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# **GOD'S NEW ISRAEL**

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**Religious  
Interpretations  
of  
American Destiny**

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# Introduction

The belief that America has been providentially chosen for a special destiny has deep roots in the American past, and it is by no means a belief that has been given up in this secular age. It is at the heart of the attempt by contemporary Americans to understand their nation's responsibility at home and abroad. It is a conviction that manifests itself most vividly in occasions of public worship when American citizens meet to share common religious sentiments. Below are descriptions of two such religious ceremonies. The first is set within the intimacy of a small rural community; the second is set in a metropolis and reaches millions of persons through television. Despite differences in setting, style, and ideology, both are American sacred ceremonies which have in common a ritualistic form and a symbolic structure. Both are celebrations of a national religious faith. Both focus on the conviction that America has been called to a special task by God.

## I: TWO AMERICAN SACRED CEREMONIES

Boalsburg, a town of approximately 800 people in central Pennsylvania, proudly announces from its billboards its claim to historical significance:

Boalsburg  
An American Village  
Birthplace of Memorial Day

In the spring of every year, when American patriots gather at cemeteries, town halls, shrines, and churches to celebrate Memorial Day the citizens of Boalsburg and vicinity remind themselves that their ancestors brought forth an event that has become a national holiday.<sup>1</sup> Memorial Day is, as

<sup>1</sup> Boalsburg did meet a disappointment in 1966 when President Johnson and both houses of Congress officially recognized Waterloo, New York, as

## 2 INTRODUCTION

W. Lloyd Warner has observed, "both sacred and secular, it is a holy day as well as a holiday and is accordingly celebrated."<sup>2</sup> Along with Thanksgiving Day and the perhaps less explicitly religious observances of the Fourth of July and the birthdays of Washington and Lincoln, Memorial Day is part of an American ceremonial calendar. It is a day of pleasure and relaxation for most Americans, but it is also—particularly for the towns and small cities of the northeastern United States—a sacred day when the war dead are mourned, the spirit of redemptive sacrifice is extolled, and pledges to American ideals are renewed.

In Boalsburg and the surrounding communities elaborate preparations precede the day itself. During the week or two prior to May 30th, students in the public elementary schools construct flag displays which are pictured in the local newspapers. Graves of the war dead are decorated by families and patriotic organizations. The Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion of the area hold meetings to plan for the holy day and services to commemorate their dead. As the day nears, merchants and residents put up American flags, and newspaper editorials encourage patriotic observance and sometimes lament languid patriotic zeal in the community. On the Sunday before Memorial Day, churches feature sermons on the virtue of human sacrifice for God and country, and veterans and their families gather at the Twenty-Eighth Division Memorial Shrine in Boalsburg to hear messages on the same theme. The climax of the celebration occurs, however, at the end of Memorial Day when all the patriotic groups and celebrants converge at the cemeteries to bring their ceremonies to a collective conclusion.

At 6 P.M. on May 30th, 1967, the crowd gathered on Church Street in Boalsburg to watch a brief parade made up of a high school band, color guards of the VFW and the Legion, fire trucks, and Girl Scouts and Brownies bearing wreaths of flowers. The crowd followed the march two blocks to the cemetery behind Zion Lutheran Church. As people found their places in front of the speakers' platform the Girl Scouts placed their flowers on the soldiers' graves and a drill team fired a rifle salute. For over a hundred yards behind the crowd stretched the cemetery containing stones marking those fallen in American wars. The grave of Amos Meyers was there, the private who was killed on the last day of the battle of Gettysburg at the age of twenty-three and whose mother decorated his

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the birthplace of the Memorial Day observance. The old-timers, leaders of patriotic organizations, and the press in Boalsburg insist, however, that this was simply a miscarriage of justice: whereas Waterloo's claim rests on the original decoration of soldiers' graves there on May 5, 1866, the first grave decorations in Boalsburg occurred almost two years earlier.

<sup>2</sup>W. Lloyd Warner, *American Life: Dream and Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 1.

grave on that first Memorial Day in 1864. The minister of Zion Lutheran Church offered an invocation, and the district representative to the state legislature in Harrisburg rose to give the address.

It was a typical Memorial Day message that lifted up images the people anticipated on this occasion. The nation's and community's war dead were honored as the speaker symbolically united the ethnic and religious groups. He called upon his hearers to remember on this day the sacrificed dead—the Smiths and Steins killed in Vietnam, the Maloneys and Rossis who fell in the Pacific islands, the Heidlers and Lozoskis who made the “supreme sacrifice” in the battle of Meuse-Argonne. And only if the living of the community pledge themselves to the principles for which these men died—democratic freedom and the defense of freedom against tyranny and oppression around the world—will these blood sacrifices not have been in vain. The sacrifices are the sanctification of America's “divine mission” of preserving and dispensing freedom.

Since the spirit of protest against United States involvement in Vietnam was very much in the air in the spring of 1967, several Memorial Day speakers attempted to draw a distinction between democratic freedom and certain types of dissent. “Those who practice civil disobedience,” said a Legionnaire at a town a few miles from Boalsburg, “must expect to suffer the penalties provided for violating our laws. It is not an exercise of free expression to burn a draft card, nor to desecrate the flag of the United States.”

The Memorial Day celebration is an American sacred ceremony, a religious ritual, a modern cult of the dead. Although it shares the theme of redemptive sacrifice with Christianity and other religions, and although its devotees would insist that the God called upon is the same as the God of Judaism and Christianity, the Memorial Day rite is a civic service that unites Protestants, Catholics, and Jews beyond their sectarian differences. Lloyd Warner has described the essential function of the rite:

Each man's church provides him and those of his faith with a set of beliefs and a way of acting to face these problems [of our own, our friends' and all men's death]; but his church and those of other men do not equip him with a common set of social beliefs and rituals which permit him to unite with all his fellows to confront this common and most feared of all his enemies. The Memorial Day rite and other subsidiary rituals connected with it form a cult which partially satisfies this need for common action on a common problem. It dramatically expresses the sentiments of unity of all the living among themselves, of all the living to all the dead, and of all the living and dead as a group to the gods.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

#### 4 INTRODUCTION

Joined with the unifying and existential problem-solving function of the cult is the conviction repeatedly expressed by the speakers that this nation has the providentially bestowed responsibility of acting as guardian and preserver of freedom. American soldiers have presented themselves as sacrifices on the altar of history that America's God-given task of rescuing oppressed peoples might not fail, that she may continue to be a beacon of freedom to all the world, that the sacred principles contained in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution might remain untarnished.

