

Rogers M. Smith

RELIGION AND AMERICA'S POLITICS OF PEOPLEHOOD

During my first year of graduate school in 1975, Professor Harvey C. Mansfield led a discussion section for graduate students in a survey course on the history of political thought. There he argued that there was a “hole in the center of liberalism,” by which he meant that a political philosophy whose central tenet was to permit people maximum freedom to pursue self-defined ends did not contain and probably could not contain standards to guide the best uses of that freedom.¹ As a liberal, I found Mansfield’s argument powerful and disturbing. My dissertation and first book arose in large part out of a desire to show that liberal commitments to reason and freedom did provide norms and aspirations that could and should guide worthwhile human lives.² But I soon ruefully concluded that, though the liberal rationalist values I defended were (and remain) compelling to me, I could not hope to demonstrate them definitively enough to claim that different judgments about authoritative human norms were illegitimate. I also could not expect to persuade many of my fellow Americans that these sorts of secular, rationalistic values were the proper way to fill the “hole” in liberalism – because arguments for such values have been around since at least the late colonial period, and most Americans have always preferred to take their guidance from different sources. The reason that most Americans historically were not so troubled by the normative “hole” Professor Mansfield diagnosed in modern liberalism was that they have long filled that hole, and arguably grounded and constrained their liberalism, through their predominantly Christian religious beliefs. Three decades of subsequent research largely devoted to the Unit-

¹ Similar characterizations and concerns are visible in the collection of essays Professor Mansfield published soon thereafter, *The Spirit of Liberalism*, Cambridge MA 1978.

² R. M. Smith, *Liberalism and American Constitutional Law*, Cambridge MA 1985, rev. ed. 1990.

ed States has only persuaded me all the more that these religious convictions must be ranked among the “foundational concepts” of American political culture, to use James Ceaser’s apt term.³ The question I wish to explore in this essay is why that should be: why have religious beliefs so often been fundamental in the lives of political communities past and present, and why have they been particularly central to American political culture? Building on my 2003 book *Stories of Peoplehood*, I argue that religious appeals and religious organizations have distinctive characteristics that often lead them to play particularly important but also particularly problematic roles in the politics through which forms of political peoplehood are created. I will suggest why, in America’s historical context and in light of the limitations of liberalism to which Professor Mansfield long ago called attention, religion has been distinctively foundational in the United States, and therefore distinctive problematic in certain ways. And, using some American cautionary examples, I will offer some prescriptions for how those who favor a democratic politics that promotes human rights and human flourishing should respond to such problems.

The Political Potency of Religious Stories of Peoplehood

Even if they take some distinctive forms in the U.S., the political problems posed by religious commitments are, of course, far from new. They played a central and, in the eyes of some, *the* central role in the initial development of what many scholars now call “the modern liberal tradition.”⁴ The thorny relationship of religion to politics was undeniably fundamental to the thought of perhaps the greatest forebear of modern liberalism, the English philosopher John Locke. He wrote in his first Letter Concerning Toleration that, in regard to religion,

It is not the diversity of opinions (which cannot be avoided), but the refusal of toleration to those that are of different opinions (which might have been granted), that has produced all the bustles and wars that have been in the Christian world upon account of religion.⁵

Particularly in the United States, where the Letter was probably Locke’s most widely read work in the founding era, this view has been read as an argument for keeping religion out of politics, for separation of church and state. But despite its difficulties, the importance of religion for politics, and for the politics of peoplehood in particular, has recently been recognized by a modern English political philosopher, Margaret Canovan, who wrote that in meeting the tasks of

³ See e.g.: *idem*, *What if God were One of Us? The Challenges of Studying Foundational Political Concepts*, [in:] J. W. Ceaser, *Nature and History in American Political Development: A Debate*, Cambridge MA 2006, p. 141–168.

⁴ For critical discussion of such accounts, see: J. G. Gunnell, “The Archaeology of American Liberalism” 2001, Vol. 6, p. 125–145.

⁵ J. Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Indianapolis 1955, p. 57.

forging political communities, historically “Much the most common solution has been rule by one man at the head of an army, buttressed by as much support from religion as can be mustered.”⁶ So, in explaining politics and prescribing for politics, we must acknowledge that religion has often been invaluable in creating political peoples – even in northern Europe, which has become perhaps the most secularized region in world history – although religion has also often been an enormous source of political repression and violence of the sort that concerned Locke, that led to official separation of church and state in America, and that has partly contributed to the relative secularization of much of modern Europe. And as the mere mention of the phrase “Islamic terrorist” indicates, religion remains politically important and problematic in both the U.S. and Europe today. Here, as in *Stories of Peoplehood*, I use the terms “political peoples” and “political peoplehood” broadly to include any group of human beings, whether defined in religious, ideological, linguistic, cultural, racial, ethnic, ancestral, territorial, or other terms, whose proponents assert that obligations to their group and its defining features legitimately trump many of the demands made on its members in the name of other human groups or associations.

I presume that no political peoples are natural or primordial. All are creations of human beings in history, including those that present themselves in other terms. Political peoples are created via asymmetrical political processes in which leaders lead – **but only under the great constraint that they must attract and keep followers.** Leaders do so both through coercive force that intimidates potential members into obedience, and through persuasive stories that prompt voluntary embrace of the worth of the communal life leaders offer as well as trust in the success of their group endeavors. My work focuses on the stories.⁷ I maintain that all forms of political peoplehood are subjects of continual, sometimes low-level and sometimes intense contestation, both internal and external, and so aspirants to leadership are always crafting and re-crafting stories to inspire and maintain allegiance to their visions of peoplehood, as well as to their own leadership. Those stories always build to some degree on pre-existing senses of identity, interests, and values, but they also always re-shape those pre-existing conceptions to some degree in light of new circumstances. All stories of peoplehood also contain three types of elements, though with differing emphases: promises of economic well-being; promises of political power sufficient to insure personal security and a measure of political influence; and what I have termed “ethically constitutive” themes, accounts depicting membership in a people as having intrinsic normative worth.⁸ Religious stories are probably the oldest, most enduring, and often the most potent of these ethically constitutive themes, though they are not unique in the roles they play. Stories contending for the normative value of a particular set of ancestors, or a broader ethnic

⁶ M. Canovan, *Nationhood and Political Theory*, Brookfield 1996, p. 22.

