryo. He wanted to see America's victory put to constructive use, and along the way, he did find signs of affection for the United States. Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru spoke of the Four Freedoms as a blueprint for the postwar world, and a handful of Australians went so far as to recommend their nation abandon the British Commonwealth and join the United States.⁵⁶ But Corwin also found disappointment. "I was dismayed too often to find that the reservoir of good will toward

⁵⁵ Bannerman, 107-108, 177-178; Barnouw, 238-241; Dunning, 522.

⁵⁶ "Final Summary," *One World Flight*, April 8, 1947; "India, Shanghai, And Other Far Eastern Cities," *One World Flight*, March 11, 1947; "Australia," *One World Flight*, March 25, 1947.

the United States about which Wendell Willkie spoke enthusiastically in 1942 had drained to a low level,” he said in the series’ final summary. Too often people in other countries charged the United States with forgetting its own ideals. A European refugee complained that the lynching of American blacks reminded him too much of the Nazi persecution of Jews, and several people worried that fascism might next appear on American shores. “From all I had read, I expected to find, and did find, areas of suspicion, fear, and criticism of Russia in certain countries, but I did not expect to find the United States also suspected, disliked, and resented,” said Corwin.⁵⁷

The core issue was war. Having experienced global conflagrations twice in two generations, people naturally wondered if the emerging Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union signaled the onset of a third. The Italian screenwriter Sergio Amidei worried that the world’s hope in the United States was fading due to fears of another war. “There is a danger that Americans will forget their responsibilities in, if you will pardon the word, a drunkenness of victory,” he said. “I am afraid that in America ... they are developing a preoccupation with defense which is dominating the idea of peace.”⁵⁸ The most poignant worries came from Czechoslovakia, where Corwin repeated a recording he had made years earlier on the grassy former site of Lidice. In 1942, Nazis killed all the men in the town in reprisal for the death of a German official. Corwin described to listeners a small monument and the enclosure that surrounded it. “At a small gate to this enclosed area is an inscription,” he said. ““Do not walk on that which we love most dearly. Signed, the Women of Lidice.”” Now, said Corwin, “men who have already

⁵⁷ “Final Summary,” *One World Flight*.

⁵⁸ Ibid.; “Italy,” *One World Flight*, February 25, 1947.

forgotten” the war and the ideals for which it was fought “walk on the graves of those we love most dearly when they talk of the certainty of another war, when they talk of the inevitability of a showdown clash between two or more worlds.”⁵⁹

Perhaps the most famous antidiscriminatory postwar radio dramas flew into American homes with *Superman*. Beginning in April 1946, the iconic series broadcast a series of remarkable adventures decrying racial and religious prejudice as un-American. The first was a twenty-five-episode story titled “The Hate Mongers Organization.” It pitted the Man of Steel against a shadowy group of race-baiters called the Guardians of America. In the first episode, a pair of teenage thugs threw a Molotov cocktail into Dave Hoffman’s drug store, burning down six of the seven buildings on the street. Danny O’Neill, a *Daily Planet* paperboy, witnessed the incident and recognized a teenage tough named “Muggs” as one of the culprits. Unfortunately, Danny stood under a streetlamp, so Muggs spotted him, too. Afraid of being caught, Muggs and his accomplice fled, but the next day, they decided to intimate Danny by beating him nearly to death. However, they were not quick enough to prevent the newsboy from relating what he saw to Superman’s alter ego Clark Kent, photojournalist Jimmy Olsen, and *Daily Planet* editor Perry White.⁶⁰

Kent and Jimmy visited Danny at the hospital, where they met Father Sheehan of St. Catherine’s, a local Catholic church. Pondering the firebombers’ motive, Kent suggested it was simply vandalism.

“No, there’s more to it than that, a lot more,” said Father Sheehan. “Setting fire to

⁵⁹ “Final Summary,” *One World Flight*; “Czechoslovakia,” *One World Flight*, February 18, 1947.

⁶⁰ “The Hate Mongers Organization, Episode 1,” *The Adventures of Superman*, April 16, 1946.

Dave Hoffman's store is just the beginning."

The priest explained that some weeks earlier, he and two other clergymen — one Protestant and one Jewish — were called to a meeting by the local school principal. Joining them were three laymen, one of whom was Dave Hoffman.

"We met to discuss two things," Sheehan said. "How we could get the youngsters of this crowded neighborhood off the streets, and more important, how we could show them how to get along with one another, no matter what their race or religion."

They decided to build a community clubhouse called "Unity House."

"Its doors were going to be open to youngsters of all races and all creeds," said the priest.

No sooner was the plan announced in the press than the men who attended the meeting received threatening letters. The anonymous letters warned against building Unity House, and Father Sheehan suspected that whoever wrote the letter also ordered the bombing of Dave Hoffman's store.

"This has all the earmarks of an organized attempt to stir up trouble between people of different races and religions," he said.

"Why, it's the Nazi method," said Kent.⁶¹

He decided the best way to destroy such an organization would be to infiltrate it and find out who was behind it. Grabbing a low-level actor like Muggs would accomplish little, he said. Instead, he suggested that Jimmy, who was not known to Muggs' gang, pose as a would-be punk from Philadelphia. Jimmy could go to the pool hall where Muggs' gang gathered, claim that he had arrived in Metropolis looking for "action," and

⁶¹ "The Hate Mongers Organization, Episode 2," *The Adventures of Superman*, April 17, 1946.

try to convince them to accept him as a member.⁶²

The plan worked, and a few episodes later, Jimmy met the leader of the Guardians of America — or, rather, he *heard* him. The mysterious mastermind would not show his face. When he met Jimmy, he hid behind a velvet curtain in the upper apartment of a high-rise building, momentarily placing Jimmy at the same disadvantage as the audience. Like Jimmy, they could only guess about the man's appearance.

"We have banded together to guard this country against the foreigners in our midst," the mastermind said. "We are going to protect America for those of us who have pure blood."

What happened to Dave Hoffman, he said, soon will happen to the rest of Unity House's planners.

We don't want the Catholics and the Jews to get along with one another! We don't want Protestants to mingle with Catholics! If that happens, we'll never gain any power. People who are friendly and stick together are hard to control. We want them hating one another. That's why we spread stories around. We tell the Christians that the Jews are trying to take over the country, and we tell the Jews the Christians want to kill every one of them.⁶³

Jimmy sheepishly offered that that was not true, and the man said he knew it was not true, but that was not the point. Hitler showed that if a leader tells a lie often enough, people will believe it.

"What good did it do him? He got knocked off," said Jimmy.

"Hitler was a great man, Olsen," said the man behind the curtain. "He made only

⁶² "The Hate Mongers Organization, Episode 3," *The Adventures of Superman*, April 18, 1946.

⁶³ "The Hate Mongers Organization, Episode 12," *The Adventures of Superman*, May 1, 1946.

one mistake. He moved too fast. We're not making that mistake."

Jimmy then received his first assignment. He was told to visit an art gallery owned by a man named Klein, a donor to the Unity House project. Jimmy was to smuggle a blade into the gallery and slash as many paintings as he could. He would be paid \$50 for each piece destroyed. After the meeting, Jimmy sneaked away from the gang and told Kent of the plot against Klein's art gallery. The two of them warned Klein and arranged for the *Daily Planet* to fake a story about the gallery being ransacked. Other episodes followed involving violent plots against religious figures, including Rabbi Harry Stone, who was beaten up, and Reverend Leeds, a Methodist minister who was nearly murdered.⁶⁴

In the story's final chapters, Jimmy was summoned back to the mystery man's high-rise apartment. There he learned to his horror that Klein's full name was Adolf Klein — he supported the Guardians of America, not the Unity House, and Jimmy's assignment had been a trap! Klein recognized Jimmy and confirmed he was a spy. The leader said Jimmy must die, but since it no longer mattered if Jimmy knew his name, he disclosed it — Frank Hill. He then called in two goons with German accents, Erik and Karl, and told them to throw Jimmy off the Metropolis Bridge.⁶⁵

At the story's climax, Kent donned the persona of Superman to rescue his

⁶⁴ Ibid.; "The Hate Mongers Organization, Episode 13," *The Adventures of Superman*, May 2, 1946; "The Hate Mongers Organization, Episode 14," *The Adventures of Superman*, May 3, 1946; "The Hate Mongers Organization, Episode 15," *The Adventures of Superman*, May 6, 1946; "The Hate Mongers Organization, Episode 16," *The Adventures of Superman*, May 7, 1946; "The Hate Mongers Organization, Episode 17," *The Adventures of Superman*, May 8, 1946; "The Hate Mongers Organization, Episode 18," *The Adventures of Superman*, May 9, 1946; "The Hate Mongers Organization, Episode 19," *The Adventures of Superman*, May 10, 1946.

⁶⁵ "The Hate Mongers Organization, Episode 20," *The Adventures of Superman*, May 13, 1946; "The Hate Mongers Organization, Episode 21," *The Adventures of Superman*, May 14, 1946.

captured friend. In classic cliffhanger fashion, he intercepted Jimmy's falling body only seconds before it splattered against the rock-hard surface of the Metropolis River.

Together, Superman and Jimmy returned to Frank Hill's apartment, overcame the goons, and discovered the secret shame behind the Hate Mongers Organization.⁶⁶

Superman revealed it only after calling the teenagers of Muggs' gang together at police headquarters. He wanted them to understand the depravity of their erstwhile employer. He asked Muggs if his older brother was in the Army.

"No, in the Navy ... ," said Muggs. "He's in the hospital. He lost a leg."

Superman asked the other boys if their fathers or brothers fought in the war. One boy said his father was killed. Then Superman revealed what he found in Frank Hill's apartment.

The only reason I asked you whether you had brothers or fathers fighting in the war was to prove something to you. These papers I'm holding in my hand were taken out of the safe in Frank Hill's office. One of them shows that Hill was a draft dodger! That while your brothers and fathers were being killed and wounded, he stayed behind and lived off the fat of the land. And you know what he was doing all during the war? He was a German spy! In fact, his name isn't even Frank Hill. His real name is Franz Hiller. And that's the man who told you he was trying to protect America!⁶⁷

"The Hate Mongers Organization" did not deny the familiar tenets of American civil religion, it simply recast them in a prophetic light. America's virtue and the lurking evil of its enemies were highlighted in frequent comparisons between the United States

⁶⁶ "The Hate Mongers Organization, Episode 24," *The Adventures of Superman*, May 17, 1946; "The Hate Mongers Organization, Episode 25," *The Adventures of Superman*, May 20, 1946.

⁶⁷ "The Hate Mongers Organization, Episode 25," *The Adventures of Superman*.

and Nazi Germany. The notion of progress — and even its association with education — also was stressed. In the final confrontation in Frank Hill’s apartment, Superman and Jimmy sneaked up on Hill, Erik, and Karl by scaring them into thinking they saw Jimmy’s ghost.

“They think you’re dead, floating down the river,” Superman said. “People like that — narrow-minded, bigoted, hateful people — are usually superstitious. Ignorance and superstition go hand-in-hand. Anyone who believes, as they do, that men should be judged by the way they worship God is as ignorant as the jungle savage.”⁶⁸

Finally, the theme of common good linked unity and individualism. Social unity, it was argued, is not the opposite of individual liberty but its prerequisite, and tolerance is the difference between a nation unified by democracy and a nation unified by terror. If nothing else, the series provided an opportunity for Americans who were so inclined to engage in a conversation about bigotry, but there was an odd feature about “The Hate Mongers Organization” that may have escaped some listeners.⁶⁹ For all its inclusive rhetoric, it never mentioned African-Americans. Not once. Bigotry based on race or ethnicity was condemned in general terms, but blacks never were mentioned by name, and there were no black characters. It is hard to believe this was accidental. At one point, Muggs explained to Jimmy (while he still thought Jimmy was part of the gang) why he did not like the Unity House, either.

“Our guys don’t like the set-up. They got a Jew rabbi and a Catholic priest on the

⁶⁸ “The Hate Mongers Organization, Episode 24,” *The Adventures of Superman*.

⁶⁹ The anthropologist Margaret Mead had led a discussion on “ways to combat prejudice and hate through radio programs for children” at the Child Study Association of America in New York on March 18, 1946, about a month before the serial began. “Plan to Fight Bias on Air,” *The New York Times*, March 19, 1946, 23.

committee. And the way they give it out, they're going to open this clubhouse to any kid that wants to join, don't matter if he's a Chinaman!"⁷⁰

Non-network programs

Some of the best examples of prophetic civil religion on American radio were never heard by a national audience. Two programs that focused on the African-American experience may have spoken too much truth to power for the networks to stomach. Yet in their local markets of Chicago and New York respectively, *Destination Freedom* and *New World A-Coming* explored radio's potential as a voice for social reform — and for prophetic civil religion. As Savage put it in her history of the African-American presence on radio, these two shows “were far more consistent in tone and content with the claims and aspirations of African Americans” than anything on network radio.⁷¹

Together, *Destination Freedom* and *New World A-Coming* engaged the themes of American civil religion from the perspective of those who had not seen the United States realize its promise. Sometimes gently and sometimes firmly, they protested that the “virtuous community” was not always so virtuous and that dissention and hypocrisy weakened America's response to its enemies. Above all, they answered the claim that America pointed toward an “end” of history with a reminder that the end was not yet — that is, that the United States remained an unfinished project. The shows' timing during and immediately after World War II was no coincidence. The migration of millions of black laborers to Chicago and New York created in those cities a viable market for such

⁷⁰ “The Hate Mongers Organization, Episode 9,” *The Adventures of Superman*, April 26, 1946.

⁷¹ Savage, 247.

programming, and the Federal Communication Commission's then-current interest in discouraging media monopoly strengthened local stations.⁷²

Like *Cavalcade of America*, *Destination Freedom* dipped into the American past to find stories meaningful to present-day listeners. In addition to Denmark Vesey, its subjects included Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Crispus Attucks, and George Washington Carver. Other episodes dealt with more recent history, such as the creation of the Urban League. For part of *Destination Freedom*'s two-year run on WMAQ — ironically, the same station that had made *Amos 'n' Andy* a national phenomenon years earlier — it was sponsored by the black-oriented *Chicago Defender* newspaper, and after that, the station sustained it. The series was the brainchild of Richard Durham, an African-American writer whose interest in radio had been stirred by William N. Robson's *Open Letter on Race Hatred*. Durham's scripts hit hard against injustice and, not surprisingly, won both scorn and plaudits. WMAQ fielded complaints about the show from the American Legion and once was picketed by a group of white supremacists. On the other hand, *Destination Freedom*'s excellence was recognized with an award from the Institute for Education by Radio, and it was publicly praised by one of Chicago's most famous citizens, Adlai Stevenson.⁷³

Destination Freedom's approach was quintessentially prophetic — it criticized but did not condemn the United States. Even as it held the nation to account for failing to achieve its ideals, it affirmed those ideals as a worthy measure. For example, a two-part dramatization of the life of Frederick Douglass linked education and liberty with a clarity

⁷² Sterling and Kitross, 210-212.

⁷³ Savage, 260-270; Dunning, 196-198.

that would have made John Adams proud. In an early scene, young Frederick spoke of reading as a path toward freedom, and he and other slaves risked punishment by sneaking abolitionist tracts into “Sunday School.” When the master caught them, Frederick was tortured, but did not break. He snatched the whip from his tormenter’s hand, and pushed the man to the ground. In a moment that resonated with the Biblical claim that the first would be last and the last first, the slave-breaker panicked.

“You wouldn’t tell the master about this, would you?” he cried. “If he hears I couldn’t break you, I’d never get another job. ... It’s a game the masters play, one against the other. They play the poor whites like me against the blacks like you. They win, we lose.”⁷⁴

Douglass let the man go, but in a later scene, after his master hired him out to unload ships, he escaped at the dock of New York and fell in with a group of abolitionists. Men and women of the extremist strip, they advocated rejecting the U.S. Constitution and dissolving the Union. At first, Frederick joined them, but the more he studied the Constitution, the more he began to think that instead of rejecting it, American ought to live up to it. One day, in a print shop he founded, Douglass was confronted by an abolitionist friend. The man complained about Douglass’ decision to support a new politician named Abraham Lincoln. During their argument, Douglass appealed to the Constitution for justification.

“What’s the Constitution got to do with it,” his abolitionist friend said. “Can it stop slaveholding? Can it stop discrimination, segregation?”

“I believe it can,” answered Douglass. “It says — “

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“Just words. Just a pack of meaningless, empty words.”

But Douglass would not be put off.

“Now, see here,” he said. “Negroes, Jews, Gentiles, are people, aren’t they? ... Well, the Constitution reads, ‘We the people,’ not ‘We the white people,’ not ‘We the privileged class, we the high,’ not ‘We the horse and sheep, swine ... ’”

“Get to the point.”

“We the people. *That’s the point.*”⁷⁵

Like *One World Flight, New World A-Coming* derived its inspiration and title from a 1943 book. Roi Ottley wrote the book as an exposé on contemporary African-American life, and some of the radio show’s earliest episodes were adapted from it. More varied in format than *Destination Freedom*, *New World A-Coming* mixed music, commentary, historical narration, and drama in inventive ways. It was made possible by the men and women — both black and white — who wrote or acted in it; by community activists who supported it; and by WMCA’s white owners, Nathan and Helen Strauss. Though WMCA was a private, for-profit station, the wealthy Strausses were animated by more than commercial motives. They saw radio as a democratic institution as well as a private business, and they believed that local, independent radio should offer programs the networks would not touch. Following a brief tenure by Nathan as Franklin Roosevelt’s Federal Housing Authority director, the Strausses purchased WMCA and found in Ottley’s book the potential for a new radio series.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ “Frederick Douglass, Part 1,” *Destination Freedom*, July 25, 1948.

⁷⁶ Savage, 249-250. *New World A-Coming* enjoyed a much longer life than *Destination Freedom* and remained on the air in New York until 1957.

Like *Destination Freedom*, *New World A-Coming* pulled few punches, and from the beginning, it forged links between race and the war effort. In a 1944 program titled “The Negro, Fascism, and Democracy,” host Canada Lee said blacks sought “democracy cleansed and refreshed.”⁷⁷ The episode drove home its point by dramatizing an incident from the life of the firebrand abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, who was said to have once hidden from an angry mob by secreting himself inside it. “So aggressively did he raise the banner of freedom that he was hunted down like a mad dog,” said Lee. When the crowd could not find Garrison at the Chatham Square Chapel, where he had been scheduled to speak, they roamed the city for hours never dreaming he was there among them, observing.

At one point, they spotted an elderly black man walking home from work. An anti-abolition speaker, then pontificating against the “nonsense” of equality, called the old man to the crowd’s attention.

“Look, should he be your equal?” the speaker roared, to which there was hearty laughter.

Garrison watched in alarm as the crowd seized the old man and led him to the podium, mocking him with insults and demanding an impromptu speech. They were shocked and Garrison was inspired by his unexpected eloquence.

I am called upon to make a speech. You know that I am a poor, ignorant man, not used to making speeches. But I’ve heard of the Declaration of Independence, and I’ve read the Bible. The Declaration says, “All men are created equal,” and the Bible says, “God has made us all of one blood.” And I think then that we are entitled to good treatment, that

⁷⁷ “The Negro, Fascism, and Democracy,” *New World A-Coming*, March 12, 1944.

it is wrong to hold men in slavery —⁷⁸

Their humor lost and patience exhausted, the crowd cut short his speech. Garrison, played by the politically active white actor Will Geer, described what he saw.

They pulled him down and beat the man. From then on, my mind was made up. On the subject of human rights, I could be harsh as truth and as uncompromising as justice. I would never think or speak or write with moderation — never! Tell the man whose house is on fire to give a moderate alarm, tell him to moderately rescue his wife from attack. Tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from fire. Do not urge me to use moderation in the cause of human right!⁷⁹

In a sense, said Lee at the show's close, black Americans have an unusually clear perspective on what America means. There is "nothing mystical" about their longing for democracy in a nation that promised freedom but did not always deliver it.

The slogans of democracy have real meaning to them. Negroes feel that the day for just talking is past. They know, too, that Americans can be recharged with progressive vitality. In spite of vocal opposition, Negroes have faith. When they sing, "On Solid Rock I Stand," this is no illusion, for the foundation of their hopes stem directly for the nation's great promises, liberty and equality for all.⁸⁰

The Medium

At first impression, it may seem that radio's contribution to prophetic American civil religion in the context of World War II and the Cold War was more negative than positive — that it aggravated the social maladies prophetic civil religion protested.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

Certainly, that often was true. White, mostly Protestant, and mostly middle-class America most often passed for “typical” in the popular dramas of the period, and non-white, non-Protestant (to say nothing of non-Christian), and working-class families either were not heard or were relegated to a ghetto of well-defined stereotypes. Exceptions such as the Jewish-themed comedy-drama *The Rise of the Goldbergs* have drawn scholarly interest precisely because they were unusual.⁸¹ Some stereotypes carried over from earlier forms of popular entertainment such as minstrel shows and vaudeville, while others were aural neologisms conjured up for radio. The medium’s lack of visual stimulation led actors to devise accents, eccentric pronunciations, and distinctive verbal configurations that audiences soon recognized as racial or ethnic markers, and not infrequently, the stereotypes became more “real” to audiences than reality. The African-American actress Lillian Randolph, best remembered as “Birdie” on *The Great Gildersleeve*, actually had to take voice lessons to learn how to speak “black!”⁸² Meantime, white advertisers tended not to see much point in serving a black market, partly because it was too small and poor to interest them, and partly because they worried that products aimed at African-Americans would be shunned by white consumers.⁸³

Yet that was not the whole story. Radio’s ability to “conquer space” also meant it could traverse ethnic boundaries to the extent those boundaries were mapped to space.

⁸¹ Donald Weber, *Haunted in the New World: Jewish American Culture from Cahan to The Goldbergs* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 131-138, argues that unlike earlier “ethnic” comedies that emphasized difference, *The Goldbergs* underscored ways in which the title family was American as well as Jewish. Malapropisms were toned down, familial relationships were typically middle class, and the family took patriotic pride in their country.

⁸² MacDonald, 331. Hilmes, 78-79.

⁸³ MacDonald, 333-334.

American radio came of age in a nation pocked by local ethnic communities, and for racial and religious minorities, race and religion often intertwined with physical location. In his study of twentieth-century Catholic communities in the urban North, John T. McGreevy argued that American Catholics prior to World War II tended to view their parishes territorially, or put another way, they thought of space religiously. “Each parish was a small planet whirling through its orbit, oblivious to the rest of the ecclesiastical solar system,” McGreevy wrote.⁸⁴ In addition to serving as social centers of urban communities, churches also acted as physical centers of ethnic neighborhoods. McGreevy quoted a Philadelphia priest who characterized a 1941 attempt to keep blacks out of his neighborhood as a “question of preserving the unity of my parish.”⁸⁵ Similarly, Martin E. Marty has described early twentieth-century religious minorities as living in “cocoons.” Even as Progressive intellectuals spoke of pluralism and cosmopolitanism, minorities turned inward to shelter themselves, Marty wrote. Catholics kept to their own fraternal organizations, sent their children to parochial schools, and read the output of their own publishing houses. Jews crowded into ghettos and inhabited the highly ambiguous position of being called the Chosen People of God by some Christians, the killer of Jesus by others, and both at the same time by still others. Additional minorities, including Asians and Hispanics — most of whom were not Protestant, either — also kept separate communities.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter With Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 10.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 252. McGreevy’s study also helps to explain why racial conflict in the North so often arose around housing issues.

⁸⁶ Marty, *Irony*, 93-149.

As the United States' first national electronic mass medium, radio invaded those parishes and broke open those cocoons. As Bruce Lenthall argued in *Radio's America*, radio personalities from entertainers to politicians to crackpots "gave listeners a sense of having a voice in a centrally controlled and vast mass culture."⁸⁷ A nation of small communities increasingly became one community, or imagined itself as such, and that made Americans feel more involved in national politics. As Lenthall described, political participation had waned in the generation leading up to radio. Voter turnout in the 1920s was lower than the 1890s. In the Depression, public life seemed pointless and the individual helpless, but radio again gave people a chance to feel they were part of America's body politic. Once again, they were connected and informed citizens, and they imagined that once again, their participation counted. Whether this was true is another matter — the mass democracy radio implied actually came amid political and economic centralization — but the ethereal national forum that emerged was available to prophetic voices.⁸⁸

The question became, what sort of "one community" should America be? The struggle that prophetic civil religion implied, meaning the struggle of living up to a transcendent standard, produced rhetoric that radio listeners did more than passively receive. They talked about it, debated it, quarreled with it. A letter to editor of *The Saturday Review of Literature* by William H. Tymous, secretary of the Washington, D.C., Veterans Congress, took strong issue with radio drama's handling of race in 1946. Implicating the soap operas *The Right to Happiness* and *When a Girl Marries* as well as

⁸⁷ Lenthall, 124.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 5-16, 105-114.

evening programs including *The Jack Benny Program*, *The Great Gildersleeve*, and *Amos 'n' Andy*, Tymous said the treatment of minorities on radio came closer to “the Nazi pattern” than anything recognizably American. Lily, a black maid on *When a Girl Marries* “is the nostalgic embodiment of the slave-ridden before-the-war South for some Lot’s wife who, in continuously looking back over her shoulder to the distorted stereotypes of the past, misses the substance, realities, and eternal values of the past,” he wrote.⁸⁹ Whether or not radio’s producers and writers mean to offend is not the point, Tymous continued — the nation is damaged either way.

Many people have been so conditioned by these anti-racial stereotypes that they placidly accept them and can see nothing wrong in such disguised fostering of race hatred. But wouldn’t it be tragic if almost every radio program presented Jeeter Lester and the other people of ‘Tobacco Road’ as the universal type of the white race?⁹⁰

Tymous’ letter drew a response from Harriet C. Burdsal of Bellaire, Texas. Commenting on what she called “this new ‘stereotype’ phobia,” she took Tymous to task for overstating his case. Even if he was right about Lily the maid, she said, complaining about Jack Benny’s black servant, Rochester, made no sense. “He is a Negro quite familiar to all of us,” she wrote. “But he does not seem to me either ‘servile’ or ‘inferior.’ Whenever I have heard Rochester, or seen him in a film, he has had just one job, and that far from servile: His job is to make a monkey out of the stereotype known as Jack Benny.”⁹¹ As for offending whites, who needs Jeeter Lester when radio already has Fred Allen’s Senator

⁸⁹ William H. Tymous, letter to the editor, *The Saturday Review of Literature*, April 27, 1946, 20.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Harriet C. Burdsal, letter to the editor, *The Saturday Review of Literature*, June 22, 1946, 22.

Claghorn, the hillbilly Li'l Abner, and the perpetual schmuck Dagwood Bumstead?

Burdsal thought Americans did more harm to their nation through internal bickering. "Let's not worry one another about stereotypes, please, Mr. Tymous!" she wrote. "Let's go on laughing, while we trip our opponents on their own red herrings ... We will win our enemies when we win their hearts."⁹²

On another instance, the man-on-the-street radio interview program *Vox Pop* irked an anonymous listener who wrote to complain. The episode originated from Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C. on Christmas Eve 1945. During the show, host Parks Johnson and co-host Warren Hull interviewed young soldiers enjoying their nation's first peacetime Christmas in years.

"Folks, this is the one night of the year when each of us is very conscious of the age-old phrase, 'Peace on earth, good will toward men,'" Johnson said. "The wounded veterans that you hear tonight on *Vox Pop* fought to give us one more opportunity to practice the things which we say we believe in."⁹³

The first man interviewed was an African-American from Macon, Georgia, but the one that upset the letter writer was a Japanese-American with the un-Japanese-sounding name Frank O'Connor. Born in California to the family of an American World War I veteran, O'Connor volunteered in December 1940 and saw sufficient action to be awarded the Presidential Unit Citation, a Pacific Theater ribbon with two battle stars, a European Theater ribbon with two battle stars, and two Purple Hearts. After receiving injuries on Corregedor, he was returned to California where he was shocked by wartime

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ "Walter Reed Hospital," *Vox Pop*, December 24, 1945.

racism.

“The prejudice that was going on over there was very terrible ...,” he told Johnson. “I didn’t have the slightest idea till I came back from the Pacific.”⁹⁴

O’Connor’s comments were too much for the letter writer.

“I realize that this is Good Neighbor Week and I’m all out for it,” he wrote, “but a Jap is a Jap, even though his name is Connor [*sic*]. His squawking about ‘Kambetsu’ [discrimination] especially in view of the fact that there was a negro soldier on the program who had nothing to say about discrimination, burns me up.”⁹⁵

As for the show’s Christmas theme, the letter-writer concluded, “Yes, I had my bible at my elbow, opened at Exodus 21:23-25 and Leviticus 24:20,” two verses that call for injuries to be paid back with “an eye for an eye.”⁹⁶

The unnamed *Vox Pop* complainant and *The Saturday Review of Literature*’s letter writers may not have articulated it as such, but they participated in a new, national public sphere enlarged by radio. That the controversies they tackled centered on race and ethnicity, and were both aggravated and informed by religion, reflected the concerns and character of that new public sphere. By December 1945, the Depression was over, the war was won, and the Axis was defeated. Yet the postwar world provided no fewer opportunities for radio to deploy the language of American civil religion. Abundance could be threatening in its own way, and the comforting tones of pastoral civil religion returned to help Americans adjust to the world the war left behind.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Unsigned letter to Parks Johnson, February 20, 1946, Vox Pop Collection, Series I, Box 1, Folder 14, LAB.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

PART II: SUCCESS STORIES

Chapter 4 — Pastoral Civil Religion and the Nation That Prays Together

Ozzie Nelson felt that something was missing. Shreds of Christmas wrapping paper littered his living room, his boys loved their new gifts, and he sank comfortably into an easy chair after indulging in wife Harriet's holiday dinner. But something was not right. Christmas ought to be more than this, he thought.¹

The Nelsons' youngest son, Ricky, wished the holiday would come more often.

"Heck, with the presents opened and the big meal over, the celebration's kind of dead," he said.

But that was not what Ozzie meant. He knew his family enjoyed each other's company, and he was grateful for the slippers Ricky gave him, but something was missing and he could not decide what it was.

"I think I'll take a little walk around outside before I fall asleep," he told Harriet.

Outdoors, Ozzie found his neighbor, Thorny — maybe he would know what was missing. But Thorny was no help, either. The best answer he could muster was to eat another piece of pie. Meantime, Ricky and his brother David somewhat unadvisedly tossed Ricky's new baseball around the living room. When David hurled a pitch too hard

¹ "The Lost Christmas Gift," *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, December 25, 1953.

for Ricky's liking, Harriet told Ricky to use his new catcher's mitt. That's when they found one thing that literally was missing: the catcher's mitt.

Ozzie returned to the house just in time to help the rest of the family search for a package that Harriet insisted had been overlooked. She was sure she purchased a catcher's mitt for Ricky, but no one could remember his unwrapping one. They searched beneath the tree and dug through the wrapping paper and sifted through the boxes on the floor, but no one found the mitt. Harriet then remembered that she had instructed the department store to wrap the catcher's mitt for her and have it delivered to the Nelsons' home. About a month earlier, another package had been misrouted to a Mr. and Mrs. *Oscar* Nelson in an older part of town, so perhaps the same thing happened to the packaged containing Ricky's mitt.

Recalling that there was no phone at the Oscar Nelson home — something Ozzie and Harriet learned when they retrieved the first misdirected package — Ozzie and Ricky decided to drive there. They were surprised to find that “Mr. and Mrs. Oscar Nelson” actually was only Mrs. Nelson, a widow with a two-year-old daughter and five-year-old son. The widowed Mrs. Nelson had not seen the mitt, but she kindly gave Ricky a handful of cookies. Unwittingly, she also showed Ozzie the Christmas cheer he had been missing.

When he and Ricky returned home, Ozzie admitted to Harriet that their family's good fortune stood in stark contrast to the other Nelsons' Spartan surroundings.

“They had a real little Christmas tree, and there were hardly any presents under it,” said Ricky.

Ozzie also felt his family's self-indulgence stood in contrast to the widow's

selfless generosity.

“I wish there was something we could do for her,” Ozzie said. “She was very brave about it, but I really don’t think they had much of a Christmas over there.”

Ozzie and Harriet remembered they had received some unwanted toys at a Christmas party a few days before. They could donate the toys — and perhaps even persuade other guests at the party to contribute their toys — to the widow and her children. David even concocted the idea of dressing up in Ozzie’s old Santa suit to make the delivery. When Ozzie called the party’s other guests, he was heartened by their response.

“You know, Harriet, I think everybody I talked to sort of brightened up when I told them what we wanted to do ...,” he said. “It did seem like something was missing, didn’t it? Now there’s hardly enough Christmas left to get it all in!”

“I don’t mind admitting that I’ll go to bed feeling a lot happier and warmer inside,” Harriet said.

The boys walked round to the other contributors’ houses and gathered the gifts so they could be shipped en masse to the widow’s home. But while they were doing this, something funny happened: the package containing Ricky’s catcher’s mitt mysteriously appeared beneath the tree.

“It’s practically in plain sight!” said Harriet.

When Ricky returned, they gave him the mitt, but now his attitude toward it had changed.

“Pop,” he said, “it sure was funny the way my catcher’s mitt just seemed to turn up.”

“Yeah, it’s very peculiar.”

Under the circumstances, Ricky said he now wanted to give the mitt to the other Mrs. Nelson’s five-year-old son.

“I had a swell Christmas even before I knew about the mitt. And the way it turned out, I don’t feel it really should belong to me,” he said.

Broadcast on Christmas Day 1953, this episode of the radio situation comedy *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* illustrated themes familiar to historians of the postwar period.² Here was a happy, white, suburban family with “traditional” gender roles using consumer goods to establish and cultivate private relationships. No part of the play criticized consumerism in any way.