There are, of course, large segments of American society that would feel little or no affinity with the Memorial Day ceremony. Many citizens in our larger cities, in fact, have never witnessed the celebration of Memorial Day as a sacred event. These portions of our society are doubtless inclined to dismiss the celebration as a vestige of village tribalism. Those who are personally acquainted with the ceremony as a sacred event may be offended by the Legionnaire superpatriotism, frequently involved in the rite, which calls down the blessing of God on all-things-American simply because they are American, and which defends "American freedoms" while at the same time undermining the personal freedom of dissent from and criticism of particular national commitments. Yet Memorial Day remains a holy day for those rural and small-town Americans who have been largely bypassed by the effects of urbanization, and it continues to be taken with special seriousness by those who have been to war and those who have sent their sons to war. Memorial Day is not America's only sacred ceremony, however, and is not the only way Americans as citizens attempt to cope with death. In her funerals for great men, especially her political leaders, America has created another religious ceremony that meets anxiety over death in a corporate way and that transcends sectarian religious differences. The funeral for Senator Robert F. Kennedy was one such ceremony.

After Senator Kennedy's death on June 6, 1968, hundreds of thousands of Americans waited outside St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City to pay their last respects, and millions of citizens who could not take their places in those long lines were able to assume a kind of presence their through their television sets. By way of television they witnessed the funeral on Saturday, followed the funeral train at its points of passage to Washington, and grieved with the family at the burial. Once again in the 1960s Americans participated in a ceremony honoring a leader who had been stopped by an act of destructive violence. In the funeral Robert Kennedy was vested with a meaning that derived from his "American dream" or his vision of American destiny. The funeral was another sacred ceremony in which the dilemma of death was met corporately, religious differences were transcended, and death was construed in terms of

America's destiny under God. The day of the funeral, unlike Memorial Day, was altogether a holy day, devoid of mixture with a holiday spirit. And because of the suddenness and circumstances of Kennedy's death, the intensity of emotion permeating the funeral was undoubtedly much greater than that of the Memorial Day ceremony. Nevertheless, many of the same themes, symbols, and invocations were present.

Senator Kennedy's funeral was obviously a religious affair; it was "religious" in the sense in which most Americans think of that term since it had the trappings of one of the traditional Western religious communities. It was, after all, a Roman Catholic funeral mass. It was at the same time a civil-religious ceremony that appealed to Americans regardless of their denominational persuasions. The occasion was one in which the Catholic doctrines of hope, resurrection, and heavenly reward for a life well-lived were drawn upon as resources of comfort by a mourning Kennedy family and other Christians. It was also an occasion when the Kennedys and numerous other Americans found a degree of comfort in the conviction that Robert Kennedy had met his death in the midst of an endeavor to secure freedom for all Americans and thereby fulfill that portion of America's destiny.

The funeral liturgy affirmed in the face of death, "For those who have been faithful all the way, life is not ended but merely changed. And when this earthly abode dissolves, an eternal dwelling place awaits them in Heaven." Senator Edward Kennedy, quoting from and commenting on a speech by his brother, offered a different kind of affirmation:

"Our future may lie beyond our vision, but it is not completely beyond our control. It is the shaping impulse of America that neither faith nor nature nor the irresistible tides of history, but the work of our own hands, matched to reason and principle, will determine our destiny. There is pride in that, even arrogance, but there is also experience and truth. In any event, it is the only way we can live."

This is the way he lived.<sup>4</sup>

Those words invited their hearers to a hope and a sense of social responsibility in a way that the promise of an "eternal dwelling place" alone could not.

In his eulogy Archbishop Terence J. Cooke also sensed the national religious meaning of the occasion and of Robert Kennedy's life and death. To be sure, the message was sensitive to the deep personal loss that the Kennedy family had sustained and appropriately commented on Robert Kennedy as devoted husband, father, and son. The liturgy's reference to

<sup>4</sup> From a transcript of the eulogy furnished by the office of Senator Edward Kennedy.

eternal life after death was cited at the beginning and at the end of the eulogy, providing the frame for the substance of the address. The greater part of Archbishop Cooke's eulogy, however, was a placing of Robert Kennedy in the context of an American dream and was a challenge to Americans to prevent the waste of Kennedy's life by fulfilling that dream.

Although Robert Kennedy could have chosen a much less arduous manner of life, the archbishop said, it was because he was driven by the ideal of building "a better world for his fellow man" that he accepted the demanding challenge of public service. "We admire the ability to identify so that Negro people spoke of him as 'one of ours'. We admire his vision in confronting the problems of poverty and civil rights." It was a dream that he had for America that evoked this admiration and enlisted his followers: "the dream of an America purged of prejudice, assuring freedom for all her citizens, a land of truly equal opportunity." The proper response to this man's tragic death, therefore, is to occupy ourselves with his dream of America's destiny. "Our sense of shame and discouragement tears alone will not wash away. Somehow, by the grace of God, and with the strength that still lies deep within the soul of America, we must find the courage to take up again the laborious work to which Senator Kennedy devoted all his energies: the building of a great and honorable nation. Especially in this hour, we must keep faith with America and her destiny and we must not forsake our trust in one another." Participation in America's historic destiny is the socially responsible way to meet Senator Kennedy's death. "We have always believed in our national destiny marked by unity in lofty ideals. We believe that our country came into existence to secure the blessings of freedom, equality, and peace for ourselves and those who will come after us."<sup>5</sup>

In this funeral Americans joined in a sacred ceremony, the scope of which crossed denominational religious boundaries. Many citizens had participated in another such ceremony only a few weeks earlier at the funeral for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and in still another only a few short years earlier at the funeral for President John F. Kennedy. American history is, in fact, replete with leaders who have been canonized in the national consciousness as exemplars of American ideals and as particular bearers of America's destiny under God. When those leaders have met their deaths they have become, in the national memory as well as in the ceremonies and speeches that surround their deaths, martyrs for the American cause, even in some cases redeemers.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> From a transcript of the eulogy provided by the office of Archbishop Cooke.