⁷ R. M. Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood: the Politics and Morals of Political Membership*, New York 2003, p. 19–71.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

or racial identity, or for the desirability of a distinctive culture or language or historical identity, or even the glories of particular homeland territories, can all serve as ethical accounts that prompt persons to embrace a common sense of peoplehood. In the U.S. and at times in many other societies shaped by modern Western political philosophy, political leaders have often advanced popularized versions of “social contract” or “social compact” theories in order to confer ethical legitimacy on their forms of political community and their policies and leadership, sometimes merging these with religious “covenant” traditions, sometimes presenting them in more secular form. Locke, of course, was also an influential advocate of social contract theory and its attendant conception of peoplehood, in both his Letter Concerning Toleration and his Two Treatises of Government. But the social contract tradition, especially its modern secular variants, demonstrates that though religious stories are in some ways the prototype for ethically constitutive narratives, they do not exhaust the category.⁹

Both leaders and followers may be primarily motivated by any of these three basic types of stories – economic stories, political power stories, ethically constitutive stories. But no form of peoplehood is likely to endure if a critical mass of members do not believe that through it they are receiving adequate shares of economic and power benefits and doing so in ways that seem normatively legitimate, if not indeed commendable. That is why all three themes are generally linked in all politically potent stories of peoplehood, past and present, even if sometimes one theme is far more overt than the others. Yet even if all three themes are needed, ethically constitutive stories and the normative legitimation they provide have distinctive importance. Even though many people are driven by concerns for economic well-being, physical security, and political power much of the time, it is nonetheless not possible to explain the politics of peoplehood strictly in economic terms or in terms of power aspirations alone. Though all engaged in such politics do seek power – some as an end in itself, many as an end to other means – and though most also seek to advance economic interests, no form of political peoplehood can long endure if it is defined and defended in purely economic or power terms. This is so because there are at least three things which ethically constitutive stories provide to leaders and members that economic and political power stories cannot so easily do. First, they can perform the useful trick of justifying loyalty to particular communities in universal terms.

The diversity of interests, identities and values that have existed in the world since time immemorial mean that it has generally been difficult to build stable forms of political peoplehood that can contribute to the well-being of at least some persons over several generations, so achieving a stabilizing loyalty to particular communities has often seemed desirable. But on their own logic, economic and political power stories of membership can inspire loyalty only so long and so far as members cannot achieve greater economic welfare or more power and security

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 72–92; J. Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. P. Laslett, New York 1965.

within any other community. Rather than remaining loyal to a particular community or people, individual and familial emigration, quests for new forms of federation, or some form of regional or group separation may often seem to make sense. But if one belongs to a particular community or people because God has deemed one should do so, or because it represents membership in the world's master race or the world's greatest civilization, then by this universalistic standard, that particular membership is likely to seem desirable on an enduring basis. Second, as I have already suggested, ethically constitutive stories are better equipped than purely economic or political power accounts to make memberships seem normatively worthwhile. To be sure, being wealthy and powerful are often seen as desirable; but in many of the normative traditions in which people have been socialized, wealth and power are also seen as spurs to selfish, destructive, immoral behavior, and for good reason – there is an abundance of empirical evidence that this is in fact the case.

Consequently, if persons are to feel their form of political peoplehood is providing them with benefits in ways that are legitimate, even noble, economic and power themes must be undergirded and justified by ethically constitutive accounts. Finally, in comparison with economic and political power stories, ethically constitutive ones are harder to prove but also harder to disprove. We can generally tell if we are rich or poor, politically strong or weak; but it is harder to tell if we are part of God's chosen people, the world's greatest culture, a speaker of the most beautiful language, and so forth. That means ethically constitutive political stories can be a tough sell in comparison to concrete promises of economic or power benefits. But conversely, once people are sold on such stories, it is hard to convince them that the stories are untrue and that the political obligations they define can be ignored. This is all the more true because people have been socialized via ethically constitutive stories since before recorded history – I believe, because they have always been politically indispensable – and as a result, most people find that certain ethically constitutive stories speak powerfully to their deepest senses of who they are and what they feel they should be.¹⁰ And though ethically constitutive stories come in a fascinating variety of forms, the most potent ones for most people in most places through most of time have been religious ones. It is harder to imagine a stronger basis for making a membership seem both unquestionably intrinsic to people's identities and normatively worthwhile than to have it assigned by God or the gods. No purely biological, ancestral, cultural, linguistic, or historical account can logically provide quite the same degree of sanctification that divine authorship bestows.

For most people historically, nothing has done more to imbue both their personal and political lives with an inspiring sense of moral meaning, and nothing has offered such reassurance of the most powerful support possible when they face the vicissitudes of human existence. The attractions of such accounts for leaders who want devoted members, and for members who want their communal lives to

¹⁰ R. M. Smith, *Stories...*, p. 93–102.

be something on which they can rely and in which they can take pride, will be clear. These political advantages explain, I believe, why no political society in recorded history failed to establish an official common religion until the founding of the United States, which had too many fervent Protestant denominations, with different ones established in different states, to privilege any one at the national level. These political advantages also help explain why even many societies that have become considerable more secular today, like Great Britain, Norway, Denmark, and Poland, still have not abandoned special statuses for the churches which were once far more central to their forms of peoplehood.