Yet, the listener, like Ozzie, received a sense that before the Nelsons performed their good deed of aiding a less fortunate family, their Christmas had been “only good.” The deeper Christmas cheer they experienced at the end of the play came only when they stepped out of their roles as consumers and gave toys they had not purchased to someone who could not have bought them if she had wanted to. Moreover, in depicting the Nelsons’ friends as equally eager to contribute gifts, the play described an entire American neighborhood as populated by generous folks who did not have to oppose consumerism but merely supplement it in order to preserve a sense of the common good amid a rising tide of material abundance.

The unexplained reappearance of Ricky’s catcher’s mitt even hinted at transcendent forces — perhaps an act of God or a turn of fate. As Ozzie and Harriet realized in the play’s closing lines, had the mitt not gone missing, the other Nelson family

² An *Ozzie and Harriet* television show also aired from 1952 to 1966.

would not have received such generosity and Ozzie would not have experienced a deeper appreciation of Christmas. In short, the impression of American life presented by this story was informed by the pastoral form of American civil religion. It depicted a benevolent nation enjoying its blessings gratefully, and it described Americans as a people wise enough to do well without forgetting to do good — and mature enough to know there was a difference.

The Problem

Would it were so easy. At the heart of Ozzie Nelson's sense of incompleteness lay a post-World War II conundrum he did not articulate and may not have understood either in real life or in his fictional on-air persona — centrifugal forces had been unleashed upon a nation that had come to think of itself in centripetal terms. The war against poverty of the 1930s and the war against the Axis of the 1940s produced in the United States unifying social dynamics. Americans had learned to identify increasingly with national culture and national goals as they battled economic privation with a New Deal that, whatever its economic incoherence, at least infused most citizens with renewed optimism and confidence.³ Pearl Harbor further cemented national feeling, this time with a common foe and quiet determination. But after World War II, poverty and sacrifice gave way to material abundance, and instead of slumping back to penury, as some had feared, the United States embarked on three of the most profitable decades in its history, the government adopted growth as a national priority, millions built new homes and

³ In a recent study, Alonzo L. Hamby summarized the New Deal as “a humanitarian success, a political triumph, and an economic failure.” Alonzo L. Hamby, *For the Survival of Democracy: Franklin Roosevelt and the World Crisis of the 1930s* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 147.

started new lives in burgeoning suburbs, and a consumer cornucopia changed what Americans ate, drank, wore, watched, worshipped, wanted, and thought. These were centrifugal, not centripetal, changes because they emphasized individual desires over collective needs and the private over the common. It was not clear that the centripetal values American civil religion cultivated in the 1930s and 1940s would survive such a brave new world, and it was questionable that the common good would survive a people climbing to the top, that Americans would draw nearer to each other by moving farther into the suburbs, or that the virtuous community would stay virtuous much less a community.

Champions of postwar consumerism disagreed. They argued that abundance offered its own form of centripetalism. By making new homes and cars and television sets affordable to average working Americans, abundance invited everyone to the party. Writing in 1952, journalist Frederick Lewis Allen went so far as to claim that “the purchasing power of the poor” was nothing less than a “new frontier.” Back in the bad old days, capitalists and workers assumed they played a zero-sum game, he wrote, but a “revolt of the American conscience” launched a program of trustbusting, collective bargaining, and federal regulation that culminated in the pro-growth fiscal policy of mid-century. In a rousing display of optimism not just about America but about Americans themselves, Lewis praised his nation for finding the right balance of just about everything. The government kept an eye on the economy’s health in the aggregate but did not favor individual enterprises, business and labor realized that well-paid workers were well-paying customers, and businesspeople and workers alike invested part of their earnings into community-building voluntary organizations such as churches, Rotary

Clubs, Boy Scout troops, and local libraries. “If you thus bring advantages to a great lot of previously underprivileged people, they will rise to their opportunities and, by and large, will become responsible citizens,” Allan concluded.⁴

Similar messages sounded from business and government. As Alan Brinkley showed in *The End of Reform*, after the so-called “Roosevelt Recession” of 1938 caught the New Dealers by surprise, they began to take Keynesian analysis seriously. Pre-1938 strategies toyed with associationism or “counterorganization” as a way to fight wage deflation, but now policymakers thought in terms of aggregate demand to boost the economy. Not only was demand something to stimulate when it flagged, it also served as a marker of economic health. Active consumers connoted well-paid workers and provided businesses with reasons to invest. The creation of the Council of Economic Advisors in 1946 — and especially its pro-growth director Leon Keyserling, who took over in 1949 — provided presidents with growth-oriented technical advice. Increased defense spending, sometimes called “military Keynesianism,” pumped more government dollars in to the economy, and the G. I. Bill of Rights, technically known as the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944, made it easier for returning veterans to spend money on college and purchase new homes. In short, as Robert M. Collins argued in his postwar economic history, *More*, “growthism” became official government policy after World War II.⁵

Business also found new ways both to promote abundance to American citizens

⁴ Frederick Lewis Allen, *The Big Change: American Transforms Itself, 1900-1950* (1952; repr., New York: Perennial Library, 1969), 85-96, 249-257.

⁵ Collins, 14-16, 25-39.

and to deliver the fruits of abundance to American consumers. When the OWI dissolved at the end of World War II, representatives of the War Advertising Council worried that the nation would be left with no central clearinghouse of information. Knowing that wartime unity had been better for business than the class conflict that had preceded it, they dropped the word “War” from the council’s name and vowed to continue delivering what they considered constructive national messages. Through a series of publicity campaigns carried out mostly in broadcast spot announcements and print advertisements, the Advertising Council provided ideological defenses of the “free enterprise” system, and their efforts met with the approval of growth-oriented policymakers. Some Advertising Council representatives even had offices in the White House.⁶

Meantime, at the enterprise level, a new generation of entrepreneurs found ways to raise the material comforts of average Americans. The *ne plus ultra* of postwar innovators was homebuilder William Levitt, whose name still graces suburbs outside New York City and Philadelphia. Levitt redesigned the American home around the wants and needs of working- and middle-class Americans. His homes were affordable, suburban, detached, and convenient. Kitchens were in back so mothers could watch their children in the yard, and picture windows were in front to make the living rooms seem larger. To lower the price, Levitt did not deliver what people did not care about, namely basements, and he loved vertical integration. His company stamped its own nails from scrap iron, and cut its own wood on the thousands of acres of forest he bought in the Pacific Northwest.⁷

⁶ Wall, 172-177, 197-198. These efforts are further examined in Chapter 5.

⁷ David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Random House, 1993), 129-143.

While Levitt tried to put more Americans in new homes, fast-food pioneers Dick and Maurice McDonald tried to seat more of them in restaurants — well, maybe not exactly *seat*. The two San Bernardino, California, restaurateurs noticed that postwar Americans commuted more, hurried about, had lots of kids, and liked hamburgers. In fact, hamburgers made up more than three-quarters of the brothers' trade. So the McDonalds redesigned their business to provide most customers with the meal they most wanted at a low price and as quickly as possible. They bought easier-to-clean stainless steel grills, closed a high-labor condiment bar, replaced durable dishes with paper plates, and modified their milk-shake mixer to load and unload more quickly. They even enclosed their kitchen in glass because the kids liked to watch. The result, McDonald's, still is the largest restaurant chain in the United States.⁸

And yet despite the government's focus on growth, the Advertising Council's touting of "free enterprise," and the vast expansion of consumer industries, there were apostates to the brave new gospel of abundance. One critic was the economist John Kenneth Galbraith. In his 1958 book, *The Affluent Society*, Galbraith argued that economic growth, while not in itself bad and certainly preferable to poverty, could prove destructive if unwisely pursued. He developed a theory of "social balance" to extrapolate his argument. What a society produces, he said, must be measured against its needs. It is possible to have too much of some things and not enough of others. Galbraith feared that the United States grew rich in private goods, those goods produced by private businesses, but poor in public goods, or goods the private sector either would not or could not produce on its own. Danger lay in the fact that goods do not exist in isolation. "Every increase in the consumption of

⁸ Ibid., 155-160.

private goods will normally mean some facilitating or protective step by the state,” Galbraith said. For example, cars need roads, and roads need police. To illustrate that social imbalance was a cultural as well as an economic peril, Galbraith added an example from education. There was a time, he wrote, when teachers (or, one could add, ministers) served as mentors for the young, but modern youths followed flashier models. “Schools do not compete with television and the movies,” Galbraith wrote, and “the dubious heroes of the latter, not Ms. Jones, become the idols of the young.”⁹

More recently, Lizabeth Cohen characterized postwar growthism as a shift from the “citizen consumer” to the “purchaser consumer,” a change that altered how the common good was conceived. The notion of the citizen consumer prevailed during the Great Depression and World War II, Cohen wrote. Citizen consumers leveraged their power as consumers much as voters wielded ballots. As stakeholders in the public good, they expected to be heard, and policymakers listened. Consumer advocacy organizations formed, politicians including President Roosevelt spoke of the rising power of the consumer, and the New Deal’s first major economic initiative, the National Recovery Administration, placed consumer representatives alongside representatives of business and labor. By contrast, purchaser consumers prevailed after the war. They contributed to aggregate demand simply by buying things. Benjamin Franklin warned his contemporaries, “buy what thou has no need of, and ere long thou shalt sell thy Necessaries,” but the purchaser consumer was told that satisfying the first desire would

⁹ John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (1958; repr. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 186-195.

produce all that followed it.¹⁰ Plainly put, the purchaser consumer served the general good not through self-sacrifice but through self-indulgence — instead of contemplating the public good so everyone would be free to pursue his or her private interest, purchaser consumers were told that private interest *was* the public good.¹¹

Not surprisingly, such talk raised religious eyebrows. It almost sounded as if God and Mammon had reached a joint operating agreement. Fears alternated between a worry that materialism would lead to a general moral decline and the specter of abundance ending quickly. Perhaps mindful of the crushing disappointment in human nature religious thinkers experienced after World War I, their message after World War II was tempered by caution and a deeper consideration of human frailty.¹² Some conservative evangelicals associated consumerism with outright moral depravity.¹³ There seemed to be noteworthy differences between what might be called “consumerist anthropology” and traditional Jewish and Christian understandings of the human experience. Consumerism described human beings as utility-maximizing, wants-satisfying animals, but Judaism and Christianity saw them as social beings with moral obligations to social justice. Similarly, consumerism championed libertarian freedom above conservation while Judaism and Christianity emphasized the stewardship of natural resources.¹⁴ Economist Robert H. Nelson has gone so far as to

¹⁰ Benjamin Franklin, “Poor Richard Improved, 1758,” in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree, vol. 7 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963), 345.

¹¹ Cohen, 18-25, 119-121.

¹² Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 42-44.

¹³ Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1992), 250. These arguments are considered again in Chapter 5.

¹⁴ For a comparison of modern mainstream economics’ underlying assumptions with those of the

define modern economics, alongside American civil religion and environmentalism, as a secular religion in competition with traditional sectarian religions. In Nelson's view, the religion of economics replaces sin with poverty, economic growth with salvation, and God's guiding hand with the "invisible hand" attributed to Adam Smith.¹⁵

The "something missing" Ozzie Nelson sensed, then, symbolized more than what he called "Christmas cheer." It also paralleled a nagging doubt felt by some Americans in the late 1940s and 1950s that the prophets of caution like John Kenneth Galbraith were right and the prophets of profit at the Advertising Council were sampling too much of their stock. The point was not that abundance was bad, but that it was incomplete, that it needed to be supplemented by something stronger, something higher, some transcendent sense of right and wrong. Pastoral civil religion fit the bill. It affirmed the American people's basic goodness and reassured them they were grown-up enough to handle the changes before them. They were a good people, a people of God, and as long as they remained a people of God, they would enjoy his blessing.

The Resources

The pastoral civil religion of the 1950s was part of a larger revival in Americans' interest in religion. Americans went to church in greater numbers, new suburban church

Judeo-Christian tradition, see Mark G. Nixon, "Satisfaction for Whom? Freedom for What? Theology and the Economic Theory of the Consumer," *Journal of Business Ethics* 70 (2007), 41. David R. Loy, "The Religion of the Market," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65 (Summer 1997): 275-290, goes even further, arguing that the philosophical assumptions of capitalism stand in tension with virtually all religion.

¹⁵ Robert H. Nelson, *The New Holy Wars: Economic Religion vs. Environmental Religion in Contemporary America* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 21-41. Gavin Kennedy, *Adam Smith: A Moral Philosopher and His Political Economy*, 2nd ed. (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 150-162, has argued that Smith implied no general theory by "invisible hand," and certainly not the view that private interest alone could serve as a basis for society.

buildings opened weekly, church coffers overflowed, and religious imagery showed up regularly in popular entertainment. Films such as *The Ten Commandments* (1956) and *Ben Hur* (1959) drew large audiences, and religiously themed novels such as Thomas B. Costain's *The Silver Chalice* (1952) and Fulton Oursler's *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1949) hit best seller lists.¹⁶ The latter even inspired a radio series. For his part, President Dwight Eisenhower fulfilled the role of national pastor in addition to chief executive by reassuring Americans they were a special people. The United States, he said, "stands as the world's mightiest temporal power, with its position still rooted in faith and in spiritual values."¹⁷

Postwar America's widespread interest in religion proceeded inside and outside of the churches — or, put another way, it comprised renewed interests both in sectarian religion within the United States' congregations and denominations and in a civil religion that arced over the nation's various religious communities. The sectarian revival was further subdivided into "intellectual" and "popular" components, but as journalist William Lee Miller noted at the time, the two had surprisingly little to do with each other.¹⁸ They asked different questions, spoke mutually incomprehensible languages, and made little effort at cross-fertilization. Existential theologians such as Paul Tillich saw in religion a more satisfying basis for human life than the options offered by atheistic

¹⁶ Robert S. Ellwood, *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 11-12. Pious popular culture was not limited to the United States. In 1954, the United Kingdom's largest film studio, The Rank Organisation, released a cinematic biography of John Wesley.

¹⁷ Quoted in Pierard and Linder, 196.

¹⁸ William Lee Miller, *Piety Along the Potomac: Notes on Politics and Morals in the Fifties* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), 125.

philosophers such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, and so-called theological “realists” such as Reinhold Niebuhr saw religion as a useful check on the unleashed human hubris that contributed to two world wars.¹⁹ At the same time, secular social scientists such as Talcott Parsons found in functionalist social theory evidence that religion was good for society.²⁰ Nevertheless, with the exception of C. S. Lewis, who was not an American, few religious intellectuals of the 1950s could have written for the general public had they wanted to. For this reason, the intellectual religious revival of the 1950s also had little influence on the use of American civil religion in radio drama.²¹

As for the popular sectarian revival, historians have debated why it happened. James Hudnut-Beumler took a demand-side approach. He noted that during World War II, the terror and tragedy of that experience drew more people into the churches, and after the war, a happier desire to start families kept them there. In effect, wrote Hudnut-Beumler, the men and women who won World War II wanted “to make something gold stay” by inculcating their values and beliefs into their children.²² At the same time, the new generation grew weary of their parents’ so-called modernist-fundamentalist debates. They could not make outright modernism coexist with their faith, and they found full-blown fundamentalism offensive to their intellect. So they combined the two in a

¹⁹ James Hudnut-Beumler, *Looking for God in the Suburbs: The Religion of the American Dream and Its Critics, 1945-1965* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 65-71; Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952); Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner, 1952).

²⁰ Parson synthesized some of his views Talcott Parsons, “1965 Harlan Paul Douglass Lectures: Religion in a Modern Pluralistic Society,” *Review of Religious Research* 7 (Spring 1966): 125-146.

²¹ Lewis was an exception in the case of radio, as well. His best-selling work of popular apologetics, *Mere Christianity*, began as a series of wartime radio lectures. No recordings of these broadcasts are known to exist.

²² Hudnut-Beumler, 83.

comfortable, if lightly examined, middling faith. Billy Graham's popularity in the 1950s owed partly to the fact that he was simultaneously easier to understand than Reinhold Niebuhr and more winsome than Billy Sunday.²³

Robert S. Ellwood, by contrast, took a supply-side approach. He argued that as much as postwar Americans craved religious experience, they did not demand as much as they got. Contrasting a stereotypical Old World village to a "typical" American town, Ellwood argued that the former might have one or two churches while the latter likely had a dozen. Reasons for this predated the 1950s and included disestablishment, nineteenth-century revivalism, immigration, and other things, but the result was a wide array of choices for religiously inclined Americans. In the 1950s, this already-diversified field grew richer because rising church incomes fueled expansions and plantings and because hitherto marginalized groups such as Catholics and Jews moved into the mainstream. At the same time, churches existed in just enough tension with an increasingly commercialized — or, as some ministers would put it, hedonistic — outer culture to keep things interesting.²⁴

On the surface, the religious revival of the 1950s did seem something of a renaissance — it was a long-delayed overcoming of the religious depression that had alienated Americans from their churches in the 1920s and had drawn the curtain on what some have called America's "Protestant Century."²⁵ On closer inspection, however,

²³ Joel A. Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 150-159.

²⁴ Ellwood, 6-9. Ellwood applied to the 1950s a thesis developed in 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).

²⁵ Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI:

postwar American religion can be seen to have been rooted in its particular time and place and to have paralleled other developments in the wider culture. For example, the magnetic attraction of a “vital center,” which, in the economic realm, pulled New Dealers, union organizers, and business executives into a common quest for economic growth, also had a religious version — an effort by Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish Americans to define a mutually inclusive “Judeo-Christian” identity. Popular appeals such as the NCCJ’s National Brotherhood Week encouraged Americans to look past each others’ separate religions and rejoice in a common appreciation of “religion,” and Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish veterans remembered fighting together in World War II. The collapse of U.S.-Soviet relations after the war spurred interfaith cooperation, as well, as all three of America’s major religious groups were equally opposed to communist atheism.²⁶

If both the religion and the wider culture of the 1950s exhibited a tendency toward the “vital center,” they also shared an interest in “personal empowerment.” Religious interest in “spiritual healing” and psychoanalysis mirrored a growing fascination with psychology as a means of improving lives. Millions of Americans had seen their first psychologist or psychiatrist during the war — the Army employed 1,500 of them — and after the war, business explored the use of psychology for screening employees and better matching jobs to people.²⁷ Meantime, doctors began to think of the body less in terms of a collection of organs and more in terms of an integrated system with latent healing

William B. Eerdmans, 1992), uses this term.

²⁶ Marty, *Under God, Indivisible*, 115-116. National Brotherhood Week is examined in Chapter 3.

²⁷ Hudnut-Beumler, 9.

capacities. They began to pay more attention to their patients' mental states, and in so doing, prepared an opening for the psychologically-inclined clergy. "Spiritual healing" or religious psychoanalysis, which combined terms and concepts from psychology with traditional (and sometimes not-so-traditional) religious teaching lent an air of middle-class respectability to religious healing. Now Presbyterians and Episcopalians could practice it without looking too much like Pentecostals. The decade's most famous spokesman for this movement was Norman Vincent Peale, whose 1952 book *The Power of Positive Thinking* spent two unbroken years on the best sellers lists.²⁸

Finally, a renewed interest in internal controls as a means of social stability characterized the decade both in the churches and in the wider culture. In the culture at large, sociologist David Riesman and journalist William H. Whyte, Jr., gave two of most famous expressions to this concern. In his landmark 1950 book *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman argued that the freewheeling industrialization of the nineteenth century had produced "inner-directed" individuals who relied on internal principles to navigate their surroundings, but the reorganizing of human life into large organizations, chiefly corporations and bureaucracies, in the early twentieth century produced an "outer-directed" individual who found greater reward by taking cues from others, working on a team, and getting ahead by getting along.²⁹ More critical was Whyte, whose 1956 book

²⁸ Donald Meyer, *The Positive Thinkers: A Study of the American Quest for Health, Wealth and Personal Power from Mary Baker Eddy to Norman Vincent Peale* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 250-258, 262. The emphasis on systems that Meyer noted in 1950s medicine is reminiscent of a similar development in the decade's thinking about technology. See Thomas P. Hughes, *Human-Built World: How to Think About Technology and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), chapter 4.

²⁹ David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950). Hudnut-Beumler, 91, opined that nonacademic readers tended to think Riesman condemned outer-directedness more than he actually did.

The Organization Man lamented the demise of individualism in favor of a “social ethic” that led most people to assume group judgments were superior to their own.³⁰ In the churches, as Robert Wuthnow has shown, similar worries surfaced about the future of a society lacking in internal direction. The underlying assumptions of this analysis were a definition of culture as an aggregation of “values” and a definition of society as an aggregation of individuals. By teaching individuals socially constructive values and giving those values divine sanction, religion was said to undergird the values that undergirded culture. The more individuals held those values, the stabler the society. Part of the churches’ mathematical preoccupation with membership was that it was a way of measuring the alleged strengthening of American society, Wuthnow wrote.³¹

If the 1950s’ combined interest in economic development, individual empowerment, and internalized morality looked familiar, there was a reason. It bore more than a passing resemblance to an even older resource — American Whiggism. As Daniel Walker Howe has shown, nineteenth-century American Whigs held to similar views. They, too, called for a “vital center” when they urged capitalists, workers, and farmers to cooperate in a so-called “American System” that would increase opportunity for everyone. They praised the “personal empowerment” of the self-made man, be he an entrepreneur or yeoman farmer, and they justified wage labor on the grounds that it led to self-made men. Finally, they did not assume that capitalist competitiveness and acquisitiveness would produce a morally good society but instead insisted that morality come from outside the market, ideally from the internal self-governance of religious

³⁰ William H. Whyte, Jr., *The Organization Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1956).

³¹ Wuthnow, 54-61, 65-67.

citizens.³²

What the Whigs did not have was a standard-bearer, and that is something Americans of the 1950s did have.³³ By serving as a central symbol of interreligious tolerance, the self-made man, and the internally-guided, religious citizen, President Eisenhower led that part of the 1950s religious revival that arced over the nation's churches and sects — namely, its civil religion. Eisenhower was born into a devout family of an Anabaptist persuasion, but as a young Army officer, he was casual in his faith and dismissive of his parents' pacifism. World War II drew him closer to his spiritual heritage, and he emerged from the war practicing what Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder called a nonsectarian “army chaplain approach to religion.”³⁴ As president, Eisenhower served as a national pastor by backing such symbolic initiatives as adding the words “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance and replacing the founders' motto “E Pluribus Unum” with “In God We Trust.” He also performed more personal acts such as becoming the first president to be baptized while in office or insisting that his cabinet meetings begin with a prayer.³⁵

Eisenhower's influence on American civil religion was more than symbolic. He also emphasized its pastoral style by weaving into it the specific concerns of the newly

³² Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 452-455, 583-585; Steven Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 3-15. Collins, 102-103, applied the Whig label to the slightly later Nixon Administration.

³³ The Whigs' first president, William Henry Harrison, died after a month in office, and his vice-president, John Tyler, abandoned key Whig policies. Subsequent Whig presidents were weak.

³⁴ Pierard and Linder, 184-194.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 201-204.

abundant 1950s. His ecumenism — at least extending to Protestants, Catholics, and Jews — was part of the national quest for a vital center. His celebrated quip that “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” may not have been as theologically vacuous as critics charged, but it did suggest that while democracy required religion, it did not necessarily require a specific religion.³⁶ His related insistence that democracy recognized the irreducible spiritual worth of each individual can be compared to the 1950s’ fascination with personal empowerment as both claimed to cultivate spiritual gifts. In a letter to retired Brigadier General Anton Frederick Lorenzen, Eisenhower identified such gifts as the source of political equality:

When our forefathers attempted to express themselves and their ideas of government to the world, they were compelled to say, ‘We hold that all men are endowed by their *Creator*’ with certain rights. The point is that except for this equality of right, a gift from the Almighty, there was no sense, logic, or reason in free government.³⁷

Finally, Eisenhower identified religion as his source of internal guidance when he recounted the hours leading up to the invasion of Normandy in 1944. “This is what I found out about religion,” he said. “It gives you courage to make the decisions you must make in a crisis, and then the confidence to leave the result to higher power.”³⁸

³⁶ For a history of this much-discussed line, see Patrick Henry, “‘And I Don’t Care What It Is’: The Tradition-History of a Civil Religion Proof-Text,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49 (March 1981): 35-49. Henry concluded that Eisenhower meant by that phrase that it might be possible for democracies to be based on religions other than those preferred by Americans. For an example of the line’s critics, see Herberg, 97-98.

³⁷ Eisenhower to Anton Frederick Lorenzen, Sept. 9, 1953, in *The Presidency: The Middle Way*, eds. Louis Galambos and Duan Van Ee, vol. 14 of *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996), 508-509. Emphasis original.

³⁸ Quoted in Pierard and Linder, 193. An additional theme of Eisenhower’s civil religion, namely its anticommunist crusading, is examined in Chapter 5.

Eisenhower's personality and leadership struck a chord with Americans, as attested to by his popularity. To this day, no post-World War II president other than John F. Kennedy has topped Eisenhower's overall approval rating.³⁹ He even inspired one American to burst into poetry:

“In God we trust,” you symbolize,
As He, you hear the people's cries.
As Lincoln walked in trust of God
You trust the One Who greens the sod;
You look to Him Who cares the most
To show the way to duty's post,
You have no fear, your God is good,
You always do the things you should.⁴⁰

More typical were Americans who saw in “Ike” a symbol of the vague but earnest religious ideals they believed had guided the United States through dark decades of depression and war and would steer it down a straight path in times of plenty.

The Programs

Another manifestation of the United States' postwar religious revival was a higher profile for religion in radio programming. Not only did sectarian shows such as Walter Maier's *The Lutheran Hour* and Charles E. Fuller's *The Old-Fashioned Revival Hour* enjoy large audiences, radio dramas dealing directly with religious themes found their way onto the major networks' schedules as well. Among them were *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, which aired on ABC from 1947 to 1956; *The Light of the World*, which aired

³⁹ Gallup, Inc., “Presidential Approval Ratings — Gallup Historical Statistics and Trends,” <http://www.gallup.com/poll/116677/Presidential-Approval-Ratings-Gallup-Historical-Statistics-Trends.aspx> (accessed November 16, 2010).

⁴⁰ Dennis Tenney, “In God We Trust” With You,” in *The Song of Eisenhower* (New York: Whittier Books, 1956), 11.

at various times on NBC and CBS; and *The Eternal Light*, a cooperative effort of NBC and the Jewish Theological Seminary that stayed on the air into the 1980s.⁴¹ Civil religion, however, showed up in mainstream “secular” shows, and pastoral civil religion celebrated the American people as religious, generous, and basically good. Christmas presented broadcasters with fruitful opportunities to emphasize these themes.

A religious nation

Ironically, one of the 1950s’ most important promulgators of nonsectarian civil religion was a man of deep sectarian faith. Father Patrick Peyton, CSC, originally hoped to use national radio to urge Catholic Americans to say daily rosaries with their families in adoration of the Virgin Mary. Instead, through a series of events that revealed much about both the nature of network broadcasting and postwar politics, he wound up creating one of the most civil religious shows on radio, introducing Americans to the iconic phrase, “the family that prays together stays together,” and spearheading one campaign that actually doubled as a Central Intelligence Agency operation.

Peyton was born in 1909 in County Mayo, Ireland, to a family richer in religious devotion than material wealth. Daily rosaries, led by Patrick’s father, were mandatory in the Peyton home. Though not desperately poor, the family struggled due to their father’s ill health, and shortly after World War I, two of Patrick’s sisters emigrated to Pennsylvania in search of better conditions. Patrick and his brother, Thomas, followed eight years later, and one of Patrick’s first jobs in the United States was peddling American flags on commission. He had contemplated the priesthood on and off since

⁴¹ Dunning, 234, 296-297, 398, 571-574. *The Light of the World* was a Biblically themed weekday serial, but the other shows aired on Sundays.

childhood, but resisted the idea when he arrived in America. However, when the flag sales — and every other opportunity — failed, he went to work as a janitor in a cathedral run by a monsignor who had privately been tipped off by Patrick’s sisters of their brother’s possible ambitions. The monsignor was smart enough not to push too hard, and a year later, both Patrick and Thomas moved to Indiana to begin studies at Holy Cross Seminary.⁴²

The Family Rosary Campaign that would form the centerpiece of Peyton’s career flowed from personal, pastoral, and political motives. The personal motive related to his battle with tuberculosis in 1938, a deadly fight he believed he won through the intercession of Mary. The pastoral motive formed around what he considered a coarsening culture and the decline of the American family, and the political motive centered on his belief that just as Mary had interceded for him, so she would intercede for the United States. When he first conceived of the Family Rosary Campaign in 1942, he meant this in the context of ending World War II, but he described it later in more general terms. In the words of his biographer, Peyton stated in a 1950 radio interview that he “believed that making the family rosary a permanent fixture in the United States would make Mary proud of America and bring it special favors.”⁴³

Peyton’s first forays into radio were on local sectarian shows, but from the

⁴² Richard Gribble, CSC, *American Apostle of the Family Rosary: The Life of Patrick J. Peyton*, CSC (New York: Crossroad, 2005), 12-21; Patrick Peyton, *All For Her: The Autobiography of Father Patrick Peyton*, CSC (New York: Garden City, 1967), 16-17, 30-31, 49-60.

⁴³ Gribble, 24-27, 36-41; Peyton, 78-81, 88-89. In his autobiography, Peyton said he was thinking of the Battle of Lepanto when he first conceived of the Family Rosary Campaign in 1942. In 1571, a coalition of European forces, including papal troops, won a major victory against the Muslim Ottoman Empire. According to tradition, Christian forces said the rosary before the battle, and afterward, Pope Pius V instituted the Feast of Our Lady of Victory to commemorate the victory.

beginning, it was obvious he was a man of his time. For one thing, though Catholics had formed the United States' largest denomination since the nineteenth century, they were just beginning to move into the mainstream of American culture. Millions of Catholics proved their patriotic bona fides in World War II, and it was not infrequently noted that the Catholic Church was one of the largest anticommunist institutions in the world. At the same time, one of American Catholicism's most visible representatives, Bishop Fulton Sheen, won a large and diverse audience on television.⁴⁴ Peyton, too, recognized the rising power of communications technology, and in this sense, he and Sheen both traveled a path more often associated with American evangelicals.⁴⁵ In 1945, Peyton convinced then-Monsignor Sheen to offer on his radio show free copies of a pamphlet Peyton helped to prepare titled "The Story of the Family Rosary." Expecting to distribute about 10,000 copies, both were astounded when 50,000 requests came in.⁴⁶ Finally, Peyton was comfortable in an entrepreneurial world increasingly dominated by the language and concepts of business. He unselfconsciously referred to himself as a "salesman for Mary" and claimed that prayer was "the best product in the world."⁴⁷

Peyton's "big break," as "show biz" calls it, came on Mother's Day, May 13, 1945. After years of experimenting with local radio, he produced a national special broadcast for Mutual to promote prayer. Thanks to a combination of natural

⁴⁴ For the Catholic situation in America in the 1950s, see Marty, *Under God*, 157-179; and Jay P. Dolan, *In Search of American Catholicism: A History of Religion and Culture in Tension* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 180-189.

⁴⁵ Quentin J. Schultze, *Christianity and the Mass Media in America: Toward a Democratic Accommodation* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2003), chapter 4.

⁴⁶ Peyton, 103-104.

⁴⁷ Gribble, 54, 61.

showmanship and a winning personality, he amazingly convinced Bing Crosby to star in it, and he invited the nationally famous Sullivan family of Waterloo, Iowa, to lead the rosary. Five of the Sullivans' sons had perished aboard the *U.S.S. Juneau* three years earlier. The show's biggest boost came unexpectedly, however. Owing to the end of the European war, President Truman designated Mother's Day a national day of celebration. Though Truman's decision and Peyton's timing were unrelated, the coincidence likely boosted the show's listenership.⁴⁸

Braced by this success, Peyton traveled to Hollywood a couple of months later in hopes of finding more stars for an ongoing series of radio programs aimed at promoting the family rosary. The stars liked the idea, and he quickly won the support of Loretta Young, Jane Wyman, Irene Dunne, and many others. Similarly, Hollywood's Catholic clergy — through which he gained access to the stars — were supportive and enthusiastic.⁴⁹ The networks were another matter. When Peyton asked them for free airtime, NBC turned him down flat and Mutual agreed only if the show was strictly nonsectarian — a condition that ruled out the rosary, which was the whole point of Peyton's project. For a time, he held out for a better offer, but at length he reconstituted the program along nonsectarian lines. *Family Theater*, a program that would stress the religiosity of the American people without being too specific about what their religion was, had been born.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Patricia F. Phalen, "Profound Sound: Family Theater Radio, 1947-1970," *Journal of Radio Studies* 11 (2004): 118-119.

⁴⁹ Gribble, 54-58; Phalen, 119-121. The actress Ann Blyth suspected that some of the stars who signed on were atheists, but the project seemed so likely to be popular and Peyton's appeals were so irresistible they supported him anyway.

⁵⁰ Gribble, 56-57.

During the show's nine-year run on Mutual, each episode of *Family Theater* began and ended with a plea for family prayer. Its most famous slogan, "The family that prays together, stays together," was written by an advertising executive, Al Scalpone, but other slogans were used as well, including Alfred Lord Tennyson's "more things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of." The show's popularity is difficult to quantify since ratings agencies did not track sustaining programs, but network and station programming managers liked it. Nearly all Mutual stations carried it, Armed Forces Radio broadcast it to troops overseas, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation picked it up, and the Voice of America beamed it into parts of Asia, South America, and Europe. One of the show's admirers sat in the Chair of St. Peter. Years after the production of new episodes ended in 1956, the show could be heard in reruns on a number of Mutual stations.⁵¹ By then, Peyton had moved on to film and television projects. In the 1960s, a few episodes of *Family Theater* were translated into Spanish and used in Peyton's most controversial project, a Latin American crusade funded and partially directed by the CIA. Initially, Peyton thought he and the U.S. government had similar goals since they both opposed Marxism in Latin America, but in time, he and other church officials came to regret the relationship.⁵²

In 1947, when *Family Theater* was taking shape, Peyton explained to his script

⁵¹ Gribble, 57, 60-63; Phalen, 120; Dunning, 240-241.