<sup>6</sup> The most obvious example of the process is Lincoln. Since Lincoln's assassination occurred on Good Friday, hundreds of speakers on the following Sunday ("Black Easter") were quick to note that assassination day was also crucifixion day. Said one: "Jesus Christ died for the world: Abraham

There are, of course, differences between the two sacred ceremonies considered here, differences of content as well as emotional climate. The human "freedom" for which the supreme sacrifice has been made and which constitutes the essence of American destiny does not, for example, have the same meaning or call for the same kind of response in the two ceremonies. In the Memorial Day celebration it means the freedom of all peoples of the world to share in American democratic principles, a freedom that Americans are obligated to safeguard. In the Kennedy funeral, "freedom" stands for the civil right of all American citizens to enjoy full and equal participation in their society. Despite such important differences, the two ceremonies have in common a symbolic, thematic, and ritualistic structure. Both are cults of the dead in which the living are united with one another, the living are united with the dead, and all are united with God and what are believed to be his purposes in history. Both ceremonies stress the belief that God has in store—has always had in store—for this nation a special destiny for which the supreme sacrifice has been made and to the fulfillment of which all Americans must dedicate themselves. And both rites are able to unite Americans beyond their religious divisions.

In the early part of the twentieth century the French sociologist Emile Durkheim observed that it is ritual that causes a religious man's faith to come alive, that quickens and sustains his religious belief. "In fact," Durkheim wrote, "whoever has really practiced a religion knows very well that it is the cult which gives rise to [the] impressions of joy, of interior peace, of serenity, of enthusiasm which are, for the believer, an experimental proof of his beliefs." Durkheim also noted that society itself (in addition to specifically "religious" groups within society) employs ritual to reaffirm its common sentiments:

There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which make its unity and its personality. Now this moral remaking cannot be achieved except by the means of reunions, assemblies and meetings where the individuals, being closely united to one another, reaffirm in common their common sentiments; hence come ceremonies which do not differ from regular religious ceremonies, either in their object, the results which they produce, or the processes employed to attain these results.<sup>7</sup>

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Lincoln died for his country." Cf. the apotheosizing of Jefferson who died on Independence Day, discussed in Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1960), pp. 3ff.

<sup>7</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. J. W. Swain (New York: The Free Press, 1965), pp. 464, 474-75.

Memorial Day and Robert Kennedy's funeral are only two of the many rituals (all of which are not, of course, rituals for the dead) in which Americans "reaffirm in common their common sentiments." They are ritualistic ceremonies that appeal to their participants as American citizens, elevate American leaders to the status of heroes or martyrs, and celebrate what are held to be American ideals.

The sentiment that is continually reaffirmed by these sacred ceremonies is the conviction that America is a nation called to a special destiny by God. A consideration of the character and shape of the national religion to which this conviction belongs is prerequisite to understanding the development of the theme of this book.

## II: THE AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

It has become a commonplace to refer to radical pluralism as the cardinal mark of religion in America. The settlement of this land by peoples of different—often antagonistic—churchly orientations and the influx of numerous European religious groups during periods of heavy immigration meant that Americans eventually had to learn to live with other Americans of diverse religious traditions. The disestablishment of religion by federal and state constitutions meant that no one religion was favored by the laws of the land and that religious organizations in this country had to become altogether "voluntaristic." Every American religion must recruit and hold its members through methods of persuasion rather than coercion, relying upon the free consent of the people rather than upon the arm of the state.

The truth of this portrait of the American religious development has often obscured the other truth, however, that most Americans have come to share a common religion. The plurality of religious sects and denominations and the often misunderstood "separation of church and state" have by no means altered the fact that Americans participate in and celebrate a civil religion. In the words of the sociologist Robert Bellah, "there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America."<sup>8</sup> Although this civil religion is not established by the laws of the land, it is supported and perpetuated by the mores and folk practices of American society. It finds ritual expression in public occasions like the two sacred ceremonies discussed above.

Bellah takes John F. Kennedy's inaugural address as an example of the verbalization of the civil religion and as a clue to the way in which

<sup>8</sup> Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus*, Winter 1967, p. 1.

the civil religion may be differentiated from the religious denominations of this country. Kennedy began and closed his address with references to God and God's relation to American tasks and principles. In the opening statement he said,

I have sworn before you and Almighty God the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago.

The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and to abolish all forms of human life. And yet the same revolutionary beliefs for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe—the belief that the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God.

Kennedy's closing statement reflects the recurrent conviction in American sacred ceremonies:

Finally, whether you are citizens of America or of the world, ask of us the same high standards of strength and sacrifice that we shall ask of you. With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth God's work must truly be our own.

As Bellah points out, similar God-references appear in all the inaugural addresses with the exception of Washington's second and "are almost invariably to be found in the pronouncements of American presidents on solemn occasions, though usually not in the working messages that the president sends to Congress on various concrete issues." To the cynic who would insist that the invocations of God are merely ritualistic expressions that a president must use to get votes or to gain the support of pious people, Bellah replies, "What people say on solemn occasions need not be taken at face value, but it is often indicative of deep-seated values and commitments that are not made explicit in the course of everyday life."<sup>9</sup> Commenting on the rhetoric of a different public ceremony, Alan Trachtenberg offers a similar judgment: "... speeches might be dismissed as highly conventional and insincere. Sincerity, however, is not a necessary qualification for cultural significance; surely the conventions of language themselves suggest predispositions among Americans to react in certain ways at certain times."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *Brooklyn Bridge: Fact and Symbol* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1965), p. 117.

