IMAGINING E PLURIBUS UNUM:
NARRATING THE NATION THROUGH MEDIATED AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

by

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ABSTRACT

The United States has become severely polarized over the last five years with some commentators even comparing this time of entrenched division to the Civil War era. However, the impulse to unify or to make one out of many (*e pluribus unum*) has existed in the country from the nation’s founding and continues to echo today as politicians and social leaders call for the U.S. to come together again. American civil religion (ACR), as introduced by Bellah in 1967, is supposed to be the unifying faith tradition of the nation. Following the election of Donald Trump, scholars of U.S. religious history and public opinion writers called for a restoration of ACR, arguing that the nation needed a common faith or narrative now more than ever.

This dissertation responds to those calls to restore ACR by interrogating the foundation of the concept in relation to white, Protestant hegemony or the myth of the American center in the United States. Specifically, this project introduces a new approach to examining American civil religion as a set of mediated narratives that participate in the meaning-making processes about the nation, self, and other. In theorizing mediated American civil religion, this project interrogates how narratives inform thinking, feeling, and behavior about the United States as stories (re)present the nation through circulation.

The theory of mediated American civil religion is applied to three case studies: the progressive interfaith policy activism of a faith-based organization, the paintings of Norman Rockwell and their contemporary reimaginings, and the personal narratives of activists, politicians, and artists. In analyzing these cases a discursive tension within ACR narratives emerges. American civil religion narratives exist within a contested space that struggles between the dream of America that people articulate as the nation’s values of equality, justice, and liberty and the myth of the American center that requires assimilation to the norms and practices of the white, Protestant moral community. This research moves beyond previous work on American civil religion to take seriously the impact of media in the (re)formation of national imaginaries and to interrogate the affordances of ACR in bringing together the nation.
This dissertation is dedicated to all those who came before & paved the way to this opportunity.

   John Campbell
   Mary Campbell
   Vera Tycoliz
   William Tycoliz
   Deborha Campbell
   Murdoch Campbell
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PREFACE:

AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

IN THE TIME OF COVID-19 & RACIAL VIOLENCE

April 2021

This project shape-shifted multiple times over the last five years as research is wont to do. I knew back in 2016 that my dissertation would explore questions of mediated American civil religion and its expressions outside of governmental institutions. Five years later and the overall topics are the same, but I struggled with what specific media to examine. From the start of my doctoral studies, debates about the U.S., its values, and its people dominated public discourse. Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the national anthem and sparked divides over respect for national symbols. President Trump implemented a Muslim Travel Ban and the nation’s identity as a country of immigrants and refugees came under fire. The resurgence of public white nationalism in the U.S. made the country confront enduring racist systems. By the end of 2017, many across the country were confused by the U.S. portrayed in the media. This was not the national story some grew up hearing.

Then March 2020 came, and public understandings of the nation shifted again. However, this time the upheaval was over an issue many thought could rally the country to unify in spite of differences. The spread of COVID-19 highlighted all of the country’s debates over race, economy, freedoms, and the concept of the truth. Suddenly, the existence of a virus was questioned and public health officials were struggling to get people to follow scientifically proven preventative measures. I was half-way through my research at this time and seriously wondered if I would be able to finish before the pandemic was over. I watched as two versions of
the U.S. clashed over COVID and I contemplated changing my case studies. The national imaginary was firmly divided between individual rights and the communal good. American civil religion appeared to be torn in two as each group used national narratives and principles to defend their position on masking, social distancing, and vaccines.

The already shocked country was dealt another blow in the summer of 2020 when people across the nation protested the murder of George Floyd. After centuries of state sponsored violence against Black people it seemed the country would finally reckon with its on-going history of racism. Protests led to new bills on policing that passed in some state legislatures. Confederate monuments were taken down and locations received name changes. Critical race theory and “doing the work” became common refrains among populations privileged by white supremacy. Yet, as I write this the nation says the names of more men and women of color killed by police. The country has experienced a rise in anti-Asian American and Pacific Islander hate due to the public framing of the pandemic by the government. Anti-Semitism continues to reassert its ugly presence. It seems as if the country is going backwards, not forwards. I wonder if this is how Robert Bellah felt in 1967 as he wrote his first article about American civil religion and the nation’s times of trial.

Many more incidents happened between 2016 and 2021 that would have been appropriate case studies for this dissertation. What I learned from current events these past five years is that the question of the national narrative continues to be debated, dissected, and modified. This dissertation may not directly address the events of 2020 and 2021 but it does grapple with national identity and the various imaginaries used to outline the boundaries of nation, self, and other. Questions about what the U.S. stands for; who the nation is as “Americans;” and what the U.S. should be in the future dominate current public conversations and are at the heart of this
dissertation. In my opinion, a project on American civil religion is particularly necessary at the
current moment as the country tries to figure out what “normal” looks like after 2021 and
whether extreme polarization can be overcome.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

“E Pluribus Unum” (Out of many, one)
— The United States Seal

An impulse to unify, or make one out of many, has informed the national imaginary and narrative since its inception, from Benjamin Franklin’s “Join or Die” print to the idea of the nation as a “melting pot” of cultures. Since the election of Donald J. Trump, entrenched polarization makes national unity appear to be a thing of the past, especially with rising debates over the meaning of core symbols and values of the United States. People debate whether it is respectful to protest during the national anthem. Cities and states wrestle with monuments to the Confederacy and leaders who defended slavery. Masking and unmasking are political statements. Families have been torn apart by conspiracy theories, differences of political opinion, immigration policies, and a global pandemic. It feels as if the only safe topic to discuss is the weather, as long as it does not bring up climate change. The country is divided.

Public commentators note that the last time the nation was as polarized as it is today the U.S. entered a war that took the lives of over 700,000 Americans.¹ This comparison to the Civil War may appear to be hyperbolic, but the violence witnessed over the last few years suggests

there may be a hint of truth to the idea. Militia movements and white nationalists are experiencing a resurgence and making their presence publicly known. In 2017 a “Unite the Right” march occurred in Charlottesville, Virginia. Images of tiki torch carrying protesters flooded the news and social media. It was reported that the marchers chanted, “White Lives Matter,” “You will not replace us,” and “Jews will not replace us,” demonstrating an allegiance with white, Christian nationalism. The next day, violence erupted between the white nationalist marchers and counter-protesters. One woman died and many others were injured after one marcher ran his car into a crowd. This violence was only the beginning. Since 2017, protests across the country have turned violent as people fight to defend their version of the United States.

The violent divisiveness witnessed in the U.S. over the last five years leads to the question of whether it is possible to reconcile the extreme polarization of the country. Is it possible for there to be a unified vision of the nation? The answer provided by some scholars and commentators is a tradition that provides a common narrative for the country—American civil religion (ACR). Sociologist Robert Bellah first introduced American civil religion in 1967 at another time of national division over civil rights and the Vietnam War. He proposed there exists “a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life…expressed in a set of beliefs,

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symbols, and rituals." This civil religion offers an understanding of the nation “in the light of ultimate and universal reality.” In short, Bellah claimed the U.S. was able to maintain a common national identity in spite of its cultural, religious, and racial diversity because of American civil religion.

In 2016 the need for American civil religion to reunify the country was proclaimed in opinion columns and editorials, shifting the conversation about ACR from scholarly communities to public discourse. Publications ranging from Religion Dispatches to The Christian Century discussed the necessity of ACR. Both publications’ articles note the death of civil religion and the need to reinvent the national tradition in an attempt to revive the morality of the U.S. following the election of Donald Trump. More widely read news outlets, including The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal, undertook discussions of American civil religion as it related to political discord in the nation. David Brooks argued, in a March 2017 New York Times article, there is a need to reintroduce the Exodus narrative of American history as a way to understand every resident’s participation in a greater project. John D. Carlson wrote in a 2017 piece for Religion & Politics, “The civil religion Bellah first extolled…is needed now more than ever to unify a divided citizenry at home and to restore American leadership in the

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5 Bellah, "Civil Religion in America."
Carlson even referred to American civil religion as “the moral backbone of our body politic.”

These columns demonstrate the enduring legacy of American civil religion as a national tradition that transcends difference and gives the nation a common purpose. However, I have to ask—where is American civil religion today? Can it still unify the nation? What kind “moral backbone” does it provide a divided United States? This dissertation seeks to answer these questions by examining mediations of American civil religion and the narratives circulated about the nation, its values, and its people.

Traditionally scholars of American civil religion, including Robert Bellah, Philip Gorski, and Richard T. Hughes, argue that it is a tradition that transcends religious and sectarian differences to unify the nation within “a heritage of moral and religious experience” found in U.S. history and its democratic values. Other scholarship notes how American Civil Religion has not always included the evolving diversity of the U.S. but can and eventually will. Both sets of scholarship emphasize the rhetorical expressions of ACR within institutions of power and historical remembering. However, they have not addressed the question of whether American civil religion perpetuates narratives and systems of power that reinforce exclusion and division rather than unify the nation. This literature, thus far, has also overlooked the role of media theory in ACR. The lacuna of mediation in studies on ACR glosses over the reality that media is central to contemporary culture, politics, and the social construction of worldviews.