As I have already suggested, the fact that religious stories of peoplehood have nonetheless become less central than they once were in modern Europe, and to a lesser degree even in America, actually provides further testimony to their political potency. Because they are so capable of inspiring senses of loyal devotion, because they are so effective in conferring moral status on some and in advancing moral condemnations of others, religious stories have long and often served to justify and probably often to motivate appalling atrocities, including systems of crushing servitude, individual and group persecution and interstate violence, even genocide. They have often had tremendous power both in providing normative buttresses for harsh governmental policies and institutions and in stirring extremist, even fanatical dissident movements, capable of persuading believers to undertake crusades and jihads, mass suicides and suicidal attacks.

Religious conflicts were particularly central to the civil wars that made Locke's 17th century the "century of revolution" in England and to many of the feudal and monarchical wars that racked Europe for so much of its history, prompting many to flee to the Americas. Still, it is important to recognize that religious stories are not alone in their capacities to provide apparent ethical legitimation for violent conflicts and repression: Communist ideology and "scientific" racist theories, along with historical narratives of past injustices demanding vengeance, have all done the same. Even as he worried about religious strife, Locke also observed:

Suppose this business of religion were let alone, and that there were some other distinction made between men and men upon account of their different complexions, shapes, and features, so that those who have black hair (for example) or grey eyes should not enjoy the same privileges as other citizens; that they should not be permitted either to buy or sell, or live by their callings; that parents should not have the government and education of their own children; that all should either be excluded from the benefit of the laws, or meet with partial judges; can it be doubted but these persons, thus distinguished from others by the colour of their hair and eyes, and united together by one common persecution, would be as dangerous to the magistrate as any others that had associated themselves merely upon the account of religion? ...there is only one thing which gathers people into seditious commotions, and that is oppression.¹¹

¹¹ J. Locke, *Letter...*, p. 54.

In this I think Locke was right, so we should not assume that religious stories are uniquely politically potent, uniquely politically significant, and uniquely politically problematic in promoting oppression and violence. But they are, I think, especially potent, unique, significant, and problematic.

Religion and Peoplehood in the United States

This framework suggests some reasons for the particular potency of religious beliefs in American political culture. Although the different American colonies were founded for a variety of reasons – some fundamentally as business enterprises, some as gifts to proprietors that British monarchs wished to reward or cultivate – there can be no denying that many of the first colonists came out of desire for greater opportunities to practice their preferred forms of Christianity. It is understandable that their colonial political leaders, who were also often their religious leaders, used religious accounts of their communities to inspire senses of faith and hope in the members of what were initially small, weak, poor communities struggling with harsh circumstances. It is also understandable that later American leaders from the revolution on would not hesitate to invoke and elaborate these religious conceptions of peoplehood, rather than their ancestors' pecuniary motives, to provide uplifting, loyalty-stirring content to their stories of national identity.

Famously, the notion that the community that American colonists built might prove to have a sacred place among the nations of the earth was central to the sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity," that Massachusetts Bay Company Governor John Winthrop gave to his fellow Puritan colonists in 1630 as their ship, the *Arbella*, first approached the shores of the New World. Referencing the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 5, verse 14, which states, "you are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden," Winthrop told his company members that, while they still had all the duties that they had had in England, they now had "to do more service to the Lord" and keep themselves "better preserved from the common corruptions of this evil world." If they did so, he promised:

The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as His own people ... He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, 'may the Lord make it all like that of New England.' For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken ... we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.¹²

It may seem absurd to think that the eyes of the world were on the passengers of the tiny *Arbella*; and for those who do not share Winthrop's theology, it also seems unlikely that God intended to make the New Englanders His special people

¹² Governor J. Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity*, 1630, at: www.religiousfreedom.lib.virginia.edu/sacred/charity.html, accessed May 6, 2009.

and dwell among them if they were faithful. But this was plainly a religious “ethically constitutive” story of peoplehood that served to inspire a sense of the enormous normative worth of the new form of community the Puritans were seeking to establish, as well a sense of trust that, despite the huge difficulties they faced, they would succeed. Since Winthrop did not rely on coercion, and he could not offer his fellows much in the way of economic benefits – and he also proved unwilling to share much political power – this promise of being part of either a glorious story if the colonists embraced his vision, or a degraded one if they did not, was crucial to the Puritan settler project. And with varying degrees of sincerity, Americans from Thomas Paine to George W. Bush and beyond have since continued to claim that America has a special providential world mission. In his great 1776 revolutionary pamphlet, “Common Sense,” Paine did not hesitate to suggest to Protestant America that its discovery had preceded the Reformation “as if the Almighty graciously meant to open a sanctuary to the persecuted in future years.”¹³ Paine would later go on to acknowledge that he was a deist who doubted that God actually intervened in human history. But when seeking to fire up belief in the moral legitimacy and potential success of the radical endeavor of colonial revolution against the world’s greatest imperial power, he felt compelled not simply to appeal to the prevalent forms of religiosity but to build them into his presentation of the very core of American peoplehood.