It is significant that Kennedy did not refer to Jesus Christ, to the Roman Catholic church, or to any specifically Catholic doctrine. This does not mean that on this occasion President Kennedy ceased to be a Catholic; it does mean that the particular doctrines of his Catholic faith were inappropriate to the public occasion. It indicates that the religious point of view he was propounding was not to be confused with his Catholicism. His religious language was aimed altogether toward the American as a citizen. He mentioned the fact that his oath of office was made before both the people and Almighty God. "In American political theory," Bellah comments, "sovereignty rests, of course, with the people, but implicitly, and often explicitly, the ultimate sovereignty has been attributed to God." Kennedy reinforced this appeal to an ultimate authority when he said, "the rights of man come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God." Again, in Bellah's words, "the rights of man are more basic than any political structure and provide a point of revolutionary leverage from which any state structure may be radically altered." Finally, in his statement that "here on earth God's work must truly be our own," Kennedy gave voice to the continuous theme in American history that it is this nation's destiny—for Kennedy, in conjunction with "the citizens of the world"—to carry out God's will on earth. Kennedy's inaugural address recalls the God-references in the Declaration of Independence: the mention of the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" that entitle any people to independence; the statement that all men "are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights"; the appeal to "the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions"; and the urging of "a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence."<sup>11</sup>

The Declaration of Independence, the inaugural addresses of presidents, the celebration of American sacred ceremonies indicate that the disestablishment of the church hardly meant that the American political sphere was denied a religious dimension. In fact, that dimension permeates the political, educational and social life of America that it constitutes a civil religion that cannot be identified with Protestantism, Catholicism, or Judaism as such. Americans may be participants in *both* the religious dimension of their civil life *and* one of the traditional Western religions. The American church historian Sidney Mead is so convinced of the presence of this civil religion at the very foundations of American life and of its potential catholicity that he has said, "just as the ideal of America has been that 'of moulding many peoples into the visible image of the citizen,' so it was implied that the religious ideal was that of melding the many diverse sectarianisms into one cosmopolitan religion."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Bellah, "Civil Religion," pp. 4-6.

<sup>12</sup> Sidney E. Mead, "The 'Nation With the Soul of a Church,'" *Church History*, Sept. 1967, p. 263.

The sacred ceremonies and Kennedy's inaugural provide some clues to the beliefs that make up the civil religion. This nation's destiny under God, the guarantee of human rights by the hand of God, the need for sacrifice and martyrdom for the fulfillment of the nation's destiny—all these are parts of the belief structure of the civil religion. When dealing with any religion, however—be it Christianity, Buddhism, or the American civil religion—it is a highly questionable practice to detail beliefs in isolation from their historical settings. In some cases a religion's reformulation of a belief—in responding to the problems, or in absorbing the spirit, of a given milieu—involves little more than a shift in phraseology. In other instances, however, changes in expression reflect changes in the very substance of the belief. The readings in this book are concerned with the central, continuous belief around which other convictions in the civil religion cluster. The readings also portray the changes—some of them quite drastic—that have occurred in the formulation of the belief. At this point the contours of the general religious context in which that belief is set should emerge in a sketch of three features of the American civil religion: (1) the sources of its beliefs and symbols, (2) its institutions, (3) the relation between the civil religion and other religions in this country.

### 1. *The Sources of the Beliefs and Symbols of the Civil Religion*

The deepest source lies in the Old and New Testaments, but the more immediate source is the history of America or certain events of that history which have been judged revelatory. In the ceremonies of the civil religion the images of God's deliverance of and demands upon his chosen people and the rebirth that can issue from sacrificial death are definitely biblical images. But they are given immediacy by being translated into events of American history. God's demands upon his chosen people became demands upon America at this particular juncture of her history. Rebirth through sacrificial death becomes the rebirth of the nation through the sacrifices of her war dead and martyrs. Biblical events serve as the archetypes, but *the immediate events of revelation*—those paradigmatic events by which the celebrants of the civil religion interpret the meaning of their national life and the purposes of God in history—are *events in the American experience*.<sup>13</sup> As will be apparent in many of the selections in this anthology, two chief revelatory events for the civil religion are the American Revolution (joined with the entire constitutional period) and the American Civil War. The first was a moment when God delivered the colonies from Pharaoh Britain and the "evils" of the Old

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Bellah, "Civil Religion," p. 18.

World, revealed the purposes of the nation, and adopted the Young Republic as an example and instrument of freedom and republican government for the rest of the world. The Civil War was the nation's first real "time of testing" when God tried the permanence of the Union or, in some interpretations, brought judgment upon his wayward people. Documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address function as scriptures that interpret these events and hence preserve the traditions of the civil religion. Washington becomes both Moses and Joshua, both the deliverer of the American people out of bondage and the leader of the chosen people into the Promised Land of independence. Lincoln assumes the role of a Christ figure in the national memory: one who tragically dedicated himself to the destiny of a united nation and whose death summed up the sacrifices that redeemed the nation for that destiny.<sup>14</sup>

Other events, persons, and documents in American history have taken on sacred meaning, but these are sufficient to point to the way in which that history most immediately supplies the civil religion with its symbolic material. It is somewhat misleading, therefore, to refer to the civil or national religion as a "common denominator" faith, as if it were formed by reducing Christianity and Judaism to their bare essentials. The belief structure is primarily constituted by the inflow of a history that *Americans as Americans* hold in common. Although the national religion borrows heavily from the Jewish and Christian religions, it is not the borrowed elements but the American experience itself that creates the commonality of the civil faith. "The Lord hath more light yet to break forth out of his Holy Word" was a declaration of John Robinson, pastor of the settlers of Plymouth in 1620 while they were still exiles at Leyden. It is also a statement that catches the spirit of the American civil religion which supposes that the light of God's revelation continually breaks forth in crucial events of American history.

## 2. *The Institutional Framework of the Civil Religion.*

Clearly the foremost institution is the nation itself, with the public school serving as an important substitution. Churches and synagogues have also provided a haven for the myths, symbols, and ceremonies of the civil religion.