⁵² Gribble devoted a lengthy chapter to this unfortunate episode, 151-202. He blamed Peyton's single-mindedness and naiveté. Peyton was likely to assume that "anything for Mary" would work out in the end, and he (and millions of other Americans) tended to equate anticommunism with Christian devotion, Gribble wrote. On the other hand, Phalen, 129, argued that part of Peytons' earlier success with *Family Theater* was due precisely to his naiveté about business. "He made outrageous requests of his collaborators that a more savvy businessman would never consider — but these requests often paid off," she wrote.

writers how he viewed the show's purpose. His statement struck an unmistakably pastoral tone.

The purpose of this series is to remind ourselves that there is a kind and merciful God who is always ready to help us; that we should declare our faith in him; acknowledge our obligation to Him, to our neighbors, and ourselves; tell Him our need, and ask His aid, through prayer.⁵³

If this sounds similar to Dixon Ryan Fox's statement in the 1930s that *Cavalcade of America* would "remind us of the purposes and motives on which our fathers and mothers based and built this nation," there were similarities between the two shows. Both consistently cast Americans as a religious people and the United States as a religious nation — both forged a link between the life of the nation and a transcendent God. *Cavalcade* did this by telling stories from the nation's past while *Family Theater*'s stories usually were set in the present, but there were exceptions.

One was "The Longest Hour," a *Family Theater* episode that imagined Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston haggling over the wording of the Declaration of Independence.⁵⁴ The story opened with the five tired men gathered at a candlelit table in Philadelphia. Around them, crumpled paper attested to the duration and frustration of their task, and outside, other members of the Continental Congress spoke openly of disbanding. The drafters knew if they did not finish quickly, their credibility — and the project of independence — would be lost.

Yet a quarrel seemed to break out over every word. Jefferson read what he had written so far: "When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for a people to

⁵³ Quoted in Phalen, 122.

⁵⁴ "The Longest Hour," *Family Theater*, July 1, 1953.

advance from that subordination in which they have hitherto remained ... ,” but he was cut off by objections. “Advance,” it was said, is too weak. The colonists wanted to do more than advance — they wanted to break away and begin anew. Similarly, “a people” was changed to “one people.” Later, when Jefferson proposed the phrase, “all men are created equal,” the sharpest exchange of all occurred between him and Adams. Adams said he preferred the word “born” to “created” and Jefferson exploded:

“On the contrary, Mr. Adams! We are created, and our quality is God-given by that act of creation! If men are merely born, they have no one to pray to, but if they are created, then it is by a divine agency, by God, and to him they may turn in time of trouble or give thanks,” he said.

Adams backed down, they finished the document, and the Continental Congress, after much debate, accepted it. In the play’s closing moments, Franklin, Adams, and Jefferson summarized their accomplishment. Franklin opined that July 4, 1776, would be a memorable date.

“Perhaps the most memorable in the history of America,” he said. “I believe it will be solemnized by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival.”

Foreshadowing what would come to be known as Manifest Destiny, Jefferson added that it would be fit to celebrate the date “with every kind of pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires from one end of this continent to the other.”

“Yes,” said Franklin, “but above all, it should be, it must be, forever commemorated as our day of deliverance, commemorated by solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty.”

Two of the themes identified in Chapter 1 also stood out in this play — the notion

of the United States as a virtuous nation, or a nation founded on virtuous principles, and the idea that American progress was good for everyone. The founders' impatience with the word "advance" exhibited a sense of history "breaking," as well. At the same time, the fact that the two most explicitly religious speeches were given to Jefferson and Franklin, arguably the least orthodox of American founders, underscored the postwar period's expanding of American "religion" beyond Christianity and certainly beyond Protestantism.

A play set a few years earlier in a radically different part of colonial America tied prayer to the time-honored American trait of pragmatism. It summarized its theme in its title: "The Prayer That Won the West."⁵⁵ It followed a caravan led by Father Junípero Serra as it traveled from Mexico into California, where the padre planned to found a mission near San Diego Harbor. Among the travelers was a skeptical muleteer named Juan who described himself as more "practical" than religious. They reached San Diego, but due to a series of setbacks including scurvy, Indians, and a possibly sunken supply ship, the Spanish government declared the mission a failure and ordered Serra and his men back to Mexico.

Serra pleaded with a government official to give him nine days to pray for the supply ship to arrive. Reluctantly, the official agreed. At the end of the last day, with darkness already descending, Juan abandoned his skepticism and joined the padre in prayer. A moment later, they looked out to sea and saw the ship pulling in to harbor.

"I have found out something! ... " Juan shouted. "There is nothing more practical than prayer!"

⁵⁵ "The Prayer That Won the West," *Family Theater*, October 16, 1947.

Though “The Longest Hour” and “The Prayer That Won the West” reached into the distant American past to emphasize the American people’s history as a religious people, *Family Theater* usually presented characters closer in time to the audience. “Heritage of Homes,” a special broadcast to mark the series’ fifth anniversary on February 13, 1952, unusually presented an anthology of historical skits rather than a single, half-hour story.⁵⁶ Though all were deeply civil religious, they alternated between pastoral and priestly messages.⁵⁷ One skit lasting about three minutes depicted a conversation between the pilot and co-pilot of a transpacific hospital aircraft. After a few lines of aimless banter, the co-pilot said he was curious about the plane’s name — “My Angel.” The pilot said he named it that because it was a hospital ship, an “angel of mercy,” so to speak. He said he planned to fly it as long as the war lasted.

“I’ve got a theory about that. You might think it’s corny,” said the co-pilot. “Tell me, you got any religion?”

Sheepishly, the pilot said he did.

“Well, have you noticed how the end of a war always comes just about the time the world is going through a spiritual regeneration? ... Well, I think it’s the spiritual regeneration that does it, everybody going back to God that does it, brings peace.”

The co-pilot said he had another theory, too.

“Why has America gotten away without being bombed?” he asked. “In England, one out of every five homes was damaged or destroyed in the last war.” He theorized that charity protected America. “America’s always been great for giving things to needy

⁵⁶ “Heritage of Homes,” *Family Theater*, February 13, 1952.

⁵⁷ One priestly story constructed a religious justification of the Korean War.

nations. Lend-lease. Friendship trains. Marshall Plan. ... Charity is a mighty big thing, and I think that's what's turning the trick. Charity means an awful lot to God."

A moral people

Reminding Americans of their religious heritage was only one technique postwar radio drama used to deliver a civil religious message. There also was the question of why the nation's religious character mattered. One reason was that it distinguished the United States from its atheistic communist adversary, but that will be treated in the next chapter. Another reason was that by emphasizing the importance of religion in American life, pastoral civil religious messages could make the case that Americans were capable of enjoying their newfound abundance without losing the moral values that held them together as a nation. *Family Theater* and other series often broadcast tales of wealthy people rediscovering "what really mattered." Typically, their wealth was characterized as good but less-than-ultimately fulfilling. When the plot required them to lose their fortune, they still might gain some moral insight.

In other words, abundance was characterized as a good that only pointed toward things of transcendent worth. This is what made the shows pastoral. A priestly approach would have found transcendent value in the wealth itself — perhaps it would have been a marker of chosenness or it would have been a tool divinely bestowed for some purpose. A prophetic approach would have judged American wealth by a separate transcendent standard and possibly found it a curse. The pastoral approach, by contrast, concentrated on the latent good inside the person that made his or her living a moral life amid abundance possible.

There were two major strategies for delivering this message. The first was to

emphasize the emptiness of abundance — not emptiness in the sense of “evil,” or the absence of good, but of indifference. These shows typically began with people who already had made large fortunes but who longed for something more satisfying. Their plots revolved around the protagonists’ discovery of what transcended their wealth. In “Tommy Malone Comes Home,” a *Family Theater* drama broadcast on April 25, 1951, James Cagney starred as a headstrong Irishman who made himself a “grand success in America.”⁵⁸

“Personally, I’ve found that making good over there is a lead pipe cinch,” he said.

Malone returned to his Irish village after nine profitable years as a general contractor building banks, and he made the biggest impression he could by buying a car in Cobh and driving it to the village where cars were rare. There he expected to find his mother living in a new house built from his remittances, but was surprised to learn she instead had turned them over to Father Callahan, the local priest, to build a boys’ school. Malone also was surprised — and a bit rattled — to meet his lost love, Nora, whom he had promised to marry years before but had forgotten in America.

Malone’s most startling discovery, however, was that he had been followed by an American insurance investigator. The “lead pipe cinch,” it turned out, was not in building banks, as he told the villagers, but in robbing them, and Malone had been nine years away from the village in part because he had been serving time in an American prison. Legally, he had done his time and was free, but the insurance investigator wanted the \$12,000 that had never been recovered.

Trapped, Malone began to feel differently about the money, himself, the village,

⁵⁸ “Tommy Malone Comes Home,” *Family Theater*, April 25, 1951.

and Nora. The money, still hidden in America, he could sacrifice, but having returned to the village and Nora, he now realized he wanted both. He wanted to find honest work in a simple land and begin his life anew. But he also felt he could not live in the village — and certainly could not marry Nora — knowing that the “grand success in America” was a moral failure. At wit’s end, he confided in Father Callahan.

“Tommy, have you forgotten what day this is?” asked the priest. “It’s Easter. And what can the meaning of Easter be for mortal man but that he, too, can come forth again into light from darkness. ... “

What Tommy Malone has been is one thing, said the priest. What he will be is yet to be seen — and will be decided by Malone himself. The priest insisted, however, that Malone confess all to Nora, and Malone found that summoning the courage to do so was no easy thing. In the final scene, he staggered through a confession as best he could, then Nora surprised him by revealing that she had known all along. Another girl who moved to America had been mailing her newspaper clippings.

Despite its Irish setting, “Tommy Malone Comes Home” delivered a pastoral message about American abundance. On the one hand, it depicted America as a land of abundance and an object of hope even for those far away. It was, quite literally, a place where a poor, rural Irishman could grow rich and come back in a car. On the other hand, it reminded listeners that what people made of that opportunity ultimately was a matter of moral character. Abundance was good, but incomplete. At the end of the story, though Malone had sacrificed his ill-gotten \$12,000, there was every reason to think he and Nora would prosper in their new life together.

A similar message featured in *Family Theater*’s darker and more existential 1953

play “The Unknown.”⁵⁹ Also set in Europe, the story involved two Americans, a reporter named Dick McLoughlin and a fading socialite named Estelle Pierce. McLoughlin was a former G. I. “who never came home” and now rattled around Paris dreaming of becoming a great writer. Pierce was an all-but-forgotten celebrity described as the “New York debutante of the year, the rage of the Ivy League, and the delight of anyone who saw her picture on the cover of a magazine in the late thirties.”

When an international team of scientists hired McLoughlin to publicize its exploration of a little-documented cave in the Pyrenees, they specifically wanted an American because Pierce had asked to join the expedition. The researchers could not explain why a socialite, who neither knew nor cared anything about science, should want to accompany them, but her money made it possible and her fame lent them a welcome dose of notoriety.

Aboard a train from Paris to the south of France, Pierce admitted to McLoughlin that she could not explain her interest in the expedition, either. At first, she said, it was a lark, but now she felt she needed to enter the cave — it was as if she expected to find something there, though she could not imagine what.

“I was sent to some very fashionable schools as a girl, and yet I never learned how to look for things,” she told McLoughlin in the lounge car.

“Maybe you didn’t know what you were looking for,” he said.

“More likely, it’s because I never had to look for anything. Whatever I wanted was always placed within easy reach.”

When they reached the Pyrenees, they descended by cable a hundred yards

⁵⁹ “The Unknown,” *Family Theater*, September 16, 1953.

beneath the surface and trekked along an uncharted passage. Soon they encountered an impassable underground gorge. The Dutch geologist leading the expedition said they needed better tackle to descend it, so he and his team turned back to fetch it and left McLoughlin and Pierce at the lip of the canyon.

“What do you think is down there, McLoughlin?” she asked.

More limestone, he said.

“No, there’s something more,” she said. “There’s mystery in all that blackness.”

Pierce said she wanted to go down immediately, before the others returned. She said she would take her chances with the cable they had. Her tone was impulsive, insistent.

“All my life, I’ve been running, I’ve been afraid,” she said. “Now I know it’s got to stop.”

Against McLoughlin’s protestations, she convinced him to secure the top of the cable, then she lowered herself in the darkness. At first, she saw nothing and only felt the smooth of the side of the canyon and heard the distant rumble of underground river. Then something wonderful appeared, and she described in unmistakably religious terms.

“Oh, Dick you should see! ... a huge cave, back under the shelf. It’s like a cathedral!”

“Can you see the river?”

“No, but I detect a little spring, sort of a, sort of a tiny little waterfall, bursting out of the rock. It looks almost like a fount. Oh, Dick. I’ve got to go in there!”⁶⁰

McLoughlin again begged her not to continue, but she refused to stop. Since he

⁶⁰ Water springing from a rock is a Biblical allusion to Exodus 17.

controlled the cable, he could have raised her against her wishes, but he knew her reasons for descending were as deep as the chasm itself.

“Dick, I have to get in there,” she said.

Only when McLoughlin discovered that the cable started to fray did he frantically try to pull her up. It was too late. The cable snapped and she plunged to her death without a sound. McLoughlin slumped beside the edge of the canyon and listened. In the play’s closing lines, he drew his own conclusions.

At the end, in her own way, she found some part of what she was looking for. She would have called it courage — courage to live. Even though she may not have known it until the end, it was really more than physical, personal courage that she sought, it was the same thing that all troubled people who roam the earth or under the earth or who search the sky are seeking. Estelle was looking for the source of all courage, and I have the feeling she found it at the last, wanting so much to live, yet plummeting down in the darkness toward eternity. I think she found an even greater courage, a courage we cannot muster alone, the courage to face death, the unknown, unafraid. I think that must have happened because, remember when the cable snapped, it was I — not she — who cried out in fear.⁶¹

If stories such as “Tommy Malone Comes Home” and “The Unknown” used loss or tragedy to underscore the incompleteness of abundance, situation comedies took a different tack. They represented a second major strategy — holding up in fun those who failed to put abundance in a proper perspective. Comedy is a time-honored method of looking at complex experiences from new angles, and the postwar years hardly represented the first time radio used comedy for more than laughs. During the Great Depression, as Susan J. Douglas observed, the verbal anarchy of Joe Penner, Jane Ace,

⁶¹ “The Unknown,” *Family Theater*.

and Gracie Allen depicted a world out of kilter, and during the war, as Gerd Horten noted, the patriotism shown by Jack Benny and Fibber McGee and Molly made propaganda palatable.⁶² With the arrival of postwar abundance, radio comedy made its own contribution to pastoral civil religion by poking holes in the overinflated egos of those who failed to understand their fortune in a properly “American” frame of mind.

One such figure of fun was Chester A. Riley, hero of the working class domestic comedy *The Life of Riley*. The series aired from 1945 to 1951 and featured screen star William Bendix as a beefy Joe Lunchbucket whose muscles extended to his brain. What Riley lacked in smarts he made up for in spirit, however, and part of the show’s humor derived from his wife’s and children’s amazement at the trouble he brought on himself.⁶³ In an episode broadcast on November 22, 1947, the family rebelled against Riley’s perpetual promises that “next year” he would buy a new car.⁶⁴ “Next year,” it seemed, was as hopeless a cry for the Riley family as it was for the Washington Senators baseball team.

Then one day Riley and a friend stopped in front of a drugstore to admire the merchandise in the window. They gawked at the goodies postwar abundance brought them as NBC’s scriptwriters plugged Hoover vacuum cleaners, Goodrich Silvertown tires, and Hallicrafters radios among other products. When the two men strolled over to a second window, they found the biggest prize — a 1947 Buick to be given away to the winner of a bean-counting contest. Suddenly, Riley had a plan.

⁶² Douglas, 105; Horten, 118-130.

⁶³ Dunning, 396-397. An earlier, and unrelated, comedy of the same title aired for a few months in 1941 on CBS.

⁶⁴ “Win a Buick Contest,” *The Life of Riley*, November 22, 1947.

First, he convinced his son to go to work at the store so he could make sure no one changed the number of beans in the jar. Then he bought a similar jar and filled it with beans. His plan was to count them and submit that total to the contest. As there were more than twenty thousand beans in the jar, counting took a long time, so Riley filled his pockets with beans and counted them on the bus as he went to work. A series of humorous incidents followed in which conversations were crossed, he lost count, and his wife accidentally cooked some of the beans, but in the end, Riley won the car. In the final scene, he and his family took it for a ride on the open highway and invited the drugstore owner to come along. While driving, Riley let slip that his son worked at the store, and that was a fatal admission. Employees' families were ineligible, so Riley lost the car as quickly as he had won it. The message was simple: America may be filled with new consumer goods, but they can be lost as easily as gained for those motivated by greed.

Ozzie and Harriet Nelson expanded on that message in a play that tackled the consumer skill of sales resistance.⁶⁵ When a package arrived at the Nelson home containing a cosmetics kit, a supply of red flannel, and other items of questionable necessity, Harriet explained that she bought them less because she needed them than because they were a "bargain." Ozzie scolded her for it, but a short time later, fell victim himself to a barber's salesmanship. Not only did Ozzie ask for a new haircut, but before he left the shop, he had a shoe shine, manicure, face massage, and "steam tonic double-cream shampoo." Similar silliness followed until a neighbor asked Harriet if Ozzie might be sprucing himself up for another woman. Harriet did not believe it, and at the end of the play, she and Ozzie both decided they were not cut out for rampant hedonism.

⁶⁵ "Sales Resistance," *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, October 5, 1951.

“Harriet, I hope this won’t be too much of a disappointment,” Ozzie said sheepishly, “but remember now, you took me for better or for worse.”

“What are you building up to?”

“Well, I just don’t feel natural all dressed up with a manicure and the hair tonic, and I’m just not the smooth type. I’m the disheveled, the unromantic type.”

“Oh, that’s fine with me, dear. Whatever you are, you’re my type ...,” Harriet said. “Unfortunately, you married a gal who’s just not the jealous type. And even if I were, I know you pretty well dear, and I trust you implicitly.”

The play was neither anticonsumption nor proconsumption, so much as what might be called “proconsumption-in-context.” The implication was that the happy Nelson family could enjoy their comfortable suburban life because they had a moral center sturdy enough to withstand loose-lipped neighbors and fictional femme fatales.

Christmas shows

Parks Johnson’s observation on *Vox Pop* that Christmas was a time when people had a chance to do the things they say they believe in seems to have been taken to heart by the men and women who wrote and produced radio drama — and for the most part, the American people were depicted as passing the test. When Christmas-themed dramas touched on abundance, they often used the same strategies as other shows. Either they emphasized a “true meaning” of Christmas that stood apart from but was not anathema to its American role as a celebration of consumption, or they used comedy to mock characters who spoke or acted as if they were oblivious to the holiday’s deeper meaning. Sectarian religious programs, usually broadcast on local stations, located that meaning in the specifically Christian story of Christ’s birth, but commercial dramas took a more civil

religious approach by emphasizing good will in human relationships and then attaching it to the life of the American nation. Christmas-themed episodes of ordinary dramas were regular fodder in December, and some episodes were repeated yearly due to listener requests.

From the perspective of American civil religion, Christmas shows are of particular interest because of the role the holiday has played in American self-identity. Throughout the twentieth century, American Christmases celebrated the virtue of the “virtuous community,” described those virtues as universal human aspirations, characterized American abundance as a divine blessing, and invited Americans of all faiths to participate in the rituals of shopping, gift-giving, tree decorating, feasting, caroling, and so forth. Moreover, as Kathleen M. Sands has noted, there is a nonsectarian, obligatory quality about American Christmas that parallels civil religion. In the United States, citizens cherish the right to choose their own beliefs, churches, and religious displays, “but to refuse the Christmastime giving and receiving of gifts, the parties and songs, the decorations and shows — is to face penalties ranging from ridicule to social excommunication,” Sands wrote.⁶⁶

Given network radio’s commercial nature, it is not surprising that it fell in love with Christmas. Long before radio was invented, the American version of the holiday had established itself as a commercial holiday to be celebrated with purchased gifts. Yet as Stephen Nissenbaum argued in his history of American Christmases, such was not always the case. Prior to the seventeenth century, Christmas in Europe was a ribald affair, closer

⁶⁶ Kathleen M. Sands, “Still Dreaming: War, Memory, and Nostalgia in the American Christmas,” in *Christmas Unwrapped: Consumerism, Christ, and Culture*, eds. Richard Horsley and James Tracy (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 58.

to Mardi Gras than Currier & Ives. Propelled by drink, rowdy gangs of revelers reversed the normal order of things and stormed into rich peoples' homes demanding to be fed, cross-dressed, and caterwauled in obnoxious dins. Often, someone dressed up like a bishop or minister to mock the church. Puritans on both sides of the Atlantic found this behavior shocking, and in America, celebrating Christmas was banned. In England, it was not banned, but Parliament declared December 25 a day of repentance for it.⁶⁷

Other than Puritans, most elites in the paternal world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did not see these outbursts as critically dangerous. They were predictable, limited, and did more to draw attention to the hierarchical order than to undermine it. In the more democratic early American republic, however, Christmas became more troubling as the rising middle class began to see it as insurrection. In Nissenbaum's account, a group of New York businessmen promoted an alternative celebration that moved festivities from the rowdy street into the family home. To do so, they invented a series of "traditions" that cloaked the reshaped holiday into what they considered more socially constructive sentimentalities, and they used gift-giving to transform the older "world-upside-down" quality of Christmas into a temporary undermining of the antebellum suspicion of luxury. Purchases that might have represented immoral profligacy at other times of the year became, at Christmas, outward signs of inward charity and familial affection. The commercial perks of this new Christmas were as obvious as the social benefits, so department stores, newspapers, and booksellers were only too happy to do their part in promoting it.⁶⁸ By the post-World War

⁶⁷ Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas* (New York: Knopf, 1996), 3-14.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 132-140. The best example of an "invented tradition" is Santa Claus. Nissenbaum stated

II period, the commercial aspect of American Christmas was well established, and the consumer abundance of the period only intensified it. Yet traces of the Puritan objection remained — no longer did people object to Christmas *per se*, but some did try to counter tendencies toward materialism and acquisitiveness with constant reminders of the holiday's "higher purpose" and social benefits.⁶⁹ Radio contributed to this project of guiding Americans through Christmas in such a way as to affirm abundance without losing one's head.

For example, in an episode of *This Is Your FBI* titled "The Return of St. Nick," Special Agent Jim Taylor gave up his own holiday to help a young boy find Santa Claus.⁷⁰ The boy's request was more serious than it sounded — what he really wanted was Taylor to find the old man who played Santa at the boy's settlement home. The aged gentleman loved the children and was loved by them in return, and there was no obvious reason why he should suddenly disappear. Taylor visited the settlement home and learned that a day earlier, the old man had acted strangely when a wealthy benefactor came to visit — in fact, he had gone so far as to hide from the woman, though no one else at the home had seen or heard of her before.

Taylor ferreted out the woman's name and visited her with a photograph of the

that when he began his study, he, like most Americans, assumed that St. Nicholas was a mythological character of Dutch extraction. In fact, he wrote, Santa most likely was invented by Washington Irving for the satirical book *Knickerbocker's History of New York*.

⁶⁹ For a recent example of this sort of argument, see Richard Horsley, "Christmas: The Religion of Consumer Capitalism," in Horsley and Tracy, *Christmas Unwrapped*, 165-187. Horsley argues that the current American version of the holiday looks more like a Roman celebration of Caesar's birthday than anything Christian.

⁷⁰ "The Return of St. Nick," *This Is Your FBI*, December 24, 1948. This episode was rebroadcast at least twice, in 1949 and 1950.

old man in hand. She had not spotted him at the home, and she was stunned to see his picture. Yes, she knew who he was — he was her long-estranged brother — and she also knew why he avoided her. Many decades earlier, when their parents died and the two siblings inherited a large fortune, she was told by the family attorney that her brother attempted to cheat her by forging a check for \$10,000. As far as she was concerned, he was a “common criminal,” and she would never forgive him. Taylor asked the woman if she still had the check, and she said she did. He took it to an FBI lab, and the lab confirmed that the signature on the check could not be her brother’s but was instead the family attorney’s.

In the play’s final scene, after the old man had been relocated, Taylor arranged for a tearful reunion of brother and sister at the settlement house’s Christmas party. The two met in a small room as the old man put on his Santa suit.

“I’m so ashamed,” the woman said. “All these years, I falsely accused you. ... Can you ever forgive me?”

“I already have.”

As they left the room together, the children of the settlement house sang “Oh, Come All Ye Faithful,” FBI Agent Taylor wished everyone a Merry Christmas, and an announcer summarized the play’s pastoral message:

Soon we will all begin a new year, a year that can bring us happiness, prosperity, and a full life. But those goals cannot be obtained without work, without hard work and long concentration. There are few bits of advice that are applicable to everyone, but there can be no doubt that for each of us life will be richer and fuller if we follow one set rule — if we live every day during the coming year with the love and kindness in our hearts that we have on Christmas Eve. For in that way lies peace on earth, good will towards man.

Examples of the second strategy — Christmas stories that mocked characters who did not “get it” — were common on domestic comedies. An obvious candidate was *The Great Gildersleeve*, whose self-indulgent title character, Throckmorton P. Gildersleeve, was knocked down a peg in many episodes.⁷¹ In a story broadcast on December 10, 1947, Gildersleeve — or Gildy, as he usually was called — spent much of the play rambling around a department store in search of a toy airplane for nephew Leroy. Interruption followed interruption. In order to appear more chivalrous than another man, Gildy carried out a woman’s packages and drove her home. Then he stopped at a barbershop and fell asleep in the chair. Back at the store, he flirted with a clerk. Just as he finally found the toy airplane, the store closed. In short, Gildy approached Christmas as if it were nothing but a quest for gifts, and he went home empty-handed.

A similar episode of *The Life of Riley* added a playful jab at advertising.⁷² When Riley learned his son opened a Christmas package early, he scolded the boy for lacking will power. People who know how to control themselves wait until Christmas, he said. A moment later, the mail brought Riley his own mysterious package — a parcel from Walla Walla, Washington, clearly marked “Do not open until Christmas.” Since Riley did not know anyone in Walla Walla, he could not fathom what the packaged contained, and the mystery only deepened his desire to open it. Yet having just berated his son for lacking will power, he could do little else but wait until Christmas. A series of increasingly ludicrous scenes followed as Riley tried to peek inside without getting caught, and at

⁷¹ “Christmas Shopping,” *The Great Gildersleeve*, December 10, 1947.

⁷² “Christmas Present,” *The Life of Riley*, December 17, 1944. Though broadcast before the end of the war, this episode was typical of what followed.

length, his family told him to open it for the sake of everyone's sanity.

"Well, OK. Just to keep peace in the family, I'll do it," Riley said.

He opened the package and found a card that read:

Dear Friend: If you succumbed to temptation and opened this package before Christmas, you have absolutely no will power. Send \$2 immediately to Professor Ludwig Steffanati, Box 27, Walla Walla, for his famous book entitled *How to Develop Your Will Power*.⁷³

A final strategy common in Christmas-themed radio programs followed the lead of the New York businessmen that Nissenbaum described by relocating classic Christmas stories onto American soil. A play rebroadcast annually for several years in the 1940s followed the Arkansas hillbillies Lum and Abner on a nocturnal visit to a barn where a baby was born in a manger.⁷⁴ The men were joined by one of the show's other regular characters, Grandpappy Spears, as they trekked across thick snow to reach the farmstead. Grandpappy said he learned earlier in the evening from the local doctor that a couple passing through the area had called with an emergency. "Some feller named Joe" took his wife to the county seat to pay their taxes, but when the storm approached they discovered there were no vacancies at the local hotel and they had to take refuge in an abandoned barn. Now the woman had gone into labor. Lum, Abner, and Grandpappy thought perhaps the couple could use an oil stove, some bed covers, and groceries, so they followed the doctor to the farm.

"I'm just glad you called me, Grandpap, just proud to have a chance to help,"

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ "Traditional Christmas Show," *Lum 'n' Abner*, December 23, 1938. This episode was repeated at least as late as 1948. Not all classic Christmas stories transplanted to an American setting had Biblical origins. For example, "Britt Ponsett's Christmas Carol," *The Six-Shooter*, December 20, 1953, retold Charles Dickens' tale in the nineteenth-century American West.

Abner said as they trundled through the snow.

“Yeah, this makes it seem more like Christmas to me, doing for somebody else ... ,” Lum said. “Trouble with a lot of us, we sort of lose the Christmas idee altogether, think too much about ourselves. The real Christmas spirit is the happiness we get out of making other folks happy.”

The three old-timers reached the farm and learned from the doctor that the woman had not yet delivered. They handed him the supplies and waited outside. Lum mused that there was something symbolic about three old men waiting for a baby.

“It’s sort of like as if we was waiting for somebody to take our place,” he said.

“Well, of course, we don’t like to talk about such things, but now we’ve about served our time, I reckon, men,” Abner said.

Lum said it was a bit like the new year — a replacing of the old with the new and a time to start over. The play ended when the doctor announced a boy was born, and a recording of “Silent Night” followed. Though at no point did the play make any literal reference to Jesus or the Gospels, it contained themes familiar to the pastoral form of American civil religion, including references to the common good, the selflessness of various members of the local community, and the sense of an old world beginning afresh.

The Medium

Writing at the beginning of the 1960s, historian Daniel Boorstin drew a distinction between heroes and celebrities. Heroes, he wrote, are extraordinary human beings celebrated for their remarkable qualities or deeds. Classic heroes were military men like Alexander the Great, lawgivers like Moses, writers like Jane Austen, or moral teachers like Jesus. Celebrities are another matter. They are famous for being famous.

The celebrity, wrote Boorstin, “is the human pseudo-event. He has been fabricated on purpose to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness.”⁷⁵ To be sure, some of the reasons for the classic hero’s demise were not unwelcome. Democracy tended to discourage god-like devotion to political leaders, and the rise of social science and critical biography deflated other would-be seers. But what celebrities added was unclear. No, it *was* clear — celebrities added nothing. “No longer external sources which fill us with purpose, these new-model ‘heroes’ are receptacles into which we pour our own purposeless,” Boorstin wrote.⁷⁶

Perhaps, but Boorstin’s skepticism was precisely what the publishers of radio fan magazines in the 1950s hoped readers would avoid. If the pastoral civil religion of postwar radio programs tried to convince listeners that America could be both wealthy and righteous, the industry’s fan magazines tried to convince them that the people behind the microphone already were. Boorstin may have been correct about the institution of celebrity being a pseudo-heroic sham, but in the 1950s, the radio industry was not yet ready to admit it. Celebrity, too, was leveraged to provide a reassuring message.

Fan magazines and celebrity entertainers were nothing new in American popular culture. As Amy Henderson has shown, entertainment-oriented publications were profitable enterprises as early as the 1870s. When magazine illustrations became common, the Ziegfeld Follies’ dancers numbered among their earliest subjects.⁷⁷ Radio

⁷⁵ Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: Or, What Happened to the American Dream* (New York: Atheneum, 1962), 57-58.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁷⁷ Amy Henderson “Media and the Rise of Celebrity Culture,” *OAH Magazine of History* 6 (Spring 1992): 50.

added a new wrinkle, however. Stage- or screen-oriented magazines translated the visual attractions of one medium to another visual medium. If the Ziegfeld Follies' elaborate costumes glittered onstage, publishers expected them to decorate magazines, as well. But when photos and stories of radio stars appeared in magazines, fans were allowed to see a world otherwise invisible to them. Disembodied voices materialized into photographs, and names heard only verbally appeared on tangible pages. It was a bit like peeping behind a curtain — fans could find out if “reality” was what they thought it was.

In the postwar period, the “reality” depicted in fan magazines increasingly emphasized the domesticity and moral rectitude of radio celebrities. Consider two profiles of the popular singer Kate Smith published in 1938 and 1951 respectively. Best remembered for her inspired rendition of the nation's unofficial civil religious anthem, “God Bless America,” Smith became a national icon during World War II. A *Radio Stars* profile of her in 1938 focused entirely on her career. She had just released an unfortunate film that even she described as a “poor picture,” and she vowed thenceforth to concentrate on singing and radio.⁷⁸ By contrast, a shorter 1951 *Radio Mirror* article balanced Smith's career and domestic life. It followed her from breakfast at 8 a.m. to a dressing room fitting at 9 a.m., television and radio work throughout the day, and dinner in the evening. “Weekends? Kate shops, cooks and sees a few friends,” the article continued. “Does that sound like an awesome schedule? It is. But when you have that nice, easy Kate Smith touch, there's nothing to it!” To underscore the point that Smith's life was more than her career, a photograph of the singer and her mother accompanied the story.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Jack Hanley, “No More Movies!” *Radio Stars*, February 1938, LAB, 38-39, 66.

⁷⁹ “The Kate Smith Touch,” *Radio Mirror*, February 1951, LAB.

A *Radio Mirror* story titled “Superman in the Suburbs” painted a similar sketch of the Man of Steel. The article described the home life of *Superman* star Bud Collyer and his actress wife, Marian, then heard on the radio soap opera *Road to Life*. The article emphasized that while the Collyers enjoyed their radio careers, they really lived for their family. Their sprawling Greenwich, Connecticut, home symbolized American success, and descriptions of the time they spent with their kids, family boat outings, and similar activities seemed to signal their priorities. The importance of religion to the Collyer family also was stressed.⁸⁰

“Bud is very devout about church,” Marian was quoted as saying. “He never misses Sunday School. And, do you know, he was invited to deliver the sermon at the Greenwich Methodist Church not long ago.”⁸¹

Readers amazed to find Superman in such a domestic setting probably were less surprised to meet Jean and Via Hersholt there. Danish émigré Jean Hersholt was heard weekly as the kindly title character of the radio drama *Dr. Christian*, and about ten years earlier, he played the good doctor in a half dozen films. A profile of the Hersholts at home insisted that just because they lived in Hollywood did not mean they were different than other Americans. To make the point, it recounted their early, hardscrabble years, when the only work Jean could find was falling off horses in silent westerns for \$3 a tumble, and it emphasized his charitable efforts for the Screen Actor’s Guild and Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. “It’s the good life at the Hersholts’ — it’s real, it’s *permanent*. And the skeptics would do well to take another look,” the

⁸⁰ “Superman in the Suburbs,” *Radio Mirror*, January 1948, LAB.