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10 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
In this dissertation I aim to fill this lacuna by examining mediated discourses of American civil religion that contribute to the (re)presentation of the imagined nation. ACR narratives are integral to understanding the U.S. as they are the stories taught in grade school, repeated in popular culture, and used to construct societal knowledge about national values, people, and behaviors. Media circulate these narratives across time and space and serve as the location where self and society co-constitute the boundaries of who is accepted into or rejected from the nation. This project transitions from the approach of past literature that examined American civil religion as a given social structure to examining how American civil religion operates as a set of narratives circulated through different forms of media. In examining ACR as mediated narratives that inform social understandings of the U.S., its values, and its people, this dissertation attends to the affordances of media and American civil religion within civic discourses. I propose that studying American civil religion within the conversations that individuals, groups, and artists have about the U.S. offers a different perspective about ACR as a unifying tradition. Instead of being morally and value neutral, the universalizing narratives of American civil religion occupy a place of tension. The narratives, as deployed by activists, artists, and individuals, become embedded in a struggle between the one and the many or the center and the margins that occurs in mediated representations of the country. Fundamentally, this project is an exploration of how media studies can account for American civil religion’s struggle to unify a polarized nation and how this tension shapes meaning-making about the nation, self, and other. It is important, then, to provide an academic context for how narrative and media participate in the formation of national identities. The following section provides a brief overview of how scholars understand the nation in relation to mediated narratives.
THE MEDIATED NATION

Benedict Anderson famously defined the nation and nation-ness as “an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”12 He outlined the development of nationalism and the nation from the 1700s onward, placing its emergence in the development of the printing press, capitalism, and movement away from group identities based on religion and dynasties. With an emphasis on the printed word, vernacular language, and conceptions of space and time, Anderson explored how various national consciousnesses emerged. The nation emerges through language and begins to conceive of itself in stories, rhetorically constructed boundaries, and narrated artifacts (such as maps). “The time of the media and the time of the nation are closely intertwined,” contributing to seeing the nation-ness of American civil religion in various mediated formats.13 The U.S., as a nation, develops through mediated narratives of its past, present, and future.

Homi Bhabha conceptualizes the nation as narrative given that both “fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye.”14 He outlines the ambivalence of the nation since the idea of nation exists in a perpetually liminal state, as it is always “coming into being” through narrative. In the liminal state of the nation, Bhabha argues, the boundaries of outside/inside are ambiguously drawn. He explains how the “locality of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself” just as the “other is never outside or beyond us.”15 This is because the imagined borders of the nation are (re)created through the conversations had and the stories told at moments of

15 Bhabha, "Narrating the Nation," 4.
perceived belonging. It is the circulation of narratives through media—news, events, or images—that allows one to read or to see the nation.

What Anderson and Bhabha highlight is the importance of narrative to the transformation of the nation from *imagined* to *real*. From narrative the nation emerges as whole and unified in the minds of people. For this project, *narratives* are the stories produced through social practice that outline the world, self, and other with the rhetorical purpose of persuading humans that *their* story is *reality*. Narrative, therefore, has epistemological implications. What is known about the world and those that inhabit it is defined by narratives. Societal memories are passed down through narratives, what is ultimately called history, and these stories outline understandings of the past and rhetorically construct the present. Media serve as the vehicles for circulating these narratives and provide one location where the nation constitutes itself as an imagined whole.

Imagining the nation through media does not occur in isolation. The consumption of media messages becomes contextualized within the experiences of daily life, school lessons, and other moments of identity formation. The media narratives about the nation become part of meaning networks. Understanding nations as networks of meanings allows for the nation to be “always in the process of emerging” as Bhabha claims. Additionally, the mediated nation as a network of meanings also accounts for the “interplay and negotiations between the individual and the community, new and old sources of authority, and public and private identities.”

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16 In claiming that narratives are rhetorical I am following the work of Journet, Boehm, and Britt on narratives and identity. They write, “To suggest that narratives are rhetorical is to remind us that they are constructed by humans within particular cultural and social contexts in order to create coherent, persuasive, and realistic representations of human experience.” (Journet, et al., *Narrative Acts*, 4)


Media, then, extend beyond the limits of news, TV, or other technologically supported forms of communication. Interpersonal communication can also be understood as media that participate in networked meaning-making. For the purposes of this project, media refer to practices of communication that contribute to the socialized construction of the world. I emphasize the use of *practices of communication* in the preceding definition to highlight that media in this project can refer to civic participation in the nation or the consumption choices of an individual. The acts of civic participation, such as voting or protesting, are forms of communication as “social construction that carry with them a whole world of capacities, constraints and power.”

Media, in this project, refer to publications (online/offline), interpersonal communication, paintings, news, and public actions of civic engagement.

MEDIA AND AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

Robert Bellah introduced the idea of American civil religion in a 1967 article entitled, “Civil Religion in America.” In this article, he examines presidential inaugural speeches with a specific focus on Abraham Lincoln and John F. Kennedy. Bellah analyzes the “god talk” and biblical tropes used in political speech to rally the country together. Additionally, he highlights the significance of different national symbols and documents. However, Bellah’s reference to these events, symbols, and documents does not engage with media theory or the role of media in meaning-making about the nation, self, and other.

Other scholars of American civil religion have also used media as data for their studies without emphasizing the importance of media to society. Christopher Chapp and Rhys Williams also study presidential rhetoric continuing Bellah’s attention to rhetoric. In 1972, Michael

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Thomas and Charles Flippen conducted a quantitative study of Bellah’s civil religion, through a content analysis of newspaper editorials commenting on the July 4th celebrations of 1970. They concluded from their analysis that Bellah’s thesis is suspicious, due to the propensity for secular statements over the religious in editorials. This analysis focuses on content of editorials at the expense of historical and socio-political context that would situate some of the secular language as secularized Protestantism. Similarly, Jermaine McDonald interrogates the inclusionary possibility of ACR through an examination of a particular media event—the construction of the Islamic Center in New York City near the site of the World Trade Center—but does not attend to the role of news or social media in the circulation of national stories about Muslims and the United States. These studies are just select examples of how scholars have glossed over the affordances of media as a vehicle for circulating American civil religion narratives and as a location for where the nation is imagined.

It is at this juncture that this dissertation intervenes in American civil religion literature. I propose that a media analysis of American civil religion leads to different questions about where ACR occurs, what narratives about the U.S. are tied to ACR, and how people engage with civil-religious narratives in their experiences of civic life. This study analyzes media artifacts using an interdisciplinary theory that includes cultural studies, mediation, and affect theory. These three theories provide a framework for examining the co-constitutive meaning-making process that occurs between media and the individuals or groups in society. In Chapter Two, I outline a theory for mediated American civil religion that emphasizes the dialogue between content, creation, consumption, and media landscape as narratives inform beliefs and behaviors in the

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United States. In particular, I engage the literature of Stuart Hall, Raymond Williams, and Nick Couldry to emphasize the role of media in (re)presenting the nation and (re)enforcing structures of power, while I employ Sara Ahmed’s concept of affective economies to demonstrate how American civil religion becomes embodied and embedded in the beliefs, acts, and identity formation of individuals and groups. Overall, a media analysis of American civil religion goes beyond the content of documents, symbols, and events to interrogate how they are (re)circulated and how they (re)present the imagined nation with consideration for socio-political, historical, and technological contexts.

A media analysis of American civil religion is of particular importance in the 21st century as the media landscape has shifted since Bellah’s work in the 1960s. Today media provide a constant stream of information produced by creator-consumers that is decentralized from previous structures of gatekeeping. Additionally, wearable tech, smartphones, and the digital quality of contemporary society mean that most people in the United States are always connected to the (re)production and (re)circulation of narratives about the nation, self, and other. This ubiquitous and instantaneous media landscape can be described by the concept of hypermediation. Hypermediation functions as “a conceptual shorthand and a material space to account for and interrogate the speed, superabundance, intensity, and ubiquity of media and their (in)ability to address the limitations and deficits of our social life.” Giuseppina Pellegrino explains that digital technology has become “embedded in the texture of everyday life.” The presence of this technology everywhere has made it become invisible. Smartphones are

extensions of bodies as they provide directions, connect users to the world, and serve as flashlights. Narratives about the nation, then, are naturalized and circulated during the most minute and banal experiences, blinding people to the ubiquity of mediated ACR narratives flooding every moment of the day.

The hypermediated quality of contemporary society is compounded by the decentralization and erosion of media authority. Trust across the nation is low, whether it is trust in the news media or trust in other Americans. This lack of trust emerges, in part, from the ability of almost anyone creating their own content and having it (re)circulated to vast populations. It is this system of content-consumers that inundates society with a multitude of narratives about the nation, self, and other and provides the foundation for the emergence of conversations about a “post-truth” era.

Any examination of media, the nation, and American civil religion must wrestle with these contemporary issues. The aim of conducting a media analysis of American civil religion is to examine the affordances of media in the 21st century as a vehicle of ACR narratives that claim to unify the diverse nation. Therefore, this dissertation acknowledges that media have played a significant role in ACR analyses since the beginning but challenges the presupposition that modes of communication and the meaning of American civil religion are given structures in society. A study of mediated American civil religion, then, attends to how the various stories that define the imagined nation and how they are (re)presented, (re)formulated, and (re)circulated across media. These media, as defined in the preceding section, are not the institutions of centralized meaning-making of past generations. Instead, mediated American civil religion engages with bottom-up expressions of national imaginaries that are (re)created in public practices of communication such as artwork, political action, and personal identity narratives.
In Bellah’s initial 1967 article he attempted to explain the existence of a special quality to the American national sentiment while refuting the notion that the U.S. was a Christian nation. Instead, Bellah claimed ACR exists as “a religious dimension for the whole fabric of American life…expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals.” This civil religion offers a transcendent understanding of the country and its global purpose.