John E. Smylie has convincingly argued that the nation gradually assumed the traditional role of the church for most Americans. As these shores were inundated by a host of diverse religious organizations and as

<sup>14</sup> On American heroes and hero cults see Dixon Wecter, *The Hero in America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941).

our laws made clear that no one religious denomination could operate as a national religion, the word "church" made sense to Americans only in the plural. Every church became for the citizens of this land "a voluntary society, perhaps the most important among others, but hardly the organ through which God made his ultimate historical demands and offered his fullest earthly rewards." Lacking special endorsement by the state, the American churches gave up the functions normally associated with the universal church. But where the churches moved out, the nation moved in. "Gradually in America the nation emerged as the primary agent of God's meaningful activity in history. Hence Americans bestowed on it a catholicity of destiny similar to that which theology attributes to the universal church." Early colonial groups believed that their own church covenants were vehicles of God's action in history, but eventually the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights became the covenants that bound together the people of the nation and secured to them God's blessing, protection and call to historic mission.<sup>15</sup>

The public schools of this country have played an inestimable role both in advancing the traditions of the civil religion and in undergirding the religious function of the nation. They have provided the place of instruction (often, admittedly, the place of unexamined propaganda) in the "sacred history" of the civil religion. To be sure, until recent efforts at redirection the public schools were unabashedly Protestant in their prayers, morning devotions, and general religious orientation. But they were also the depositories and purveyors of the events and documents of the civil religion. The Supreme Court rulings forbidding devotional Bible reading and prayer are more an effort to disentangle the practices and beliefs of the diverse American religions (including, according to the Court, the "religion of secularism") from those of the civil religion than an attempt to put an end to the civil religion in the schools. In the texts and classrooms students are still instructed in the basic documents of the civil religion (including their references to God and providence), the religion's heroes and martyrs are still celebrated on their birthdays and on Memorial Day, the American ceremonial calendar is still observed. Furthermore, the public schools have long encouraged their teachers to awaken in their pupils something very similar to what John Dewey called the "common faith," a faith consisting basically of the ideals supportive of American democracy and a type of humanism. A commission of the National Education Association in 1951 named such things as "the supreme importance of the individual personality," "common consent," "brotherhood," and "the pursuit of happiness" as items of a common faith

<sup>15</sup> John Edwin Smylie, "National Ethos and the Church," *Theology Today*, Oct. 1963, pp. 313-17.

worthy of being taught in the schools and as "the values which made America great."<sup>16</sup>

Although the civil religion has its own ceremonies, scriptures, events of revelation, and institutions, it has also found immeasurable support from the American churches. The Americanization of the churches and synagogues has been so well documented that it only needs mentioning here. To a great extent the churches of this land have come to abide by the suggestion of the Founding Fathers that the different religious groups should not only exist for the sake of their own beliefs and practices but should also assume responsibility for maintenance of the public order, the dissemination of the essential religious beliefs (for example, the existence of a Deity, the governance of the world by his providence, the reward of virtue and the punishment of crime), and the promotion of the public welfare. The presence of the American flag in the churches, the celebration of national events by religious groups, the frequent mixing of biblical and "sacred" American history in sermons are some of the obvious signs that the national religion has found a home in the American churches. The obvious signs are often misleading, however, for the history of the relationship between the national religion and the denominations has been complex.

### 3. *The Relation Between the Civil Religion and Other Religions in America.*

At least three modes of this relationship have turned up in the American experience.

Robert Bellah notes one mode when he uses Kennedy's inaugural address as an indication that the civil religion "exists alongside of" and is "rather clearly differentiated from the churches." In this address as well as in the two sacred ceremonies discussed above, sectarian religious beliefs do not intrude; in fact, religious differences are transcended to the plane of a national faith made up of images and beliefs that Americans hold in common. The religious references do have their deepest source in the biblical tradition of the churches, but they are so woven into the fabric of national history that they lose any potentially sectarian color. In this relationship, therefore, the national religion and the denominations remain quite distinct. An American may be a Methodist, a Conservative Jew, or a Roman Catholic and at the same time participate in the civil religion—without insisting that the civil religion be expressed in specifically Methodist, Jewish, or Catholic terms.

<sup>16</sup> See Robert Michaelsen, "The Public Schools and 'America's Two Religions,'" *A Journal of Church and State*, Autumn 1966, pp. 380-400.

Although this type of relationship has had its defenders in American history from Jefferson and Franklin to Lincoln to Dewey, only recently has it become a vital option in America. Only after Protestantism lost its powerful grip on the public life of the nation did the civil religion begin to dislodge itself from Protestant articulation and custody. During the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, leading spokesmen for the civil religion couched its beliefs in terms that were unmistakably Protestant. It took such factors as the impact of non-Protestant immigrants, a Supreme Court determined to de-Protestantize the public schools, and a pluralization of values in many regions of American life through modern means of communication to break through this confusion of Protestantism and the religion of America. "Not until the modern period," as Franklin Littell has said, "when Catholics and Jews and others have come into full and unabashed participation in the public life of the nation, as symbolized by the 1960 election, has the old Protestant culture-religion been frontally challenged."<sup>17</sup>

A second kind of relationship between the civil religion and other religions, therefore, has a long historical precedent, though that precedent is in the process of being broken. It is marked by a rather thorough blending of a generalized Protestantism with the national religion. The Protestantism is "generalized" in that it is nondenominational. Its representatives tend to define America as a "Christian civilization," but their Christianity is seldom big enough to include Roman Catholicism.

Lyman Beecher, that colorful and influential Congregational minister of the nineteenth century, was quite a man of his time when he mixed his Protestantism and his civil religion in about equal doses. Beecher's Protestantism was generalized in the sense that he was extremely capable of glossing over theological differences in somewhat typical nineteenth-century American Protestant fashion, but also, as Sidney Mead has remarked, because "Protestantism had become for him a principle of high generality which, he thought, permeated and was being incarnated in the democratic institutions of the Republic."<sup>18</sup> Despite the generality of his Protestantism, however, like so many other nineteenth-century Protestants, Beecher could find no room in his civil faith for Roman Catholics. His popular and oft-delivered address, "A Plea for the West", took up that central theme in the civil religion: "America is, in the providence of God, destined to lead the way in the moral and political emancipation of the world." Beecher anchored the theme to what he considered "equally plain," namely "that the religious and political destiny of our nation is

<sup>17</sup> Franklin H. Littell, "The Churches and the Body Politic," *Daedalus*, Winter 1967, p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> Mead, "Soul of a Church," p. 280.

to be decided in the West." Beecher drew upon a lively vision of the West as he encouraged easterners to pour their resources into educational and religious enterprises on the frontier, but he gave his plea urgency by warning that the West had to be educated and made religious before it was completely inundated by European immigrants who would wreck democratic principles with a "Catholic system" that is "adverse to liberty." Such a peremptory exclusion of Catholics from the religious and political nucleus of the nation has been transcended in contemporary American life, but its ideological source (the confusion of Protestantism with the religion of the nation) has not yet been completely destroyed.