⁸¹ Ibid.

article concluded.⁸²

Even when celebrities got in trouble, fan magazines backed them up. A 1948 *Radio Mirror* feature defended comedian Lou Costello who had been publicly accused of grandstanding with a youth foundation he established. Costello founded the Lou Costello Junior Youth Foundation in the Hollenbeck-Boyle neighborhood of Los Angeles, a rundown area suffering from poverty, racial tension, and rising rates of juvenile delinquency. The article maintained that Costello was serious about his charitable work and that the foundation did not just provide children with recreational activities, it also taught them how to be good citizens. “They run the foundation like a little city,” the article stated. “They hold elections for posts on the junior board of directors, for mayor, common council, prosecuting attorney, city judge, business manager and treasurer.”⁸³

At the same time that radio series such as *Family Theater* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* reassured Americans that national unity need not be lost despite the changes around them, radio celebrities seemed to offer real-life proof that that was true. The virtuous American community imagined in radio drama, at least to the extent possible, was reinforced in the visual world, as well. Unfortunately, some of what existed outside radio’s non-dimensional world was harder to explain than Lou Costello’s controversy. There still lurked external dangers, and the Cold War presented the nastiest of them all. In the minds of some Americans, the stronger medicine of priestly civil religion was again in order.

⁸² Pauline Swanson, “Come and Visit Jean Hersholt,” *Radio Mirror*, January 1950, LAB. Emphasis original.

⁸³ William Tusher, “Is Lou Costello On The Level?” *Radio Mirror*, July 1948, LAB. Another example along the same lines was a story about longtime radio announcer Norman Brokenshire’s battle with alcoholism. Norman Brokenshire, “My Lost Seven Years,” *Radio Mirror*, March 1950, LAB.

Chapter 5 — Priestly Civil Religion and the American Way

When Matt Cvetic told his own story, he gave it lots of dramatic tension. In a memoir published privately in 1959, Cvetic described the day in 1941 when he received an anonymous phone call from a man who wanted to speak about a matter of life and death. Curiosity piqued, Cvetic met the mysterious caller at a café. The man identified himself as FBI agent “Murphy” and invited Cvetic to join the agency as an undercover infiltrator of Pittsburgh’s communist subversives. He suggested that Cvetic’s job with the U.S. Employment Agency made him invaluable to the bureau — not only did it give him a deep knowledge of the city’s labor unions and working class, but Pittsburgh was the linchpin of the American steel industry, a resource of tremendous military importance.¹

Murphy gave Cvetic some time to think it over. Lying in bed that night, Cvetic reflected on what seemed a preposterous proposal. As the son of Slovenian immigrants, he had been raised to take pride in his parents’ new country, and the fact that he was known around the office as an ardent anticommunist only made the idea that he could pass himself off as a Red more ludicrous. Still, it was precisely because Cvetic loved the United States that he could not bring himself to turn Murphy down. He could not shake from his mind a sense that everything he loved about America — the freedom, the prosperity, the decency — all of it could be lost. “I thought of how Communism

¹ Matt Cvetic, *The Big Decision* (n.p.: Matt Cvetic, 1959), 9.

challenged America; of how too many people sat, snug and smug in their cozy homes and apathetically shrugged off the insidiousness of the Communist's efforts to destroy America," Cvetic wrote.² He vowed not to be one of them. He would heed his country's call. The next time he met Murphy, he accepted the assignment.

Cvetic knew from the start that the organization he infiltrated was deadly, but he found his greatest suffering at home. There, too, he felt he had no choice but to maintain a façade — even his own family would have to believe he was a communist. With pathos befitting a soap opera, his memoir detailed the horror his wife and sons felt at the loss of their husband and father's patriotism. One day, he wife confronted him about communist literature he brought in the house.

"This is my property and it stays here," I shouted belligerently, feeling heartsick that it had to be this way. "What I read, or how I feel about certain matters, is none of your business."

My wife stared at me aghast, shaking her head. "My God," she shouted, "what's happening to you? You a Communist! You, the father of two lovely children! What will people think? ... I'm not going to have people point at me and say: There goes a Commie's wife."³

Still harder was Cvetic's inability to tell his sons about his double life. When one of them fought at school to defend his father's honor, the boy pleaded with Cvetic to tell him rumors of communism were untrue. All Cvetic could do was hope the boy would understand "some day." His marriage smashed, his sons turned against him, Cvetic even had to watch his mother die thinking he was a dirty Red. "I knew if I deviated from my

² Ibid., 10-11.

³ Ibid., 23.

rigid rules of secrecy, I would risk being unmasked by Red Agents,” he wrote. “Exposure would mean, not only that my usefulness to the FBI would be ended, but posed the threat of savage Communist reprisals”⁴ Only nine years later, when Cvetic came into the open and testified before the House Un-American Activities Committee, was he redeemed. In the book’s final scene, he stood over his patriotic father’s death bed, and the old man revived from a coma just long enough to praise his son’s service to the United States. “‘Matt,’ he whispered slowly through those pale lips, ‘I’m so glad you came to see me. Now I can go and tell Mamma what a good boy you were ... I’ll tell her, Matt ... I’ll tell her ...’,” Cvetic wrote.⁵

Though described by one historian as “more fiction than fact,” Cvetic’s maudlin memoir *The Big Decision* offered insights both into the priestly civil religion of the postwar period and into its relationship to mass entertainment.⁶ This was not the first time Cvetic’s story was laid before the American people. In 1950, just months after his HUAC appearance, a series of articles about him appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, and the following year, the actor Frank Lovejoy played him on the big screen. Dana Andrews portrayed him in a syndicated radio show titled *I Was a Communist For the FBI* from 1952 to 1954.⁷ In each venue, communism was associated not only with tyranny but also with godlessness, and defending “Americanism” was described as a godly duty. “[Communists] sneer at God, and being godless, they have no compunctions about

⁴ Ibid., 23-24, 195-196.

⁵ Ibid., 210-216.

⁶ Daniel J. Leab, “Anti-Communism, the FBI, and Matt Cvetic: The Ups and Downs of a Professional Informer,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 115 (October 1991): 578.

⁷ Ibid., 554-559, 571-574; Dunning, 340.

resorting to brutal, horrible torture and murder — tactics of the most hardened, sadistic criminals,” Cvetic wrote in *The Big Decision*.⁸ In a two-page “altar call” at the end of the book, he urged readers to take specific action. Choose either “Americanism with freedom of thought, speech, press, and religion as guaranteed by our Constitution” or “Communism with its systematic brain-washing, thought-control, enforced communal living, mass enslavement, and mass murder,” he wrote.⁹

In reality, as historian Daniel J. Leab has shown, Matt Cvetic’s life was not as full of dramatic tension, nor was it as morally inspiring, as that of the twentieth-century Nathan Hale described in his memoir, the magazine articles, the movie, and the radio show. Indeed, a priest who knew him once described him as a “schmuck.”¹⁰ Leab opined that Cvetic’s motive for working with the FBI from 1941 to 1950 may have been love of country, but it may also have been a middle-aged man’s thirst for adventure. Cvetic’s account of his divorce omitted the troubles he and his wife had experienced before 1941, and it did not breathe a word of his well-known drinking and womanizing. Nor did the memoir mention that Cvetic’s undercover work ended in 1950 because the FBI fired him. He was not as tight-lipped as he made out, and the bureau knew of more than one instance when he bragged about his undercover work to attract a woman or impress a prospective employer. By the time of Cvetic’s death in 1962, a man whose name ten years earlier attracted *The Saturday Evening Post* and Warner Brothers ended his days stumping for fringe organizations like Billy Hargis’ Christian Crusade and the John Birch

⁸ Cvetic, 10.

⁹ Ibid., postscript.

¹⁰ Leab, 542.

Society.¹¹

From the perspective of American civil religion, however, Cvetic's story — at least the version designed for public consumption — bifurcated the world into freedom-loving, prosperous, godly people whose values were embodied in the United States, and tyranny-loving, impoverished, atheistic people who tied their hopes to the Soviet Union. Abundance was not just a blessing, it was the natural product of the blessed American system — but that system had to be defended. As in World War II, when Roosevelt declared that the “world is too small to provide adequate ‘living room’ for both Hitler and God,” no one was permitted to hide in the cracks. Even the title of Cvetic's book implied that he, and by extension the audience, had to choose which side they were on. That Cvetic's decision destroyed his family, itself a sacred institution, only underscored the existential nature of his choice and suggested that actions otherwise unthinkable might have to be taken. History had reached a breaking point again, another sort of final confrontation. Only this confrontation was “final” in the sense that it was ultimate — a confrontation of ultimate good and ultimate evil. It was not final in the sense that it might be over anytime soon.

The Problem

The fact that Cvetic's undistinguished service to the FBI became a civil religious multimedia franchise in the 1950s points both to that decade's sacralization of politics and politicization of the sacred. The core task of the priestly form of American civil religion in the postwar period was to characterize the Cold War as a Manichean,

¹¹ Ibid., 542-546, 551-552, 578-579.

existential struggle and to attach a salvific role to the United States. This form of civil religion was centripetal because it called on all Americans to support their nation in a new, apocalyptic crisis and because it politicized virtually every aspect of American culture. It was priestly because it cast the United States as the embodiment of political liberty, economic freedom, and religion — a national Holy Trinity collectively referred to as “the American Way.”

President Harry Truman set the tone in his second inaugural address on January 20, 1949, a speech delivered at the beginning of a year that would witness the first Soviet atomic bomb and a communist victory in China. “It may be our lot to experience, and in a large measure bring about, a major turning point in the long history of the human race ...,” Truman told those gathered at the capitol and everyone else who heard him on their radios. “The peoples of the earth face the future with grave uncertainty, composed almost equally of great hopes and great fears. In this time of doubt, they look to the United States as never before for good will, strength, and wise leadership.”¹²

Truman preached a gospel of America that was about more than military victory. It also was about “material well-being, human dignity, and the right to believe in and worship God” — the very points on which Truman believed American democracy and Soviet communism parted ways. In four couplets, he compared the two systems’ views of human beings, government, social justice, and social change. Democracy held that people have the “moral and intellectual capacity” for self-government, that the state “is established for the benefit of the individual,” that social justice arrives through “peaceful

¹² Harry S. Truman, “Truman Inaugural Address, January 20, 1949,” Harry S. Truman Library & Museum, http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/50yr_archive/inagural20jan1949.htm (accessed March 3, 2011).

change,” and that nations can achieve a “lasting peace.” By contrast, communism insisted that humans require “strong masters,” that the state is the tool of those masters, that justice comes through violence, and that “the world is so widely divided into opposing classes that war is inevitable.”¹³ In short, Truman described a bipolar world in which the work of the United States was not simply blessed by God but was, in fact, God’s work. Echoing generations of politicians who spoke of the United States as a redeemer nation, he characterized the nation as a virtuous community uninterested in “old imperialism” but eager to share with all peoples an eschatological gift of progress, both in material terms (as in industrial and scientific advancement) and moral terms (as in a defense of freedom). “The initiative is ours ... ,” Truman said. “Our allies are the millions who hunger and thirst after righteousness.”¹⁴

Just as Cvetic felt both that he had to choose and that he had to make choices that otherwise would have been unthinkable, the United States found itself in a crisis that both demanded a response and yet rendered obsolete all past experience. H. W. Brands has argued that the Cold War presented a new kind of crisis for the United States — a threat that could not be removed but could only be lived with. Unlike the Spanish enemy in 1898, the Germans in 1917, or the Nazis and Japanese in 1941, the nuclear-tipped Soviet Union presented a foe that could not simply be vanquished, for to do so would be to destroy the United States, as well. Despite comprising “the mightiest nation on earth,” Brands wrote, Americans suddenly felt “alarmingly vulnerable.” For the first time in their history, “the safety of Americans now depended in large part on the good behavior of the

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

country they had identified as their mortal enemy.”¹⁵ Trusting the Soviets seemed as impossible as it was inevitable, so American leaders came to the conclusion that total security was out of reach and the best they could hope for was a kind of controlled insecurity, or what Ira Chernus later would dub “apocalypse management.”¹⁶ Brands argued that *National Security Council Report 68*, the confidential 1950 document that laid a foundation for Cold War-era foreign and military policy, “amounted to an American declaration of permanent cold war” and the nuclear policy that later would be called “mutually assured destruction” amounted to a defense that claimed to be deterrence but really was reliance on other side’s good sense.¹⁷ So unbearably titanic was the crisis that it stretched if not exploded the imaginations of American leaders. Brands described a pivotal moment when, for President Eisenhower, the enormity of atomic war sunk in. A report by the Panel on the Human Effects of Nuclear Weapons Development predicted 50 million *immediate* casualties. “Eisenhower responded to the report with surprise bordering on shock,” Brands wrote.¹⁸

¹⁵ H. W. Brands, “The Age of Vulnerability: Eisenhower and the National Insecurity State,” *The American Historical Review* 94 (October 1989): 964.

¹⁶ Ira Chernus, *Apocalypse Management: Eisenhower and the Discourse of National Insecurity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 6. A scholar of religion who has studied American civil religion, Chernus expressed his frustration with the concept in “Confronting the Mythical Beast,” entry posted March 19, 2010, The Immanent Frame, Social Science Research Council, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/03/19/confronting-the-mythical-beast/> (accessed December 20, 2010).

¹⁷ Brands, 965. Put another way, the existential nature of the Cold War undermined the underlying logic of “containment” or “deterrence” as a response to communism. Deterrence assumed that the United States could convince the Soviet Union that the costs of nuclear war would outweigh the gains. At base, it was a rational cost-benefit analysis. But as people on both sides realized that such a conflict would destroy or render unlivable both nations, and possibly the entire planet, the cost to both sides (annihilation) and the benefit to both sides (annihilation of the enemy) became absolute and equal. Since both nations could control their own policy actions but not the actions of the enemy, security came to rest not on relative advantage so much as trust that the other side would not strike. What began as a rational comparison of costs and benefits became a seemingly irrational trust in an enemy held to be utterly untrustworthy.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 985. Similar, though less dramatic, was Secretary of Defense Charles E. Wilson’s stance.

Plainly put, the Cold War undermined centrifugal tendencies latent in the United States' Enlightenment origins. The classic liberal project of dividing politics, economics, and religion into separate spheres of human activity — a project McLuhan associated with “typographic man” — was undermined by a crisis that threatened to destroy all three in a single barrage of mushroom clouds. As a result, much of the civil religion that emerged in the 1950s blurred distinctions between the three. Chernus focused on Eisenhower to explain how the parts fit together. The thirty-fourth president, Chernus wrote, fancied himself a “realist” in the mold of Reinhold Niebuhr, meaning he accepted basic human selfishness as an inescapable fact and viewed with skepticism, but not hopelessness, the human capacity for self-improvement. Because of that skepticism, Eisenhower believed some measure of control over humans was necessarily lest their selfishness lead to Hobbesian chaos. However, control could come either internally or externally. Democracy differed from communism precisely because it gave individuals the external freedom to cultivate internal controls and thereby improve themselves. Communism granted no such external freedom and thereby stunted human progress beyond that allowed by political elites. Put another way, democracy was morally preferable to communism not because it made people good but because it gave people the freedom to make themselves better, or at least to limit their evil. At the level of individuals, such a formulation might seem more pastoral than priestly since it still called upon individuals to “rise above” themselves toward self-improvement, and, indeed,

The former General Motors executive admitted that, if necessary, even fiscal conservatism could wait. “If we can do this within a balanced budget, fine. If not, we will simply have to postpone balancing the budget,” he said of national defense during one meeting. *Ibid.*, 970.

historians have identified Eisenhower as playing a pastoral role.¹⁹ Such rhetoric could also be used to priestly effect, however, when it cast the United States' democratic-capitalist system as a *prerequisite* to individual morality. Democracy, capitalism, and morality — and, by extension, religion, since it was seen as the fount of morality — fused into an irreducible whole.²⁰

The result of the existential and all-encompassing nature of the Cold War was the near-total politicization of American culture. At a time when war could mean not only the loss of American power but also the destruction of the American nation, millions of Americans felt that an extraordinary threat elicited an extraordinary response. And yet it was precisely their inability to end the crisis that produced the notoriously excessive and irrational outbursts of the period. Soon, where and to whom Americans worshipped, how they dressed, where they chose their friends, and whom they married all could mark a person as “one of us” or “one of them.” During the Cold War's most frantic years in the late 1940s and early 1950s, the state of New York required loyalty oaths for fishing licenses, twelve states barred atheists from becoming notary publics, and the federal government declared nudists ineligible for public service.²¹ Not surprisingly, popular entertainment became a prominent forum for political rhetoric, and the centripetal forces of radio were called upon to help Americans fulfill a divine purpose.

¹⁹ Pierard and Linder, 184-185.

²⁰ Chernus, 7-10, 21-28.

²¹ Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 9-14, 45, 87; Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 256.

The Resources

If World War II-era radio exhibited close cooperation between the commercial broadcasting industry and such federal agencies as the Office of Facts and Figures and Office of War Information, the Cold War, too, emphasized interests that business and government held in common. Broadcasters, political leaders, and broadcasting regulators articulated an interpretation of “American values” that emphasized the alleged interdependence of political democracy, capitalist economics, and religion. Americans who wished to cast the Cold War as a spiritual struggle followed President Truman’s lead in describing the United States as a virtuous community embattled from without by an evil global communist conspiracy, and they spoke of future American victory in eschatological terms. Their arguments gained credibility, in part, from the communists’ own antics.

Not surprisingly, the template Americans used to frame the communist menace was the just-defeated Nazi menace. Despite the two systems’ obvious ideological differences — differences millions of Europeans were willing to die for — Americans found both sufficiently dystopian, illiberal, and anti-democratic to lump together as “totalitarian.” One former U.S. Ambassador put it bluntly during World War II when he described the war between Germany and the Soviet Union as a contest between “Satan and Lucifer,” and similar sentiments revived after the war when the U.S. State Department published captured German papers documenting Hitler and Stalin’s brief alliance.²² At the same time, Americans could not but compare Soviet gulags to German

²² Les K. Adler, Thomas G. Paterson, “Red Fascism: The Merger of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia in the American Image of Totalitarianism, 1930’s-1950’s,” *The American Historical Review* 75 (April 1970): 1051, 1058.

death camps, communist censorship to Nazi propaganda, Hitler's cruelty to Stalin's thuggery, and, most ominously, Hitler's expansionism in the late 1930s to Stalin's puppet governments in Eastern Europe. "In short," wrote historians Les Adler and Thomas G. Paterson, "the analogy taught that the enigma of Soviet Russia could be fathomed only by the application of the historical lesson learned in the 1930's."²³

As a result, the same themes that characterized priestly civil religion during the war — the United States as a chosen sufferer, the unbearable evil of the enemy, the notion of history standing at a decisive junction — reappeared with the onset of the Cold War. But there were shifts in emphasis, as well, and they focused on those points at which the United States and Soviet Union were most different. As Eric Foner argued in *The Story of American Freedom*, the use of one of the nation's most cherished words — freedom — underwent a sometimes subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle transformation away from Roosevelt's "Four Freedoms" and toward "free enterprise." The former had contained two individual freedoms familiar to all Americans, freedom of speech and freedom of worship, as well as two that were more complicated. Freedom from fear, which was essentially a call for security, was impossible to deliver amid the existential angst of the Cold War, and freedom from want smelled suspiciously socialistic. What Foner called "Cold War freedom" focused instead on the liberties communism did not provide — freedom of economic activity and the defense of American interests and allies. In effect, whatever was not communist was defined as "free." For business, free enterprise meant freedom of investment. For consumers, it meant the freedom to choose among a plethora of consumer goods. For everyone, it so completely fused the "defense

²³ Ibid., 1062-63.

of freedom” with the defense of the United States that it could scarcely avoid pushing civil religion in a priestly direction.²⁴

Broadcasters stood front and center in the development of Cold War rhetoric. In a speech at Boston University in 1957, radio pioneer and NBC vice president William S. Hedges described his industry as a source of capitalism’s vitality. “It is advertising which gives power to the transmission belt which moves products from factory to consumer,” he said. “In other words, advertising has the muscle power to serve producer, retailer and consumer alike.”²⁵ Hedges had joined the radio industry in 1922 and had been an early defender of a private, for-profit, national broadcasting model.²⁶ The rhetorical popularity of “free enterprise” in the 1950s suited him well, but he did not stop with “muscle power.” If advertising drives capitalism, capitalism means freedom. In another speech, he argued that the “men who run the business affairs of broadcasting operations are much like other businessmen.” They want to sell a product that people like because that is the only way to make a profit — and without a profit “broadcasting would cease to be a private enterprise and would become a government operation, with the program content being dictated by bureaucrats.” To reinforce his point, he compared American broadcasting not to the Soviet media, but to the far-from-Bolshevik BBC, which Hedges still considered too “unfree.”

²⁴ Foner, 249-273. As Foner noted, such bifurcation produced howling absurdities. For example, apartheid South Africa, being anticommunist, was defined as “free” despite the fact that the United States made regular appeals for racial unity at home.

²⁵ William S. Hedges, “What Is Past Is Prologue,” speech at Boston University, October 16, 1957, William S. Hedges Collection, Series III, Box 2, Folder 2, 6, LAB.

²⁶ For example, in William S. Hedges, “Well Operated Independent Radio Station v. Chain Programs,” 1929, speech delivered at National Association of Broadcasters meeting, William S. Hedges Collection, Series III, Box 2, Folder 1, LAB, he made the case that national programming paid for by advertisers or ad agencies offered the medium a brighter future than local programming.

Many years ago, the then head of the British Broadcasting Corporation, Sir Ian Reith, was visiting in the United States. It was my pleasure to entertain him with a small luncheon in Chicago. Knowing that the BBC was government operated, I was curious to know what response was given to listener reaction. So I asked him the naïve question: “Are you at all influenced by the letters you receive from listeners to the BBC.” His answer was, “Certainly not. We do not give them what they want. We give them what is good for them.”

“And who decides that,” I asked.

“I do,” he said.²⁷

Even more ambitious was the “Campaign to Explain the American Economic System,” an Advertising Council initiative designed to sell “free enterprise” directly to the American people. The promotion was spearheaded by the Advertising Council’s Public Policy Committee, a panel that included prominent businesspeople; the presidents of Harvard University, Vassar College, and Hunter College; an assortment of journalists, nonprofit executives, and labor leaders; former New York governor Herbert H. Lehman; and one clergyman, the ubiquitous Reinhold Niebuhr. A booklet of print advertisements designed for the campaign illustrated its central economic themes, each of which could be compared to a prominent religious theme of the period. Capitalism was said to be good for investors and laborers alike — a kind of economic ecumenism. The long-run trend of American economic history was said to be upward — a reflection of America’s age-old eschatological hope. And communism was judged a fraud — the ultimate external evil conspiracy.²⁸

²⁷ William S. Hedges, “Speech to Rotary Club - Draft,” November 1, 1956, William S. Hedges Collection, Series III, Box 2, Folder 2, 3, LAB.

²⁸ The Advertising Council, “A Campaign to Explain the American Economic System,” Thomas D’Arcy Brophy Papers, Part 1, Box 75, WHS.

The ads themselves came out fighting. For example, one featured nine “talking heads” opining about the source of the United States’ strength. One person cited “a government of the people, by the people, and for the people,” while another named “individual initiative and enterprise.” Still others claimed it was the “ability to invent things” or “labor’s right to organize.” “Have they caught the secret of America’s greatness?” asked the headline. Then a smaller headline answered: “[E]ach one is right about the U.S. way ... but only partly right at best!” America prospered because different people brought it different strengths: “Teamwork to produce more will bring higher wages, shorter hours, better quality and more happiness for everyone.”²⁹

This unmistakably centripetal message was echoed in another advertisement that featured a futuristic worker pushing a button on a machine surrounded by atomic symbols. “What happens to your job — if we get atomic energy to drive our machines?” the headline asked. The copy below admitted that some workers would be laid off, but temporary unemployment would be a small price to pay for the benefits of progress. Earlier technologies such as steam and gasoline engines put blacksmiths out of work, but the auto industry employed more Americans than blacksmiths ever did. “Every time a new and more efficient source of power has been developed, something really wonderful has happened in this country,” the ad continued. Technology increases worker productivity, and “the result is that all of us can have more goods — more cars, more clothes, more food — by working more efficiently for shorter hours.”³⁰

Other advertisements took direct aim at the Soviet model. One pictured a

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

classroom of Russian schoolchildren and made fun of a *Pravda* article that had called on teachers to instill “a profound contempt for bowing and scraping before the bourgeois culture of the West.” Americans do not claim their system is perfect, the ad responded, but when something goes wrong, they are “free to do something about it.” Only capitalism gives workers the freedom to choose where they want to work, capitalists the freedom to invest, and both together the freedom to lower production costs and boost wages, it continued. A similar ad took a cheekier approach. “Comes the revolution!” it screamed above a middle-class family in their living room. “You, the American citizen — are the greatest revolutionist in history! You have met those age-old tyrants — cold, hunger, dirt, disease — and hurled them back.” Of course, the revolution referred to was the Industrial Revolution, not a certain disturbance that occurred in October 1917.³¹

If the broadcasting industry joined Truman, Eisenhower, and other public officials in selling Americans on the American Way, the government took a step toward the broadcasters’ wishes in the way it regulated radio and television after World War II. In her history of Federal Communications Commission regulation during the postwar “Red Scare,” Susan L. Brinson argued that Cold War rhetoric provided anti-New Deal conservatives in Congress with a pretext for removing regulations they abhorred, or, failing that, at least removing FCC employees who annoyed them.³² An example of the former was a 1949 revisiting of the so-called Mayflower Decision of 1941. In that decision, the FCC had been forced to choose between two Boston networks vying for the

³¹ Ibid.

³² Susan L. Brinson, *The Red Scare, Politics, and the Federal Communications Commission, 1941-1960* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 4.

same frequency. The Yankee Network was financially solvent but had a history of biased reporting. Mayflower Broadcasting was fairer-minded on the air, but hurt its case by fibbing to the commission about its financial condition. The commission granted Yankee the license, but with a hobble — the final decision stipulated that “the broadcaster cannot be an advocate.” This set off complaints that Yankee’s “freedom of speech” had been violated, and in 1949, a more conservative FCC nuanced the decision by clarifying that editorializing was allowed if “it is exercised in conformity with the paramount right of the public to hear a reasonably balance presentation.”³³

Anticommunism also could be used to harass left-leaning FCC employees, though the best example occurred during the war. In November 1941, the staunch anticommunist Texas Congressman Martin Dies wrote a letter to Roosevelt’s FCC chairman, James Lawrence Fly, complaining about one of Fly’s employees, Dr. Goodwin Watson. Dies charged that Watson, an academic psychologist whose leftish leanings were well known, was nothing less than “a propagandist for communism and the Soviet Union.” In fact, as Brinson noted, Watson was an ordained Methodist minister who identified himself as neither a communist nor a socialist and who, at some considerable personal cost, had accepted a position with the FCC because he wished to bring his expertise in propaganda to bear in the war against Germany. Nevertheless, Dies struck a nerve among Congressmen who either saw little daylight between the New Deal and Soviet communism or who simply clutched at anything to impede “that man” in the White House. In April 1943, a special Congressional panel declared Watson “unfit” to be a

³³ Ibid., 31-35, 129-130; Sterling and Kittross, 332-333. In time, this premise would evolve into the Fairness Doctrine.

government employee, but actually firing him was more difficult thanks to a sympathetic Senate.³⁴ Still, the point was made — anticommunism would be the order of the day on both sides of the microphone.

While broadcasters, politicians, and regulators worked to reinforce the Cold War linkage between political and economic freedom, the addition of the third member of the new trinity — religion — was made simpler by the fact that the United States and Soviet Union took opposite stances on it, as well. If President Roosevelt had characterized World War II as a defense of the “material and spiritual centers of civilization,” it was even easier for Presidents Truman and Eisenhower to employ similar rhetoric against a frankly antireligious power.³⁵ Publicly and privately, American presidents during the Cold War emphasized the centrality of religion to American life and identity. In a private letter to Winston Churchill in 1954, Eisenhower struck an eminently priestly tone when he wrote that only when one “attempts to picture an atheistic materialism in complete domination of all human life, that he fully appreciates how necessary it is to seek renewed faith and strength from his God, and sharpen up his sword for the struggle that cannot possibly be escaped.”³⁶ On another occasion, he confessed to a minister that, if anything, he did not stress the religious nature of the Cold War enough. “It is quite true that the appeal to basic spiritual longing is probably the most fundamental approach we could use,” Eisenhower wrote. “And it is equally true that despite my personal deep

³⁴ Brinson, 76-81. The effects of the “Red Scare” on radio writers and performers are considered in Chapter 6.

³⁵ Cherry, 291; Pierard and Linder, 189-190; Marty, *Under God*, 301-302.

³⁶ Eisenhower to Winston Churchill, Feb. 9, 1954, in *The Presidency: The Middle Way*, eds. Louis Galambos and Duane Van Ee, vol. 15 of *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996), 889.

conviction on the subject, of which I know you are aware, this aspect has from time to time appeared ‘dragged in by the scruff of the neck.’”³⁷

The men who sat in the White House were hardly the only Americans to cast the Cold War in religious terms. Ex-communist journalist-turned-anticommunist witness Whittaker Chambers described “Communism and Freedom” as “the two irreconcilable faiths of our time” in his bestselling autobiography, *Witness*.³⁸ Communism, he wrote, is “man’s second oldest faith.”

Its promise was whispered in the first days of the Creation under the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: “Ye shall be as gods.” It is the great alternative faith of mankind. Like all great faiths, its force derives from a simple vision. Other ages have had great visions. They have always been different versions of the same vision: the vision of God and man’s relationship to God. The Communist vision is the vision of Man without God.³⁹

In other words, Chambers underscored a typically civil religious divide: communism on one side, *all* religion on the other. Congress agreed. In the mid-1950s, it replaced the founders’ national motto, “E Pluribus Unum,” with a new one, “In God We Trust,” and it added the words “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance.⁴⁰ That gestures of this sort were civil religious and not necessarily Christian was suggested by the fact that a government body (Congress) added the phrase, but the Baptist clergyman who wrote the original version (Francis Bellamy) had not included it.

Similar sentiments animated some American churches. Popular evangelist Billy

³⁷ Eisenhower to Stanley Hoflund High, March 20, 1953, in *ibid.*, vol. 14, 116.

³⁸ Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (New York: Random House, 1952), 4.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁰ Marty, *Under God*, 298-300; Whitfield, 89-90.

Graham claimed that communism had been “masterminded by Satan” and obviously combined religion and politics when he said it was “anti-God, anti-Christ, and anti-American.” He echoed the Cold War’s existential tone when he declared that “either Communism must die, or Christianity must die,” and he offered loud backing, at least at first, for Senator Joseph McCarthy.⁴¹ Though some leading evangelicals of the 1950s de-emphasized premillennial dispensational eschatology on the grounds that it marginalized them and stunted their ability to minister to the wider culture, others developed a new genre of anticommunist rhetoric by locating the Red Menace in Biblical prophecy.⁴² Many associated the Soviet Union with the Book of Ezekiel’s cryptic reference to a “chief prince” who would supposedly attack Israel in the final days. Using various formulations, premillennial writers argued that because the Hebrew for “chief prince” was *nesi rosh*, and because “Rosh” could have been an early version of “Russia,” the Soviet Union fit the bill.⁴³ By 1963, one vice president of the Moody Bible Institute stated in certain terms that “the name is branded upon that godless nation as though God wanted the whole world to know that this is the people He has foredoomed to perish upon the mountains of Israel.”⁴⁴

For their part, the world’s communists did not exactly burnish their image with

⁴¹ Whitfield, 81; William Martin, *With God On Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway Books, 1996), 33-35. At one point, Graham went so far as to suggest that he could support altering the Fifth Amendment if it got in McCarthy’s way.

⁴² Regarding the different ways 1950s American evangelicals used premillennial dispensational eschatology in their public pronouncements, see Carpenter, *Revive Us*, 198-204.

⁴³ Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1992), 152-162, 230-241.

⁴⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 158.

Americans. Their actions in the 1940s and 1950s only fueled the view that everything they stood for was anathema to religion, yet this happened in two seemingly opposite ways. On the one hand, they really were atheists, and atheism was one creed that lay beyond the bounds of even the most generous interpretations of American civil religion. Nikita Khrushchev, who led the Soviet Union after Stalin's death in 1953, launched a new antireligion drive in his first year as Soviet premier. Just as public confessions of religion became louder and more ubiquitous in the United States, public expressions of atheism became more prominent in the Soviet Union. Communist Party leaders complained that religion was counterproductive because it was unscientific, it wasted time devoted to religious observances, and its holidays were "often accompanied by many days of drunkenness and by mass slaughter of cattle."⁴⁵ Admitting that religion had failed to wither away on its own, they decided to give it a push. Directives issued by the Central Committee in 1954 called for improvements in atheist propaganda, several new atheistic publishing ventures, and more emphasis on atheism by social organizations such as the Komsomol youth league and the labor unions.⁴⁶ Harsher measures were taken, as well, including the closing of churches and the initiation of legal action against believers.⁴⁷

On the other hand, communism weirdly seemed to be a religion to some Americans — one whose promises were sweet but whose illiberalism and historical materialism rendered it anathema to American civil religion. In his study of religion and

⁴⁵ Joan Delaney Grossman, "Khrushchev's Anti-Religious Policy and the Campaign of 1954," *Soviet Studies* 24 (January 1973): 375.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 378.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 384.

politics, Emilio Gentile took a more social scientific tack than Whittaker Chambers, but he agreed that communism functioned as a kind of faith, and he listed the Russian variant, Bolshevism, alongside Italian fascism and German Nazism one of the species of sacralized politics that followed World War I. Inspired by “Marxist eschatological passions,” Bolshevism displaced the saints of the Russian Orthodox Church with its own saints — Marx, Lenin, and Stalin — and installed a new calendar and new rituals to bolster its new beliefs, Gentile wrote.⁴⁸ Not a few Americans made similar observations. For example, in 1951, the Rev. Dr. Charles W. Lowry of All Saints Protestant Episcopal Church, New York, delivered a series of lectures on “Communism and Christ.” He said that communism was a religion to the extent that it helped man “find personal well-being through union with forces and power greater than himself,” but it was dangerous precisely because it could be seen “in many respects paralleling or caricaturing Christianity of a strongly dogmatic, authoritarian and intolerance type.”⁴⁹ Harold J. Laski, a British Marxist who wrote and lectured in the United States, went so far as to compare Russian communists to American Puritans. “There is the same consciousness of election, the same realization of the infinite worth of grace, the same contempt for the normal habits of human nature, a good deal, too, of the Puritan’s conviction that whatever denies his central truth is error from the devil the infection from which cannot be destroyed too early,” he wrote.⁵⁰

What is perhaps most striking, from the perspective of civil religion and radio, is that those on both sides who conceived the Cold War in transcendent terms also

⁴⁸ Gentile, 38-44.