Although American civil religion engages in reverence for national symbols (the flag or Lincoln Memorial) and national rituals (presidential inaugurations), there exists an invisible component to this national religion, which Bellah described as the pursuit of being “a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as men can make it, and a light to all nations.” It is this notion that builds on historical narratives of the U.S. as a chosen nation or a “city on a hill,” which will be explored in Chapter Three. Although Bellah rejected the idea that American civil religion is specifically Christian, he acknowledged the use of biblical motifs, such as Exodus and the New Israel. He avoided addressing this topic further by writing, “this religion is clearly not itself Christianity” and “it is also genuinely American and genuinely new.”

Bellah claimed American civil religion “exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches” as a national faith that unifies a religiously pluralistic nation. He specifically highlighted that ACR and Christianity have different functions within American society. Traditional religion operates within the personal realm whereas civil religion serves the public and the state. Yet, American civil religion does hold the same characteristics as

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25 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
26 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
27 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
28 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
29 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
30 Bellah, "Civil Religion in America.”
31 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
traditional religions—rituals, beliefs, teleology, etc. This separation between ACR and Christianity becomes ambiguous as the moral agenda of Bellah’s civil religion becomes apparent. The case for civil religion as a moralistic guide for a nation and its citizens emerges out of Rousseau, as religious dogmas should only concern the state “as they have reference to morality and to the duties which he who professes them is bound to do to others.”32 Bellah expanded on this idea when pointing out the moral failings of the U.S. and writing in *The Broken Covenant*:

> The basic moral norms that were seen as deriving from that divine order were liberty, justice, and charity, understood in a context of theological and moral discourse which led to a concept of personal virtue as the essential basis of a good society.33

Thus, American civil religion provides the moral foundation of the United States. It serves a prophetic function, “judging the behavior of the nation against transcendent values.”34 I am by no means arguing that American civil religion is Christianity or that the U.S. is a Christian nation. Instead, I am introducing the idea that American civil religion may be intertwined with a hegemonic discourse about the United States, its values, and its peoples. This hegemonic discourse is called *the myth of the American center*.

The notion of the myth of the center comes from Nick Couldry’s work *Media Rituals*.35 In this monograph, Couldry outlines what he calls the myth of the mediated center, connecting the significance of media to the reproduction of symbolic power and the central norms that such


power has naturalized. He summarizes this myth as “the belief, or assumption, that there is a
centre to the social world, and that, in some sense, the media speaks ‘for’ that centre.”

Couldry’s myth engages with Emile Durkheim’s notion of the sacred center and the social
collective which take formation in Durkheim’s definition of religion. Durkheim also influenced
Bellah’s American civil religion which is explained in Chapter Three. This theme of the center
and the collective is replicated in other studies, especially those attending to questions of order,
chaos, and power.

Couldry defines the myth of the center as the claim “that beneath these real pressures of
centralisation is a core of ‘truth,’ a ‘natural’ centre (different ‘centres’, of course, depending on
where we live) that we should value, as the centre of ‘our’ way of life, ‘our’ values.”

Power, as symbolic power, establishes the center to be valued and the center to be held sacred. Whether it
can be recognized or not, the center still serves as a location of the sacred. This sacred could be
material or ideological and the forces of power within society (re)construct the center/periphery.

Robert Bellah and Philip Gorski reference this sacred center as part of American civil
religion without explicitly connecting it to the myth of the center. Bellah, as illustrated,
understood American civil religion as a unifying tradition that would establish an American
collective relationship with the transcendent apart from traditional religion and through U.S.
documents, celebrations, and ideals. Gorski revives this collective tradition by advocating for a
“vital center…premised on a common vision of the American project that is grounded in
America’s civil religious tradition.”

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37 Mircea Eliade, The Myth of the Eternal Return (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Bruce Lincoln,
39 Philip S. Gorski, American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present (Princeton:
constitutional system on the “vital center.” Embedded within the language of Bellah and Gorski is the notion that the U.S. produces a sacred center that circulates certain American ways of life, values, and identities that also have a universal appeal. There is within American civil religion, then, a sacred universal that emerges from within the history and life of the United States.

What I refer to as the myth of the American center takes the statements of Bellah and Gorski seriously. It understands that American civil religion implies there exists “a core of ‘truth,’ a ‘natural’ centre that we should value, as the centre of ‘our’ way of life, ‘our’ values,” based on a particular narrative of the United States. It is a national narrative that constructs and reconstructs the center and plays out within the tradition of American civil religion. The myth of the American center creates the illusion of a universal sacred collective while actually misrecognizing (to borrow Pierre Bourdieu’s term) the white, Protestant hegemony reproduced and re-naturalized in the United States.

Richard T. Hughes in his monograph on American civil religion uses the term myth to encompass all stories told about the nation. He writes, “our national myths are the means by which we affirm the meaning of the United States.” Here Hughes employs myth to highlight the “meaning and purpose” that stories can convey, which is why he focuses on particular narratives from American history (ex. The myth of the chosen nation). My engagement of myth differs slightly from Hughes’. I agree that “a myth is not a story that is patently untrue,” but in this project I want to emphasize the hegemony of myths. The myth of the American center is only one hegemonic narrative and Hughes examines others in his book. Yet, as this dissertation

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interrogates, the myth of the American center has become so embedded in U.S. society that the cultural influence of white, Protestantism goes unnoticed in American civil religion.

Here I use the term myth to distinguish between white, Protestant hegemony and American civil religion. Narrative (or story) serves as the primary analytical category to examine social and cultural meaning-making in this project. If narrative is how people structure and give meaning to the world, then these stories are repositories of a multitude of contexts and ideologies.45 Put simply, narratives are not neutral but are rhetorical as stated in the previous section. However, some narratives become so embedded and naturalized in society that it is no longer clear where they originated from or how they operate in reality formation. This is where myth emerges. Myths are narratives. Myths, however, have “an imperative, buttonholing character” rooted within systems of power.46 They aim to hide their origins and become naturalized within society. Myths are the hegemonic narratives subtly at work structuring the world as if it has always been that way.47 They are the stories that acquire broader circulation and dominance as the story, while other narratives take-on a secondary or resistant position. Which narratives people accept as truth depends on their context “and for that reason it speaks truth to those who take it seriously.”48 Therefore, while a hegemonic narrative may have the broadest acceptance as the myth of society, other narratives circulate and convince some people of their truth.

The myth of the American center operates as a hegemonic narrative within the United States. It privileges white, Protestant ways of understanding the world at the exclusion of the

47 Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice; Barthes, Mythologies; Couldry, Media Rituals: A Critical Approach.
48 Hughes, Myths America Lives By, 2.
diversity the nation purports to value. This myth of the center is only one operative narrative within American civil religion. As this dissertation elucidates, there is a discursive tension within ACR between the myth of the American center and other ways of moralizing and outlining a common national identity.

With the conclusion of this section three key phrases of this research’s vocabulary have been established. *American civil religion* is “a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity” that understands the U.S. through various narratives that outline a transcendent purpose and values of democracy, equality, and freedom.  

The *myth of the American center* describes the hegemonic narrative in the U.S. about unifying around a sacred universal which is supposedly inclusive to all people. Lastly, *white, Protestant hegemony* serves as the operative power at the heart of the myth of the American center. It is the sacred universal that is actually not inclusionary but requires assimilation to hegemonic norms that reflect white and Protestant conceptions of the world.

METHODOLOGY

This dissertation aims to answer three core questions. These questions examine the affordances of American civil religion to bring together a polarized nation through its mediated narratives. The data collected to answer these questions examine multiple media forms, while the analysis attends to American imaginaries embedded within national narratives and (re)created within media and embodied experience. The guiding questions for this project are:

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49 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”

50 In this project I employ both United States and America to refer to the country. However, I want to note that “America” is a problematic term in that it conflates two continents with the identity of two countries. This is a critique I make in chapter 3 regarding the field of American religious history. In spite of the problems “America” and “American” present, I use these terms because they are the common vernacular used in the United States to refer to the country and its people.
• Where is American civil religion in the mediated meaning-making about the United States?

• What kind of nation does American civil religion communicate when examined as a network of narratives circulated through media?

• Can American civil religion provide a common narrative to bring a diverse nation together or is it too deeply intertwined with white, Protestant hegemony?

These questions focus on American civil religion’s claimed purpose to unify a diverse and pluralistic nation of small groups and individuals. However, the questions shift the focus of examining American civil religion from state institutions, such as the presidency or national monuments, to interrogating how the narratives of American civil religion are (re)produced through media and inform the imagined nation. The questions also attend to issues of inclusion and exclusion within the United States. Looking at how American civil religion narratives structure understandings about the nation as a unified whole requires attention to meaning-making about “America,” “American,” and “other.” There is a particular focus in these questions about representations of the nation, self, and other, the hegemonic culture of the myth of the American center, and the possibility of incorporating the margins into American civil religion.

This project examines three case studies to interrogate these questions:

• The progressive interfaith policy activism of Faithful Citizens based in Denver, Colorado. In particular, I study the rallies at the state capitol in 2019-2020 to advocate for a “moral economy” and interviews with people affiliated with the organization.

• Norman Rockwell’s Four Freedoms and Civil Rights paintings and their reimaginings as done by contemporary artists.
• The narratives of progressive individuals on how they understand the U.S., its values, and its people.