Finally, the civil religion and other religions in America have existed in a relationship of tension. The most obvious instances of the tension appear in those sects, like the Jehovah's Witnesses, that spurn patriotic symbols, reject American sacred ceremonies, and refuse to allow the nation to function for them as a "church." But clergy and scholars within the Christian and Jewish mainstream have also insisted that a tension exists between their own traditions and the American "culture faith."

During the 1950s and early 1960s a flood of criticism flowed from the pens of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews who were convinced that the Americanization of their faiths resulted in a banal, watered-down version of their potent Judeo-Christian heritage. Charges against the "American Shinto," that vague "religion in general" which is the heart of the "American way of life," ranged from claims of its sentimental piosity and theological naiveté to indictments of its idolatrous worship of American values and narrow-minded nationalism. Much was made of the way in which God and religion were *used* in our culture by politicians, clergymen, popularizers of religion, and businessmen for their own higher ends: for the support of particular national tasks, for the swelling of church membership rolls, for gaining "peace of mind" in a troubled world, for achieving success in a society of capitalistic competition. Professor Will Herberg summed up the reasons for his condemnation of the civil religion:

... civic religion has always meant the sanctification of the society and culture of which it is the reflection, and that is one of the reasons why Jewish-Christian faith has always regarded such religion as incurably idolatrous. Civic religion is a religion which validates culture and society, without in any sense bringing them under judgment. . . .

The burden of this criticism of American religion from the point of view of Jewish-Christian faith is that contemporary religion is so naively, so innocently *man-centered*. Not God, but man—man in his individual and corporate being—is the beginning and end of the spiritual system of much present-day American religiosity. . . .

God is conceived as man's "omnipotent servant," faith as a sure-fire device to get what we want.<sup>19</sup>

There have been some who have replied to the critics of the civil religion. Sidney Mead has written, "The 'American religion,' contrary to Will Herberg's much popularized misunderstanding, is *not* 'the American way of life' as we know and experience it, any more than the Christian faith is the way of life that ordinary professing 'Christians' commonly exemplify in their everyday activities."<sup>20</sup> Along the same line Robert Bellah insists that the critics "take as criteria the best in their own religious tradition and as typical the worst in the tradition of the civil religion," conveniently overlooking the fact that spokesmen for the civil religion have often drawn upon a vivid belief in a transcendent God who cannot be reduced to human designs, in order to censure American society.<sup>21</sup> Abraham Lincoln, for example, who identified with no particular denomination, was able to perform this "prophetic" role for the civil religion during the sectional crisis (see Part IV). And one is reminded of John Kennedy's use of the idea of "the rights of man from the hand of God" as a revolutionary lever. Mead and Bellah seem to be after a distinction between *religious nationalism* and *national religion*. Religious nationalism implies a corporate attitude of unconditional reverence for the nation and for its pretended or real goals. National religion, on the other hand, suggests a national attitude of reverence for a transcendent sovereign authority whose designs cannot be identified one-to-one with the designs of the nation. In the latter case America can function as a "church" or as an inclusive institution whose ideals and goals bind a people together under a sovereign God. When those ideals or goals themselves usurp the transcendent authority, or when the nation's every move receives uncritical religious endorsement, the national religion slips into the idolatry of religious nationalism.<sup>22</sup> Many readings in this book will

<sup>19</sup> Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., Anchor Books, 1960), p. 263, 268. Similar criticisms are abundant, but see especially Martin E. Marty, *The New Shape of American Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1959); A. Roy Eckardt, "The New Look in American Piety," *Christian Century*, Nov. 17, 1954; Peter Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1961).

<sup>20</sup> Mead, "Soul of a Church," pp. 274-75.

<sup>21</sup> Bellah, "Civil Religion," p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> For this formulation of the distinction I am indebted to my colleague Professor John R. Whitney in his unpublished paper, "Civil Religion in the Philippines." Cf. his "Commentary on 'Civil Religion in America,'" in *The Religious Situation: 1968*, ed. Donald R. Cutler (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 365-81.

show that the sense of national destiny has frequently led Americans to make the passage from national religion to religious nationalism. Other readings will demonstrate, however, that Americans have often recoiled from the passage and have understood the deluding temptations of the path.

This much must be said on behalf of the critics of the American civil religion: their indictment of the utilitarian distortions of religion (which reached their peak in the 1950s) has been very much to the point. However much they have identified the whole of the civil religion with its worst side, they have portrayed the idolatry involved when the civil religion sanctifies, without question, the values or goals of American society. To that extent, when other American religions exist in a relation of tension with the civil religion, the tension can point up the distortions of the latter.

The accumulated tradition of the civil religion by no means guarantees that it will persist as a vital religious orientation in American life, for it faces serious problems in the modern world.

Much of the symbolism of the civil religion, for instance, has lost its clarity and specificity. Words such as freedom, democracy, providence, and (especially) God which recur in the celebrations of the national faith seem to lack uniform meaning for contemporary Americans. This problem of language is not so much a case of the death of the symbols themselves as it is a matter of the symbols becoming ambiguous. In fact, the ambiguity seems to increase the symbols' capacity to conjure up, like words of Black Magic, diverse and potent images. As W. H. Auden has put the matter, "words like Communism, Capitalism, Imperialism, Peace, Freedom, Democracy, have ceased to be words the meaning of which can be inquired into and discussed, and have become right or wrong noises to which the response is as involuntary as a knee reflex."<sup>23</sup>

When the civil religion's central symbol, God, becomes ambiguous but retains its evocative powers, the resultant problem is much more serious than a mere problem of language. If that symbol does not refer clearly to a transcendent reality that brings all nations to judgment, the national religion is more than a little inclined to ignore the narrowness and evil within the nation. Reinhold Niebuhr's understanding of the Jewish-Christian God as one "who laughs at human pretensions without being hostile to human aspirations" can exercise a powerful check on chauvinism without destroying the national spirit. When a transcendent

<sup>23</sup> From an excerpt of Auden's speech made upon acceptance of the 1967 Medal for Literature of the National Book Committee, *The Washington Post Book World*, Dec. 24, 1967, p. 8.

perspective of that kind is lacking, the lost causes and less than virtuous aspirations of a people are hidden under a cloak of self-righteousness. Americans have more than once been blinded to their vices by their pretensions to virtue (as well as by their real virtues). As Sidney Mead has so aptly put it, while Americans have consistently viewed themselves as the bearers of a special destiny under God, "God, like Alice's Cheshire Cat, has sometimes threatened gradually to disappear altogether or, at most, to remain only as a disembodied and sentimental smile."<sup>24</sup> In theological terms the God who smiles innocuously on American undertakings is a sentimental Deity whose wrath has ceased to burn toward national sins. In more secular terms the American people have failed to measure themselves by their own highest national ideals. (See Part VII.)