⁴⁹ “The Age of Reason Held Disappearing,” *The New York Times*, August 13, 1951, 12.

⁵⁰ Harold J. Laski, *Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (New York: Viking, 1947), 74.

recognized that popular culture was one of its most crucial battlefields. The United States' evangelical impulse long had produced didactic novels, poetry, plays, and movies, and that tradition continued in radio drama.⁵¹ In the Soviet Union, Leon Trotsky linked popular culture and religion in a 1923 essay in which he argued that the Russian church never touched workers as deeply as cinema, yet it tried to touch them in much the same way. "As for church-going, the people do not go because they are religious," Trotsky wrote, "the church is brilliantly lighted, crowded with men and women in their best clothes, the singing is good — a range of social-aesthetic attractions not provided by the factory, the family, or the workaday street." Were the Communist Party to provide similar attractions, he opined, it could break the workers' loyalty to the church more effectively than antireligious propaganda.⁵² Perhaps that was what Khrushchev had in mind when he added to his 1954 initiative a call for "fairy tales, folk songs, sayings and proverbs directed against religion."⁵³ In any event, when American radio drama was summoned to the cause of leading people to religion, or at least to a religious feeling about their nation, it had much to work with.

⁵¹ For a history of religion and popular culture in America, see R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Though less focused on religion, John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1978), uses the history of a popular New York landmark to compare the "edifying" popular culture of the nineteenth century with the baser, working-class oriented amusements of the twentieth century.

⁵² Leon Trotsky, "Vodka, the Church, and the Cinema," 1923, Marxists Internet Archive, "Women and Marxism: Trotsky (Vodka, the Church, and the Cinema - 1923)," http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/women/life/23_07_12.htm (accessed December 7, 2010).

⁵³ Grossman, 377.

The Programs

Postwar radio programs used the priestly style of American civil religion to cast “the American Way” as itself transcendently good. Instead of the United States simply enjoying the divinity’s protection, now God’s will for humankind — understood to include democracy, capitalism, and religion — had to be protected by the United States. This tended to have two effects. First, it inverted part of the pastoral civil religious formula found in the 1930s’ superhero adventures. Second, it suggested that Americans had reached an exceptional moment in history, one that authorized extraordinary measures.

Institutions

Integral to the American monomyth described in Chapter 1 was the inadequacy of the nation’s normal means of countering danger. Before Superman, the Green Hornet, or the Shadow would swoop into action, the nation’s “ordinary institutions” — generally, its government bodies, law enforcement agencies, and military — had to have been overcome. Jewett and Lawrence called this the “only failing” of an otherwise edenic virtuous community.⁵⁴ Radio’s superhero adventures delivered a pastoral message in the 1930s because they reminded Americans that even when national institutions let them down, there remained moral resources on which the nation could draw. Skepticism about the ordinary institutions was understandable in a country suffering from the Depression, but the Cold War coincided with an era of rising national confidence, and girding Americans for a new fight required a priestly message that cast the institutions themselves as moral resources. The fumbling commissioners, buffoonish sheriffs, and

⁵⁴ Jewett and Lawrence, *Monomyth*, 170.

crooked businessmen of Depression-era stories gave way, after the war, to squeaky-clean policemen, death-defying special agents, and patriotic captains of industry. The institutions were back.

Richard Gid Powers illustrated this transition by describing the prickly relationship between prolific radio producer Phillips H. Lord and Federal Bureau of Investigation Director J. Edgar Hoover. In the mid-1930s, the two men cooperated on a short-lived detective series titled *G-Men*. It soon became apparent they pursued different visions. Lord specialized in crowd-pleasing, if artless, formula thrillers, and wanted to emphasize his detectives' heroic qualities, in effect turning them into superheroes. Hoover preferred to stress the teamwork of the bureau and the expanding science of criminology. *G-Men* ended with hard feelings on both sides, but Lord and Hoover fulfilled their desires in other series. Lord went on to produce *Gangbusters* and *Counterspy*, while Hoover found other producers who were willing to create a new kind of show.⁵⁵ In a 1940 magazine article, Hoover outlined his idea — radio stories that made the bureau the hero — and asked listeners to place their faith not in some extra-institutional savior but in the institutions themselves. Commenting on possible Nazi sabotage, he wrote, “the combined attack by federal and state forces should be sufficient so far as investigation and prosecution are concerned.” The bureau welcomed the assistance of private individuals, “but this cooperation should be limited to passing on to the proper officials all questionable facts or rumors which may come one’s way.”⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Richard Gid Powers, *G-Men: Hoover’s FBI in American Popular Culture* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), 207-217.

⁵⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, 220.

The “official broadcast” of the FBI in the postwar period was *This Is Your FBI*. It aired on ABC, then a fledgling enterprise evolved from the old Blue Network, from 1945 to 1953. Unlike its longer-lived rival, CBS’s *The FBI in Peace and War*, *This Is Your FBI* was given access to FBI files — indeed, as Powers noted, Hoover’s anger about the CBS series was part of the inspiration for *This Is Your FBI*. Though the show was not “official” in the same sense that *This Is War* or *You Can’t Do Business With Hitler* had been official — that is, it was not literally produced by a federal agency — Hoover had as many fingerprints on it as the G-Men had on their Tommy guns. It was he who took the idea to the advertising agency that produced it, and he even helped them find a sponsor. For good measure, he loudly announced that *The FBI in Peace and War* did not have the bureau’s endorsement, and he asked Congress to restrict the commercial use of the FBI’s name and seal.⁵⁷

Hoover’s broadcasting philosophy was apparent in a *This Is Your FBI* episode titled “Communist Agent” that aired on December 1, 1950. The story involved Bruce Carter, a shipping clerk working on the U.S. West Coast. A year earlier, the Marxist-leaning Carter emigrated from Canada, hoping to bring mischief to the United States. A year inside the country changed his mind, however, so by the time a party operative gave him his assignment, he chose instead to tip off the FBI. A communist agent using the false name “Jones” wanted to sneak someone out of the country and asked Carter for a list of outbound freighters willing to carry passengers. Throughout the play, the FBI agents were little more than plot devices moving the story from clue to clue, but explicit appeals were made in two speeches by the narrator at the end of the first and second acts.

⁵⁷ Powers, 221-222; Dunning, 667-668; MacDonald, 169-170.

In the first speech, he pondered why any American should be attracted to communism.

Perhaps the most tragic fact about tonight's case from the files of the Federal Bureau of Investigation is that Don Crawford, which is the real name of communist agent Jones, and Arthur Harrison, the man he is trying to help flee the country, are both Americans. Each was born in this country and grew up with the advantages that are inherent in that statement. Yet, each became a communist and adopted this foreign ideology. Why? In their cases, as in so many others, the answer goes back to their younger days when the doctrine was first taught them. Each joined a cell of the party before his twenty-first birthday, a cell made up of other young Americans similarly indoctrinated.⁵⁸

Not only was there no good reason to be a communist — by implication, it was ascribed to youthful naiveté — but it was “tragic” when an American made that choice because being an American carried “advantages” that were “inherent.” Like the coda Matt Cvetic attached to his memoir, this speech, too, ended by urging Americans to preserve what they had.

You as an individual listener to this program might be asking what you can do to help stem the tide, to prevent the communist total in this nation from swelling. There is an answer. Teach the youngsters now growing up more than the three R's. Teach them that as Americans, they are part of a people who own the most precious thing in the world — their personal freedom.⁵⁹

In the second act, Crawford and Harrison were arrested, and the narrator's next speech clarified the link between the specific institution of the FBI and the larger battle for the American Way.

These two arrests did not, of course, end the subversive work of the Communist Party in the United States. They

⁵⁸ “Communist Agent,” *This Is Your FBI*, December 1, 1950.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

are still active in every state in the union. But they can be prevented from accomplishing their goals with the aid of an alert, watchful citizenry. If you suspect anyone of espionage, sabotage, or subversive activities, report the facts to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Please report only facts. Remember that the ideological war between communism and democracy is a battle between the Big Lie and the Big Truth. So avoid reporting malicious gossip or idle rumor. Get the facts. Then turn to page 1 of your telephone directory for the number and call the nearest field office of your FBI.⁶⁰

The return of the institutions in 1950s radio was not limited to federal law enforcement. Perhaps the most famous crime-fighting show of the decade focused instead on the Los Angeles Police Department. *Dragnet* premiered on NBC in 1949 and would remain on the air until 1957. Along the way, it inspired an even more famous television series and two mostly forgotten movies. As with *This Is Your FBI*, the idea of *Dragnet* began when someone from law enforcement and someone from entertainment agreed that the police force itself, and not some idealized heroic policeman, should form the basis of a new series. The “someone from law enforcement” was LAPD sergeant Marty Wynn, who served as a technical adviser to the 1948 film *He Walked By Night*, and the “someone from entertainment” was the then-little-known actor Jack Webb, who had a supporting role in the film. Inspired by his conversations with Wynn, Webb hammered out *Dragnet*’s concept. To make it authentic, he visited police stations, rode with detectives, and even took classes at a police academy. Eventually, he convinced the LAPD’s brass to open its files to him in much the same way Hoover aided *This Is Your FBI*.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Dunning, 208-209; Jane Pelgram, “Bona Fide Crime,” *Radio-Television Life*, November 25, 1949, LAB, 38-39.

The result, as John Dunning put it, was “a pioneering series of unprecedented realism.”⁶² Whether in plot, dialogue, or sound effect, verisimilitude triumphed. Gone was the superheroic formula of masked crusaders dropping from the sky, and in was the daily work of ordinary policemen. Or so audiences were told. Riffing off *The Shadow*’s iconic tag line, “Crime does not pay,” Webb once said, “We don’t even try to prove that crime doesn’t pay. Sometimes, it does.”⁶³ The sound effects were so detailed there could be as many as three hundred in a single episode. In older or more formulaic police shows, effects had been rudimentary — a siren here, a gunshot there. But when *Dragnet*’s officers read a suspect’s description on a police file, they could be heard flipping to page 2 because descriptions were on page 2 of real LAPD files, and when they climbed a flight of stairs in a police building, the number of steps exactly matched the actual building.⁶⁴ One early episode spent nearly two and a half minutes — an eternity in broadcasting — following the buzzing and clicks of a long-distance phone call from Los Angeles to Murphy, Idaho.⁶⁵ In an interview published that same month, Webb said his greatest frustration was convincing bit players *not* to adopt police-show conventions. “Instead of speaking like real people, they fall into working-class stereotypes with lots of ‘ain’ts’ and ‘youses,’” he said. “Real people don’t necessarily sound like stereotypes, so the actors have to be broken of the habit.”⁶⁶

⁶² Dunning, 208.

⁶³ Ibid., 210.

⁶⁴ Pelgram, 43; Dunning, 211.

⁶⁵ “Mother-In-Law Murder,” *Dragnet*, November 24, 1949.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Pelgram, 43.

At first glance, *Dragnet*'s realism and attention to detail might be thought of as a step away from the American monomyth. The show's protagonist, Sergeant Joe Friday, was merely competent, not a cartoon character like Dick Tracy. But these shows did not reject the myth so much as transfer the qualities of the superhero onto the nation itself in the form of its authorities and institutions. Detailed, technically accurate police shows implied detailed, technically accurate police work, and that, in turn, implied that the nation's ordinary institutions were staffed by well-trained men and women who both embodied "the Big Truth" and knew better than the average citizen how to protect it. To borrow Powers' term, these shows "mystified" officialdom in much the same way that superhero stories made their protagonists larger than life. Now ordinary citizens played the role the institutions played in the 1930s — they were well-meaning, but needed help — and the institutions played the role of the superheroes. As Powers put it, "FBI publicity made counterespionage out to be a complex, highly sophisticated task best left to experts scientifically trained for the job — in other words, the FBI."⁶⁷

In a *Dragnet* story broadcast just before Christmas 1953, police came to the aid of a religious icon. Friday and his partner, Frank Smith, were assigned to recover a statue of Jesus taken from the oldest church in Los Angeles, the eighteenth-century Old Mission Plaza Church a few blocks from City Hall. At the church, they met Father Xavier Rojas who said the statue had been stolen from a crèche. Thirty-one years earlier, the people of the church chipped in to buy it, and each year it was displayed a few days before Christmas. The priest hoped it could be returned in time for the first Christmas Mass.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Powers, 218.

⁶⁸ "The Big Little Jesus," *Dragnet*, December 22, 1953. In "The Big Saint," *Dragnet*, April 26,

“Just for a check on the pawn shops, how much is the statue worth?” Friday asked him.

“In money?”

“Well, that’s the point in pawn shops, Father.”

Not much, Rojas admitted. That was not the point to the church.

“We’ve had children in the parish, they’ve grown up and married,” he said. “It’s the only Jesus they know. ... And we’ve had children who’ve died. It was the only Jesus they knew. So many of the people who come here are simple people. They wouldn’t understand, Sergeant. It would be like changing the evening star.”⁶⁹

A choirboy, Joseph Heffernen, reported seeing a man in a mismatched suit carrying a bundle out of the church after the last Mass before the theft. It was about the size of the statute. Friday and Smith tracked down the man’s employer, obtained his name, and finally located his home, a flea-bitten motel for derelicts called “The Golden Dream.” When they confronted the man, he became belligerent, further fueling suspicion. They arrested him and took him to police headquarters, where he finally confessed — but not to the theft of the statue. He thought they had come about an unrelated fender-bender and knew nothing of the theft. He said the package at church contained a mended pair of pants he had picked up from a tailor, and that also explained the mismatched suit.⁷⁰

Frustrated, Friday and Smith returned to the church to break the bad news to Father Rojas that they would not be able to return his statue in time for Christmas Mass.

1951, a religious icon “solved” a crime as a St. Christopher medallion helped police located a ring of car thieves.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

As they spoke, a small boy pulled a wagon along the sidewalk in front of the church. Inside the wagon was the missing statue of Jesus.

“When he got closer, you could see he was no bigger than a pint of milk,” Friday said, narrating the scene. “He was a luminous-eyed little Mexican boy with a face as young as yesterday.”

The boy explained to Father Rojas in Spanish that he had just received the wagon for Christmas. He had prayed for such a wagon, and he promised that if he received it, he would give Jesus the first ride. Now, seeing the officers, he wondered if he had done the wrong thing.

“He wants to know if the Devil will come and take him to hell,” Rojas said.

“That’s your department, Father,” said Friday.

In the play’s closing moments, the boy placed the icon back in the crèche as Friday described the scene. “Frank and I could have been wrong, but the small plaster statue seemed to approve,” he said. As the boy pulled the wagon out of the church, Smith said one thing puzzled him.

“I don’t understand how he got that wagon today. Don’t kids wait for Santa Claus anymore?” he asked.

“It isn’t from Santa Claus,” said Rojas. “The firemen fix old toys and give them to new children. Pacquito’s family, they’re poor.”

As he spoke, a sacred theme that had begun with a single organ was joined by a women’s chorus. It seemed to signal that even the angels smiled.

“Are they, Father?” asked Friday.⁷¹

⁷¹ Ibid.

Finally, the return of the institutions represented by shows such as *This Is Your FBI* and *Dragnet* was not limited to law enforcement nor even to public institutions. It was not government qua government but the American Way of democracy, capitalism, and religion (or moral virtue) that was lifted up by priestly postwar civil religion. Some shows celebrated more general institutions such as “free enterprise.” One fanciful entry was *Family Theater*’s comical play, “The Story of Danny Dollar Bill,” starring the squeaky-voiced character actor Sterling Holloway.⁷² Danny was a personified dollar bill who wanted nothing more than to bring the world cheer. When his first owner, a wealthy man in a limousine, thoughtlessly threw him away on two cigars, he commiserated in the cash register with a wrinkled, older buck named Horace.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get around,” said Horace. “I just came in from the racetrack myself. ... Now, there’s the life, kid. Plenty of excitement. You’re always on the move.”

“Well, just what do we buy at the races?” asked Danny.

“Well, we don’t buy nuttin’ really. People use us to bet on the nags. Ah, you ought to see them. They go nuts.”

“Does this betting make them happy?”

The question caught Horace off-guard.

“Happy? Yeah, I guess,” he said. “When they win, which ain’t often. The guys who bet me usually lose their shirts. I must be a jinx or somethin’.”

“Oh, I don’t think I care too much about going to the racetrack then,” said Danny.

⁷² “The Story of Danny Dollar Bill,” *Family Theater*, November 7, 1951. Confidence in law enforcement and free enterprise also could be combined, as in “Murmured Million,” *Counterspy*, August 11, 1949. In that story, federal agents pursued a ring of criminals who were shaking down American corporations by spreading false rumors about their products.

“You see, Horace, I want to make people happy when I buy things for them.”

As the play progressed, Danny found it a tough ambition. His frustration mounted when a woman used him to buy a tie her husband did not need, and he was disappointed by a musician who did not spend him for something he did need. The bottom came when Danny was stolen by a wayward youth named Tommy. Thanks to his theft, the boy was sent to reform school.

“Poor Danny Dollar Bill,” said Holloway. “He wished he’d never been printed. He wanted so much to make people happy, and all he’d succeeded in doing for young Tommy was to buy him five years of misery.”

Then one day in a bank, Danny found himself in a stack of worn-out bills destined for the incinerator. He tried to slip away, but a teller trapped him with her paperweight. When she lifted the weight, she gasped — and then giggled. She called her boss, and he snickered, too. Soon everyone in the bank was laughing. Danny had no idea what they found so funny until someone explained that a printing error had placed a smile on George Washington’s face. At the end of the play, Danny hung proudly in a frame inside the bank, and whenever the hurried people of the city stopped to look at him, they grinned. A U.S. dollar bill, symbol of the American capitalist system, not only found a way to make people happy, but participated in their happiness, as well.⁷³

Peons to “free enterprise” also often anchored another priestly strategy — presenting American political and economic institutions as embodiments of the rest of the world’s aspirations. Such a theme was the weekly diet of *Life With Luigi*, an

⁷³ Ibid.

immigration-related situation comedy on CBS from 1948 to 1953.⁷⁴ The show starred veteran character actor J. Carrol Naish as Luigi Basco, a well-meaning if clumsy newcomer to Chicago. Each episode was framed as a letter to his mother in Italy, and tips on Americanism were provided by Miss Spaulding, who taught a citizenship class Luigi attended with other immigrants. The show probably did not reflect how America looked to outsiders so much as it revealed how Americans wanted to think their nation appeared to the rest of the world, but it invoked a form of national self-identity that could be considered assimilationist. Luigi and his fellow classmates in Miss Spaulding's Americanism class came from many countries and spoke many languages, but in each episode, they endeavored to become as American as possible as quickly as possible.

In an episode broadcast on May 5, 1951, Luigi unexpectedly found himself delivering an "I Am an American Day" speech. Because he did not yet have his papers, he explained that for him, it really was "I Want to be an American Day." Nervous before a crowd of fifteen thousand, he stammered and stuttered at first, but then he spoke from the heart about what becoming an American meant to him. Naish delivered the speech in a thick, stereotypical Italian accent.

All I'm-a can think of-a now is a boat. Is almost-a three years ago and I'm-a coming to America in that boat. America! Then we pass Statue of Liberty, beautiful lady of-a peace, and I'm-a could hardly wait to get off-a that boat, to hear-a somebody speak English. And then the boat is-a dock, and I'm-a run down-a the gang-a-plank and then ... I'm-a never forget it. Was a little boy playing, and I'm-a heard my first American words — bippety-boppety-boo! ... Laugh-a and sing, that's America. Work and-a play, that's America. Joke-a how you want-a, speak-a how you want-a, that's America. Americans, no let-a nobody tell you you

⁷⁴ Dunning, 397.

can't-a say what you want-a, you can't-a vote how you want-a, because then ... then, you change America. And when you do that, people like-a me, we become Americans, but we say, is no more America.⁷⁵

So closely did Luigi identify the United States with its professed ideals that he concluded if those qualities were absent, the United States would not be the United States. Chief among them were political freedoms, such as freedom of speech and participation in representative government, but his joke about “bippety-boppety-boo,” which alluded to popular music, and his references to laughing, singing, and playing implied that material abundance, consumerism, and leisure were part of the equation, as well.⁷⁶

Finally, a story titled “Joe Discovers America,” which aired as part of the anthology series *Radio Reader's Digest* on March 4, 1948, explored how American capitalism changed a European nobleman. In a tale that claimed to be based on fact, the Hungarian nobleman Joseph Mornay arrived in New York harbor in 1906 wearing “formal white gloves and an elegantly waxed moustache.” When an immigration clerk asked him his occupation, he took offense.

“Whatever pleases me is my occupation. Hunting, riding, dueling. I also play the cello. ... I am a Hungarian gentleman. I do not work for a living,” he said.⁷⁷

When subsequent questioning revealed he lost his estate to creditors, the clerk wryly commented that Mornay would learn much about his new country. Though penniless, he was not friendless as his Uncle William worked for a steel mill in

⁷⁵ “I Want to be an American Day,” *Life With Luigi*, May 15, 1951.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ “Joe Discovers America,” *Radio Reader's Digest*, March 4, 1948.

Pittsburgh. Mornay was shocked to find that William, a common laborer, lived like “a servant” rather than the nobleman he had been in Hungary. He lamented William’s having “lost his fortune.”

“No, my boy. I still have my fortune ...,” said William. “Right here, in these two hands. That’s everybody’s fortune in America. Two hands and an opportunity to use them.”⁷⁸

Much as he hated it, Mornay was broke, so he accepted William’s help in landing him a job as a puddler. Immediately, he alienated himself from his co-workers by refusing to speak to them and claiming they were “inferior.” Finally, one of them clocked him. As he nursed a sore jaw, the one person he had befriended, a Polish girl named Anna, came to his aid. Yet even she could not abide his calling America “backward.”

“You’re the one who’s backward ...,” she said. “If you’re so much better than the men you work with, you have a chance to prove it. They’ll pay you what you’re worth.”

“You mean I’m not worth much?”

“Well, are you, Joseph? Tell the truth. How much are you worth to this company with your arrogant attitude, with your constant complaints?”

Realizing she spoke from affection, he decided a change of tack was needed. Now his pride led him to work harder than the other men, to “show these peasants what a nobleman can do.” What Mornay found to his surprise, however, was that the work changed who he was, not just the relationships he had with others. Anna noticed it, too.

“You’re becoming an American, Joseph, against your will,” she said.

“Not against my will,” he replied. “Not any more. Six months ago, when I

⁷⁸ Ibid.

decided to work hard, and prove that I was worth [*sic*], I wanted to get ahead just to show the other people. But now I want to show myself.”⁷⁹

“Joe Discovers America” stood in contrast to *Family Theater*’s play “Tommy Malone Comes Home,” discussed in Chapter 4. In the latter, America represented an opportunity that immigrants could use for good or ill, but in the former, the American system itself made them into better human beings.

Exceptions

Postwar radio dramas using the priestly style of American civil religion also evinced a feeling of the extraordinary, a sense that history stood at a moment in which normal rules do not apply. Protagonists both inside and outside the ordinary institutions found themselves having to take unusual measures, only this time it was not because American institutions failed — it was to fulfill America’s redemptive mission. This flowed, in part, from the notion that history stood at a point of ultimate conflict, but it also flowed from the belief that the United States *was* good and did not merely *represent* good. Its agents were authorized to take actions which, had the communists or someone else taken them, would have been distasteful, immoral, and illegal. As when Cvetic supposedly took the extraordinary action of destroying his family for the national good, the priestly heroes of radio drama took liberties, bent rules, and made exceptions.

Their exceptions often bore a resemblance to those described in the political theology of Carl Schmitt. The point is not that Schmitt served as a model for radio’s writers — they probably never read him and, if they had, would not have admitted it —

⁷⁹ Ibid.

but his philosophy of the exception resembles how a sense of the extraordinary combined with the return of the institutions to give priestly civil religion the form that it took in postwar radio drama. Schmitt was born in Germany in 1888 and, in the 1920s, toiled away as a low-profile conservative Catholic academic. He was deeply skeptical of the liberal parliamentary Weimar Republic and suspected it would wind up in a dictatorship. In late 1932, after Hitler was named chancellor but before the Enabling Act expanded his powers, Schmitt worked briefly as an advisor for the conservative politician Kurt von Schleicher. Shortly before Schleicher fell victim to the purge known as “The Night of the Long Knives,” Schmitt joined the Nazi Party in May 1933, and he was accused of producing a kind of Nazi apologetics. He later repudiated his involvement with Hitler’s regime, and he was not convicted of criminal wrongdoing after the war, but some of the things he wrote in the mid-1930s permanently marred his intellectual reputation. Nevertheless, they did not prevent him from becoming one of the world’s most influential political thinkers after the war.⁸⁰

At the center of Schmitt’s politics was the idea of the exception, which he defined as “a state of extreme peril, a danger to the existence of the state, or the like.”⁸¹ By calling such an event an exception, Schmitt underscored his view that it lay beyond the normal functioning of liberal democracy. He rejected the Enlightenment’s hope that politics could be rationalized and tamed into a rule of law capable of handling all possible situations. The exception, wrote Schmitt, “cannot be circumscribed factually and made to

⁸⁰ For a brief introduction to Schmitt’s thought, see Michael Hollerich, “Carl Schmitt,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, eds. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 107-122.

⁸¹ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, George Schwab, trans. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 6.

conform to a preformed law.”⁸² Not only is the law unable to foresee it in all of its particulars, but the exception calls into question the very existence of the law. It is, in a sense, bigger than the law — it is capable of destroying the law but the law is incapable of destroying it. The trickiest question to Schmitt was who was to decide when an exception exists, for therein he found the true source of sovereignty. As he put it in his most quoted line, “sovereign is he who decides on the exception.”⁸³

What is most important about the Schmittian exception from the perspective of American radio drama is that while it lay *beyond* the law, it did not stand *against* the law. The sovereign stepped away from the law in order to save the law, not to abrogate it — once the exception passed, the state would go back to normal. Unlike the superheroes of the 1930s, who rescued people for whom the law had failed, the fictional communist-fighters of the 1950s saved the law itself. In a Schmittian sense, they took sovereignty onto themselves. At the international level, the United States assumed a similar role when its fictional secret agents operated without restriction in other countries in order to save their “freedom.” A subtext was the redemptive violence both meted out and suffered by these protagonists. Not only was the violence they deployed against America’s enemies justified by referencing the United States’ longstanding self-identity as a redeemer nation, but the violence they suffered also was redemptive when it ended their earthly existences in order to transform them into something transcendent, namely heroes.⁸⁴

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 5.

⁸⁴ The notion of “exception” described here is similar to what cultural historian Richard Slotkin called “the problem of force” in Western movies of the late 1940s and early 1950s. As an example, he compared John Ford’s 1950 film *Rio Grande* to the Truman Administration’s policy in Korea. In the film, the protagonist, Colonel Kirby Yorke (played by John Wayne), had “the knowledge and the skill necessary

Stephen J. Whitfield found similar themes in the works of one of the 1950s' bestselling writers — Mickey Spillane. Though panned by critics, Spillane wrote six of the 1950s' ten bestselling novels, and his private eye hero, Mike Hammer, reached iconic status on radio, in film, and on television as well as the printed page. Spillane even played Hammer himself in a British interpretation of the franchise.⁸⁵ Whitfield did not mention Schmitt, but he found in Hammer similar assumptions about the limited utility of “preformed law.” Equating communism to madness, Hammer undermined all hope that it was possible to reason with Reds. As Whitfield put it,

In destroying such motiveless, psychopathic malevolence, Hammer personifies the rejection of liberalism. The cure for the plague of Communism cannot be the diffusion of New Deal programs to relieve economic misery, or the extension of the Four Freedoms to lighten the burden of social injustice. The solution, the creator of Hammer seems to fantasize, is violent prophylaxis.⁸⁶

Hammer's unflinching use of violence — graphic descriptions of oozing wounds and messy crime scenes can almost be lifted at random from Spillane's works — was “presented as redemptive and even sacrificial, sinuously finding its source — however

to ‘solve the Indian problem’ for good and all,” as Slotkin put it, but he was not given authority to use it. So he made an “exception” and crossed the Rio Grande River in pursuit of Apaches — clearly violating Mexican sovereignty — but the plot was constructed in a way that made his action seem morally justified and even salvific. “The ideology that informs Yorke's mission ... is the same as that which would govern the rationales and procedures of ‘covert action’ and ‘secret war,’ which would be typical features of American Cold War tactics in the ensuing forty years,” Slotkin wrote. “In operations of this kind, officials of the government — in the executive branch, the military, or the CIA — undertake a mission deemed vital to national security that cannot be successfully initiated or completed without violating the letter or spirit of the Constitution and/or Congressional statutes, formal treaty obligation, or international law.” Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), 353-365.

⁸⁵ Spillane's acting career effectively began and ended with *The Girl Hunters* (1963), a forgettable British film adapted from a novel Spillane published the previous year. More famous were the several American Mike Hammer movies of the 1950s, a Mike Hammer television series that aired in 1958 and 1959, and numerous later film and television productions.

⁸⁶ Whitfield, 36.

preposterously — in Christian ethics,” Whitfield wrote.⁸⁷ Violence, in other words, was not only a means justified by its end, but a right to kill that only those who embodied right could exercise. It was the same sacred violence that *Cavalcade of America*’s John Brown invoked in 1940 when he identified himself with the right hand of God.

Spillane’s world came to radio in 1953 in a series titled *That Hammer Guy*. It aired on Mutual throughout that year and most of 1954.⁸⁸ Less graphic than the novels, it retained their pug-nosed bluntness, and audiences were encouraged to imagine themselves as Mike Hammer through his use of second-person narration. In one episode, his secretary, Velda — a character familiar to Spillane’s readers — called her boss for help when a man was shot in her apartment.⁸⁹ On arrival, Hammer discovered the wound was superficial, threw a blanket over the still-unconscious victim, and lifted the phone to call the police.

“Mike, who are you calling?” Velda asked.

The police, he said.

“Why?”

“Well, why do you think? The law says all bullet wounds have to be reported to the police.”

She dissembled.

“Please, Mike, put the phone down ... I don’t want you to report this. Can’t you make one exception?”

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Dunning, 659.

⁸⁹ “Velda’s Brother,” *That Hammer Guy*, n.d.

“The law doesn’t believe in exceptions. What’s the matter with you, Velda? You what me to lose my license?”

Distraught, she admitted the wounded man was her brother Bill. He was impetuous and immature, and four years earlier involved himself with the Communist Party. She warned him not to. Now he wanted out, and it appeared the communists did not want to lose him. When Bill awoke, Hammer scolded him.

“Your sister tried to talk some sense into you four years ago,” he said.

“Four years ago, I was younger. You know what it is to be a young guy and broke?”

“Is that why you belonged?”

“The only reason. I was a paid courier. I wasn’t interested in politics or party dogma, just money. I was paid for my work, and I didn’t ask questions.”

Hammer warned Bill there was no easy way to leave communism, but by establishing that Bill never had been a true believer, the play left open the chance he could wind up a hero without violating its principle that communists were beyond redemption. A curvy plot followed involving a manila envelope full of mysterious documents, a late-night walk on the pier, and a Marxist seductress named Marion Reed. In the final scene, Bill became a hero when Reed tried to shoot Hammer and Bill blocked the bullet. Hammer dispensed with Reed and rushed to the dying Bill.

“Mike, it’s no flesh wound this time, is it?” he said. “You were right, Mike. No easy way. But this is the best, isn’t it?”

Narrating in the second person, Hammer had the last word. “You never get a chance to answer that question,” he told the audience. “But you can tell by the fixed smile

on his face that he really found the answer himself.”⁹⁰

The hero’s role as a savior of law and order also highlighted a 1952 play that aired as part of the series *Nightbeat*. Unlike Mike Hammer, *Nightbeat*’s protagonist, Randy Stone, was not a private eye, but a reporter for the fictional *Chicago Star*. Stone was played by Frank Lovejoy, the same actor who portrayed Matt Cvetic on the big screen. “Long Live the Clown” began when a frantic woman rushed into *The Star*’s office and asked Stone if the paper paid for stories.⁹¹

“Well, they’ve been known to if it’s important enough, and if it’s an exclusive . . . ,” he said. “What do you have to sell?”

“I’m married to a communist spy,” she said.

Stone asked her why she came to a newspaper instead of the FBI.

“They won’t pay anything,” she said. “I’ve got to have money. And you’ve got to promise that you won’t tell them until after you’ve paid me.”

Stone told her to slow down. “If you’ve got a story, my boss will be happy to buy an exclusive, but not behind the government’s back,” he said.