Similarly, when George Washington wrote in the 1780s to Irish and Dutch admirers that America should and would be “open to receive not only the Opulent and respectable Stranger, but the oppressed and persecuted of all Nations And Religions,” making it “an Asylum” for “the needy of the Earth,” he was chiefly seeking to attract European immigrants to an infant country seeking to grow; and he did not endorse Winthrop’s specific vision of that nation’s religious mission. Nonetheless, Washington, too, legitimated, indeed valorized, the newly United States as the ideal locale for believers to pursue the religious lives they preferred.¹⁴ With the Anglican Church established in South Carolina and only recently disestablished in Virginia, and the Congregationalists established in New Hampshire and Connecticut (and still established for practical purposes in Massachusetts), while Rhode Island and Pennsylvania professed commitments to religious freedom, the ensuing Constitutional Convention gave little consideration to establishing any “Church of the United States.” Instead it banned religious tests for public office. But though its example contributed to the eventual ending of all governmental establishment of churches at the state and local levels throughout the United States during the 19th century, the notion that the United States was in some sense providentially favored remained widespread and politically potent. After visiting the United States in the Jacksonian era, admittedly a time of religious revivalism, Alexis de Tocqueville laid special emphasis on Americans’ pervasive religiosity and the dis-

¹³ *Tracts of the American Revolution 1763–1776*, ed. M. Jensen, Indianapolis 1967, p. 424.

¹⁴ *Immigration and the American Tradition*, ed. M. Rischin, Indianapolis 1967, p. 43–44.

tinctive alliance they had forged between religion and civil and political freedom, an alliance he saw as only strengthened by their decisions to separate church and state. Tocqueville suggested that colonial New England had done more than any other part of the country to give shape and identity to “the whole American world,” precisely because of the way it blended its Calvinist Christianity with community self-governance and, increasingly over time, with commitments to civil freedom. Tocqueville then generalized that in America, “Religion regards civil liberties as a noble exercise of men’s faculties,” while “Freedom sees religion as the companion of its struggles and triumphs, the cradle of its infancy, and the divine source of its rights.”¹⁵ Though we might today challenge that sweeping generalization, recalling for example that antebellum American religious leaders, many trained in New England, provided the most prominent defenses of slavery, Tocqueville’s characterizations still testify to how profoundly American peoplehood had come to be identified with religious freedom and religious flourishing, and, for many if not most Americans, with a providential sense of the nation’s distinctive identity. And with this long, deeply constitutive tradition of seeing American peoplehood as closely allied with religion or even as holding a special place in the plans of Divine Providence, it is not surprising that American leaders have often turned to religious themes in times of trouble, when they were unable to provide the sorts of economic and political benefits their constituents hoped to receive, or when they were seeking to provide such benefits through means that many regarded as morally dubious.

Many commentators have noted that, as the staggering costs in resources and human lives of the Civil War mounted and as the outcome remained deeply uncertain, Northern leaders in general and President Abraham Lincoln increasingly sought to inspire those called on to make so many sacrifices by imbuing the struggle with profound religious significance, as in the Battle Hymn of the Republic: “As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free.” And though Lincoln professed it to be beyond human capacities to know divine will, and hence whether God was on the side of the Union, he still did not hesitate in his great Second Inaugural to insist that, much as everyone wished for the war to end,

If God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled up by the bondsman’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid with another drawn with the sword. . . still it must be said, ‘The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’¹⁶

While Lincoln and other leaders of the ultimately victorious Union thus expressed and reinforced religious conceptions of American peoplehood to stir men to sacrifices in the cause of human emancipation, fin-de-siècle American leaders,

¹⁵ A. de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer and M. Lerner, trans. G. Lawrence, New York 1966, p. 29, 30, 40.

¹⁶ A. Lincoln, *The Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, Vol. 7, ed. A. B. Lapsley, New York 1905–1906, p. 330–331; cf. e.g. H. V. Jaffa, *Crisis of the House Divided*, Chicago 1982 [orig. 1959]), p. 229–232, 316.

like others before and since, deployed those conceptions to legitimate far more morally dubious enterprises, including the Spanish-American War that brought the United States its first overseas empire. In the wake of the nation's military triumphs in that war, Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana won national fame by brushing off all constitutional, legal, and moral objections to this newly expansive American imperialism by insisting

God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Teutonic peoples for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration. No! He has made us the master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns ... And of all our race He has marked the American people as his chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world.¹⁷

The success of Beveridge's speech and many like it in legitimating for the American people controversial uses of their military power has through the course of U.S. history further embedded in American political culture the identification of American nationalism with religious beliefs and purposes. Even so, perhaps because the United States found its 1898 overseas imperialist venture more burdensome than beneficial and thereafter refrained from such overt, morally questionable conquests, perhaps because the U.S. was, with the exception of the Great Depression, largely successful thereafter in providing its citizens with both economic and political benefits, Beveridge's strident brand of providentialist religious rhetoric became less common during most of the 20th century. This trend toward somewhat more secular public discourses arguably reached its peak in the 1960s, when challenges to various American traditions raised by the various liberation movements of the era went so far that Harvard theologian Harvey Cox anticipated the end of the use of the term "God" in American politics.¹⁸ Of course, events proved Cox to be very wrong. Contemporary liberal philosopher William Galston has suggested that, in important respects, the reverse occurred. He believes that, even though many of the challenges to traditional forms of racial, gender, economic and religious ordering of American society in the 1960s were themselves cast in religious terms, they still "contributed to the breakdown of consensus," undermined social senses of shared standards – they widened the "hole" at the center of modern liberalism – and thereby set the stage for the resurgence of both conservatism and religion in American life.¹⁹

Presidential rhetoric provides evidence that such a resurgence did indeed occur. Though it is sometimes asserted that all American presidents speak extensively in religious terms and have always done so, in fact such rhetoric became less preva-

¹⁷ A. Beveridge, "On the New Colonies", Congressional Record, 56th Cong., 1900, 1st Sess., Vol. 33, pt. 1, 711.

¹⁸ H. Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*, rev. ed., New York 1966, p. 234.