The civil religion, like any religion which becomes an established part of a culture, is always in danger of sanctifying the virtues of a society while ignoring its vices. Although the danger is not characteristic of the contemporary scene alone, America's present position as a great world power intensifies the peril. Americans have long lived under the conviction that their nation always comes to the defense of other countries for the sake of "free institutions" and "democratic governments." Can we admit, rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding, that we have also rushed to the aid of military dictatorships (as in South Vietnam) when we believe such action will serve our own national interests? The powerful *and clear* symbolizing of a transcendent reality is a religious assurance that such pretensions and shortcomings of the nation will be brought to light.

The civil religion faces another dilemma. How inclusive can that religion become without losing its identity? For the sake of a healthy openness it is called upon to embrace a plurality of values and standpoints both within the nation and in the world at large. Within the national boundaries, however, it has found no way of embracing agnostic or atheistic elements. Perhaps it is absurd to expect a civil *religion* to include these elements within its own fold. But as a *civil* religion, it definitely has a responsibility to these components of the national life. Since the civil religion is so intimate a part of American society, it is capable of obstructing the full participation of Americans in the nation's public life. When it performs that function it fails to support the democratic principle that no person or group of persons shall be disadvantaged by either their religious or their nonreligious beliefs. "We have had a Catholic president; it is conceivable that we could have a Jewish one. But could we have an agnostic president? Could a man with conscientious scruples about using the word *God* the way Kennedy and Johnson have used it be

<sup>24</sup> Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963), p. 152.

elected chief magistrate of our country?"<sup>25</sup> One may expect that the further pluralization of American society will permit a positive answer to that question; in the meantime Americans must wrestle with the issue of how inclusive American public life really is when it is informed by the present attitudes of the civil religion.

A more urgent aspect of this same dilemma turns on whether the civil religion will truly encompass the black American, the poor, the American Indian, and all those other citizens who have been excluded from a white, affluent mainstream. The civil religion certainly has the resources for meeting this problem in its doctrine of the rights of all men, and its spokesmen have not neglected civil rights when articulating the theme of "America's destiny under God." Solutions to this paramount problem will not come easily, however, inasmuch as the social issues which have increasingly divided Americans since the end of World War II portend a loss of corporate identity, a loss of what Durkheim called "collective religious sentiments." The civil religion is not simply the heir of this dilemma; it has been one of its chief creators as well. Surely, for example, the revelatory events of the civil religion have been drawn too exclusively from the history of white America. Time will tell whether the national faith will include in its revelatory traditions Negro and American Indian history and "saints." Martin Luther King, Jr., and Nathan Wright, Jr., have indicated at least the possibility of this course of action in their vision of American blacks as a redemptive remnant for the whole of American society (see Part VII).

Finally, the question of the possible inclusiveness of the civil religion has international implications. In the midst of a twentieth-century quest for world order and understanding, a *national* civil religion—one that draws its traditions from a national history and institutionalizes itself in a nation—seems terribly provincial. Does not the civil religion tighten the hold of national prejudices on the American mind? Although the civil religion need not play this deleterious role, that has been its overwhelming tendency. Although the ideals and goals of the civil religion need not exclude connection with what John Kennedy called the ideals and goals of the "citizens of the world," Americans, like citizens of other nations, are apt to confine their visions within the limits of national self-interest. Since the end of the First World War, statements of leading American clergymen and church councils (traditionally strong supporters of the civil religion) indicate the hesitancy on the part of church leaders to commit themselves to the United States as the decisive locus of God's action in history. The theological rediscovery of the sin that infects all nations, the apotheosis of racism and extreme nationalism in Nazi Germany, and an ecumenical movement that attempts to cross both religious and cultural

<sup>25</sup> Bellah, "Civil Religion," p. 15.

barriers have convinced these clergymen that any acceptable religion must have much wider institutional boundaries than those of the United States.<sup>26</sup> There is no evidence, however, that the reservations and protests of church leaders have seriously weakened the appeal of the national religion to the masses of American society. In fact, in a world that continues to be somewhat nervously balanced by national power blocks, it is perhaps hoping for too much to expect most Americans to give up the religious endorsement of their national tasks. Still, two improvements of the American civil religion do seem to be within the realm of immediate possibility: it could begin to incorporate international or transnational symbols and creeds into its framework, and it could take the position that it is only *one* of a host of more or less acceptable civil religions in the world.

### III: AMERICAN DESTINY UNDER GOD

Beheld from the angle of governing myths and symbols, the history of the American civil religion is a history of the conviction that the American people are God's New Israel, his newly chosen people. The belief that America has been elected by God for a special destiny in the world is the focus of American sacred ceremonies, the inaugural addresses of our presidents, the sacred scriptures of the civil religion. It has become so pervasive a motif in the national life that the word "belief" does not really capture the dynamic role that it has played for the American people. It has long since passed into "the realm of motivational myths."<sup>27</sup> It is a myth in the sense that it provides a religious outlook on history and its purpose, and by finding a place in the feelings and choices as well as in the ideas of the people, it can move them to action. When a spokesman for the civil religion appeals to this myth, therefore, he not only strikes a responsive chord in his auditors, for if he dramatizes his subject, he may elicit a commitment.

A sense of providential calling is not, of course, an exclusive possession of the American people. Other nations have been sustained by the belief that God or Fate or historical circumstance has elected them to a preeminent role in history. The sentiment is probably as old as nationalism itself;<sup>28</sup> at any rate, it has furnished other nations and groups of people with a sense of purpose as they have developed their corporate ideals

<sup>26</sup> This shift on the part of the clergy is delineated by John E. Smylie in his doctoral dissertation, "Protestant Clergymen and America's World Role, 1865-1900" (Princeton Theological Seminary, 1959), pp. 569-81.