“Oh, you can tell the FBI. I didn’t mean you couldn’t give them the facts. But we’ve got to be safe first. Don’t you see? We’ve got to be safe.”

The play established, in its opening scene, that the case would go to the FBI eventually, but it was so unusual that first extraordinary steps had to be taken. The woman said her husband, a Czechoslovak immigrant, had lost his faith in communism when he saw what America really was like, and now he wanted to escape his employers.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ “Long Live the Clown,” *Nightbeat*, May 8, 1952.

She wanted money because she dreamed of buying a farm in Kansas and the two of them starting a new life far away.

Stone left the newspaper office with her, and she led him to her husband, Rudy Griš, who worked as “tightrope clown” at a circus.⁹² At first, he resisted both of them. He told his wife to go to her quarters, and he told Stone she fell from a trapeze some time ago and had been addled and excitable since. His defiance withered, however, when it was time for his own act, and because someone sabotaged his shoe, he fell from the tightrope to the ground. In his dying moment, he called for Stone and confessed he was a spy.

The rest of the play weaved two plot threads together. A pair of Marxist hit men named Kovacs and Mavlik — the men who killed Rudy — now set out to kill Stone and Mrs. Griš, and in what at first seemed unrelated, a local Chicago gangster named Louis Martelle complained about a column Stone had written about new mobsters moving into the city. Martelle wanted to know who they were, but Stone would not tell him. The play came to a climax in Mavlik’s “luxury house trailer” on the Michigan lakefront. Just as he and Kovacs were about to dispatch with Stone and Mrs. Griš, Martelle — who had been following Stone — burst in and shot Mavlik. A second later, he was shot by Kovacs who was shot by Martelle in turn. Martelle had mistakenly assumed that the communists were simply rival gangsters, and as Stone pointed out in a closing monologue, he was not the only American to miss the communist presence lurking among them.

The cops? They figured for a gang killing, and you couldn’t blame them. That’s how it looked — three dead hoodlums. I told them the blond man was Mavlik, and they said it was plausible and interesting, but his identification read, “Herman Kennedy, Pittsburgh.” They almost believed me

⁹² Pronounced “Greesh.”

when Mrs. Griš backed me up, that is until they checked and found out that she'd had a bad fall and hadn't been the same since. Oh, they were nice about it. They told me to come back if I ever got any proof. Fat chance. But there is one interesting slant to the whole case. Louis Martelle, gangster, killer — yet, although he never got to know it, in life's crazy way he was the right guy in the right place at the right time, and for a brief moment, became a hero.⁹³

Mike Hammer's story about Velda's brother and Randy Stone's saga of the communist clown were two examples of tough guys taking exceptional liberties not simply to supplement American law and order but to save it from an international conspiracy. A third story from the series *Dangerous Assignment* made more explicit the religious subtext of the Cold War. *Dangerous Assignment* featured film star Brian Donlevy as Steve Mitchell, a globetrotting secret agent for a vague "commission" that never was identified but listeners would likely have assumed was part of the U.S. government. NBC aired the series off and on in the early 1950s, and it later was remade in Australia.⁹⁴ Had it been a film series, it would have fit solidly in the "B" category.

An episode titled "Assignment USA" aired on Christmas Eve 1952. It began with Mitchell popping in to the commissioner's office just in time to learn he lost his holiday vacation. An organization called International Lecture Tours had been sending European professors on speaking engagements around the world, including the United States. One of those professors, Dr. Gerber, was in the U.S. and wanted to talk to Mitchell about a spy within the organization. When Mitchell met with the professor, he refused to say anything until he knew his son, a schoolboy in Sweden named Kurt, would be protected.

⁹³ "Long Live the Clown," *Nightbeat*.

⁹⁴ Dunning, 190. A Cvetić-related story with a religious theme was "The Black Gospel," *I Was a Communist For the FBI*, February 18, 1953, in which communist revolutionary ideology was associated with nihilism.

As it was the only way to get Gerber to talk, Mitchell flew to Stockholm to pick up the boy, but he was told by the schoolmaster that a woman claiming to be Kurt's aunt had collected him from the school the day before. The trouble was, Kurt had no aunt.⁹⁵

Subsequent scenes trotted out a series of suspects — an American ex-pat named Saunders who worked at International Lecture Tours' headquarters in Stockholm, a blustery Dr. Friedrich who was an academic rival of Gerber's, and the beautiful Dr. Bjuchek who might be a femme fatale. In the final act, Mitchell noticed a child known to be one of Kurt's playmates mysteriously carrying something into the woods. She walked into an old barn with the package and came out empty-handed. Inside the barn, Mitchell found Kurt hiding in a feed box and munching the sandwich the girl had given him.

"Did you come to help me? ...," the boy asked. "That is good. I've been praying for help. I knew it would come."

Kurt told Mitchell he escaped from the woman who posed as his aunt shortly after they left the school. Since then, he had been hiding.

"How did you happen to pick this barn to hide in?" Mitchell asked.

"Oh, I knew it was the right place as soon as I saw this manger ...," Kurt said. "I read about a little boy in a manger once."

As they chatted, a car pulled up carrying Saunders and a goon named Oscar. Realizing that Saunders was the spy, Mitchell pulled a lightbulb from a dangling wire and held the wire behind his back. When Saunders lifted a gun, Mitchell swung the wire at it, electrocuting the spy and diverting Oscar long enough to pounce. He turned to see Kurt in the feed box, praying.

⁹⁵ "Assignment USA," *Dangerous Assignment*, December 12, 1952.

“I prayed that something would happen to deliver us,” Kurt said. “It happened.”

“Well, you see I sort of made it happen, Kurt.”

“Did you? I prayed for a bolt of lightening, Mr. Mitchell.”

“Well, I guess you could call that electric spark a bolt of lightening, but it was man-made lightening.”

“Was it? How did you happen to think of it?”

Mitchell stammered a bit, then admitted he was not sure how he thought of it.

“You see?” said Kurt.

“Yeah, I see. I’m the last guy in the world to argue the point, believe me. Funny. I was the one who was screaming that my Christmas was spoiled. Thanks, Kurt.”

“For what?”

“For one of the best Christmases I’ve ever had.”⁹⁶

Violence was depicted not only as redemptive, but as an answer to prayer. That the spy was an American, and not one of the European professors, also underscored the fact that appearances could be deceiving. The suspect ostensibly most likely to be on Mitchell’s side, in the end, tried to kill him.

The Medium

In two classic studies of primary orality, or aural communication in societies that predated the printed word, Walter Ong observed that sound is inherently agonistic. It implies conflict and feeds fear, or at least is useful to those who desire such ends. Ong attributed this to what he called sound’s performative and mnemonic qualities. More than

⁹⁶ Ibid.

print, sound tends to imply the existence of living others and tends to represent alterity in personal terms.

In *Orality and Literacy*, Ong illustrated sound's performative quality with the example of a wounded buffalo. When hunters see the body of a buffalo lying on the ground, sight alone may not determine whether or not it is dead. The hunters will approach it cautiously because they do not know if it still is capable of doing them harm. But if they hear it bellow or grunt, sound will remove all doubt that it is alive and dangerous. The hunters' alarm will sharpen, and they likely will take further aggressive action to remove the danger.⁹⁷ In other words, human beings associate sound with immanent presences. Unlike text, which is an object left behind by the prior performance of an absent author, sound always is being performed while it is present. This places it in the here-and-now, or what Ong called the "human lifeworld."⁹⁸

By itself, sound's performative quality does not explain why its immanence implies a struggle. For this, Ong turned to sound's mnemonic qualities, or the burden of information storage it placed on preliterate storytellers. Drawing from Eric Havelock's work, Ong argued that the characters in oral epics resembled types more than living people because they served as shorthand references for ideas oral societies wished to preserve. Heroes embodied character traits each community deemed necessary to its flourishing since its laws, creeds, and codes of conduct could not be written down. This strategy strengthened institutional memory and aided in the education of new generations, but it also limited the complexity of what could be communicated. If stories or characters

⁹⁷ Ong, *Orality*, 32.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 42-46.

grew too nuanced, they became hard to follow, audiences lost interest, and their purpose was defeated. As a result, conflict in oral storytelling stayed simple and personalized — the world was bifurcated into good people and bad people, and misfortune resulted from the work of nefarious agents. The identification of larger interconnections, such as social dynamics or economic structures, would await the arrival of text. As Ong put it, “[T]he movement from oral through typographic culture ... corresponds in great part in a shift from a more polemically textured culture to a less polemically texture one.”⁹⁹

Ong’s identification of sound with struggle helps to explain why typographic cultures that have attempted to use radio to educate non-typographic cultures have frequently met with disastrous disappointment. In 1969, Edmund Carpenter was hired as a communications consultant for the Territory of Papua-New Guinea, then still under Australian rule. The Australian government wanted to use radio to prepare the territory for self-rule by instructing its population in such topics as modern sanitation and political democracy, but what they got was violent resistance — and, as Carpenter noted, it was radio and not the presence of Westerners that was new in the areas affected.¹⁰⁰ “There is no shortcut to tolerance and to teaching tolerance,” Carpenter told an interviewer years later. “The notion that you can electrify these things ... I don’t think it works. They tried to do that in New Guinea with radio, and they ended up with riots.”¹⁰¹ He argued that those who use radio in such places should understand its agonistic potential and take steps to lessen the effect. “If the government insists on its expansion, then I think support

⁹⁹ Ibid.; Ong, *Presence*, 192-207.

¹⁰⁰ Carpenter, *Phantom*, 113-114; Harald E. L. Prins and John Bishop, “Edmund Carpenter: Explorations in Media and Anthropology,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 17 (Fall-Winter 2001-2002): 124.

¹⁰¹ Prins and Bishop, 134.

should be given to activities that favor individuals, specialization, privacy, enclosed space, etc., that is, activities producing effects opposite from those produced by radio,” Carpenter wrote.¹⁰²

Modern media environments such as the United States, in which radio coexists with other media and even the radio audience stands in the shadow of centuries of typographic culture, experience sound’s agonistic qualities in milder forms. Nevertheless, postwar American radio drama developed strategies to tease out its potential for describing the United States’ conflict with the Soviet Union as existential and Manichean and to cast the United States in the role of transcendent hero. Stories that restored confidence in the nation’s ordinary institutions lauded law enforcement agencies, businesses, and other institutions in much the same way oral epics lavished praise on Achilles and Beowulf. Similarly, just as oral poetry used gore and violence to highlight the military skill of its heroes, so priestly postwar radio shows used realism and technical precision to emphasize America’s scientific and technological prowess. Even the notion of the “exception” mimicked an aspect of oral culture, for all words are exceptions in cultures innocent of text. As Ong put it, words mean what they mean in their “current use” to oral storytellers and hearers. The concept of an abstract, universal meaning separate from the word itself is lacking as there are no dictionaries to record prior uses or to catalog subtle differences between usages.¹⁰³

The sound of radio was an immanent presence in 1951 in the homes of Americans

¹⁰² Carpenter, *Phantom*, 157.

¹⁰³ Ong, *Orality*, 44, 46-49. Philosophers sometimes use the term “naïve realism” to describe a view of language in which there is a one-to-one correlation between signs and their referents.

who listened to a celebration of the 175th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The patriotic American Heritage Foundation (not to be confused with the later Heritage Foundation) helped to organize the event. In a report to AHF President Thomas D'Arcy Brophy, an executive consultant declared that "radio deserves special mention for what was undoubtedly an out-standing contribution." Public service announcements, prepared by The Advertising Council, began airing three months before the events, and the networks collectively contributed 15 hours of sustaining time from July 1 to July 4. In addition, the report cited "dozens of commercial shows dedicated in part, or in their entirety, to the Year of Rededication," including *Cavalcade of America*, *The Telephone Hour*, *Ford Theater*, and *The Prudential Hour*, among others.¹⁰⁴

The celebration itself linked the conflict of the Revolutionary period to the Cold War by juxtaposing eighteenth- and twentieth-century military images, reinforced civil religious feelings through coordinated church services, and inspired in some Americans — or at least someone who wrote for *Life* — a sense of the extraordinary. Events began with "religious rededication services" in 1,600 American churches on July 1, and continued with youth programming the next day, and Armed Services Day on July 3. The latter observed the 150th anniversary of the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard. Events of July 4 were centered at Independence Hall in Philadelphia, and among them were "a Rededication of the Shrine of Liberty and the redistribution to the 48 States of 'hallowed earth' collected from shrines and battlefields of the Charter Colony States." Included in the report to Brophy was a quote from *Life* magazine. Previous Independence Days, it

¹⁰⁴ C. M. Vandeburg to Thomas D'Arcy Brophy, "Interim Report With Suggestions," July 16, 1951, American Heritage Foundation, Thomas D'Arcy Brophy Papers, Box 16, Folder 2, WHS, 17-18.

said, have emitted “sound and fury signifying nothing — fun and frolic, fireworks and pickled eggs and spilled French dressing.” But now “more than any other time in history, the American nation was ready to accept a serious program of Rededication to the principles of good citizenship that are embodied with the symbol of the Declaration of Independence.”¹⁰⁵

What was missing in the report was any measure of how many Americans were unimpressed. Even among those who agreed that democracy, capitalism, and religion were mutually reinforcing — and certainly among millions who found Stalinism abhorrent — there were those who felt uncomfortable with much of what the priestly form of American civil religion produced. They wondered, for example, where charity, humility, and tolerance fit into the scheme of “American values,” and they wondered if the “one nation” that so fervently bowed its head in prayer on July 4, 1951, really was as unified as it claimed. These dissenting, though not disloyal, voices were not often heard on *This Is Your FBI* and *Dragnet*, but they found other, more prophetic, routes to the radio dial.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 5-7, 12.

Chapter 6 — Prophetic Civil Religion and Voices of Dissent

In April 1950, an actor wearing black-and-white riding clothes, two ivory-handled revolvers, a mask, and a ten-gallon hat walked into several children's hospitals in Washington, D.C. If press reports are any guide, the Lone Ranger's visit was not unlike a Marian apparition. A boy mended his ways and refused to strike a friend who tripped him in the hallway. A girl flung aside her crutches to accept a silver bullet. Children who had refused food restored their appetites. Children who had lain in bed sat up. "I've never seen anything like it," said a nurse. "Kids who had not moved for a week are up and waiting for the Lone Ranger." A doctor was humbled. "That man over there has done more than we could ever do," he told the *Washington Times-Herald*.¹

Children in 1950 had not known a world without *The Lone Ranger*. Unlike their parents, for whom radio had been an exciting new experience when the show premiered in 1933, the grade-schoolers of 1950 may well have assumed there always had been a Masked Man. Then in its sixteenth season, *The Lone Ranger* was the highest-rated non-musical Western on the radio. Its 13.6 Nielsen rating stood well ahead of *Hopalong Cassidy*'s 8.6, *The Tom Mix Ralston Straight-Shooters*' 7.6, *Straight Arrow*'s 6.6, and

¹ "Kids in Hospitals 'Oh, Ah and Gee' at Lone Ranger," *Washington Times-Herald*, April 11, 1950, 10; "The Ranger Rides Again on Errand of Mercy Here," *Washington Times-Herald*, April 12, 1950, 8; David Willson Parker, "A Descriptive Analysis of the Lone Ranger as a Form of Popular Art." (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 1955), 168-169. Parker was given access to *The Lone Ranger*'s executives and records. His dissertation contains extended quotations and reproduces corporate documents.

Challenge of the Yukon's 6.5. In addition, children had been reading Lone Ranger novels since 1935, comic strips since 1938, and comic books since 1940. Two Lone Ranger movie serials were released in 1938 and 1939, and a television show began in 1949.²

Yet if the Lone Ranger assumed near-supernatural qualities in the minds of children — to say nothing of the breathless press — not everyone he visited was impressed. Five years after the Ranger's Washington tour, researcher David Willson Parker asked another doctor about the radio hero's alleged healing powers. Dr. Phillip A. E. Stebbing had greeted the Lone Ranger when he arrived at Gallinger Hospital, where the child set aside her crutches. Stebbing remembered the incident well, and he remembered the newspapers' hype. He thought little of either. "There were no miraculous cures observed by me," he wrote Parker. "In fact, it was my impression that the whole affair was arranged as a publicity stunt for the Lone Ranger rather than for the entertainment of the children. I am sorry to spoil a good story, but that is the way things appeared to me."³

Dr. Stebbing's skepticism, in light of the children's excitement and the newspapers' supernatural allusions, placed him among a population of naysayers whose criticisms also would be heard on postwar radio drama. These critics heard reassurances that Americans were godly and good, but they found them smug and self-indulgent. They heard affirmations of "the American Way" but wondered if the United States was as virtuous as advertised or if all Americans were allowed to share in its abundance. For the

² Harrison B. Summers, ed., *A Thirty-Year History of Programs Carried on National Radio Networks in the United States, 1926-1956* (New York: Arno, 1971), 168, 171.

³ Parker, 170; Dick Osgood, *WYXIE Wonderland: An Unauthorized 50-Year Diary of WXYZ Detroit* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1981), 60.

most part, these critics did not reject civil religion so much as they redeployed it. Instead of quarrelling with the pastoral message by asserting that Americans were not or should not be religious, prophetic critics demanded a civic faith that accepted Americans in all their religious diversity. Instead of quarreling with the priestly message by calling “the American Way” a sham, prophetic critics said it was so wonderful the nation should extend its advantages to every single citizen. Postwar radio dramas of this third type were prophetic because they challenged what they considered empty-headed hubris and prodded Americans to live up to their civil religious principles. As Martin E. Marty put it in an essay that distinguished between priestly and prophetic civil religion, “If Joel, speaking for Yahweh, could ‘call a solemn assembly,’ Amos could speak in the same name and say, ‘I despise the noise of your solemn assemblies.’”⁴

The Problem

Part of the problem lay in the dramatic form itself. By the 1950s, radio drama no longer was young, and in the minds of some of its writers — many of a new generation — its storytelling conventions creaked. What had been fresh and innovative in the 1930s and 1940s now seemed dated. Shows like *Dragnet* found part of the answer by updating their sound effects, but that was just a start — the stories themselves needed updating. Critics felt the plots were too formulaic and predictable — they needed to be messier and less perfectly resolved, as in real life. Likewise, characters needed to be complicated and multidimensional, also as in real life. Something no longer worked, but it was hard to pinpoint.

⁴ Marty, “The Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion,” 147.

Though it was perhaps not obvious at the time, radio drama was being asked to do something different in the 1950s than it had done in the 1930s and 1940s, and it was not well suited to the task. During the Depression, the effects of a national crisis were all too real to millions of Americans, and the sacrifices of World War II were real to nearly everyone. Fears of loved ones being killed or wounded, and homefront annoyances ranging from the scarcity of tires to the need to collect fats, were immediate and palpable. But the crisis of the Cold War mostly was ideological. Except for families of servicemen and women in Korea —and there were fewer of them than families of loved ones in World War II — the worst fears about communism had more to do with what could happen than what already was happening. What was immediate and palpable in the 1950s was a spectacular economy, and the very concept of “containment” implied the worst the communists could do had yet to be loosed. Cold War radio dramas, therefore, could not rely on their listeners’ personal experiences and had to rely on imagined threats. They had to construct and then reinforce ideological premises that instructed Americans why communism was anathema and why they should fear the expansion of communism in places they never had heard of.

This is where the dramatic form became a problem. As the literary scholar Roland Barthes has observed, a narrative “constructs an enigma which creates an expectation and desire for a solution.”⁵ When people read a text — or, it could be asserted, listen to spoken words on the radio — questions are raised the reader wants the text to answer. Expository texts give them the answers because the purpose of that kind of text is to

⁵ Quoted in Jochen Schulte-Sasse, “Can the Disempowered Read Mass-Produced Narratives in Their Own Voice?” *Cultural Critique* 10 (Autumn 1988): 184.

make an argument that reaches a conclusion, and if such a text is part of an ideological project, it will answer its questions — or, as Barthes put it, “arrest the enigma” — in a way that reinforces a particular ideological view. Drama, on the other hand, holds its readers’ attention by *not answering the questions*. Creating dramatic tension is like dragging a mechanical rabbit before a pack of racing dogs. It keeps the reader reading by widening the enigma and pushing its “arrest” ever further away. This teasing quality makes drama engaging and emotionally involving, but it is less useful for hammering home ideological commitments. When drama tries to pin its enigmas down in an ideologically consistent manner, it runs the risk of becoming tendentious and heavy-handed.⁶ During World War II, it was easy for war-rattled radio listeners to fill in the blanks on their own, but the Cold War seemed not quite as real. It was everywhere in the sense that every aspect of American culture became politicized, but it was nowhere in the sense that instead of making actual sacrifices as they had in World War II, Americans found themselves living better than ever. Some radio shows split the difference by grafting long, ideological expositions onto dramas such as the *This Is Your FBI* play discussed in Chapter 5, but that was blunt and artless.

A second problem had to do with the audience. By the 1950s, centripetalism itself no longer was new. For twenty years, the federal government had expanded, massive corporations parked themselves in ever-taller office buildings, and thanks in part to the war and in part to a booming economy, thousands of new cities and churches and civic organizations had been formed. Increasingly prevalent was a fear that organizations were

⁶ Or, as Schulte-Sasse put it somewhat more strongly of dramatic texts, “But if the reading of stories were to lead to knowledge, they would be superfluous. In other words, were narration to reach its goal (of arresting meaning), it would eliminate its own necessity.” Ibid., 185.

replacing individuals. As noted in Chapter 4, David Riesman's classic sociological study *The Lonely Crowd* and William H. Whyte's *The Organization Man* worried about the bonds that held Americans together, but there also were popular manifestations of these fears. One of the most famous came in 1956 when journalist John Keats published *The Crack in the Picture Window*, an unrelenting broadside against the nerve center of postwar society — suburbia. Far from a new frontier for free individuals, the suburbs actually were fake towns spit out by faceless corporations and governments, Keats wrote. Suburban societies lacked the jobs, social institutions, and recreational facilities of traditional American towns, and the typical home that lined their streets was "a little box on a cold concrete slab." Moreover, suburbs tore the nation apart by dividing its people by class and race, eroded the tax bases of its local communities, and saddled suburban homeowners with debt. Far from the society the New Dealers hoped would be built around the individual's needs, 1950s suburbs actually dictated to the individual what his or her needs were, Keats wrote.⁷

As the decade progressed, angst about the individual took at least two forms, one extreme and centrifugal and the other milder and centripetal. In a study of the period's literature, Timothy Melley dubbed the extreme version "agency panic," and he described it as a source of paranoia. It grew from the fear that once-autonomous individuals were becoming automatons in the face of giant systems that sought to take over people's minds and bodies. Agency panic was rooted in a philosophy of "liberal individualism" that saw people as "atomistic and autonomous" with "attributes [acquired] through the labor of

⁷ John Keats, *The Crack in the Picture Window* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), xiv-xvii.

self-creation.”⁸ The nefarious systems that supposedly threatened liberal individualism were paradoxically given all the attributes of autonomous self-creators, warping the logic of these narratives but also leading to attitudes that eventually resisted “social commitments *in general*,” Melley wrote.⁹ Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*, published in 1961, and Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, which contained such absurdities as V-2 rockets that tracked where a certain U.S. lieutenant had sex, took agency panic to a paranoid extreme, but as Melley pointed out, the phenomenon was politically promiscuous and could be applied to the anticommunist fulminations of J. Edgar Hoover, as well.

The milder and more centripetal form of fear about the individual led to calls for “inclusiveness.” This was more common in radio drama. Inclusiveness dignified the individual by drawing attention to those who seemed left behind or overlooked, but it remained fundamentally centripetal because it demanded that they be included in the community that ostracized or ignored them. Antiracism was a common inclusivist theme, as was intellectual freedom, especially during the McCarthy years. Inclusiveness, therefore, was partly a response to the illiberal excesses of anticommunism, partly a reflection of New Deal sentiments, and partly the product of the prophetic form of American civil religion, especially when it drew on the nation’s egalitarian tradition.

The Resources

For prophetic critics of the postwar United States, the search for “updated” dramatic forms and impassioned pleas for those at the periphery would fuel much

⁸ Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000), 7-16, 53.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 56. Emphasis original.

creative inspiration. Fortunately for them, millions of people in the audience felt likewise, or least were open to new types of stories. At the same time, competition from television created a “window of opportunity” for daring or experimental storytelling styles, and the targeting of entertainment personalities in the so-called “Red Scare” gave radio artists both something to talk about and an emotional reason for talking about it.

Radio grew up during World War II, and audiences knew it. Before the war, shows such as *Cavalcade of America* relied on simple, comfortable stories to build large audiences, but during the war, the nation learned that radio could think. Audiences grew accustomed to turning to their radios for war news or other public information, politicians increasingly used the new medium as a means to garner support for campaigns or policies, and war correspondents delivered in seconds headlines that took the newspapers hours. So eagerly were Roosevelt’s “Fireside Chats” received that many people mistakenly remembered them as being weekly, when in fact they aired much less often. Likewise, Americans clung to every word of Edward R. Murrow’s hair-raising broadcasts from London. Radio also tried to contribute to “serious literature.” In 1937, Archibald MacLeish’s play *The Fall of the City*, which depicted a frightened population’s call for a master, tested radio both intellectually and technically, and two of Stephen Vincent Benét’s plays numbered among *Cavalcade*’s most popular.¹⁰ Perhaps no one demonstrated radio’s capacity for seriousness better than the Norman Corwin, whose most famous broadcasts are described in Chapter 2. At the end of the war, Corwin was asked to produce a victory special, so he wrote *On a Note of Triumph*, which celebrated

¹⁰ Barnouw, 65-70, 152-154, 211-213; Bannerman, xi, 73-88, 144-162; Blum, 31-41. The Benét plays were “They Burned the Books” and “A Child is Born.”

the common man. “You had what it took and you gave it ...,” the narrator said, “each of you has a hunk of rainbow around your helmet.”¹¹

After the war, millions of Americans who had left small towns and farms to fight were not the same people when they returned. Novels such as James Jones’ *From Here to Eternity* and Norman Mailer’s *The Naked and the Dead* pushed further than radio in grappling with a world that had become confusing. “Suicide, betrayal, insanity, murder, rape were typical story devices,” wrote historians Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak. “The grim ending (rather than the happy one of romance fiction or even the upbeat ending of thirties social-protest literature) came to be expected.”¹² To those Americans changed by the war were added the millions who felt the promise of the New Deal slipping away. Many of radio’s artists joined other Americans in hoping the social transformations of the 1930s would resume. Connecticut Congressman Chester Bowles plead for a restored New Deal in his 1946 book, *Tomorrow Without Fear*. He called for a more equitable America of full employment and sufficient wages.¹³ Yet the same year his book appeared, Congress axed a meaningful Full Employment Act, workers’ real incomes shriveled when wartime price controls were lifted, and President Truman’s fights with the unions were so blustery he threatened to seek authority to draft strikers into the Armed Forces. At the same time, women who wanted to keep their wartime jobs — 80 percent of them in New York — were pushed aside in favor of returning veterans.¹⁴

¹¹ *On a Note of Triumph*, May 8, 1945.

¹² Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 376.

¹³ Chester Bowles, *Tomorrow Without Fear* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1946), 1-3, 51-56.

¹⁴ Chafe, 81-84, 93; Wittner, 19-21.

The most explosive issue — not for the first time in American history — was race. Gary Gerstle has argued that America's wartime service experience was assimilationist among whites and segregationist between blacks and whites. "The key image of this racialized army was that of the multicultural platoon, a unit made up of Protestants, Catholics, Jews, southerners, westerners, and easterners, all of whom were white," he wrote. He might have added Irish, Italian, Polish, and so forth. Because the armed services remained segregated, and because its centripetal "multiculturalism" only extended to whites, it cultivated and underscored a collective "white" identity as opposed to "black." For their part, African-Americans pushed tirelessly for an end to segregation, but success would come later. During the war, though officials had little to complain about the African-American response to the Selective Service Act of 1940 or their rates of recruitment, soldiers trained and usually fought separately. Blacks were sent into combat less often than whites, and they almost always were commanded by white officers.¹⁵

Meantime, there was something new in American homes in the 1950s — and it was not a baby. From 1948 to 1950, the number of television sets in the United States mushroomed from 148,000 to 4.4 million.¹⁶ Most radio networks were eager to expand to television, but first the new medium had to pass through a money-hemorrhaging development phase. Raiding radio was the answer. In the early 1950s, networks owning both radio and television divisions forced radio to finance its own descent by demanding it bring in as much money as possible to develop television while simultaneously slashing

¹⁵ Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 203-204, 211.

¹⁶ Miller and Nowak, 344.

radio budgets. William Paley, who owned CBS, explained years later that his television division lost \$60 million before hitting the black in 1953 while his radio division dropped from a peak in 1950 to red ink in 1956. For radio broadcasters, the rise of television meant that network demands for short-term profits increased even as “conventional wisdom” claimed the medium was doomed.¹⁷

Radio broadcasters adopted two responses that could be summarized as “diversion” and “adaptation.” On the one hand, advertising salesmen assuaged their clients’ fears by pointing out that the radio audience still was larger than the television audience, and that people who bought television sets did not stop listening to the radio. Present numbers were emphasized over long-term trends. A pamphlet titled *Are You Looking or Listening?*, for example, argued that the 42 million homes with radios and the \$723 million spent on radio airtime in 1951 both were higher than ever. “Conversely, during 1951, a greater clamor by people in high and low places that radio was a declining advertising value ... a paradox, to say the least!” the copy chortled.¹⁸

On the other hand, there was a recognition that radio would have to adapt. Those who took a longer view drew a distinction between television killing radio completely and merely killing its current form. In a 1951 speech at a Broadcast Music Inc. Clinic, William S. Hedges repeated familiar arguments about the radio audience being larger and wealthier than ever before, but he added that television would push radio broadcasters to think creatively. “The brightness of radio’s future is dependent upon the adaptability as well as the ingenuity of those who are interested in the survival of broadcasting,” Hedges

¹⁷ William S. Paley, *As It Happened: A Memoir* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), 219-221.

¹⁸ John Blair & Co., *Are You Looking or Listening?* (New York: John Blair & Co., n.d.), LAB, 3.

said. Somewhat prophetically, he cited all-night disk jockeys as an example of such creativity.¹⁹ In the long run, it would indeed be the purveyors of so-called “format radio” who would find ways to keep Americans listening long after radio’s dominance was gone, but in the 1950s, not everyone was ready to give up on network drama. An alternative strategy was to push the boundaries of drama. Westerns, police shows, science fiction stories, comedies, and dramas became grittier, edgier, and more iconoclastic. As Erik Barnouw noted, some shows even went so far as to discuss previously taboo subjects such as venereal disease.²⁰

Had it not been for three ex-FBI agents and a Syracuse, New York, grocer, broadcasting’s woes may have been annoying but they would not have been as terrifying for people in the radio industry. Theodore Kirkpatrick, John Keenan, and Kenneth Bierly, who worked for the FBI during the war, formed the vigilante anticommunist investigation firm American Business Consultants in 1947. They produced *Red Channels: The Report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*, a 213-page special report issued on June 22, 1950, to subscribers of the trio’s newsletter, *Counterattack*. The booklet contained the names of 151 entertainers — including Norman Corwin — and alleged they had connections with left-leaning organizations. Most of the 151 had backed the New Deal, and some had simply supported the wartime U.S.-Soviet alliance. The next year, Laurence Johnson, owner of four grocery stores, appointed himself an unofficial *Red Channels* enforcer. Johnson knew businesses avoid controversy, so if he found a product advertised

¹⁹ William S. Hedges, “Has Radio a Future?” 1952, speech given to Broadcast Music, Inc., clinic, William S. Hedges Collection, Series III, Box 2, Folder 2, LAB, 5-7.

²⁰ Barnouw, 214, 244, 286-290; MacDonald, 82, 84-86.

on a show that employed a blacklisted person, he displayed that product beside its biggest competitor. Then he placed a sign in front of the two products implying that one supported America and the other might support subversives. He encouraged other grocers to do the same. Though Johnson's critics painted him as a small-town eccentric, two facts spooked advertising agencies and networks into thinking he was dangerous: first, he was an officer in the National Association of Supermarkets, and, second, advertising for items stocked by grocers made up most of radio's revenue.²¹

The effect was chilling. Before *Red Channels*, radio's decision makers could say they did not know a particular performer's political views, but after *Red Channels* and the expanded lists that followed it, anticommunist hardliners would not take that for an answer. Norman Corwin was never unemployed as a result of blacklisting, but other actors suffered mightily. Joseph Julian, a veteran actor who had been heard in classic shows including *The Shadow* and *Inner Sanctum Mysteries*, lost almost all his income for three years. Fear and anger consumed the industry — those who were not listed were furious, and, if they spoke out, became listed. "Any political liberal, or anyone vaguely to the left of right, might suddenly be labeled a Communist or a fellow traveler ...," Julian later wrote. "Left became a dirty word. A joke of the time: 'I have no left foot. Only a right foot number two.' But [it] was not very funny.'"²²

In short, the stage was set for new kinds of radio drama, and that provided an

²¹ Merle Miller, *The Judges and the Judged* (1952), in John Cogley and Merle Miller, *Blacklisting: Two Key Documents* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1971), 75-81, 98-101; John Cogley, *Radio-Television*, vol. 2 of *Report on Blacklisting* (1956), in *ibid.*, 100-110; Barnouw, 253-257, 265-277. Barnouw lists the 151 entertainers named in *Red Channels* on page 266.

²² Bannerman, 219; Joseph Julian, *This Was Radio: A Personal Memoir* (New York: Viking, 1975), 168-202.

opportunity for reassessments of American civil religion. Radio's writers had ample cause to wonder if the reassuring and gratifying civil religion of *Cavalcade of America*, *The Lone Ranger*, and similar programs was as innocuous in the 1950s as it had seemed in the 1930s. At the same time, competition from television led to more risk-taking, or wider boundaries, in radio broadcasting, and an ever wealthier and more complex audience seemed interested in innovation.