These case studies appear disparate at first glance; yet, they each provide a different perspective on mediated American civil religion and emerge from my scholarly biography. The first impetus for selecting these case studies emerges from the previous research I did on the Christian Right. In the past, I focused on the national imaginaries of the Christian Right and how they were interpreted in the political realm. American civil religion narratives and the myth of the American center are easily identified within the Christian Right as sections of this population advocate for Christian nationalism, appeal to biblical tropes, and lobby to legislate their morality. However, I became interested in investigating if American civil religion narratives were as influential in progressive imaginaries of the United States. This research interest led me to the policy advocacy of interfaith organizations, which data gathered from one such group serves as the first case study. Additionally, the increase in public protests such as the Women’s March and Black Lives Matter made me interested in the artwork carried on posters and circulated online in support of these events. This interest in artwork led me to discover the iconicity of Norman Rockwell’s paintings and their on-going presence in the visualization of the nation. In brief, the events from 2015-2020 informed the selection of my case studies as I examined American civil religion narratives in progressive faith-based advocacy and visual imaginaries of the United States.

My case selection was also impacted by the emergence of COVID-19 at the height of my research in 2020. The interruption that the pandemic caused limited my ability to access archival material and attend public, in-person events. Therefore, the final case study that examines the personal narratives and media consumption of activists and artists emerged at this time. In many
ways this case study is a natural extension of the others as it emphasizes the co-constitutive
meaning-making process between media and individuals or groups.

Overall, these case studies serve to highlight the bottom-up embodiment and expressions
of American civil religion narratives among progressives in the United States. This emphasis on
progressive manifestations of American civil religion supplements the extensive literature about
Christian Nationalism, the recent resurgence in attention to the Religious Left, and demonstrates
the versatility of ACR narratives. Each case addresses how the U.S. is imagined through media,
the influence of American civil religion in structuring an imagined nation, and tensions between
inclusion and exclusion. Lastly, the diversity of case studies offers a holistic understanding of
ACR as operating within daily circulations of meaning. This approach to American civil religion
moves away from the focus of previous scholarship that primarily attended to ACR in the
political sphere, presidential rhetoric, and grand moments of history.

This dissertation takes a qualitative approach for its methodology, allowing for
interrogation of meaning-making processes. Ethnography and archival work served as the
methods for gathering data, while textual/discourse analysis is the method by which data was
evaluated. I follow the approaches taken by Carole McGranahan, James Clifford and George
Marcus, David Morgan, and Gillian Rose, who recognize the importance of cultural context and
storytelling to meaning-making and also place lived experience and reflexivity at the core of
their methods. Although the method of collection differs for each case, the common mode of
analysis across the cases develops a unified study. Ethnography, as a practice of experience,
allows me to observe how people perform imaginaries. Thus, an analysis of data from participant
observation and interviews requires an approach that considers the dialogue between researcher
and informant, cultural context, and the biases of those involved. Archival work also presents a
dialogical relationship between researcher and material across time, space, and norms. Simply, my methods of collection require me to attend to constructions of power that occur through discursive practices, or the particular use of media to produce meaning and distributions of power that can be addressed using textual/discourse analysis.\(^{51}\)

The data for the first case study on Faithful Citizens was gathered through participant observation, interviews, and digital collection of organization publications. I attended various events in Denver that were sponsored by Faithful Citizens. I also interviewed over 20 people who either attended events, spoke at events, or were employees or board members of the organization. One problem in data collection did arise over the course of my research—COVID-19. I was able to shift my interviews to video calls, which was an option the participants could have selected from the beginning. My in-person participant observation was also interrupted and I had to attend events virtually either through Zoom webinars or via recorded videos posted to social media. Most of my participant observation was completed prior to the Colorado pandemic shut down.

Data for the Rockwell case was collected at the Norman Rockwell Museum Archives in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. I made multiple visits to the archive to understand Rockwell’s production process, the historical and social context of his images, and the public’s reception to the paintings. This information was supplemented by secondary sources about Rockwell and his works. I then conducted virtual interviews on Zoom with artists who reimagined Rockwell’s paintings. The final case study uses the combined data from all of my interviews. In total, I interviewed twenty-five people affiliated with Faithful Citizens and seven artists. A list of questions used for this case study is in Appendix A.

Textual and discourse analysis are how I examined my data. Rose describes discourse analysis as “centrally concerned with language” and the construction of knowledge that “shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it.”52 Similarly, textual analysis “is an attempt to gather information about sense-making practices.”53 A textual/discourse method allowed for the examination of meaning making, embodied knowledge, and power in media.

Additionally, textual/discourse analysis allowed me to attend to affective economies. Affect theory assists in corporealizing American civil religion. Each collection of data is a cultural artifact embedded in Williams’ structures of feeling, as the “affective elements of consciousness and relationships.”54 My data, as relational objects, can be examined for intensity or “the feeling of bodily change.”55 To gaze, to read, to observe, and to converse are all visceral and emotive processes. I, as the researcher, experience affect in the course of research. I encounter images, texts, and individuals that exchange affect. Affect is relational and dialogical, occurring simultaneously with meaning-making. Therefore, affect assists in producing imagined experiences. These experiences are real in the sense that they do occur—the encounters between affective objects—but they are imagined in that the thoughts and feelings about the other in the encounter are the product of power relations. Affect can produce a “felt experience of closeness, empathy, or perhaps even responsibility to the Other,” a public intimacy encountered through mediations of the other.56 Thus, textual/discourse analysis, as a practice of attending to detail,

circulation, productions of knowledge, and power, has space to attend to the role of affect in the discursive practices of American civil religion.

The following chapters employ textual/discourse analysis to examine mediated American civil religion and its impact on understanding the nation, self, and other. I pay particular attention to how discursive tension manifests within each case study as people navigate the boundaries of *us* and *them*. The next section of this introduction attends to the question of researcher positionality, which is an important aspect of ethnographic methodologies.

**RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY**

If the purpose of ethnographic methods is to produce knowledge through dialogical relations with others, then ethnography and textual/discourse analysis requires a researcher to interrogate their own presence. Angela McRobbie highlights the fact that the selection of a topic for study and the questions a researcher wants to ask are connected to their biographies and historical moment. The approach to navigating the nuances and dynamics of historical and social power relations requires self-disclosure with participants and self-reflexivity about “our own auto-biographies and our experience” as a way to “write ourselves into our analysis.” Self-reflexive ethnography recognizes the malleability of words, meanings, and context as it moves across mediated and embodied experiences of the researcher and the informants. Therefore, I quickly want to disclose my positionality in relation to the United States.

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I was born and raised within the U.S. and am a citizen. I have been embedded within American civil-religious discourses since childhood as I recited the pledge of allegiance, learned U.S. history, and became a voting member of the country. My place within American society is privileged. I can easily move unseen and accepted within American civil society as a white, well-educated, Catholic/Protestant raised, non-religious woman. My physical appearance and social upbringing place me within the inner bounds of an imagined America. This positionality required continual reflexivity as I analyzed texts and images as well as spoke with a diversity of people. In each case study I made space for the texts, images, and individuals to “talk back” so I can hear the stories of other experiences that (re)produce meaning and identity across time and space.

One way this self-reflexivity appears throughout the dissertation is in interludes. These interludes are moments to re-position myself as researcher in relation to my subject matter and data. At various points in this dissertation, I pause to reflect on the media, experiences, and affective encounters that shape my understandings of the United States, myself as a citizen, and the boundaries of national belonging. I hope these breaks in the analysis deepen insight into my findings and provide transparency about my relation to my work.

DISSERTATION STRUCTURE

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters in addition to four interludes. This first chapter frames the research and serves as an introduction to the topics of American civil religion, the mediated nation, and the myth of the American center. Chapter Two outlines literature in media studies, affect theory, and public sphere theory to conceptualize an interdisciplinary

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60 Although being a woman does exclude me from the inner most bounds of idealized “American-ness,” but in contrast to women of color and other minority populations I can easily “fit in” to a white, Protestant hegemony.
61 Pink, Doing Sensory Ethnography, 76.
I develop a theoretical model to examine mediated American civil religion. The theories surveyed focus on the role of media and affect in meaning-making and the role of civic participation in the public embodiment of the national imaginary. Chapter Three examines the relationship between American religious history and American civil religion as it relates to the Protestant imaginary that dominates national narratives. This chapter establishes the historical and social context for examining mediated American civil religion in the 21st century and outlines the origins of the myth of the American center. Chapters Four, Five, and Six are dedicated to the three case studies. The cases proceed as follows: I first examine expressions of organized civic activity in the work of Faithful Citizens. Then I attend to visual narratives of the nation as depicted in Rockwell’s work and current reimaginings. Lastly, I explore how individuals narrate the U.S. and affectively understand their place in the nation. These cases address different mediated expressions of American civil religion while focusing on common ACR narratives that frame each encounter with the national imaginary. In each case, there is evidence of a discursive tension within American civil religion that wrestles with the enduring myth of the American center. The final chapter serves as a conclusion that outlines the overarching findings about mediated American civil religion, bringing together the three case studies and suggesting future areas of examination.
CHAPTER 2

MEDIATED AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION:
RELEVANT LITERATURE AND THEORY

“It is a truism that there is much at stake in the words people use and how they happen to use them, just as there is much at stake in the stories they tell and how those stories get told.”
— Bruce Lincoln

An examination of American civil religion as a set of narratives that inform the national imaginary requires particular attention to the way these stories are told and circulated. Media, in all its forms, dominates contemporary life and operates as the primary vehicle for communicating and circulating information. It is necessary, then, to contextualize this project within the literature of cultural studies and media studies and their work on processes of meaning-making. In particular, a theory of mediated American civil religion needs to attend to the “social and historical ground” that frames the (re)telling of its narratives. Stories about the nation, its values, and its people are connected to broader historical and social discourses that establish hierarchies of meaning and power. These hierarchies of meaning and power engage emotional responses through media circulations that produce affective meaning-making as personal and national narratives are reconciled to make a cohesive whole. Therefore, any interrogation of mediated meaning-making needs to account for the symbolic and the social power in the way these narratives are enacted, lived, and affectively experienced. This chapter outlines a theory of mediated American civil religion that attends to structures of power, the

(re)presentations of narratives that inform the national imaginary, and the affective encounters that occur in media.