¹⁹ W. A. Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues, and Diversity in the Liberal State*, New York 1991, p. 268–269.

lent during the 20th century, until it was revived by Ronald Reagan and then carried further by George W. Bush. The leading quantitative study of the topic is by two communication scholars, Kevin Coe and David Domke.²⁰ They did content analysis of all Inaugural and State of the Union Addresses from Franklin D. Roosevelt through the speeches of the second President Bush. These speeches seemed appropriate because all presidents give them and because, in terms of categories first offered by Aristotle, Inaugural Addresses tend to be “epideictic,” more ceremonial and vision-defining, while State of the Union Addresses tend to be more “deliberative,” concerned with providing concrete policy proposals and arguments. Coe and Domke also coded presidential religious expression as displaying “petitionary” or “prophetic” postures, with “petitionary” statements requesting or offering thanks for divine assistance, and “prophetic” implying “a knowledge of God’s wishes, desires or intentions.”²¹

Their results, achieved with a high coefficient of intercoder reliability (.94), show that Ronald Reagan initiated a new era in which “God” references per presidential address more than doubled compared to presidents from FDR through Jimmy Carter. George W. Bush ranks highest in references per address and references per 1,000 words, exceeding even Reagan. In contrast, though Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush invoked God more often per address than pre-Reagan presidents, their rate per 1,000 words was roughly that of those predecessors.²² The second Bush and Reagan also adopted the prophetic posture in 47% of their addresses, compared to 0% for pre-Reagan Democrats, 5% for pre-Reagan Republicans, and 15% for the first Bush and Clinton, all statistically significant differences.²³ Both presidents, but especially Bush, made prophetic statements most often in relation to the role of the U.S. in promoting freedom in the world. As Coe and Domke note, this rhetorical posture “treads closely to claims regarding a divine vision for U.S.

²⁰ K. Coe, D. Domke, *Petitioners or Prophets? Presidential Discourse, God, and the Ascendancy of Religious Conservatives*, “Journal of Communication” 2006, Vol. 56, p. 309–330.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 316.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 316–319. Prior to encountering the Coe and Domke study, I asked two student researchers to count and code religious references in all presidential Inaugurals, State of the Union addresses, and nomination acceptance speeches from George Washington through George W. Bush using an online archive that has since been displaced (www.theamericanpresidency.us/archive.htm). The speeches are now available at www.presidency.ucsb.edu, and I have re-checked them using that site. The researchers categorized the religious remarks as “providential” and “non-providential,” a less useful dichotomy than Coe and Domke’s; and the research had a slightly lower level of inter-coder reliability, so I rely on the published Coe and Domke results here. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that, even including nominating speeches, the patterns identified in these researchers’ counts of presidential religious references track those found by Coe and Domke very closely. In both studies, all presidents examined had the same relative rankings in terms of numbers of references, with virtually the same counts for references per speech (even adding nominating speeches). Our research confirms that George W. Bush, followed by Reagan, made more religious and more specifically providentialist references per major speech than any 20th-century president, and they were rivaled historically only by James Buchanan, John Quincy Adams, and the single Inaugural Address of William Henry Harrison (Research memorandum and tables by Stefan Heumann, on file with Rogers M. Smith).

²³ K. Coe, D. Domke, *Petitioners or Prophets?...*, p. 320.

foreign policy.”²⁴ Scholars relying on more “qualitative” interpretive methods have reached similar conclusions. The theologian Caryn Riswold has analyzed George W. Bush’s Sept. 20, 2001 speech advocating military action against Al Qaeda and Afghanistan’s Taliban regime. Bush argued that America was “called to defend freedom” and he concluded, “The course of this conflict is not known, yet its outcome is certain. Freedom and fear, justice and cruelty, have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them.”²⁵ Riswold argues that this language suggested that not only was Bush’s call to arms “justified by God;” it offered Americans

certainty of the outcome” of his policies. She concludes that his rhetoric “stakes a claim that America is the favored nation under God, and presents subtle justification for violence ... It communicates a religious worldview that justified its veiled call for holy war, equating patriotism with faith in a God who is not neutral. The presidential address was a religious response, presenting a retribution theology as national policy.”²⁶

Communications scholar Denise M. Bostdorff has also closely analyzed many of Bush’s post-September 11th speeches, and reaches similar conclusions. She sees Bush as repeatedly invoking Protestant traditions holding that “the U.S. has a sacred, civil covenant,” harkening back to “the covenant between God and New England” that “periodically needs to be renewed by current citizens.”²⁷ He also relied heavily on the “theme of predestination” because, she believes, “citizens were more likely to support the war... if they believed the effort would ultimately succeed.” Of course leaders always seek to “speak confidently,” but “Bush’s rhetoric often went beyond simple confidence to outright certitude.”²⁸ These characterizations support Coe and Domke’s coding of Bush’s rhetorical posture as frequently and distinctively “prophetic.” In deploying such religious themes, the younger Bush followed Reagan’s model, more than that of his own father. No theme was dearer to Reagan than the notion that America was destined by “Divine Providence” to be John Winthrop’s shining “city on a hill.” He invoked that image when he announced his candidacy for the presidency in 1979, in his 1984 nomination acceptance speech, and in his final State of the Union address, as well as in many other statements.²⁹ In his Inaugural addresses, Reagan repeatedly made clear that

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 324.

²⁵ G. W. Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People,” September 20, 2001, at: www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html (accessed May 21, 2007).

²⁶ C. D. Riswold, *A Religious Response Veiled in a Presidential Address: A Theological Study of Bush’s Speech on 20 September 2001*, “Political Theology” 2004, Vol. 5, p. 44–46.

²⁷ D. M. Bostdorff, *George W. Bush’s Post-September 11 Rhetoric of Covenant Renewal: Upholding the Faith of the Greatest Generation*, “Quarterly Journal of Speech” 2003, Vol. 89, p. 294, 306.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 307.