The Programs

Neither Westerns nor science fiction programs were as ubiquitous on radio as in film or on television, but both genres produced some of the period's most original and artistically compelling radio drama. Because they removed their narratives to an imagined, and seemingly transhistorical, other world, they also were well suited to the prophetic project of judging the United States from a transcendent vantage point beyond American history. For Westerns, that other world was a mythological past, and for science fiction it was a fanciful future. In either case, the distance between the actual present and the imagined setting of these stories proved fertile for prophetic civil religion.

Westerns

Perhaps no genre was better suited to civil religious rhetoric than the Western. Like the historical figures biographed by *Cavalcade of America*, radio's archetypes from the pioneer to the cowboy came to radio already freighted with mythological significance. The Western could present itself, even at its most fanciful, as America's own story, its own Homeric epic, and by the 1950s, radio Westerns could even comment on the radio Western, as they had been part of the medium's standard fare for a

generation. It is therefore useful to think of the radio Western as having proceeded through two generations. The first dominated from the early 1930s to the early 1950s, and the second existed contemporaneously with the first for most of the rest of the 1950s. What distinguished these two generations was not mere chronology, however. Rather, they exhibited different storytelling styles, different plots and characters, and, often, different styles of American civil religion.

That this reworking of national mythology occurred in the Western genre is not surprising. Scholars long have understood its myth-making malleability. In a classic essay, film critic Robert Warshow asked readers to consider a child with a toy gun. “What most interests him is not (as we so much fear) the fantasy of hurting others, but to work out how a man might look when he shoots or is shot,” Warshow wrote. “A hero is one who looks like a hero.”²³ In other words, Westerns do not report history so much as use it to contemplate — or to argue about — national identity. Warshow also called the Western “an art form for connoisseurs” because slight variations carry big meanings. Though detractors may complain that Westerns are formulaic, it is the formulas that make them imaginative. They are a bit like languages. They provide authors and audiences with a set of recognizable signs — the town marshal, the reluctant gunman, the scout — and a grammar for using those signs — the search for gold, the cattle drive, the wagon train. The characters and plots are, in some sense, given, so it is the subtle variation in each retelling that gives them their distinctiveness. Writers of second-generation Westerns used the genre both to critique first-generation Westerns and to situate their own stories

²³ Robert Warshow, “Movie Chronicle: The Westerner,” in *The Immediate Experience: Movies, Comics, Theatre and Other Aspects of Popular Culture* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962), 146, 153. This essay previously appeared as “The Westerner,” *Partisan Review* (March 1954).

in the postwar world, yet with care and cleverness, it was possible for them to embed protests in such a way that those who heard them heard them and others simply enjoyed a ripping yarn.²⁴

The quintessential first-generation Western was *The Lone Ranger*. The series premiered on January 31, 1933, on then money-losing WXYZ in Detroit. The station's owner, George Washington Trendle, had severed ties with CBS and, inspired by the success of movie Westerns, thought a radio Western could save his station. A handful of network or syndicated radio Westerns already had proved the genre's appeal to young listeners — and its merchandizing potential for broadcasters wishing to peddle hats, badges, and toy pistols. During a meeting at the station in December 1932, a rough concept was hammered out, and one of Trendle's contract writers, Fran Striker, of Buffalo, New York, was hired to fill in the details. A writer of legendary prolificacy — *The Saturday Evening Post* estimated he wrote sixty thousand words a week — Striker was self-employed as a one-man syndicate when WXYZ's dramatic director, James Jewell, asked him for a "wild west thriller ... including all the hokum of the masked rider." Debate raged for decades over who should be credited for creating the Lone Ranger — Trendle, Striker, or Jewell — but two things are certain. First, the show was wildly popular from the start. Three and a half months after its premiere, *The Lone Ranger* offered a free popgun to the first three hundred kids to respond. Nearly thirty thousand wrote in — and that was when the show was little heard outside Michigan. Second, in May 1934, Trendle hired Striker as a full-time salaried employee in exchange for Striker surrendering intellectual rights to Trendle. Striker's son later claimed his

²⁴ Ibid.

father needed the money because he was supporting himself, his wife, two children, his parents, grandparents, and aunts and uncles, all victims of the Great Depression, but whatever the case, it was Trendle and not Striker whom the Ranger made rich. When Trendle sold the rights to Texas oilman Jack Wrather for \$3 million in 1954, he sent Striker \$4,000. Eight years later, when Striker was killed in a car crash, his family refused the orchids Trendle sent to the funeral.²⁵

Striker initially tried to meet WXYZ's request by adapting *Covered Wagon Days*, a series he had already written. As David Willson Parker, who interviewed Striker in 1955, put it, this first draft presented the Lone Ranger as "a happy-go-lucky cowboy who laughed and sang as he shot down assorted outlaws." Trendle wanted more than an adventurer, however. He demanded a man of moral purpose, a patriot — in his own words, "the embodiment of a granted prayer." His hoped-for hero would not smoke, drink, or use slang, and when he had to use violence, he would simply graze the skin or shoot off a hat. As an official company history described, "Trendle envisioned a radio series that would paint a graphic picture of the hardships endured by pioneers that they might establish the principles which have been handed down as an American Heritage." In rewrite after rewrite, Striker, Trendle, and Jewell plugged away at the character and initial script. Finally, after the fifteenth version, Trendle allowed a late-night test broadcast. They decided it was good, but still needed polishing. The show had to be distinctive — perhaps a catch-phrase would set it apart. Striker searched for one, and

²⁵ Fran Striker, Jr, *His Typewriter Grew Spurs: A Biography of Fran Striker — Writer* (Runnemede, NJ: Quest Co., 1983), 29-37, 98-99; Osgood, 48-52, 192-193, 323, 385-387, 400-401, 416; David Rothel, *Who Was That Masked Man? The Story of the Lone Ranger*, rev. ed. (San Diego: A. S. Barnes, 1981), 27-55; J. (Joseph) Bryan, III, "Hi-Yo, Silver!" *Saturday Evening Post*, October 14, 1939, 21, 131, 134, 136; Dunning, 406-409; and Parker, 129-155.

after experimenting with the underwhelming “Hi-Yi!” and the just-plain-silly “Hi-Yi, Yippee!” it was decided that “Hi-Yo, Silver!” fit the bill. Around the tenth episode, Tonto was added because, as Jewell put it, the Lone Ranger “can’t keep talking to his horse.”²⁶

Over time, Striker developed a back story to explain who the Lone Ranger was, why he was “lone,” and why he wore a mask. His name was John Reid; he was the sole surviving Ranger of an ambush that killed his older brother, Dan; and he did not want the man behind the ambush, Butch Cavendish, to know he was still alive. Less well remembered is the fact he was independently wealthy. Dan left him a silver mine from which he fashioned his silver bullets and with which he financed his lifelong quest to aid the expansion of the United States. The old-fashioned republican ideal of public virtue through personal independence was combined with the civil religious notion of the United States as a virtuous community and “American character” as religious and moral. “He is the composite of all strong men — he is a legend,” wrote Striker. “He’s Americana.” In an unpublished statement titled “Teaching Democracy Through Adventures Stories,” Trendle called the Ranger “a composite of all men who uphold the laws of God and man” and argued that he helped listeners appreciate “our great American Heritage of opportunity, security and freedom.”²⁷ Striker also associated his hero with transcendent morality in a set of guidelines for freelance writers, when he wrote that the Ranger disapproved of “men who, even though within their legal rights, step beyond the bounds of fair play.”²⁸ The Ranger’s divine inspiration was stated explicitly in an episode

²⁶ Parker, 133, 135, 136; Osgood, 59; Rothel, 29-30; Bryan, 131; Striker, Jr., 38-39.

²⁷ “The Origin and Development of the Lone Ranger,” in Parker, 184-185.

²⁸ “The Lone Ranger Standards and Backgrounds,” in *Ibid.*, 214.

recounting his origins. At the moment the masked man realized his destiny, the narrator intoned, “In the Ranger’s eyes, there was a light that must have burned in the eyes of knights in armor, a light that through the ages lifted the souls of strong men who fought for justice — for God!”²⁹

As was typical of first-generation Westerns, *The Lone Ranger* described a world in which autonomous individuals made clearly good and bad decisions in a morally unambiguous universe. Its stories were morality plays somewhat reminiscent of their medieval forebears. The characters were not complex human beings, but something like archetypes, or ideas on two legs. That the show ostensibly was aimed at children misses the point since it attracted adult listeners, as well. In an episode broadcast in 1944, for example, the Ranger turned a young man from crime simply by appealing to his sense of righteousness. Disguised as an outlaw named “Tex,” the masked hero accompanied wayward Lynn Allison on a bank job. Alone with Lynn inside the bank, Tex dumped the contents of some boxes from the safe. As he and Lynn poured over the bills and envelopes under lamplight, Lynn grew uneasy.

“Here’s some money that belongs to a church,” Tex said.

“Now wait,” said Lynn. “Do we have to take that?”

“Bank robbers take everything. Let’s see. Here’s another envelope. It’s marked ‘hospital.’ Ought to be plenty in that.”

“I, uh ... no, I don’t think we ought to take it,” Lynn said.

Lynn refused to go through with the job and said he would rather take his chances

²⁹ “The Lone Ranger’s Origin,” *The Lone Ranger*, June 30, 1948.

with a furious gang-leader than be a robber. “I believe you really mean that,” said Tex, who then revealed himself as the Lone Ranger. He warned Lynn never to make another mistake and helped him escape from the gang.³⁰

Trust in another person’s righteousness also could be ennobling, as it was in “Faith at Foxhead,” a *Lone Ranger* episode broadcast on June 11, 1943. Deputy Sheriff Jeff Pearson wanted to marry the sheriff’s daughter, Melody Walker, but Jeff had gone bad, having been lured into gambling by the evil Linc Morgan. Worse, Jeff was helping Linc rustle cattle at Foxhead Canyon. Melody knew about the gambling and made Jeff promise he would stop. She suspected the rustling, but it was too horrible to contemplate, so she convinced herself it was not true.

“I just have faith in Jeff, that’s all,” she told the Lone Ranger.

When Jeff’s father and a U.S. marshal were ambushed by Linc’s men, the former

³⁰ “Al Jennings,” *The Lone Ranger*, August 7, 1944. This play was at the center of what surely was one of radio drama’s most asinine spectacles. The episode’s writer, Robert Green, assumed a story about a real-life badman would interest listeners. When he picked the Oklahoman Al Jennings, who was said to have known the Dalton Brothers and Jesse James, he assumed that Jennings must have died years before. But Jennings had not died. Then 81, he was a retired evangelist living with fourteen cats in Tarzana, California, consulting on Western films and tinkering with his own manuscript about his days as a robber and killer. When Jennings heard Green’s play on the radio, he was offended by a scene in which the Ranger shot a gun out of his hand — and he sued. The trial commenced in September 1945. Years later, Green called it the most ludicrous and tragic experience of his career. Jennings “really couldn’t distinguish between what was real and what wasn’t,” Green remembered. The Lone Ranger is a “a pack of lies . . .,” Jennings fumed. “During the 1800s, I was all over the West, Oklahoma Territory, Texas, Arizona. Rode all over, knew everybody. The Lone Ranger? I never heard of the S.O.B.” As the trial continued, Jennings regaled a clearly amused judge, jury, and newspaper-reading public with ever taller tales. On the same day he accused *The Lone Ranger* of exaggeration, he told of being shot at more than four hundred times and having bullets tear his shirt off. The pinnacle of absurdity came when he stood up in the witness box and challenged the Ranger to a duel. “Where is he?” Jennings shouted. “Let the Lone Ranger come up here. Let him use his silver-plated gun and bullets. We’ll go downstairs and he can use ‘em. I’ll use frozen horse turds and I’ll still beat him to the draw.” “Years Change Al Jennings,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 30, 1940; “Al Jennings Files \$100,000 Radio Defamation Suit,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 8, 1944; “Al Jennings Sues Radio,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 27, 1945; “Cattle Stealing Days Recalled By Al Jennings,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 28, 1945; “Jury Compares Radio and Jennings Stories,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 29, 1945; “Jennings Tells How Alibi Faked,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 2, 1945; “Jennings Loses Suit For \$100,000,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 1945; Stanton Delaplane, “Al Jennings,” *Western Folklore* 14 (October 1955), 287-288; and Ray Windrix, “A Writer for George Trendle, Robert Green,” *Collector’s Corner*, May-June 1980, 23-24.

survived but the marshal was killed, and the Lone Ranger retrieved the badge from his corpse. Jeff heard of the ambush and finally turned on Linc, but a short time later, he was killed trying to stop Linc's latest rustling scheme. The Lone Ranger ordered Tonto to ride to Jeff's body and pin the dead marshal's star upon it. Though the Ranger knew Jeff never had worn the badge in life, he told Melody her lover had been working undercover.

"The boy was killed because he made many mistakes, but why should a girl's faith die with him?" the Ranger asked. "Hurry, Tonto!"³¹

Overt references to religious faith frequently figured into the Ranger's stories, as well, though in keeping with the parameters of civil religion, it was nonsectarian and vague. One character set on the straight and narrow was Bull Davis, owner of a café in the frontier town of White Rock. Davis was a burly, unpleasant brute who verbally abused his son, hated religion, and had run the last preacher out of town. A new minister, Parson Wheeler, traveled to White Rock to complete an unfinished meetinghouse, and his son, Jack, soon befriended Bull's son, Billy. Bull did not know of the boys' secret meetings, so when he decided to burn the meetinghouse down, he accidentally trapped Billy in the blazing building. Jack ran in to fetch him, but became trapped himself.

"If you have any faith at all, pray a little," the Ranger told Bull before going in after both boys.

Bull was so struck by the life-risking selflessness first of Jack and then of the Lone Ranger that he promised to build the parson "the finest meetinghouse money can build." When Billy revealed that Jack had taught him to preach during their secret meetings, Bull told his son how the masked man effected his own conversion.

³¹ "Faith at Foxhead," *The Lone Ranger*, June 11, 1943.

“I don’t know who he is, but he taught me something I’ll never forget,” Bull said.

“What did he teach you, Pa?”

“That faith is bigger than guns, son. It made me and the parson friends. And it made me thankful to the masked hombre, and, well, son, I’ll always believe it brought you back to me.”³²

Finally, the nation’s need for religious guidance was emphasized in a humorous way in “The Deacon Agrees,” a story that aired in 1945. The town of Reid City was annoyed by a tyrannical preacher called “The Deacon” who was determined to build a church. The tone was set in the opening scene, when the Deacon sat on a hotel verandah and a passerby commented on the sunny weather. The Deacon shot back: “The sun is shining to warm the skins of you sinners!” A few minutes later, the Deacon decided that sin in Reid City was so bad he had to smash the Royal Flush Saloon. When the Ranger heard of this, he was afraid the Deacon would be killed by Faro Keller, a notorious gambler, so he pressured Keller into helping the Deacon build the church if, in exchange, the Deacon agreed to leave town the day it was finished. On the day the church was completed, the Deacon left, but a stagecoach arrived carrying an even more tyrannical preacher — Parson Johnny Brimstone. The Ranger shocked the town by replacing the Deacon with Parson Johnny. The story ended with the new preacher shooting the church bell to call everyone together. “Come to meeting brothers!” he yelled. “Let Parson Johnny Brimstone drive away your sins!”³³

If *Lone Ranger* stories were moralistic and didactic by picturing ideal Americans

³² “Faith and Guns,” *The Lone Ranger*, September 1, 1947.

³³ “The Deacon Agrees,” *The Lone Ranger*, January 29, 1945.

as autonomous individuals making correct moral choices, they were centripetal in the way they depicted the frontier as a place for history to start over, for error to be corrected, and for all people — white, black, native, male, and female alike — to enjoy progress together. Like the assimilation of the U.S. Army in World War II, however, it was a melting pot in which not everything melted. The show's executives — all white men — claimed to be battling bigotry. They pointed to Tonto as proof. Striker's writers' guidelines stated, "If the Lone Ranger accepts the Indian as his closest companion, it is obvious to the child listener that great men have no racial or religious prejudice. Nowhere in the stories is any minority group referred to in a derogatory manner." Trendle's lawyer and business partner, Raymond Meurer, went further. He suggested Tonto made *The Lone Ranger* appealing to black children. "It's pretty hard for them to identify with most of the radio cowboys, even with the Lone Ranger ...," he said. "But they can with Tonto." The same argument in reverse was applied to girls. Tonto, being a man, did not threaten girls with "sex competition," said Meurer. "A girl could 'project in fantasy' with the Knights of literature until they'd meet 'Lady Elaine' or someone. Then she'd lose interest," he explained. Therefore, female listeners could "project in fantasy" about the Lone Ranger without an on-air love interest getting in the way. Throughout the series' long run, female roles were small and predictable, and romance was limited to minor characters since Trendle thought it upset young boys. Added director Charles Livingstone rather coldly: "Sometimes we leave a girl sighing over the Ranger. But he rides off and leaves her."³⁴

Regarding religion, Trendle and Striker's emphasis on personal faith reflected a

³⁴ Parker, 199-200, 202, 207, 213; Bryan, 131.

Protestant outlook, but *The Lone Ranger*'s civil religion focused less on particular creeds than on the act of directing one's trust toward something outside oneself, be it God, the nation, or even a hero. As Striker put it in his guidelines, the Lone Ranger

is generally visualized as a Protestant, but ... he shows respect for preachers and worshippers of every denomination, including the Indians' veneration of their own Great Spirits. The Lone Ranger believes that our Sacred American Heritage provides that every individual has the right to worship God as he desires.³⁵

For practical purposes, these assimilationist strategies toward race, gender, and religion produced narratives in which all characters — or at least all characters of good moral fiber — could celebrate the expansion of an American nation that, nevertheless, leaned in a white, male, and civil religious direction. In “Western Union Story,” the Ranger dazzled Indians with a telegraph to show them “white man’s magic” was “a power for good,” and in “The Fire God,” the Ranger “liberated” a group of Apaches from religious error by exposing Peyroma, their medicine man, as a fraud. The script was careful to condemn Peyroma individually as a sharpster, not native religion in the abstract, but the distinction probably was lost on casual listeners.³⁶

To be fair, *The Lone Ranger* was more careful than other first-generation Westerns in its treatment of native Americans. Many of its peers simply turned Indians into stock villains or exotic supporting players. Among the most notorious were historical dramas, such as *Frontier Fighters*, which ended a re-enactment of Little Big Horn with this peroration:

³⁵ Parker, 214.

³⁶ “Western Union Story,” *The Lone Ranger*, July 9, 1952; “The Fire God,” *The Lone Ranger*, December 12, 1945.

Thus died General George A. Custer, fighting to his last bullet and his last breath. He did not fight Indians because he hated them, but, in a day when there were frontiers to be guarded and frontiers to be won for civilization and posterity, he did his duty as he saw it. And on the scrolls of time, General George Custer and those ill-fated 112 officers and men will be honored by every man, woman, and child for centuries to come as heroes all, frontier fighters!³⁷

The more prominent series *Cavalcade of America* similarly described a pioneer wedding during which the couple rushed through their vows so they could take up arms against marauding Sioux. That same episode illustrated the exotic, and often ludicrous, assumptions radio scriptwriters made about native Americans. Earlier in the story, the groom serenaded his love by playing a guitar used “to scare the Indians.” “Let’s scare some now,” he said before banging out a tune about “the red, white, and blue.”³⁸

After World War II, some prewar Western series, including *The Lone Ranger*, continued in essentially unaltered form, and new series arose in a first-generation vein, with the only real change being they now cast screen stars in the leading roles. Among these were *Wild Bill Hickok* which premiered in 1951 with Guy Madison and Andy Devine, and *Frontier Town* which began in 1952 with Jeff Chandler as a frontier lawyer. Meantime, singing cowboys Gene Autry and Roy Rogers continued their musical Western franchises on radio, and the non-singing William Boyd, who played Hopalong Cassidy in sixty-six feature films, reprised his role on radio in 1950. Beneath the surface, however, there were other creative individuals who felt the reassuring and celebratory tone of radio Westerns left something out — not only were the characters flat and their

³⁷ “Custer’s Last Stand at Little Big Horn,” *Frontier Fighters*, n.d.

³⁸ “Transcontinental Journeys,” *Cavalcade of America*, November 11, 1936.

stories cartoonish, but there was a sense these Westerns did not fully capture what the United States was supposed to be. Postwar angst about “organization men,” the bomb, the Red Scare, and the ever-more-prominent question of race only keened these feelings.

One such critic was a then-aspiring writer named John Meston. Born in 1914, Meston was an adult when the Masked Man reached his hometown of Pueblo, Colorado, and he did not have time to listen to the radio, anyway. He was too busy roping calves on the rodeo circuit, fishing for trout, and riding horses through the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. He did have an affinity for stories, but his tastes ran more to James Joyce than Zane Grey. The son of a successful businessman, Meston pursued his literary interests at Exeter, Dartmouth, and the Sorbonne, and started but did not finish a Ph.D. in English at Harvard. Perhaps inspired by modernists like Joyce, Meston longed for stories less didactic — and certainly less simplistic — than fare served up by Trendle and Striker. He was not exclusively interested in Westerns, but they touched his love of the West, so when he went to work for CBS Radio after returning home from World War II, he could not shake a stubborn notion. Maybe what writers like Archibald MacLeish and Norman Corwin had done for radio generally could be done for the radio Western. Maybe it, too, could be intelligent, literate, and challenging. Maybe instead of peddling soft soap to kids, it could be as gritty as the West. Maybe radio was ready for an adult Western.³⁹

Meston’s job at CBS was continuity acceptance. Working in Hollywood, it was his responsibility to review scripts for all types of programs and make sure they met the network’s policies and standards. As such, he came to know many of CBS’s writers and

³⁹ “The Biography of Gunsmoke,” WAMU-FM broadcast, Washington, D.C., April 25, 1976; Cecil Smith, “Meston: Gunsmoke Gets in His Eyes,” *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 25, 1960, A10-A11; Daja Wangchuk Meston. *Comes the Peace: My Journey to Forgiveness*, (New York: Free Press, 2007), 23.

producers. One producer, Norman Macdonnell, then working on an acclaimed, if not particularly profitable, anthology series called *Escape*, was intrigued at the thought of a new kind of Western. He agreed to produce a script Meston adapted from an Ernest Haycox story, "Wild Jack Rhett," which was broadcast on *Escape* on December 17, 1950. Though primitive compared to what followed, the show experimented with clipped, blunt dialogue, deliberate pacing, and a tragic, if still glorious, dénouement. It received favorable comment, so Meston and Macdonnell tried another. "Pagosa," an original Meston story, was heard on August 6, 1951. Broadcast, rather improbably, on the anthology series *Romance*, it told the story of lawman-turned-rancher Jeff Spain and featured the full-toned, bass voice of radio regular William Conrad. Meston and Macdonnell thought they had a winner and decided to ask the network for permission to build a new series around Jeff Spain. They were in for a shock.⁴⁰

Meston discovered he had not been alone in wanting to update the radio Western. CBS owner Paley had a special fondness for a detective show he picked up after NBC cancelled it in 1948. *The Adventures of Philip Marlowe* was unsentimental and tough, and Paley told his vice president in charge of network programming, Harry Ackerman, he wanted a Western just like it. Meston and Macdonnell had not known about this, and by the time they offered the network Jeff Spain, Ackerman already had writers and actors in place for a project called *Gunsmoke*. In fact, two audition disks had been cut with Rye Billsbury and Howard Culver, respectively, playing the lead character, "Mark Dillon," a U.S. marshal in 1870s Dodge City, Kansas. Unfortunately, neither actor seemed to have

⁴⁰ "Biography"; "Wild Jack Rhett," *Escape*, December 17, 1950; "Pagosa," *Romance*, August 6, 1951. Macdonnell was profiled for a popular audience in Jane Pelgram, "Behind the Scenes, Norman Macdonnell," *Radio and Television Life*, May 3, 1949, LAB.

the right chemistry for the role, and the show remained in search of an advertising sponsor. CBS was beginning to question if *Philip Marlowe's* success could really be replicated in the Old West, and Meston and Macdonnell seemed at an impasse. Then in April 1952, another CBS series, the Cold War cloak-and-dagger thriller *Operation Underground*, had its own sponsorship trouble. The network dropped it, and to fill its spot gave *Gunsmoke* a second chance. This time, it would be up to Meston and Macdonnell to sort out the details, and they were only given a week to do so.⁴¹

Years later, Meston could not remember why he did not write the first *Gunsmoke* script. Perhaps it was thought too risky to start the series with an inexperienced writer. In any event, a radio veteran was brought in, and an accomplished musician, Rex Koury, was hired to write the theme. Despite oversleeping the day it was due and writing it on the back of a magazine in ten minutes, Koury wound up with a radio classic. The toughest problem was the same one that had dogged Ackerman — who should play the lead character, renamed “Matt Dillon” by Meston? After numerous auditions, CBS settled on William Conrad, the actor who had played Jeff Spain in “Pagosa.” Macdonnell explained later that CBS initially balked at Conrad because he sounded like a villain, but that would turn out to be part of what made *Gunsmoke* distinctive. The most important distinction were the scripts, however, and after the first year, Meston wrote almost all of them.⁴²

Just as *The Lone Ranger* was emblematic of the first generation of radio Westerns, so *Gunsmoke* came to epitomize the second generation. Ackerman's stillborn

⁴¹ Lewis J. Paper, *Empire: William S. Paley and the Making of CBS* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), 181; Dunning, 12; “Biography.”

⁴² SuzAnne Barabas and Gabor Barabas, *Gunsmoke: A Complete History and Analysis of the Legendary Broadcast Series* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1990), 33; “Biography.”

project and a brief transitional series, *Hawk Larabee*, which was broadcast in the late 1940s, had preceded it in searching for something new, but everything that followed measured itself against Meston's stark revision of Western mythology. If, in the first generation, Americans were autonomous individuals in a morally simple universe, in the second generation, they still were individuals, but they were caught up in complex, specific circumstances with problems they could not control — perhaps no one could control — and with the “correct” solutions less than obvious. “The West, just after the Civil War, was in a sense a kind of arena for frustrated gladiators,” he explained in a letter. “Homicidal psychopaths gathered along the frontier and had themselves a real circus with little or nothing to stop them from happily mowing one another down.” The West was not a blank slate where high ideals were forged, but a moral void where people struggled not to lose what sense of right and wrong they brought into it. “The rules were childishly simple. If the other man went for his gun before you did, you were free to kill him with immunity. And anyway, if there weren't too many unfriendly witnesses about, you could always claim he did, and probably get by with it just as easily,” Meston wrote.⁴³

Job number one for the Western storyteller was deflating the larger-than-life hero, the “phony big-hat,” who, as Meston put it, “rides along thumping his guitar, nasally singing a synthetic ballad, and looking for all the world like a fugitive from a cheap circus.” Matt Dillon was not as cynical as his creator, but he was a man doing his job and nothing more. His sidekick, Chester Proudfoot, was a likable dolt, and Kitty, the female lead, was frankly a prostitute. Meston admitted in a 1960 interview that Kitty's livelihood

⁴³ “Biography”; Barabas. 32-33. Meston's letter was said to have been directed to the *New York Herald-Tribune*, but it is unclear if the newspaper ever published it.

was more ambiguous on television, but Amanda Blake, who played the role on television, took her cue from radio. “Let’s face it,” said Blake. “She’s a working girl in the old West and she doesn’t take in washing.”⁴⁴

If religious figures in first-generation Westerns seemed much like stereotypes — Bull Davis was “the man who saw the light,” Parson Johnny Brimstone was “the straight-talker who told people what they needed to hear,” and so forth — *Gunsmoke*’s characters sometimes found religion a personal struggle. An episode titled “The Preacher” featured Seth Tandy, a clergyman who had lost his faith. His self-esteem had shattered with his belief in God, and he traveled West so as not to infect others with doubt. Confronted by a thug named Sam Keeler, Seth allowed himself to be beaten without resistance. Later, when Sam kidnapped Seth and took him into the countryside to kill him, Matt Dillon risked his own life to save Seth. Seth was moved by the hero’s courage.

“You came willing to sacrifice your life to save mine, and knowing mine is worthless,” he said to Matt.

The marshal’s temper flared.

“No man’s life is worthless, Tandy, whether he thinks so or not.”

“I can see that now,” said Seth. Inspired by the marshal’s example, he decided to return to the church.⁴⁵

Another second-generation radio Western, *Frontier Gentleman*, broadcast its own story titled “The Preacher” three years later. Thomas Yorby and Boyd Greer were preachers in Deadwood, South Dakota, but they were not doing any preaching. Greer

⁴⁴ “Biography”; Smith, A11.

⁴⁵ “The Preacher,” *Gunsmoke*, November 13, 1955.

aimed to kill Yorby and had pursued him across several states. Yorby was tired of running. Like Seth Tandy, Yorby lost his faith and his will to live. He had accidentally contributed to his wife's death in Kansas, and Greer, her brother, demanded revenge. The show's eponymous hero, J. B. Kendall, an English journalist in the West, forced the two preachers to confront one another in a hotel room. He thought if Greer had a clear opportunity to shoot Yorby, Greer would realize he could not bring himself to do it. Kendall was right. Once Greer saw how deeply Yorby tortured himself, he left the room.⁴⁶

Neither of these stories were "antireligious." In both cases, they depicted the loss of religious faith as a personal calamity, not a liberation. However, they also found faith a difficult thing to achieve, and they refrained from associating skepticism with villainy or suggesting that it was "un-American." Instead of using religion as an external marker of who was and was not a good American, they described America as a place where some people struggled with faith more than others. These stories moved away from a frontier in which abstract "religion" always was associated with redemptive American expansion, and skepticism always was associated with evil intent, to a frontier in which religion was not abstract at all, but a particular experience in the lives of individuals. *Gunsmoke*'s "The Preacher" ended on a hopeful note when Seth Tandy decided to return to church, but his decision began with the fact of Dillon's courageous action, drew from that a reflection of his own worth, and only then moved toward a renewal of faith. By contrast, in "Faith at Foxhead," the Lone Ranger forced the "facts" to fit Melody's faith in Jeff Pearson to avoid "a girl's faith [dying] with him."

⁴⁶ "The Preacher," *Frontier Gentleman*, October 19, 1958.

Second-generation Westerns that treated religion dared to ask, if only by implication, what sort of religion “religious America” contained — they threw into question how moral and right the moralism and didacticism of the earlier Westerns had been.⁴⁷

Put another way, second-generation Westerns humanized their characters by emphasizing their human frailties and feelings about religion, or other difficult subjects. The civil religious significance of this was that by making the mythical Old West a human place, as opposed to a kind of American Olympus whereon there strode gods, second-generation Westerns emphasized the distance between the United States and the transcendent ideals it espoused. Since other civil religious messages of the period — especially those of the priestly type — sought to narrow this gap, prophetic stories served to challenge them. Had they *only* challenged them — had, for example, shows like *Gunsmoke* only debunked the mythic imagery of *The Lone Ranger* — then they may not have been civil religious at all. But second-generation Westerns did more than debunk first-generation Westerns. They, too, were morality tales after a fashion.

Most often, their morality contained some combination of racial or religious inclusiveness and New Deal sentiments about the common man or the public weal. Regarding racial and religious minorities, for example, second-generation Westerns drew attention to differences and exclusions that earlier, assimilationist rhetoric glided over. In “Father O’Tool’s Organ,” a two-part *Have Gun, Will Travel* story broadcast in 1960, a Christian religious quest was aided by political revolutionaries and a non-Christian

⁴⁷ The danger of associating oneself too closely with “the right hand of God” was dramatized in another way, as well — through stories about homicidal religious fanatics. In “Kangaroo,” a John Brown-like madman threatened to cut Chester’s right hand off, and in “Kitty’s Killing,” a religious fanatic threatened Kitty, forcing her to kill him in self-defense. “Kangaroo,” *Gunsmoke*, January 18, 1959; “Kitty’s Killing,” *Gunsmoke*, February 2, 1958.

religion. The show's hero, Paladin, was asked to fetch an organ in Vera Cruz, Mexico, by the organ's new owner, Father O'Tool, who ran a Catholic mission on the American side of the Rio Grande River. The padre arranged for an Indian named Tono — an obvious allusion to Tonto — to aid Paladin on his journey. On their return, Paladin and Tono encountered revolutionaries who offered them protection. Unfortunately, when they arrived at the mission, a planned horse race threatened to empty the mission on the day a bishop was to inspect the new organ. Tono asked a Navajo medicine man to dance for rain to postpone the horse race, and rain came on cue. The church was filled with parishioners when the bishop arrived, and Father O'Tool succeeded in making a good impression on the bishop.⁴⁸ If *The Lone Ranger*, in practice, had not always been as ecumenical as Striker's guidelines suggested, second-generation stories such as "Father O'Tool's Organ" sought to fill the gap.

In similar fashion, stories built around female characters ranked among Meston's finest scripts. In "Kitty," Dillon asked Kitty to a society party, and the bigotry with which the "better folk" of Dodge confronted them only drove them closer. In "The Cabin," two ruffians killed a girl's father and forced her to live with them. She and Matt overcame them, but in the end, she hinted that a life of prostitution in Hays City was all that was left to her, suggesting that the Old West was not as free for women as for men. In addition to airing stories about women, *Guns smoke* had two women among its writers: Kathleen Hite and Marian Clark. One of Hite's stories reversed gender roles and attributed to a female character the brutal heartlessness usually reserved for males. After

⁴⁸ "Father O'Tool's Organ, Part 1," *Have Gun, Will Travel*, August 7, 1960; "Father O'Tool's Organ, Part 2," *Have Gun, Will Travel*, August 14, 1960.

the mother of a no-good thug put an end to her troubles by killing her son in cold blood, another scoundrel complained, “There’s no woman in you at all.”⁴⁹

Finally, inclusion in second-generation Westerns also could be used to buttress New Deal themes sometimes occluded by a rising emphasis on “free enterprise” and private consumption. *Hopalong Cassidy*, a 1950s radio show more typical of first- than second-generation Westerns, broadcast a story of intriguing symbolism on January 15, 1950. In “The Coltsville Terror,” Hopalong, a sort of toned-down Lone Ranger, and his sidekick, California Carlson, happened across an abandoned church in a ghost town. Inside the church, they met the mother and daughter of the preacher who built the church and donated it and the land it was on to the town. The preacher had been shot and the people driven away a year before by gunmen. Hopalong and California learned that a wealthy miner named Riker intended to destroy the church, ostensibly for lumber, and justified himself on the theory that unused public resources belong to whomever grabs them first. Later, Hopalong discovered Riker really coveted oil beneath the church, and he defended public land against a rapacious capitalist.⁵⁰

Science Fiction

If radio Westerns critiqued the United States by telling familiar stories in new ways, the medium’s science fiction series spoke from perspectives both literally and figuratively far away. Science fiction’s other-worldly quality stood in a long critical

⁴⁹ “Kitty,” *Gunsmoke*, November 29, 1952; “The Cabin,” *Gunsmoke*, December 27, 1952; “The Old Lady,” *Gunsmoke*, January 24, 1953. “The Old Lady” was written by Kathleen Hite.