In theorizing mediated American civil religion, I have centered my investigation on public expressions of the nation, self, and other. This attention to the public stems from the importance of American civil religion and the myth of the American center as common narratives. Literature on nation-making emphasizes that the imagined community must be constructed in a collective and through public discourses. An individual may have a personal interpretation of the common narratives, but they do not imagine the nation in isolation. Additionally, civic activity occurs within the public sphere as individuals and groups demonstrate, vote, and communicate political stances. Theory about the public sphere and civic participation are, therefore, also crucial to mediated American civil religion.

This chapter pursues an interdisciplinary theory of mediated American civil religion that attends to public processes of meaning-making in three parts. In the first section, I situate the study of American civil religion within the fields of cultural studies, media studies, and their conceptions of power, while focusing on the processes of meaning-making that occur through media. This section additionally explores the place of affect theory in processes of meaning-making and the role of affective economies in (re)forming boundaries of national belonging as outlined by structures of power. The second section connects American civil religion to theories of the public sphere as it relates to citizenship and civic participation. This section builds on the narrative construction of the nation by extending the power of stories to public discourses and physical manifestations of belonging and civic action. Affect also plays a role in these civic publics. Lastly, I conclude the chapter with a summary of how these resources can ground a hybridized approach to theorize American civil religion as a set of narratives that make meaning.
through media and produce affective responses. I wish to argue that such an interdisciplinary theoretical model can expand current understandings of American civil religion and illuminate the concept’s influence on U.S. society beyond rhetorical traditions and national institutions discussed in the introduction. Such an interdisciplinary theory would make it possible to reconsider American civil religion as a scholarly concept and reevaluate its contribution to a unified national identity.

MEDIATED MEANING, POWER, AND AFFECT

An examination of national narratives must attend to questions of media, power, and the physical-emotional experience that (re)enforces particular worldviews of nation, self, and other. Cultural studies and media studies serve as a starting point to develop a theoretical model to study mediated American civil religion given its attention to dynamic structures of power within the processes of meaning-making. Recent scholarship in media studies has begun to expand on cultural studies examinations of meaning-making through affect theory. My research uses cultural studies, mediation, and affect theory as guides to understand American civil religion as a set of mediated narratives that (re)construct imaginaries of nation, self, and other.

Mediated Meanings and Power

Cultural studies and media studies provide a theoretical framework for the nation as narrative, as outlined by Bhabha in the introduction, by attending to the various ways meanings or worldviews are (re)constructed and circulated through mediated and lived experiences. The

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process of imagining the nation through cultural formations allows for the consideration of power structures that inform the nation as narrative and the various hegemonic discourses that serve as common understandings of the United States and its citizens. Through the theoretical frame of mediated culture and structures of power, a different perspective for analyzing American civil religion emerges. It is no longer an institutional given rooted in grand rites and the rhetoric of leaders, but a set of mediated narratives (re)circulated and (re)constructed through the activities and cultural artifacts of daily life that constitute “a whole way of life.”65 In this section I outline how the concepts of representation, mediation, and hegemonic discourses form one pillar of a new way to theorize American civil religion and understand its relation to the myth of the American center.

The culture of a nation is not “merely-reflective,” but is a co-constructor of the national consciousness.66 In his analysis of cultural studies trends, Stuart Hall writes, the field “conceptualizes culture as interwoven with all social practices…as a common form of human activity.”67 This approach emphasizes the totality of different aspects of society, which provide a framework for understanding how economics, politics, literature, etc. are interwoven to form the nation and its culture. The underlying principle of this aggregated understanding of culture, according to Raymond Williams, is “the proposition that social being determines consciousness.”68 In other words, human activity, including modes of production, and social consciousness, ideas, politics, and institutions, are mutually constitutive—one does not

68 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 75.
exclusively determine the other.\textsuperscript{69} Interactions and relations between all parts of society construct the culture from which various worldviews of the nation develop.

Williams’ famous proclamation of culture as “a whole way of life” situates experience in terms of meanings. Social meanings situate experience. Through common meanings, or narratives, individuals become a community and understand their way of life in terms of these stories, which then (re)produce new or old meanings.\textsuperscript{70} Therefore, for the purposes of this project, I examine culture as:

both the meanings and values which arise amongst distinctive social groups and classes, on the basis of their given historical conditions and relationships, through which they ‘handle’ and respond to the conditions of existence; and as the lived traditions through which those ‘understandings’ are expressed and in which they are embodied.\textsuperscript{71}

This constitutive definition of culture allows for the understanding of nation as narrative and the ability to examine various forms of media for the national stories that outline the bounds of nation, self, and other.

Hall centers representation in the meaning-making process as crucial to the above understanding of culture. He notes that representation serves as the primary creator and circulator of meaning, which informs how one understands the world around them.\textsuperscript{72} Hall views representation as constitutive, arguing that only through representation as a process of meaning-making do “the frameworks of intelligibility” emerge that structure worldviews and form “the

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\textsuperscript{69} Williams, \textit{Marxism and Literature}, 81.
\textsuperscript{70} Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” 52.
\textsuperscript{71} Hall, "Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms," 39.
\end{flushleft}
shared conceptual maps which groups or members of a culture or society share together.” Thus, it is through representation of the U.S., its citizens, its values, etc. that the idea of the American nation takes form. The representation of the U.S. is constitutive of America.

Shared maps of meaning cultivated through representation allow the nation as an entity to exist. American civil religion serves as the shared map that guides U.S. residents to comprehend the nation through narratives about values, history, people, and purpose. The representations of the U.S. (re)constitute the American civil religion framework of meaning. However, the shared maps of meaning that narrate a nation are not fixed. Communication, and therefore meaning-making through representation, is complicated. Hall explains how representations are “likely to be very different as you move from one person to another, one group to another, or one part of society to another, one historical moment and another.” This movement or circulation of representations will be interpreted differently depending on the context. To continue with the map metaphor, the road of understanding one takes within the map of American civil religion will depend on social, political, economic, and other contextual forces. Therefore, understandings of American values such as free speech and a voting democracy represent common meanings within American civil religion, but the interpretation of these values and their meaning will shift depending on one’s socio-political positioning. Non-white people who have oppressive experiences with free speech and voting rights in the U.S. will read representations of such values different than those whose speech and vote have not been challenged. The processes

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73 Hall and Jhally, Stuart Hall: Representation & the Media.
74 Hall and Jhally, Stuart Hall: Representation & the Media.
75 Hall and Jhally, Stuart Hall: Representation & the Media.
of meaning-making through representation that form the nation as narrative exist within a
network of relations.

In naming American civil religion as a shared map of meaning that includes different
roads of interpretation, I am situating ACR as the dominant discourse in the United States. Hall
defines discourse as “the frameworks of understanding and interpretation to make meaningful
sense” of the world. 77 Discourses structure how we understand the meanings being made through
representation. They are “a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is
understood and how things are done in it.” 78 American civil religion, then, is a discourse about
the United States that forms understandings and perceptions of the nation. The speech acts that
(re)produce representations of the U.S. in the processes of meaning-making occur within the
discourses of American civil religion. Here I am using speech acts to refer to various forms of
media including traditional written and verbal communication as well as physical action and
imagery. These speech acts are the practices of representation that make meaning and are the
locations where disputes over meaning occur.

Hall situates the question of power within the circulations of meaning. 79 For this reason,
“the issue of power can never be bracketed out from the question of representation.” 80 Power,
then, becomes articulated through speech acts (media). Hegemony, as the invisible, controlling
influence of dominant narratives, is co-constituted alongside meaning in these media
circulations. The dominant representations or narratives that serve as hegemonic discourses are
often those viewed as common sense. Power makes meaning appear to be fixed. 81 For example,

77 Hall and Jhally, Stuart Hall: Representation & the Media.
78 Rose, Visual Methodologies, 187.
79 Hall and Jhally, Stuart Hall: Representation & the Media.
80 Hall and Jhally, Stuart Hall: Representation & the Media.
American religious history often begins with Puritan settlers in New England, as discussed in the next chapter, marking the genesis of the nation at this point and ignoring the faith traditions of Indigenous populations that pre-date European settlement. What is absent from a representation is just as important as what is (re)presented in revealing who, what, and where power is situated. An examination of media can highlight the hegemonic discourses that moderate what the nation holds as true. Michel Foucault referred to these hegemonic discourses as “regimes of truth” that outline what a society “accepts and makes function as true.” Therefore, what a society knows about the world around them is communicated and formed through power as manifested in media representations.

Media serve as the location through which the nation as narrative circulates, (re)enforces, and resists hegemonic discourses. In fact, Hall positions media production as a process of “distinctive moments” that constitute the whole of a hegemonic narrative. Part of this process is the “frameworks of knowledge” that are constituted by the struggle over ideologies. It is through the frameworks of knowledge that meanings are encoded in media and then decoded in the co-constitutive viewing relationship of media and society. Hegemonic encodings can be decoded in resistance terms, while other times the hegemonic encodings are decoded “inside the dominant code.” Media, therefore, are the primary vehicle for the reproduction of hegemonic narratives of the nation across time and space while also operating as a location through which struggle may occur. It is through media that I analyze manifestations of American civil religion as a site of tension between the hegemonic myth of the American center and other national narratives.