²⁹ R. Reagan, “Announcement of Candidacy,” November 13, 1979, at: www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed May 21, 2007); *idem*, “Nomination Acceptance Speech,” July 17, 1980, at: www.presidency.ucsb.edu/nomination.php (accessed May 21, 2007); *idem*, “7th State of the Union Address,” January 25, 1988, at: www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed May 21, 2007).

he understood this to mean that America should be an “exemplar of freedom and a beacon of hope” to all the world, and that God “intended” and “called” the American people to play this role, so that God was the true “author” of America’s “dream of freedom.”³⁰ One of Reagan’s most celebrated expressions of this view came in a speech at the 1986 Statue of Liberty commemoration, where the president praised the nation’s history of welcoming immigrants by saying,

I have always believed there was some divine providence that placed this great land here between the two great oceans, to be found by a special kind of people from every corner of the world, who had a special love for freedom.³¹

Yet while this was a classic “epideictic” ceremonial speech, it interpreted the past, rather than prophesying the future; and Reagan generally trod carefully in his prophetic providentialist statements, knowing they could be controversial. In his 1984 State of the Union Address, Reagan observed, in a defense of school prayer, that “we must be cautious in claiming that God’s on our side, but I think it’s all right to keep asking if we’re on His side.”³² In addition to religious support, Reagan also often emphasized what he saw as the lessons of history and history’s “calls” to Americans.³³ Even so, this was clearly divinely guided history, and over time Reagan asserted more and more strongly that God had “entrusted in a special way to this nation” a responsibility for the “defense” of freedom at home and around the world.³⁴ But though he moved closer to suggesting that particular policies that he advocated accorded with divine intentions, his religious rhetoric remained primarily an inspirational view of American identity in general, not a justification for specific positions.

George W. Bush went further, especially in foreign policy contexts after September 11, 2001. In his first State of the Union address in 2002, Bush stated that “History has called America” to “fight” and “lead” the campaign for liberty and justice, and he assured his fellow citizens that “God is near” to us amidst these

³⁰ *Idem*, “First Inaugural Address,” January 20, 1981, at: www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed May 21, 2007); *idem*, “Second Inaugural Address,” January 21, 1985, at: www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed May 21, 2007).

³¹ *Idem*, “Remarks at the Opening Ceremony of the Statute of Liberty Centennial Celebration,” July 3, 1986, at: www.reagan.utexas.edu/archives/speeches/1986/70386d.htm (accessed May 21, 2007); *idem*, “3rd State of the Union Address,” January 25, 1984, at: www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed May 21, 2007).

³² E.g.: R. Reagan, “4th State of the Union Address,” February 6, 1985, at: www.theamericanpresidency.us/1985.htm (accessed December 19, 2004).

³³ *Ibidem*; R. Reagan, “6th State of the Union Address,” January 27, 1987, at: www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed May 21, 2007); *idem*, “7th State of the Union Address,” January 25, 1988, at: www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed May 21, 2007). Reagan also increasingly emphasized that “the unborn child is a living human being entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” granted by “our Creator” (“5th State of the Union Address,” February 4, 1986, at: www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed May 21, 2007); “7th State of the Union Address...”).

³⁴ G. W. Bush, “1st State of the Union Address,” January 29, 2002, at: www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed May 21, 2007).

difficult events.³⁵ On September 11, 2002, he reaffirmed that Americans had heard “history’s call,” and he made even clearer that history was for him, as for Reagan, a providentialist history. Bush stated

we do know that God has placed us together in this moment ... to serve each other and our country. And the duty we have been given – defending America and our freedom – is also a privilege we share ... This ideal of America is the hope of all mankind ... That hope still lights our way.

Using Biblical language (John 1:5) in a popular Protestant translation, the president concluded, “And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it.”³⁶ In his 2003 State of the Union Address, Bush went on to assert that “this call of history has come to the right country,” and, in case there remained any doubt that the voice of this history was the voice of God, he added that though “we do not claim to know all the ways of Providence,” we knew enough of them to “trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life and all of history” as we pursued the course the president had set.

Later that year, in his widely praised speech to the National Endowment for Democracy, Bush argued still more explicitly that “Liberty is both the plan of Heaven for humanity, and the best hope for progress here on Earth,” and that as part of this plan, America had a “mission to promote liberty around the world.” He concluded “we can be certain that the author of freedom is not indifferent to the fate of freedom.”³⁷ In his 2004 State of the Union speech, Bush argued, again like Reagan, that “God has planted in every human heart the desire to live in freedom,” and he assured Americans that they would fulfill their “mission” to “lead the cause of freedom” because of “that greater power who guides the unfolding of the years.”³⁸ Then, in his speech accepting his second presidential nomination, Bush returned to his motif of the “story of America,” a “story of expanding liberty” in which “America is called to lead the cause of freedom” because freedom “is the Almighty God’s gift to every man and woman in the world.” He closed by assuring Americans that they “have a calling from beyond the stars to stand for freedom.”³⁹

Bush’s Second Inaugural Address, which his speechwriter termed the speech that best expressed the president’s “worldview,” took as its central theme the argument that America must now make “the success of liberty in other lands” the centerpiece of national policy, for this task represented not only “the urgent re-

³⁵ *Idem*, “Remarks on September 11, 2002 at Ellis Island,” at: www.cgi.cnn.com/2002/US/09/11/ar911.bush.speech.transcript (accessed May 21, 2007).

³⁶ *Idem*, “2nd State of the Union Address,” January 23, 2003, at: www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed May 21, 2007).

³⁷ *Idem*, “Remarks at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy,” November 6, 2003, at: www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-2.html (accessed May 21, 2007).

³⁸ *Idem*, “3rd State of the Union Address,” January 20, 2004, at: www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed May 21, 2007).