⁵⁰ “The Coltsville Terror,” *Hopalong Cassidy*, January 15, 1950. This play reused the script for *The Marauders*, a Hopalong Cassidy feature film released in 1947. *Hopalong* star William Boyd did not fancy second-generation Westerns. “They aren’t Westerns,” he said. “We call them head-knockers.” Hedda Hopper, “Hopalong Discusses Current Cowboys,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 2, 1961, C8.

tradition — just as the philosophes of the eighteenth century wrote of the Iroquois or Chinese to jab at the *ancien regime*, so postwar science fiction writers wrote of other planets to prod the United States.

As a medium, radio suited science fiction well since both relied heavily on listener imagination. In a 1945 essay titled “How to Listen to Radio Drama,” script writer Rome C. Krulevich went so far as to argue that what he called “fantasy” offered “the nearest approach to the unique in radio drama.” “The essential feature of radio drama is its dependence upon the imagination of the listener ...,” he wrote. “But it’s that which may lead to the development of a new form ... a uniquely radio form.”⁵¹ Much of Krulevich’s specific advice could as easily have dripped from the pen of John Meston. For example, both disdained stereotypes. “All mothers are not noble, spending all their waking hours in the kitchen baking cookies. All young lovers are not torn by doubt and confusion that makes them say, ‘I want to be sure ... very sure.’ All country doctors are not kindly and philosophical,” Krulevich wrote.⁵² Yet it was in speculative fiction rather than Westerns that he found the best opportunity for radio to develop its potential. To make his point, he described a scene he thought radio alone could do justice. A man stepped onto an elevator, rode it to the top of a tall building, and then crashed through the roof to soar over the city and off into the stars. “Here on the printed page we cannot duplicate the effect of the scene; on the stage it would be impossible to reproduce it; the moving picture could most nearly approximate it.” But “the sensitively personal form of

⁵¹ Rome C. Krulevich, “How to Listen to Radio Drama,” in *Let’s Learn to Listen* (Madison: Wisconsin Joint Committee for Better Radio Listening, 1945), LAB, 17.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 14.

radio, which stimulates the listener's imagination," could best convey it through invocative sound effects and dialogue, he wrote.⁵³

Radio's two most important science fiction series of the 1950s were *Dimension X* and *X Minus One*, both heard on NBC. *Dimension X* aired in 1950 and 1951, and *X Minus One* was heard from 1955 to 1958. Most of their stories were lifted from popular science fiction magazines, and many episodes adapted tales by major science fiction writers such as Isaac Asimov, Ray Bradbury, and Robert A. Heinlein. Prior to these series, most of radio's serious science fiction showed up piece-meal in anthology series, such as *Suspense*'s two-part adaptation of the Curt Siodmak novel *Donovan's Brain* in 1944. Though *Dimension X* and *X Minus One* differed from earlier fare like *Flash Gordon* and *Buck Rogers*, to speak of them as a "second generation" of radio science fiction in the same way that *Gunsmoke* constituted a second-generation of Westerns would be misleading. There was about as much science in *Flash Gordon* as in *The Jack Benny Program*, and besides, *Flash Gordon* and its ilk rarely were as civil religious as *The Lone Ranger*, though they could be classified as superhero adventures.⁵⁴

Radio science fiction raised the same prophetic critiques Meston did on *Gunsmoke*, though in different ways. Instead of depicting the liberal autonomous individual in a morally uncomplicated universe, they blurred the lines between individuals, society, and technology, and asked Americans if they were as "good" as they assumed. For example, in "Child's Play," a story that aired on *Dimension X* in 1951 and was repeated on *X Minus One* four years later, Sam Weber, a wealthy Westchester, New

⁵³ Ibid., 17.

⁵⁴ Dunning, 199-200, 729-730.

York, lawyer, explained the secret of his success. Years earlier, Weber said, he had been a meek and frightened man. Another lawyer in his office bullied him unmercifully, and worst of all, threatened to steal his girlfriend. Weber's boss was fed up, too. He said if Weber did not start to show some "zip," he would be out of a job. Then one day, a coffin-shaped box arrived unexpectedly at Weber's apartment. When he opened it, he found a card that made no sense: "To Sam, from your classmates at the Interdimensional and Cosmic Institute. Merry Christmas. 2145 A.D." Even more puzzling were the wires and gadgets inside the box, objects resembling a "kid's chemical set." An instruction booklet identified them as the "Build-A-Man Set No. 3" suitable for ages 11 to 13 and said the set could "build and assemble complete adult humans in perfect working order." There even was a "disassembler" for correcting mistakes.⁵⁵

In the scenes that followed, Weber became so exasperated in work and love that he finally decided to use the kit to build a copy of himself — only this time with zip. In an entertaining, if predictable, series of events, the "new" Sam Weber punched out old Sam's office rival, but then stole the old Sam's job and girlfriend for himself. Alarmed, the old Sam decided to use the disassembler, but was himself disassembled. In the end, listeners learned that the new Sam was the wealthy Westchester lawyer who had told them the story all along.⁵⁶

Though "Child's Play" contained no explicit references to American civil religion, it critiqued pastoral assumptions about economic abundance and technological progress by

⁵⁵ "Child's Play," *Dimension X*, June 24, 1951. This play was performed again for *X Minus One* and broadcast as part of that series on Oct. 20, 1955.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

suggesting that, at least in this case, technology could obliterate morality. Even if Americans were morally capable of handling abundance responsibly now, the play seemed to ask, could technology change them in a way that would undermine that? Moments before the old Sam decided to disassemble his creation, he hesitated, wondering if it would be murder, but the new Sam, a technological construction, had no such scruples — he just had zip. “Child’s Play” suggested not that technological advancement was bad, but that the virtue of the virtuous community did not necessarily advance in lockstep with it.

More overtly civil religious was “In the House Where I Was Born,” an episode of the highly unusual series *Quiet, Please*. Penned by the talented but sadly overlooked Wyllis Cooper, *Quiet, Please* was so original it was nearly impossible to assign to a genre. It sometimes is remembered as a horror show — perhaps because it’s most famous play, “The Thing on the Fourble Board,” fit that description — but whatever the label, it certainly was speculative. Some *Quiet, Please* stories went even further than *Dimension X* and *X Minus One* in using radio’s ability to bend time and space to disorient the listener. All *Quiet, Please* stories were told simply and directly to the audience by a first-person narrator. Dialogue was used sparingly, as were environmental sounds and weird musical effects. “In the House Where I Was Born” began with a war veteran describing his annual pilgrimage to his boyhood home.

“Every year, I come back, just before Decoration Day,” he said. “It’s pleasant some years. Some years, it’s different. Everybody ought to go back once a year to the house where he was born.”⁵⁷

⁵⁷ “In the House Where I Was Born,” *Quiet, Please*, May 24, 1948. The play was repeated the following year. The script can be viewed online at “Quiet, Please – Viewing Script,” <http://www.quietplease.org/index.php?section=readscript&id=102> (accessed February 18, 2011).

The veteran then described the house in detail:

The big bay window where I used to sit and watch the snow
on winter afternoons faces right out into the street now.
And the wooden steps go right up from the sidewalk to the
big double front door. . . . The round oak base burner with
the Isinglass in the doors where the coals glowed red of a
winter's night.⁵⁸

A few minutes later, he added that the house was in Brooklyn but confusingly referred to “the brownstone steps into a high-ceilinged house with a fireplace in the front room.” The confusion deepened when he described the day he brought his young bride to the house.

“Darling, This is home!” he said.

“It’s a fine home, a wonderful home!” she said.

“My people have lived here since the — ”

“Since the Thirty Years’ War! You have told me that.”

Still later, he baldly stated, “And the house where I was born is a ’dobe shack somewhere in the Texas panhandle.”

By the end of the play, the listener may well have concluded the play made no sense. The narrator had contradicted himself numerous times, and at other times, he refused to disclose important details, at one point even suggesting he had forgotten his wife’s name! Only in the closing moments did listeners learn they were hearing from an unknowable man — a man in a tomb of the unknown soldier.

My face is dim in Eternity now. But, once, you knew me.
Perhaps you wept to hear that Sergeant Death had spoke
my name. Is it you that I hear through the dust, O, my
brother? Is it your little song that I hear, O, my mother?

⁵⁸ Ibid.

I, in my tomb of marble?
I, in my tomb of stone?
I am the Chief of them all.
I am the Chief of the Dead.⁵⁹

“In the House Where I Was Born” was civil religious in that it participated in what W. Loyd Warner called the “cult of the dead” surrounding American Memorial Day. That it aired twice in May was no coincidence. But the play could be considered prophetic because of its subtexts of inclusion and universalism. The narrator was not simply a generic composite of fallen veterans, he was a composite of veterans *whose names had been forgotten*. In an early scene, the narrator remembered listening as his mother told him a bedtime story about a character nobody knew. Surely, the boy said, the worst thing that could happen would be “not having anybody know you.” Moreover, though there were clues that established the veteran as an American — the fleeting references to Brooklyn and Texas, for example — the inscription the narrator quoted from the monument that stood over him was curiously inaccurate. The United States’ real Tomb of the Unknown Soldier states, “Here Rests In Honored Glory An American Soldier Known But To God.” But the inscription in the play read, “He Lies Here Deep, Unknown To All Save God.” It is possible that Cooper simply misquoted it, but that is unlikely given his usual attention to detail. Probably, he obscured the inscription in light of the fact that many nations established tombs of unknown soldiers after World War I. In doing this, he underscored the similarity of experience of the United States’ fallen, forgotten veterans and those of other nations, thus asserting that even in the civil religious

⁵⁹ Ibid.

ritual of Memorial Day, the United States was not coterminous with the transcendent.⁶⁰

A similar message about American capitalism was heard in “The Parade,” another play that aired on both *Dimension X* and *X Minus One*. Rather surprisingly, it suggested that advertising — long hailed by radio executives as the bedrock of “the American Way” — could actually represent the nation’s greatest vulnerability. The play began when a mysterious Mr. Luchar entered the offices of Sid Ryan, proprietor of Publicity Associates, an advertising and public relations firm. Luchar immediately identified himself as a Martian, but Ryan did not take him seriously.⁶¹

“A Martian, huh? As in Orson Welles?” he asked.

“Precisely,” said Luchar.

“I’m a Rotarian, myself.”

Luchar persisted with the gag, and Ryan started to throw him out, but his tune changed when Luchar offered him \$5,000 up front for a publicity campaign worth \$1 million eventually.

“It has been my observation that advertising and publicity are the very backbone of earthly civilizations,” he said.

He said he wanted to introduce a new product and asked Ryan the best way to

⁶⁰ Though the prophetic message as described here seems to dominate this play, it raises an important caveat about the different styles of civil religion. Most radio plays that used civil religion fit fairly obviously into one of the three categories used in this study, which is part of why those categories are useful. A number contained elements of more than one style, perhaps containing some passages of a pastoral nature and others of a priestly nature. However, a few, including this one, were so subtle that a causal listener might reasonably have heard more than one style with the listener and not the text determining which was heard. In this play, for example, a listener who focused on the inclusiveness would have heard a prophetic message, a call for the nation to remember the nameless dead or even a chiding of the nation for too easily overlooking them. But a listener who focused on the nobility of the dead soldier’s sacrifice may have received a priestly message as described in Chapter 2.

⁶¹ “The Parade,” *Dimension X*, August 25, 1950. This play aired on *X Minus One* on May 1, 1955, and January 25, 1956.

launch a campaign.

“Well, if the client has a lot of dough to throw around, a suspense campaign is best,” Ryan said. Tease the public with a series of cryptic newspaper advertisements. String them along, make them guess what you are up to. “Then, finally, when you’ve teased them enough, you bust loose and unveil the product.”

Luchar thought the plan sounded perfect. He wanted the first ads to read “The Martians are coming!”; subsequent ads to specify that “June 1 is Martian Day”; and on June 1, he wanted a parade down Fifth Avenue with the slogan, “World of Tomorrow, the Martian World!” When Ryan asked what the product was, Luchar used Ryan’s own advice against him — suspense campaigns only work in complete secrecy. If the product leaks out, the suspense is gone. Even Ryan would not be told.

Puzzled but also eager for the \$1 million, Ryan went to work on the contract. He bought the advertising, arranged for the necessary permits with the city, and found a bevy of balloons, clowns, and drum majorettes for the parade. He even hired forty midgets. Ryan also learned through the grapevine that Century Pictures was working on a film about a Martian invasion. Aha! he thought. So this was Luchar’s secret product.

On the day of the parade, an announcer described the scene in a radio broadcast-inside-a-radio-broadcast. At first, the scene was light with clowns tumbling and spectators laughing, but then the crowd grew silent. The clapping of what sounded like jackboots grew ever louder. As the Martians approached, the announcer described them in terms that, in the 1950s, would have invoked images of a Munich rally or a parade through Red Square:

Now here they come, ladies and gentlemen, the Martians,
marching in booted, helmeted ranks, row after row of them.

This is an impressive sight, ladies and gentlemen, a rather serious contrast to the rest of the joyous, slapstick parade we've been witnessing up to now. Perhaps, oh, two hundred tall, broad-chested men dressed in metallic gray spacesuits with fixed glass visors drawn across their faces. Each one is holding an ominous-looking ray gun at the ready position. They are marching in absolute silence ... as though some mute, unspoken commander were marking time for them. Even children are awed by the unexpected war-like realism of the Martian legion.⁶²

Ryan became alarmed when he noticed discrepancies between the parade he witnessed and what he had planned. Frantically, he called Century Pictures and demanded to speak to Luchar. They told him they knew no Luchar, and besides, the Martian picture had been cancelled months earlier. It finally dawned on Ryan that the Martian invasion was real and that what was happening outside his window marked the death of the United States. He also realized that advertising — bedrock of the American Way — had just been used to “sell” Americans the end of their republic. The play closed with the sound of the Martians firing on the crowd.⁶³

Finally, just because science fiction stories took place in the future rather than the Old West did not preclude them from using the trope of the frontier. In fact, frontier experiences were a staple of science fiction and provided prophetically-minded writers an opportunity to critique the United States' understanding of itself as an exceptional or redeemer nation. In “The Castaways,” a group of natives on the Pacific island of Tahani refused to leave their homes to make way for a U.S. atomic test. An angry American general ordered the natives' chief to his quarters, but the chief only started singing when

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

the general dressed him down. His song was a curse: “The island will remember the tears of its children and punish the invaders. The Great Destroyer will not destroy, and the evil man who is the chief will travel far through the blackness of night. Even as the children of the island end, so will he.”⁶⁴ Furious, the general ordered a detachment of Marines to clear the island by force, but to their horror, they discovered when they arrived that the whole tribe — men, women, and children — had walked off a cliff into a lagoon.

When the test occurred, the bomb failed to detonate, and the part of the chief’s curse about the Great Destroyer not destroying seemed eerily familiar. The general dismissed all suggestion the curse had anything to do with it. He drew a clear line between American “progress” and native “nonsense.”

“It will take more than a mumbo-jumbo curse from a native witch doctor to stop this operation,” he shouted.

In the second half of the play, he and a scientist traveled to the island to investigate the bomb. As it resided at the bottom of the lagoon where the natives jumped, the Americans had to pilot a small underwater craft in order to reach it. In the play’s unexpected conclusion, the “natives” turned out to be extraterrestrial castaways whose spacecraft had landed in the lagoon centuries before. They had not drowned when they jumped off the cliff but simply swam down to their stranded ship, still underneath the water. The bomb had not exploded because they had stolen it and robbed it of its nuclear material, which they needed as a fuel source to leave the earth. The point of the play was not hard to decipher and bore a resemblance to the Biblical injunction that “the last shall

⁶⁴ “The Castaways,” *Dimension X*, August 11, 1950. It was repeated on *X Minus One* on September 15, 1955, and November 28, 1956.

be first.” Not only was a U.S. atomic test — a symbol of American technology that was itself a symbol of American exceptionalism — stymied by what appeared to be a pre-modern people, but the aborigines turned out to be more advanced than the Americans.⁶⁵

The Medium

If, as was discussed in Chapter 5, sound is agonistic, it matters who is speaking. The voices of authority in series such as *This Is Your FBI* and *I Was A Communist For the FBI* used radio to different effect than did the voices of criticism in *Gunsmoke* and *Dimension X*. This is another reason why McLuhan’s aphorism “the medium is the message” is best interpreted as “the medium is part of the message” or “the medium influences the message.” Content does matter. A priestly message is not the same as a prophetic message, even if either heard on the radio differs from the same content in print. In the mid-twentieth century, some radio dramas tried to unite Americans to defend their principles while others tried to unite Americans behind their principles. Radio could serve pastoral, priestly, or prophetic ends.

Those men and women who produced dramas that invoked prophetic civil religion were not the only ones to recognize the medium’s potential for criticism and reform. The same booklet that contained Rome C. Krulevich’s essay about radio drama contained another article by University of Wisconsin history professor Chester P. Higby. He argued that the stories people tell each other influence their national histories so profoundly that they can mean the difference between democracy and tyranny. As evidence, he cited the collapses of the Second Republic in France and the Weimar

⁶⁵ Ibid.

Republic in Germany. Napoleon III and Adolf Hitler came to power because too many people believed false narratives, he said. The French came to believe that Napoleon Bonaparte had been a beneficent leader, and the Germans became convinced their army was “stabbed in the back” during World War I. In classic prophetic fashion, Higby questioned whether American radio stories attracting large audiences were inculcating the values the United States needed to avoid calamity. “Good nations are composed of good individuals,” he wrote. A population whose entertainment is edifying, historically accurate, and true-to-life will be better suited to self-government than a nation mesmerized by nonsense. And what attracted Americans? Soap operas. “They give no insight into real life ...,” Higby complained. “The characters of the soap dramas are either black or white. Most of the characters of real life are some shade of gray. ... At best the soap dramas help to pass the time. They certainly do nobody any good.”⁶⁶

Higby’s warning swung entirely in the direction of content. He operated under the assumption that “the message is the message.” As a result, his concerns could also be — and were — directed at earlier entertainment forms such as traveling road shows and pulp fiction magazines. But he did little to explain why radio as a specific medium could be used to uplift or edify or at least counter the rubbish he saw all around him. Yet there already was a long preaching tradition in America that pointed to the critical — if not outright subversive — potential of sound communication. In a study of sound in the eighteenth century, Leigh Eric Schmidt argued that “New Light” evangelicals described the communications they believed they received from God in aural terms — they said

⁶⁶ Chester F. Higby [*sic*], “What Difference Does it Make to My Country What I Listen To?” in *Let’s Learn to Listen* (Madison: Wisconsin Joint Committee for Better Radio Listening, 1945), LAB, iii-iv.

God *spoke* to them directly. Schmidt called it “inner hearing.” To underscore how subversive it was, he contrasted it to the Calvinist doctrine of the calling, which told people to remain in their God-given social “stations.” Among other things, the doctrine of the calling meant Christians were expected to accept as authoritative the interpretation of texts offered by an educated clergy presumably chosen by God to fill the station of interpreter. Inner hearing bypassed both the clergy and the texts. This was so potentially reorienting — or, some would say, disorienting — that alarmed conservatives like Charles Chauncey pleaded with people to “abide in their callings” while even reform-minded divines such as Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley urged them to distinguish between “genuine” and less credible voices.⁶⁷ In the twentieth century, prophetic radio drama played a similar role with respect to the texts of American civil religion. This was not done through expository textual exegesis, but through dramas that seemed to “show” what America ought to be, or how it differed from what it ought to be. Thus, for example, when *X Minus One* broadcast a story about a lone American who settled on an uninhabited planet only to be castigated as a “savage” by later settlers, listeners could reflect not only on the United States’ frontier experience, but also on possible disjunctions between the treatment of native Americans and the ideals of America’s founding creeds.⁶⁸

Additionally, it was significant that radio followed centuries of typographic culture. The “primary” in Walter Ong’s description of primary orality was important. Visual inventions such as the alphabet, writing, and printing did more than “make their

⁶⁷ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 41-57.

⁶⁸ “The Native Problem,” *X Minus One*, September 26, 1957.

mark.” They constituted the media environment, or at least the dominant component of the environment, into which radio was introduced. The aural “lifeworld” of primary orality was, by the twentieth century, a distant din, strong enough to be personally moving, immanent, and agonistic, but weak enough to admit a degree of irony not present in pre-oral narratives. As Ong put it,

By the beginning of our present electronic age, when the possibility of storing detailed verbalized knowledge becomes virtually infinite, the hero has almost vanished as a major conservator of culture. He is replaced by his opposite, the antihero who, instead of storing knowledge, comes ultimately to reflect wryly on the vast quantities of it which are stored and on the storage media themselves ...⁶⁹

The wry reflection Ong described assumed a distance between the culture the hero no longer conserved and that of the “antihero.” In the late twentieth century, creators of what Ong called antiheros adopted all manner of cultural platforms or poses from which they issued their criticisms, but the radio shows described in this chapter issued their appeals, at least in part, from the prophetic style of American civil religion. When John Meston wrote of “[h]omicidal psychopaths ... happily mowing one another down,” or when he described the nineteenth-century frontier as a place where murder was easy to get away with, he might have seemed to have replaced the myths and moral codes of *The Lone Ranger* with no morality at all. But he really made room for other mythical interpretations. He and other writers of second-generation Westerns fused anger over a war-torn world, the Cold War, and anticommunist witch hunts with the New Deal’s promise of a better, more equitable America. They grabbed the audience by toppling expectations of what Westerns were “supposed to sound like,” then demanded dignity for

⁶⁹ Ong, *Presence*, 205.

people lost in the glow of the first generation's triumphalism.⁷⁰

Some radio listeners shared a similar hope. Shortly after World War II, a young Kansas City woman wrote *Vox Pop* host Parks Johnson and expressed what she thought radio could do to better the world. Marian Sears spent nearly four years in the Women's Army Corps before returning home to take advantage of the G. I. Bill's educational opportunities. She saw radio as a kind of complement to the G. I. Bill, an extension of the postwar project of building a more peaceful — and in both the priestly and prophetic senses — a more American world. Your programs, she wrote Johnson

form a foundation [*sic*] step to the real solution of real world peace. Education in the ways, beliefs and occupations of peoples all over the earth must precede any widespread peace program. Your program helps us to know how people are, live, think and do in all parts of our own country. Thank you for fine entertainment.⁷¹

Of course, by the late 1950s, the hour was late for network dramatic radio of all types. Soon electronic storytelling would give way to television, and radio would be given back to affiliates who filled it with news, sports, and music. It would be the ironic fate of the radio Western and science fiction story to bloom as art forms, and as vehicles for social commentary, just as they reached the end of their sojourns. For those who had “ears to hear,” though, radio dramas that used prophetic civil religion found their own ways of keeping up with a nation expanding and diversifying in thought as well as population.

⁷⁰ Again, this paralleled developments in the movie Western. *High Noon* screenwriter Carl Foreman said his film was an allegory about the House Un-American Activities Committee. John Lenihan, *Showdown: Confronting Modern America in the Western Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 119-120.

⁷¹ Marian Sears to Parks Johnson, October 17, 1946, *Vox Pop* Collection, Series I, Box 1, Folder 14, LAB.

Conclusion — The End of Radio Dominance and the Eclipse of Consensus

During the 1950s, journalist and historian William Lee Miller worried about the soul of America. The decade's much-vaunted religiosity, he wrote, "is closely tied to a popular patriotism, of which it is the uncritical ally. ... The two pieties combine in much public discourse, and often the American will slide unnoticing from one to the other." Miller indicted the mass media for confusing politics and religion — and for repackaging both of them to make them more "salable." He even quoted advertising executive Clem Whitaker to explain how it was done. Said Whitaker: "Put on a show!"¹

This study has echoed Miller's observations both about the intermingling of America's "two pieties," which scholars have dubbed American civil religion, and about the role of the mass media in promulgating and shaping civil religious discourse. It has shown that, in the 1930s through 1950s, civil religious ideas were expressed not only in the official utterances of elected leaders or on solemn national holidays such as Memorial Day, but also in the ubiquitous sounds of daily commercial entertainment. It also has shown that radio, the dominant national medium of the period, was not a neutral carrier of civil religious rhetoric but was instead centripetally biased. Radio and civil religion combined to produce a unifying, if invisible, "community of the air" that Americans imagined to be an exceptional nation, a global redeemer, and a virtuous society.

¹ Miller, *Piety*, 62, 129.

Locating civil religion in popular, commercial entertainment answers critics who complain there is insufficient evidence to think of it as a religion that, in the words of Robert N. Bellah, “requires the same care in understanding that any other religion does.”² The nation’s founding documents, presidential inaugural addresses, and calls to war may contain the most famous expressions of American civil religion, but Americans attach notions of transcendence to the life of their nation in more popular and mundane venues, as well. Inventing and repeating stories about the nation, its history, its ideals, its role in the world, or the character of its citizens is one of the most common ways American reflect upon and perpetuate their civil religion, and their civil religion is one of the most common ways they link religion to politics. Entertainers, businesspeople, advertisers, bureaucrats, and social reformers are as apt to recite these narratives as are politicians. In doing so — even if they think they are simply attracting an audience — they stake their own claims about what America “means.”

At the same time, to emphasize the importance of radio as a medium for telling civil religious stories in the mid-twentieth century is to explode the assumption that mass media are nothing more than extensions of person-to-person communication. Media scholar Quentin J. Schultze has argued that Americans habitually “interpret the meaning and significance of new technologies partly in spiritual if not in distinctly religious terms.”³ The emergence of electronic media, he maintained, was almost reflexively associated both with a sense of progress inherited from Protestant eschatology and a

² Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” 21. John F. Wilson, “A Historian’s Approach to Civil Religion,” in *American Civil Religion*, eds. Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 130-134, argued that references to civil religion are too few and scattered to constitute a separate religion.

³ Schultze, 47.

sense of mission stemming from the nation's revivalist tradition. When radio arrived in the nation's homes in the 1920s and 1930s, a people already convinced they had a special relationship with God assumed the new medium would make an exceptional nation even better, but they tended to think in *quantitative* terms. Bruce Barton declared that college professors would deliver more lectures to educate more citizens, police would bring more criminals to justice by broadcasting their descriptions, and the basic decency of the American people would be more obvious to nearly everyone. Christian ministers assumed they could use the radio to bring more Americans to God. Less observed were the *qualitative* ways that radio altered communication. Far from simply amplifying existing messages, it tilted public discourse toward unifying themes, including those of civil religion. The medium's ability to conquer space eroded geographical and social divisions within the United States, its deeply personal participatory quality bonded listeners to disembodied voices, and the commercial and governmental institutions built around radio preferred national markets and regulations. Disruptive voices, such as those of ethnic separatists, radical political minorities, exclusivist religious sects, or hate groups, remained a part of the national landscape, but radio was not their friend and broadcasters and regulators took steps to keep them off the air.

This centripetal bias influenced radio's presentation of all of civil religion's styles. Pastoral civil religion, which comforts the nation by reminding it of its relationship to something transcendent, benefited from radio's national for-profit business model and from the culture of celebrity it cultivated. During the Great Depression, the networks' business interests gave them commercial reasons to broadcast comforting messages, and as radio burrowed its way into American life, it developed a pantheon of

performers who were held up as model citizens. Priestly civil religion, which makes the nation itself an object of transcendence, benefited from the immanent and agonistic power of sound. During World War II, radio plays about the war made Americans feel personally involved in the conflict, and during the Cold War, sound's tendency to associate danger with personalized others lent credence to the demonization of communists and the sanctification of the "American Way." Finally, prophetic civil religion, which judges the nation from a transcendent perspective, benefited from the widened public sphere that radio created and, when chiding the nation for associating itself too closely with the transcendent, from the time-honored subversive potential of sound.

Because civil religion was (and is) ubiquitous in American culture and because radio was a beloved part of most Americans' lives in the 1930s through 1950s, the alleged consensus the United States experienced in the mid-twentieth century appears but a fleeting moment not likely to return. America's so-called "Age of Consensus" was characterized by an unusually centripetal media environment that ended with television. If, as McLuhan claimed, radio pulled together what print had rent asunder, television rent it asunder again. Whereas Father Coughlin was simply a voice to his radio listeners, Bishop Fulton Sheen was a voice, an alternatively stern and smiling face, and a man wearing Roman Catholic liturgical garments who spoke from a room full of books, made notes on a blackboard, and stood in front of a Madonna. The differences that divided Americans were harder to hide on television, and the medium tended to reassert individual autonomy by bringing viewers back into a dimensional universe of bodies in space. If, as was stated at the beginning of this study, radio leaned toward collectivist interpretations

of society, then television tended to make America more libertarian.⁴

By the 1960s, what fans of radio drama often call the “Golden Age of Radio” and the 1950s’ not-entirely-convincing “Age of Consensus” both had passed. American civil religion remained, but its prophetic voices sharpened, especially in the civil rights movement. Hoping to heal the nation’s divisions, prophetic civil religion drew attention to them in the short run. As early as 1949, the popular magazine *Radio and Television Life* had sensed a change of climate in the nation’s media environment, and while it did not foresee the centrifugalism of the 1960s, it suspected that losing radio would change America more than people expected. As an unnamed writer put it,

In the early twenties the radio visionaries were declaring that the new medium would cure deafness, do away with wars and unite all the nations of the world. It has done none of those things, but it *has* filled the hours of lonely invalids, brought the sound of battle of World War II into the front

⁴ McLuhan famously labeled television a “cool” medium as opposed to the “hot” medium of radio. By “cool,” he meant less filled with data and requiring more completion on the part of the audience. Television audiences were given more bits of data they had to piece together — the sounds, the pictures, the foreground, the background, the actors, the sets, and so forth. In McLuhan’s view, this made television less intense and more casual, and that, in turn, partially unwound the centripetalism radio had bound. Taking a cue from this distinction, media historian Thomas Doherty has argued that instead of thinking of television as the medium that made Senator Joseph McCarthy’s career possible, it should be thought of as the medium that destroyed him. “Dependent for sustenance on the very freedoms that McCarthyism restricted, the medium was preprogrammed for resistance,” Doherty wrote. It is important to remember that, writing in 1964, the television McLuhan referred to was small-screened, lacking color, and subject to indifferent reception. No doubt he would consider twenty-first century television much “hotter.” The screens are larger, sometimes very large, the pictures are in color and of higher resolution, framing and editing techniques are busier and more energetic, and, especially on news and sports programs, there often are many bits of data displayed before the viewer at once. McLuhan anticipated that the television of the future might be quite unlike what he knew. “If anybody were to ask whether all this would change if technology stepped up the character of the TV image to movie data level, one could only counter by inquiring, ‘Could we alter a cartoon by adding details of perspective and light and shade?’ The answer is ‘Yes,’ only it would then no longer be a cartoon. Nor would ‘improved’ TV be television,” he wrote. McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 313; Thomas Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 18. Finally, while the long-term effects of the Internet can only be guessed at, they probably will differ both from those of radio and television. The popularity of online social networking suggests the Internet is less individualistic than television, but the virtual communities formed online typically are smaller, more homogenous, and more voluntary than the collective identities shaped by radio. They also are much less likely to correspond to national boundaries.

parlors of distant countries and at least endeavored to explain to the peoples of the world *why* all the nations are not united.⁵

In other words, America was not perfect for having known radio, and maybe not even better, depending on one's point of view. But it was more unified, and it lived in a smaller world. At least some of those at the margins felt included, faraway lands were a bit nearer, and listeners knew more about themselves. Americans may not have heard the Voice of God as James Whitmore's character did in *The Next Voice You Hear*, but they had heard the voices of each other.

⁵ "If Radio Died Tomorrow," *Radio and Television Life*, November 6, 1949, LAB, 4. Emphasis original. Interestingly, when the people of radio's America first glimpsed television, their reaction was much like their fathers' and mothers' first response to radio — boundlessly optimistic. "The eye's sensitivity to brightness ranges from one to 10,000,000, that is, the eyes distinguishes that many intensities between pitch blackness and brilliant white light," declared a pamphlet published by NBC as early as 1939. "The ear, on the other hand, distinguishes only about 11,000 different sounds." In other words, the eye clearly is superior to the ear "for learning purposes." A 1949 supplement to *Liberty Magazine* predicted that Americans would be able to "test-drive" new cars from home by watching "televised demonstrations" rather than going to the showroom and that everyone would be able to learn from "renowned educators, eminent scientists, and great professors like Einstein" via video talks. Television would even improve American government. "I also hold that TV will diminish the phoniness and fear in the world . . .," one writer declared. "For example, it's difficult for a politician to mouth ornate nothings when you are looking right at him. I say put a TV camera in Congress and save the country!" National Broadcasting Company, *Words Versus Pictures* (New York: National Broadcasting Co., 1939), LAB; Nora Hammesfahr, "TV Show of the Future," in "What You Should Know About Television," special issue, *Liberty Magazine*, August 1949, LAB, 66; Ted Shane, "How TV Will Affect Family Life," in *ibid.*, 62-63.

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