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82 Hall and Jhally, Stuart Hall: Representation & the Media.
The theory of mediation connects Hall’s approach to meaning-making with the importance of media in the formation of group worldviews and a national consciousness. Mediation investigates how media (re)produce meaning. Roger Silverstone understands mediation as a process, one “in which institutionalized media of communication…are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life.”\textsuperscript{86} In this understanding, media are locations where individuals and collectives construct, circulate, and translate meaning. However, I depart from Silverstone’s focus on “institutionalized media” to incorporate broader forms of communication. Media, in this project, incorporates institutional, interpersonal, and banal communication. Building off of the previous discussion of speech acts, I include personal correspondence, political rallies, interviews, and paintings as media alongside traditional understandings such as institutionally published and circulated information. My reasoning for including rallies, interpersonal communication, and paintings as media is that they are locations of mediated discourse that provide a glimpse into mundane understandings of the nation, self, and other. These locations of meaning-making outside of institutional media better illustrate Lawrence Grossberg’s claim that power “operates where people live their daily lives, and in the space where” institutions and the mundane overlap.\textsuperscript{87} They offer insight into the pervasiveness of hegemonic discourses and how individuals or small groups wrestle with the narratives of the nation. In the next section, I integrate affect theory into the idea of mediated American civil religion.

\textsuperscript{86} Nick Couldry, “Mediatization or Mediation? Alternative Understandings of the Emergent Space of Digital Storytelling,”\textit{ New Media & Society }10, no. 3 (June 2008): 380.
Affect Theory: Feeling the Nation

Affect theory extends the reach of cultural studies and mediation by attending to the embodied and emotional aspects of life and meaning-making. Affect theory examines the visceral and gut reactions to the world and the representations that outline the parameters of thinking and behavior in any society. This section outlines the role affect theory can have in interrogating media representations of the U.S., the embodiment of power, and the connection between thought and action as it relates to American civil religion.

Raymond Williams’ “structures of feeling” bridges the fields of cultural studies and affect theory. Structures of feeling elaborate how social consciousness emerges through lived experience. Feeling is the “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal or systemic beliefs” over variable locations, times, and conditions. Williams is concerned with the “affective elements of consciousness and relationships,” which highlights his preference for feeling over experience given that consciousness must be in the present and the word experience connotes the past. Contemporary affect theory similarly attends to the present, split second moment of response. This concern with tense reinforces the idea of meaning-making as always in process. Structures of feeling are concerned, then, with emerging culture and the struggle over meaning. They also constitute social boundaries, assigning those with particular meanings and values to a common structure of feeling. Here Williams explains structure as “specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension.”

88 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 132.
89 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 132.
90 Williams, Marxism and Literature, 132.
structures of feeling that outline the way of thinking and behaving in a society are parallel to the processes of hegemonic discourses.

Affect theory also addresses the tension of emerging culture by locating the body and emotions within relations of power, imagination, and resistance. Various scholars hold different grounds regarding affect, from equating affect with emotion to defining affect as pre-cognitive and purely visceral. What they all agree upon, however, is the social nature of affect just like Williams’ “structures of feeling.” Affective responses are not produced in isolation. An individual, the body, must engage in a relation or encounter with another body or object. Cultural artifacts, such as media, offer a prime location through which to study the social practice and relations of affect.

The study of affect emerged from within psychology, neuroscience, and other social sciences. Some scholars, such as Brian Massumi, Laruen Berlant, Zizi Papacharissi, and Sara Ahmed have applied affect theory to cultural and media fields. However, a debate over the connection between affect and emotion separates scholars who understand affect as primarily pre-cognitive and separate from emotion from those who focus on affect as encompassing the visceral/pre-cognitive and the named emotional experience. Massumi situates affect as intensity and specifically distinguishes it from emotion. Emotion is the subjective account of the “quality of an experience.” It is “ownable” by an individual or a group. Affect, on the other hand, is almost ineffable. It is experienced in the immanent frames of social encounters, but also transcends them as it reaches backwards and forwards across time and sociality. Berlant positions affect in terms of attachments. She sees, for instance, attachments to a conception of

the “good life” as producing affective experiences of optimism and anxiety.\textsuperscript{94} Another articulation of the affect of attachments is Berlant’s examination of the continual return of the dismayed to the political. The civic body recognizes “that the normative political sphere appears as a shrunken, broken, or distant place of activity among elites,” yet, with “cruel optimism,” they return to recommit themselves to the political endeavor.\textsuperscript{95}

What the approaches of Massumi and Berlant have in common is a recognition that affect operates not just on an individual level, but socially across time and space. Thinking of affect in terms of intensity and attachment cultivates a framework for analyzing national affect, which I claim aligns with the visceral and emotive content of patriotism and nationalism. The on-going debates over Confederate statues and the administrative response of former President Trump against critical race theory reveal affective mediations regarding narratives around the U.S., its history, and its values. Papacharissi’s work on affective publics demonstrates this macro examination of affect. Her study of hashtag publics surrounding the 2011 Egyptian Revolution and the Occupy Movement demonstrates media’s role in (re)forming broad affective expression.\textsuperscript{96} Employing Williams’ “structures of feeling,” Papacharissi aims to understand the mood of a particular historical moment as mediated through Twitter. She analyzes media to comprehend overarching affective expressions similar to how this project studies media to examine moments of affective response connected to the national discourses of American civil religion.

Sara Ahmed’s approach to affect examines the micro-experiences within the larger trends of social and political experience. She often cites an anecdote from Audre Lorde about her

\textsuperscript{95} Berlant, \textit{Cruel Optimism}, 227.
\textsuperscript{96} Papacharissi, \textit{Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics}. 
experience of witnessing the affective disgust of a white woman as she encounters Lorde’s black body as a way to explain ties between race, affect, and encounter. 97 This story demonstrates how Ahmed focuses on the personal or small group affective experience while positioning her analyses within cultural discourses—like American civil religion. As a result of this analytical focus, Ahmed’s approach to the place of emotion within affect differs from other scholars.

Papacharissi, Massumi, and Berlant understand affect as prior to emotion. Papacharissi notes affect “contains a particular energy, mood, or movement that may lead to particular feeling, and possibly the subsequent expression of emotion,” but “it both precedes and sustains or possibly annuls feeling and emotion.” 98 Ahmed, however, concretizes theoretical understandings of affect by placing them within the language of the everyday. “Emotions, in other words, involve bodily processes of affecting and being affected,” which make the act of naming an emotion experienced as part of the affective process. 99 Individuals do not refer to their affective experiences; they phrase such moments in terms of physical reaction and cognitive emotions.

Both of the outlined approaches to affect are important to understanding American civil religion and the myth of the American center, but Ahmed’s theory of affect informs my examination. Her attention to interpersonal encounters as moments of affect serves my case studies given they engage personal and socialized media—rallies, interviews, paintings, and conversations about current events—as locations of meaning-making about the United States and the impact of discourses on thinking and behavior. The remainder of this section outlines

Ahmed’s approach to affect with particular attention to her work on encounters and affective economies.

Ahmed embraces the concept of emotion in her examination of affect. She describes emotion as “the feeling of bodily change” and places it within the construction of social hierarchy. Emotions (re)produce social hierarchies through encounters with the (imagined) other. The (social) body of one takes on a valuation higher than that of the other. Here Ahmed introduces her concept of the economies of affect, which place emotion as outside of the individual and within a cultural construction of self, other, and value. This examination of affect situates personal encounters within a broader discursive frame of the nation.

Affect is external and received, reinforcing cultural studies’ understanding of meaning-making as relational—how two people, an object, an institution, or an ideology encounter each other to produce affect, rather than emotion being unidirectional from subject to object. Affect becomes embedded in the meaning-making process discussed previously and it is through relations as encounters that power and resistance can be understood. Ahmed theorizes encounter as contact between bodies—the slide, the graze, the caress—that incorporates not just a meeting, but a surprise and a conflict. These encounters occur when the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are illuminated, such as a visceral recoil of a white person enacted through crossing the street to avoid a person of color. Avoiding an encounter or creating a distanced encounter reproduces social hierarchies that are formulated through hegemonic discourses. This encounter/avoidance frame can be applied to Hall’s idea of absence/presence outlined in the previous section or the notions of visibility/invisibility that are discussed in the following

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102 Ahmed, Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality.}
section. This affective (re)production of hegemony reinforces cultural studies’ engagement with power as a location of struggle over a dominant narrative.

Encounters, however, are not just the contact of two physical bodies. They can be virtual or imagined encounters. Reading and engaging with a social media post, viewing a video or an image, and hearing another persons’ narrative place the body in an encounter through imagined experiences of relations. Imagined experiences are real in the sense that the thoughts and feelings about the other in the encounter are the product of power relations based upon hegemonic discourses. The virtual and imagined encounters occur within broader social framings. An individual does not see, hear, or speak in isolation.

These encounters, real and imagined, occur within and form economies of affect. These affective economies situate encounters within larger discourses about the nation, self, and other. The encounter of two individuals is mediated through historical economies of affect that have stuck to objects and people. For instance, the affective experience of pride and obligation regarding the vote in the U.S. is embedded within an affective economy that represents histories of disenfranchisement and rhetoric about democracy. However, these affective economies go beyond situating encounters within the power of enduring narratives. Ahmed introduces the concept of affective economies to understand how “emotions work to align some subjects with some other and against other others.”