³⁹ *Idem*, “2nd Nomination Acceptance Speech,” September 2, 2004, at: www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed May 21, 2007).

quirement of our nation's security," but also "the calling of our time."⁴⁰ The president was careful to acknowledge that liberty might take different forms around the world, that "when the soul of a nation finally speaks, the institutions that arise may reflect customs and traditions very different from our own."

The speech also contained passages that seemed mindful of criticisms of Bush's earlier providentialist rhetoric, as well as the example of Lincoln's great Second Inaugural, which recognized the divine justice of American suffering but refused to claim divine sanction for the Union cause, saying only that "The Almighty has His own purposes."⁴¹ Somewhat similarly, Bush stated that Americans had "complete confidence in the eventual triumph of freedom," but not because "history runs on the wheels of inevitability; it is human choices that move events." Nor did Americans "consider ourselves a chosen nation; God moves and chooses as He wills." Still, Bush insisted, "History has an ebb and flow of justice, but history also has a visible direction, set by liberty and the Author of Liberty." In his 2005 State of the Union address, devoted largely to domestic matters, Bush reiterated that Americans would "add to that story" of the "history of liberty," and that "The road of Providence is uneven and unpredictable – yet we know where it leads: It leads to freedom." In his two subsequent State of the Union speeches, his providentialist discourse did give way to pragmatic policy arguments, perhaps because his administration's failure to realize his previous prophecies of foreign policy success made a shift to different rhetorical terrains seem advisable.⁴²

But the evidence permits no doubt that, building on traditions going back to the colonial era, George W. Bush made religion central to the vision of America peoplehood that he offered to his nation, and that he invoked it especially in contexts where it might confer normative legitimacy on his most controversial policies. And so his example is, at a minimum, consistent with my central argument here, that religion remains distinctively important in American politics, for reasons that are understandable in terms of the political roles of religious stories of peoplehood in America's historical and contemporary contexts.

The success of both Reagan and the second Bush have been, moreover, parts of the rise of the Religious Right in American politics, some of whose members wish to win recognition of the United States as a "Christian nation," and most of whom want to privilege religious perspectives over secular ones in public institutions and policies. These Religious Right perspectives are commonly and, I think, correctly thought to have reinforced Bush's often providentially justified foreign policies. And though I have argued that to win court cases, many Religious Right advocacy groups in America have in fact endorsed egalitarian and pluralistic views

⁴⁰ *Idem*, "2nd Inaugural Address," January 20, 2005, at: www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed May 21, 2007); "Foreign Policy" 2006.

⁴¹ A. L i n c o l n, "2nd Inaugural Address," March 4, 1865, at: www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed May 21, 2007).

⁴² G. W. B u s h, "4th State of the Union Address," February 2, 2005, at: www.presidency.ucsb.edu (accessed May 21, 2007).

under which they have no more prominence than any other groups, it remains true that President Bush went further than any predecessor in using religious justifications for controversial, often otherwise indefensible policies.⁴³

As a result, I think it fair to say that even though the United States has generally managed problems of religion relatively well through extensive though not total separation of church and state, recent history has confirmed that there remains a danger of the political use of religious stories to justify harsh coercive policies, at least toward outsiders. The 2008 presidential campaign showed, moreover, that Americans also continue to be anxious that religious stories may be used in radically dissident fashion in ways that may divide and endanger the American republic. Although Barack Obama's pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, deployed rhetoric denouncing American racism and imperialism that are in fact fairly conventional in many African-American churches, and though this rhetoric rarely supports political radicalism in African-American communities nor was it part of any radical activism by the former Marine Reverend Wright, even so candidate Obama felt compelled to repudiate the anti-American sentiments in Wright's sermons. The examples of Bush's policies and the Wright controversy are sufficient, I think, to indicate that dangerous uses of religious stories by political authorities and controversies over religious stories used to justify dissidence remain important features of American political life.

Normative Responses

I hope that what I have said so far makes it plausible to hold that religious tales of peoplehood both have enormous political appeal and pose enormous political dangers, if not uniquely so, more so than many other sorts of stories of political peoplehood. This combination of political power and peril means that those committed to regimes that seek to realize values of democracy and human rights face continuing challenges of managing the place of religious groups and religious ideologies in their political societies. I believe the United States, like most nations in modern Europe, has on the whole done well in meeting these challenges via mixtures of recognition and accommodation of religious bodies and substantial separation of religion and government, with the particular combinations necessarily and appropriately varying in different times and places. But these combinations still face threats that they will come unstuck, either through controversies over whether government may become repressively identified with particular religions, as in the worries over the Religious Right in the United States and the recognition

⁴³ R. M. Smith, *Religious Rhetoric and the Ethics of Public Discourse: The Case of George W. Bush*, "Political Theory" 2008, Vol. 36, p. 272–300; idem, *An 'Almost Christian' Nation? Constitutional Consequences of the Rise of the Religious Right*, [in:] *Evangelicals and Democracy in America*, ed. S. Brint, J. Reith Schroedel, Vol. 1: *Religion and Society*, New York 2009, p. 329–355.

of Christianity in E.U. documents in Europe, or through controversies over whether radically dissident religious views should be permitted, as in the controversies over Rev. Wright in the U.S. and over the hijab and other Islamic practices in Europe. So in the remainder of this essay I suggest some guidelines for confronting these continuing challenges that build on the analysis of religious stories of peoplehood I have advanced. These prescriptions fall under two headings: first, the issue of how far religious groups and beliefs should be separated from politics, and second, how far governments should seek to be neutral among different religious groups.