<sup>27</sup> The phrase is Sidney Mead's in his discussion of the motif, *The Lively Experiment*, p. 75.

<sup>28</sup> Russel B. Nye, *This Almost Chosen People* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1966), pp. 164-65.

and their historical tasks. The fact that the conviction is not uniquely American, however, by no means derogates from its importance in the American experience. It has sustained the American people from the colonial period to the present, and it has taken on a distinctively American appearance as it has both motivated and vindicated American projects. It has been such a powerful myth for the nation that it has decisively shaped our foreign relations as well as our own internal developments. "It needs to be taken into account if we are to understand the American willingness to help, the passion to build and reform, and how these virtues get mixed up with America's complacency and, at times, her insufferable self-righteousness."<sup>29</sup>

It would, of course, be highly misleading to assume that this pervasive and continuous theme of American destiny has received uniform interpretation throughout American history. The various challenges that have faced the American people—the settlement of a wilderness frontier, the formation of a republic, the fighting of wars, the preservation of peace—have evoked different interpretations of America's high calling. And occasionally within the same period of history, with respect to the same challenge, Americans have been deeply divided over the meaning of the national mission. The following documents and their introductions are concerned with these variations on the one theme of American destiny under God. It is well to note beforehand, however, that there have been two basic versions when the theme has been applied to the relation between America and other peoples.

America has been regarded either as a "light to the nations" which by force of example will positively influence other peoples and perhaps draw them to an American haven of freedom, or as a chosen people with an obligation actively to win others to American principles and to safeguard those principles around the world. The first pattern is what Clinton Rossiter has called the "true American Mission" and the "finest expression of American nationalism":

It assumes that God, at the proper stage in the march of history, called forth certain hardy souls from the old and privilege-ridden nations; that He carried these precious few to a new world and presented them and their descendents with an environment ideally suited to the development of a free society; and that in bestowing His grace He also bestowed a peculiar responsibility for the success of popular institutions. Were the Americans to fail in their experiment in self-government, they would fail not only themselves, but all men wanting or deserving to be free.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Gordon Harland, "Religious Faith and the National Task," *Religion in the Public Domain*, eds. Conrad Cherry and John Fenton (University Park, Pa.: Center for Continuing Liberal Education, 1966), p. 45.

<sup>30</sup> Clinton Rossiter, "The American Mission," *The American Scholar*, 20 (1950-51), 19-20.

This view of American destiny had its classic expression during the Revolution and the constitutional period, but it had been nursed by the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay and has appeared repeatedly in the course of American history. According to the second version, Americans have presupposed that their divine election involves more than being an example for the rest of the world. They have believed that this nation is called to spread abroad the fundamental principles stated in the Bill of Rights, to preserve democratic government around the world, and to protect free men wherever and whenever their freedoms are threatened. Such assumptions undergirded the foreign-mission enterprises of the American churches during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and they have stimulated and vindicated American participation in foreign wars.

The second version of American destiny has had its unlovely manifestations: a muscular imperialism that cloaks American self-interest with platitudes about saving the world for democracy, a racist myth that justifies American actions abroad because of "Anglo-Saxon superiority," etc. But the first version contains within it the seeds of an extreme isolationism that would preclude the nation's responsibility for the international welfare. Again Clinton Rossiter's remarks are appropriate when he says that America's mission understood as example

can serve as a cloak for the revival of the most short-sighted, ethnocentric stamp of isolationism, but only if internationally-minded Americans permit it to be stolen from their keeping. The American Mission, a view of national destiny neither vulgar nor imperialistic, can certainly be squared with a healthy attitude of international cooperation.<sup>31</sup>

The key word here is "cooperation", which means that if the avoidance of isolationism is not to result in some form of imperialism, America must free herself from the messianic illusions which have led her to insist that she is the Savior of the world. International cooperation requires an openness to alternatives and compromise, something which is altogether foreign to messianic absolutism.

All of the contemporary problems facing the civil religion come to a head in the myth of American destiny under God. The ambiguity of the God symbolism tends to render the direction of American destiny indistinct; and an attitude of international cooperation balks at any nation's assumption that it has a higher destiny than any other nation. Above all, the belief in America as God's New Israel has come to support America's arrogant self-righteousness. It has been all too easy for Americans to convince themselves that they have been chosen to be a free and powerful

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

people not because God or the circumstances of history choose in mysterious ways but because they *deserve* election. The blessings of success, wealth, and power are readily taken as signs of their having merited a special place in history. Much of this smug self-satisfaction doubtless stems from the fact that America has never tasted the bitter dregs of tragic defeat. "As a civilization," Max Lerner has said, "America has never had to meet the great test of apparently irretrievable failure. Except for the Civil War, its history has been without sharp breaks, and even the Civil War was (in the phrase of Allan Nevins) an 'ordeal of union' rather than a break in history." The relative smoothness of America's movement from the past into the future sets her apart from other civilizations. "America as a civilization has been far removed from the great type-enactment of the Christian story, or the disasters of Jewish history or of the Asiatic empires: it has not suffered, died, been reborn. The weight it bears as it faces its destiny is the weight not of history but of institutions. Its great tests are still to come."<sup>32</sup>

It may be, however, that America's tests are already upon her and that her historical resources for dealing with the tragic dimensions of life simply have not been mined. The most recent crises both at home and abroad have cast dark clouds of doubt over the unbroken American success story. These crises may force Americans to recover the largely ignored components of frustration, failure, and defeat in the national experience—components discernible, for example, in the history of the South and in the history of the black American.<sup>33</sup> But to make this suggestion is to anticipate the concluding part of this book. A grasp of the recent threats to the mythology of American destiny requires, first of all, an understanding of the rich, complex history of that mythology.

<sup>32</sup> Max Lerner, *America as a Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1957), p. 948.

<sup>33</sup> See C. Vann Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (New York: Random House, Inc., Vintage Books, 1960), pp. 3–25; and Vincent Harding, "The Uses of the Afro-American Past," in *The Religious Situation: 1969*, ed. Donald R. Cutler (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 829–40.