In other words, affective economies reveal the boundaries of social groupings and outline the feelings and behaviors that demarcate that one belongs inside versus outside. Affective economies bind social groupings together through shared emotions, such as pride or hate. It is these shared feelings that bind which are situated within broader discourses.

Affect sticks to certain objects and bodies and transfers emotions of hate, love, desire, and disgust through encounters.\textsuperscript{105} This “slide” of affect across time and space circulates through society and establishes an affective economy.\textsuperscript{106} Through this process of circulation, affect is embedded within processes of meaning-making. Just as discourses about the nation, self, and other are (re)presented through media circulation, the affect that sticks to objects of discourse is experienced over and over again. Circulation (re)produces discursive power and this power, in part, is due to the emotional impact of affect. Ahmed notes that affect is cumulative, “the more they circulate, the more affective they become, and the more they appear to “contain” affect.”\textsuperscript{107}

Norman Rockwell’s \textit{Four Freedom} paintings, for example, accrue affect and power as representative of the U.S. and American civil religion through their circulation. Since the 1940s these paintings have (re)presented a particular discourse about the nation and have (re)produced the affective experience of wartime patriotism. Economies of affect, then, are crucial to understanding the circulation of hegemony and the enduring power of its narratives.

Public encounters that circulate affect are the primary focus of this project. The following section outlines public sphere theory as it connects to citizenship to better understand the role of affect in mediated meaning-making about the United States. Civic participation serves as a public location where the thoughts and behaviors (re)presented through mediation and affect theory can be observed. Therefore, it is important to bring public sphere theory and citizenship into conversation with affect theory and mediation.


\textsuperscript{106} Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 120.

\textsuperscript{107} Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 120.
PUBLIC CITIZENS AND THE AFFECTIVE NATION: OUTLINING THE IMAGINED BOUNDS OF BELONGING AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Notions of the public and citizenship are a normalized pairing in the vernacular. To perform one’s citizenship is to engage in a public community of fellow citizens. The public sphere, as the space in which public opinion is formed, is theoretically accessible to all citizens for the preservation of democracy.\(^{108}\) American civil religion reinforces the idea of an accessible public sphere by claiming to be a universal belief system that unifies the diverse population of the United States. However, such broad understandings of the public sphere, citizenship, and American civil religion overlook the numerous inequalities and stratifications existing in society as (re)presented through mediation and affect theory. It is important, therefore, to move beyond the broad understandings of the public sphere as a “social space generated in communicative action” and of citizenship as a legally granted status of right and protection in order to accommodate the lived reality of social interaction within American civil religion.\(^{109}\) This section outlines the relationship between publics, citizenship, and American civil religion as they relate to affect theory in terms of recognition and the boundaries of belonging.

Initial scholarship idealized the public sphere by constructing it as an open and accessible space for discussion on matters of politics, economics, and society. This conception of the public, introduced by Jürgen Habermas, prioritized the coming together of individuals with the purpose of being critical of state authority.\(^ {110}\) Yet this construction of the public sphere received significant criticism for its utopic notions of rational discourse, exclusion of women and diverse

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\(^ {110}\) Habermas, “The Public Sphere.”
socio-economic classes, and strict delineations between private and public.\textsuperscript{111} Other scholars, such as Nancy Fraser, acknowledge these shortcomings, but aim to reinvigorate Habermas’ work with modification. Fraser sees value in the Habermasian notion of the public sphere as “it designates a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk.”\textsuperscript{112}

This political participation connects to common understandings of enacted citizenship. To vote, to state an opinion, even to protest, and other publicly done civic activities demonstrate one’s status as a citizen.\textsuperscript{113} To be a citizen is to reach the epitome of belonging, no longer are you excluded from the nation-state but can now can enjoy the benefits and protections of the social contract.\textsuperscript{114} However, U.S. history quickly reveals that even legal citizens are not always recognized as such nor are their citizen rights always protected. Linda Bosniak refers to those who exist in a liminal state of citizenship as “alien.” She notes that aliens can be “outsiders to and subjects of citizenship simultaneously,” making excluded, unrecognized citizens “outsider[s] inside.”\textsuperscript{115} The status of African-Americans, religious minorities such as Muslims, and the social status of the impoverished exemplify the outsider inside potentiality. Mediated meaning-making and affective experience (re)enforce the boundaries of the outsider inside.

The marginalization and exclusion of some citizens in recognized civic activities complicates the notion of a public sphere as a theater of universal, open political participation. Michael Warner proposes a pluralization of the public sphere to distinguish between the public, a

\textsuperscript{111} Garnham, “Habermas and the Public Sphere.”

\textsuperscript{112} Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” \textit{Social Text}, no. 25/26 (1990): 37.


“social totality,” and the idea that a multitude of *publics* take shape due to factors of communal belonging (ex. geographical location, fandom, identity categories, political affiliation, etc.).

This project follows Warner’s thinking. Movements and events such as #BlackLivesMatter, the Women’s March, and the Poor People’s Campaign demonstrate the existence of a plurality of publics. Yet, simultaneously, there exists *the* public which emerges through mediated hegemonic narratives. This plurality of publics can be complicated even further by introducing the idea of counterpublics—a public that speaks back to *the* public of social totality.

Counterpublics form as a result of real or perceived inequalities, which returns us to the outsider inside exclusion of some citizens in civic activities. The “counter” emerges from the focus of these publics’ conversations on imagining different ways of structuring society and the related dominant narratives. Counterpublics seek to “overcome exclusions in wider publics.” Therefore, to be a counterpublic the public discourse must be situated against that of a different public. In the case of this project, the activist counterpublic speaks against the perceived social totality of *the* public to reveal inequalities, marginalization, and inhumane treatment of some legal citizens within the United States.

*The* public of the U.S in this project is understood as the moral community of American civil religion. I outline the position of American civil religion within broader conversations about American religious history, national narratives, and national identity in the following chapter. This civil-religious public is not automatically all-inclusive, in spite of current theorizations about American civil religion. Scholars of ethnic studies, American history, and rhetoric address

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the on-going racialization of belonging in the United States beginning, with the “Naturalization Act of 1790,” which permitted “free white persons” to become citizens, through to today’s profiling and denying of citizenship to Latinx people.\(^\text{119}\) Attempts to categorize oneself as “white” to gain citizenship have regularly occurred, such as the famous court cases of Takao Ozawa and Bhagat Singh Thind in the 1910s.\(^\text{120}\) This racializing of belonging, according to Mae Ngai, reifies notions of an ethnic American identity (re: white) while others remain nation-less and are racialized.\(^\text{121}\) Others, such as African Americans and Muslims, remain as “alien citizens” within their own nation-state. Therefore, numerous groups of individuals are historically and currently excluded from full participation in the civil-religious public given racialization, marginalized religious practices, and “un-American” cultural practices.\(^\text{122}\)

The boundaries of belonging and political participation within the civil-religious public do not adhere to legal definitions. In fact, citizenship within the civil-religious public focuses on substantive or social citizenship, which is the ability to act like a citizen, essentially to exercise your right to vote, to have your person and property protected, and to go about your life with the surety of belonging to the nation-state.\(^\text{123}\) Although the cases under examination in this project focus on those who have \textit{de jure} or legal citizenship, the place of participants within American civil religion’s moral community may prevent them from having social citizenship.\(^\text{124}\)

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\(^{121}\) Ngai, \textit{Impossible Subjects}, 7–8.

\(^{122}\) Glenn, \textit{Unequal Freedom}, 43–44.

\(^{123}\) Glenn, \textit{Unequal Freedom}, 53.

\(^{124}\) Glenn, \textit{Unequal Freedom}; Ngai, \textit{Impossible Subjects}.
legal citizen does not mean one fits into the national narrative as it imagines and affectively
draws the bounds of belonging. If one is not recognized as a citizen, then attempts to enact
citizenship within the civic arena of American civil religion are not permitted and neither are the
benefits and protections of the social contract. Recognition, therefore, plays a significant role in
discourse around publics, citizenship, and American civil religion.

Recognition in this context aligns with my previous explanations of Hall’s
presence/absence and Ahmed’s encounter/avoidance. As discussed in the previous section,
Ahmed’s approach to affect theory engages the concept of encounter for the circulation and
experience of affect. These encounters lead to situations of visibility/invisibility or
recognition/misrecognition/non-recognition between the alien or other and the citizen. The
boundaries illuminated through affective encounters separate the alien from the citizen, creating
Bosniak’s outsider inside. In short, the circulation of affective economies within the public
sphere of American civil religion (re)construct the bounds of national belonging and exclusion.

This seeing of the other in an encounter gives visibility to a normative state of being that
challenges a citizen’s/person’s desire to be recognized as belonging. According to Wendy
Hesford, “Recognition grants or denies subjects access to normative systems of value.
Recognition affords legibility to certain bodies and social relationships and not to others.
Recognition sanctions and authorizes.” Therefore, recognition provides some with substantive
citizenship while classifying others as citizen aliens—the outsider inside. Recognition as
acquired through affective encounters is not a wholly positive form of visibility. By advocating
for recognition as a citizen some gains are made, but bodies are also made more visible and,

125 Bosniak, The Citizen and the Alien: Dilemmas of Contemporary Membership.
therefore, put at risk. To become visible does not necessarily lead to affirmative recognition of citizenship. To have a presence in mediated (re)presentations does not signify meaning-making power.

The public sphere in the United States as outlined by American civil religion is a dominant narrative regarding the nation’s past, present, and future. This civil-religious public serves as the location of analysis for this project’s examination of affective and mediated meaning-making about the nation, self, and other. Substantive citizenship operates as a category of belonging within this civil-religious public, but also reveals the hegemonic and resistant narratives that delineate us and them even within the legal bounds of citizen. Together public sphere theory and civic participation outline the bounds of this project’s examination, while affect theory and mediation provide a different theoretical approach to analyzing American civil religion.