On the first issue, writing as a secularist, I have argued for some years against those who seek to foster a purely secular public realm, in which political officials and institutions do not articulate religious beliefs or acknowledge the religious origins of their own values. I regard such admonitions, sometimes espoused by advocates of John Rawls's public reason or Jürgen Habermas's discourse ethics, as politically unrealistic, given the potency of religious arguments for both leaders and followers.⁴⁴ And I also regard them as ethically illegitimate, because though I still regard purely secular outlooks as more intellectually persuasive, I also still feel compelled to acknowledge that secular perspectives are not so definitively established as to make it unreasonable for people to see the world in religious terms. U.S. experience suggests that efforts to drive religious discourse out of politics only provokes the very sorts of religious assertiveness and public conflict that advocates of full separation of religion and politics seek to avoid, and it does so on terms that permits religious groups to portray themselves as persecuted martyrs.

I therefore think it appropriate for religious arguments to be advanced publicly in democratic politics as fully and as openly as possible, so long as they are not in any way exempt from the criticisms to which all public advocacy should be subject. I have also argued that, because no society can long endure without the support of various ethically constitutive stories that overlap in giving support to the sense of peoplehood and the basic values and institutions that constitute the society, supporters of democracy and human rights must decide what sorts of ethically constitutive stories they should embrace. I would like to see more and more communities embrace historical stories of their own identities, seeing themselves accurately as human creations in history with specific traditions, achievements, challenges and opportunities that their members may understandably see as fundamental to who they are, as normatively compelling, and that they wish to continue and, one hopes, improve. But again, I do not think it feasible or appropriate to say that all members of a people must understand their peoplehood in secular historical terms – who am I to say that providentialist accounts of American national identity, for example, are plainly wrong? And though I think it is misleading to think about actual, real-world memberships in terms of a divine covenant, or for that matter a hypothetical secular social contract or ideal speech situation, I certainly would not wish to forego the support for democracy and human rights that have been

⁴⁴ R. M. Smith, *Stories of Peoplehood...*, p. 140–158.

built in the U.S. and in many other societies through arguments for conceiving of peoplehood in those terms.

Moreover, even in telling a historical narrative of peoplehood, it is in many circumstances only accurate to acknowledge the constitutive role that religious traditions have played in the development of that people. Although we should not accept characterizations of the United States as a “Christian nation,” we should emphatically agree that American political culture and history cannot be understood with grasping the role of different forms of Christianity and, over time, other religions in generating much that has been central to American experiences.

What is objectionable, I believe, is for the leaders and institutions of regimes purporting to embody values of democracy and human rights to treat any particular religion or all religions as essential to the values to which members of such societies must subscribe to be citizens. It is one thing to say that American political culture has been heavily shaped by Christian values; it is quite another to say that one must be Christian or have recognizably Christian values to be an American. Doctrines that define political membership in terms of religious identity are too easily adaptable to politically motivated repression, if they do not indeed overtly define invidious domestic hierarchies of political status, to be permissible in political communities that profess to respect the human dignity and rights of all. Even Israel, which bestows a “right of return” and a guarantee of Israeli citizenship to virtually all those around the world whom its rules deem to be Jews, does not insist that Israeli citizenship is confined to Jews, much less to believing Jews – though it has far to go before it truly provides equal citizenship to, especially, its substantial number of Arab citizens. So while I believe that proponents of literally all religious stories of peoplehood should be entitled to express their views openly and that many merit certain limited kinds of recognition, even accommodation, advocates of democracy and human rights must firmly oppose the rise to power and the institutionalization of stories of religious peoplehood that present faith and religious membership as inescapable qualifications for political membership.

What types of religions deserve governmental recognition and accommodation? That is the subject of my second normative argument. I believe that, while concerns to avoid religious conflict mean that governments should try to treat religious groups and religious beliefs in as even-handed way as possible and to be as inclusive as possible, it is not literally possible for government to be neutral toward all religions. In any particular community context, some religious groups will have beliefs and practices that are far more compatible with the dominant laws and customs of that society than those of other religious groups. Religions that proclaim the propriety of theocracy and ones that practice child marriage and arranged polygamous marriages cannot be accommodated as fully as others by societies that are committed to democracy and that seek to protect children and women from exploitation. It is also not possible, for example, to make every denomination’s holy days also secular holidays for the whole community, even though it may be

possible to accommodate many favored by the more sizable religious groups. And since full neutrality is not possible, I think it is permissible even for secular societies to offer accommodations to large denominations that have historically helped build support for values of democracy and human rights, accommodations that are not extended to all other religious groups.

But such special privileges always run the risk of wedding government and powerful religions too closely, in ways that present the dangers of intolerance and invidious discrimination that have been so pervasive in explicitly religious forms of peoplehood in the past. And they can also overlook the contributions that more radical religious perspectives, like those of Black Muslims in the U.S., can make in providing important critiques of widely accepted but still unjust governmental policies and social practices that adherents of more conventional religions take for granted.

So though I do not think that governments can credibly pretend to be wholly neutral toward religions, and I do think that political peoples with ethically constitutive commitments to democracy and human rights can in some ways favor those religious groups within it that support such values, I think the politics of peoplehood is conducted best, and conducted most legitimately, when efforts are made to provide real opportunities for as many voices as possible to be heard and for as many groups as possible to thrive, sometimes while maintaining their critical distance, within the forms of peoplehood that result.

However deep the challenges that religious groups and religious beliefs pose to the processes of constructing and maintaining defensible political societies, or, to put it differently, desirable forms of political peoplehood, I believe that precisely because those processes are not divinely ordained, precisely because they are the terribly important activities of fallible and often misguided and ill-motivated human beings, we need to conduct the politics of peoplehood in ways that both engage and challenge religious perspectives constructively, seeking as much as possible neither to enthrone any or to expel any irrevocably. More legitimate forms of peoplehood can be built historically only through processes of political construction that are as inclusive and as democratic as possible, and that means keeping all religious views part of the process, without entitling any to dictate or terminate those processes.