CONCLUSION: BRIDGING MEDIATION AND AFFECT TO EXAMINE MEANING-MAKING IN AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

This chapter presents a hybridized theoretical approach to studying mediated American civil religion narratives as they are circulated in processes of meaning-making about the nation, self, and other. Previous examinations of American civil religion situate the concept within governmental institutions and practices, focusing on presidential rhetoric, national monuments, holiday framings, and founding texts. This approach overlooks the banal experiences of American civil religion as it (re)constructs national meaning through narratives as they manifest in activities such as journalism, interpersonal communication, protests, and artwork. Central to my theoretical framework for this project is the idea of public mediated meaning-making about the nation and the role of affect in delineating the bounds of national belonging. In joining
theories about culture, mediation, and affect, I am able to attend to the affordances of American civil religion as groups and individuals (re)present their understandings of the nation, its values, and its people through various media. The following case studies employ this interdisciplinary framework to interrogate mediations of American civil religion as narratives that inform thinking, feeling, and behavior about the United States. Each case examines a particular media output in the context of its historical formation and the affective implications of mediated American civil religion for imagining the nation.

Before examining the case studies, further contextualization is required. The next chapter outlines the relationship between American religious history and American civil religion. I place American civil religion within the context of academic meaning-making about the nation and its religious identity and provide a more detailed outline on the body of ACR literature. This overview of American religious history as it produces American civil religion highlights the endurance of a public Protestant imaginary that dominates narratives about national morality, purpose, and behaviors. In contextualizing the emergence of American civil religion within the academy, the following chapter establishes the need for studying mediated American civil religion.
I wrote a poem after 9/11 about the United States. It was based on an idea I had read in the comics section of the newspaper that I devoured each morning at breakfast. This poem ended up being published, making me a published poet at the young age of twelve. I revisited this poem while working on this dissertation and was shocked by the message it contained. My twelve-year-old self was far more optimistic about the United States and the values it espouses. The poem, entitled “This America” is reprinted below.

This America

This rich country of culture,
This faraway land,
This place of freedom, this home of the brave,
This other world,
Small universe,
This castle created by man for man….

Against kings and for the cry of freedom,
This world of happiness,
This small Thanksgiving,
This loving rock placed in a blue ocean
Which reaches from one to another,
Or a place of wealth beyond imagination…

Friend to friends,
And foe to foes,
This sacred life,
This home,
This universe,
This United States.

What strikes me the most about this poem is how full of American civil-religious language it is. I had already learned to place the country in its own special realm as a “small universe” and a “sacred life.” The U.S. to my twelve-year-old self was exactly as I had been
taught—a place of freedom, a government for the people by the people, a place of opportunity, and a welcoming home to all cultures. Maturity and experience over the interceding nineteen years make me want to school my younger self on the realities of the United States and how it enacts its purported values.

I followed the same path in the last few years as many of the people I spoke to for this dissertation. I began to read critical race theory and expose myself to memoirs written by Americans who have experienced oppression. In the memoir of Austin Channing Brown, *I’m Still Here*, she wrote a quotation that I would tell my younger self—“be suspicious of the language of America.”¹²⁷ I would tell my younger self that the narratives and the rhetoric I learned about the United States may exemplify *my* experience in the country, but it does not speak to everyone’s. Brown’s words resonated with me as I finished this dissertation and returned to some of the stories I have been hearing since grade school.

The next chapter explores some of these stories as they relate to religion in the United States. In particular, I examine the relationship between the construction of an American religious history narrative and the concept of American civil religion. I ask the reader to “be suspicious of the language of America” as I outline the Protestant hegemony that informs much of American culture.

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CHAPTER 3

THE PROTESTANT HEGEMONY:

FRAMING AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

“Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.”
— George Orwell

George Orwell captures the precariousness of history in this quotation from 1984. The stories we learn in school about the nation’s past tell only a limited set of events and are regularly framed by the classic saying, *history is written by the victors*. Historians are familiar with the philosophical debate over truth and fact in their field, but the malleability of history within the discipline needs to be considered. Accepted historical narratives inform the direction of research no matter the field.

History outlines one’s understanding of the present. If the United States is a country of democratic revolution instead of settler colonialism, then contemporary conflicts are understood as protecting democracy rather than reinforcing racial power hierarchies. This chapter examines the historical framing of religion in the U.S. as a way to contextualize American civil religion within broader conversations about nation, self, and other. For, as Annette Atkins writes, “history is never a ‘given;’ it is always a ‘creation’.”

This chapter proceeds in three parts. The first section briefly outlines the scholarly focus of American religious history over the years. I focus primarily on the trajectory of study and its geographical and denominational attentions. An overview of trends in American religious history establishes the narrative foundation for an understanding of U.S. religious identity and values.

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The second part of this chapter builds off of the scholarly framing of U.S. religion by interrogating a dominating theme—Protestant hegemony. I examine how the stories told within American religious history establish the importance of Protestantism to the development of the U.S. and Protestantism’s contribution to national narratives, mores, and practices. The final section of this chapter provides a more extensive study of American civil religion and its literature. I begin with an overview of conceptions about a unifying national faith or identity that pre-date Robert Bellah’s 1967 article and a survey of key literature about American civil religion following Bellah. I then question Bellah’s principle that American civil religion serves alongside churches and is not Christian. Here I challenge Bellah’s argument and place it in conversation with various studies on secularization, the liberalization of Protestantism, and the work of Rousseau and Durkheim. I conclude that ACR serves as a moral community for the U.S. that is entangled with Protestantism. This conclusion establishes the discursive tension within American civil religion narratives between national ideals and the myth of the American center that arises within the case studies. The aim of this chapter is to provide a foundation for my thinking regarding American civil religion, historical narratives, and the existence of white, Protestant hegemony as the myth of the center. I firmly believe that understanding the stories told about the past inform the present and the future.

TRENDS IN AMERICAN RELIGIOUS HISTORY

American religious history has gone through numerous scholarly transitions over the course of the last hundred years, with some of the biggest paradigm shifts happening since the
1980s, such as lived religion.\textsuperscript{130} Scholars have focused on church history, Puritan settlers, pluralism, and a multitude of other aspects in the vast field of American (usually meaning U.S.) religious history. Yet, at the heart of U.S. religious history exists a paradox and a narrative that continues to perplex scholars—\textit{the one} and \textit{the many}. Catherine Albanese, in her American religious history textbook, describes \textit{the one} as “religious unity among Americans. It refers to the dominant public cluster of organizations, ideas, and moral values that have characterized the country.” She identifies \textit{the many} as “religious pluralism (the free existence of many faiths) and postpluralism (the new combinations that occur as people borrow religious ideas and practices from one another).”\textsuperscript{131} Tensions within the U.S. and the idea of a universal faith (American civil religion) become apparent within this paradox. As such, U.S. religious history and its various methodological trends frame the story of American civil religion. The stories told within U.S. religious history are the foundational narratives for American civil religion (ACR).

Trends in U.S. religious history can be simplified to another form of \textit{the one} and \textit{the many} binary.

On the one side are those who think that comprehensive narratives of American religion ought to highlight [elites], since their political and cultural influence has been so great…On the other side are those who, while acknowledging mainline Protestants’ public power, suggest that the standard stories obscure a good deal of U.S. religion history.\textsuperscript{132}


\textsuperscript{131} Catherine L. Albanese, \textit{America, Religions, and Religion}, 4th edition (Belmont: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2007), 11.

Here Thomas Tweed isolates the one as histories of Protestantism and its national dominance and the many as histories focusing on pluralism. United States religious history, then, divides itself between those concerned with “the whole story,” which often looks at Protestant institutions and power, and those who challenge “the scope and history of white, male, mainline Protestant influence.”

Prior to WWI, scholars of religion in the U.S. studied Christianity with a focus on “church history,” or the development of intuitions, theology, and orthodoxy. Catherine Brekus and Clark Gilpin note that part of the focus on “church history” was due in part to the predominance of scholarship coming from seminaries. However, the movement of religious study from the seminary to the university did not necessarily shift focus away from Christianity. Instead, scholars began examining “the social and environmental factors that gave a distinctive shape to American Christianity.” Many of the early names associated with American religious history wrote within this genre—Arthur Schlesinger, Sidney Mead, H. Richard Niebuhr, and others. Yet, the “distinctive shape” was regularly found within white Protestantism or Protestantism’s interaction with other faiths.

Sydney Ahlstrom, author of the 1972 tome A Religious History of the American People, positions his work as shifting away from the Protestant mythic narrative of a unified tradition and looking towards a history with “constant attention…given to the radical diversity of American religious movements.” Ahlstrom wrote, “a new present requires a new past,” in acknowledgement of the social and political shifts of the 1960s. Although Ahlstrom sought to

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133 Tweed, Retelling U.S. Religious History.
136 Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People, xiv.
137 Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People, 3.
attend to the diversity of U.S. religions, *A Religious History* still centers on the influence of Protestantism and tracks its development from pre-colonial settlement through to the 1960s. James O’Toole describes Ahlstrom’s work as tracing a Protestant Empire whose “ethos was gradually attenuated and secularized over time.”

In spite of the critique of hindsight for Ahlstrom’s historical study, *A Religious History of the American People* did mark a turning point within the field. Ahlstrom is credited with writing the last sweeping history of religion within the nation; it’s the last in a long line of general religious histories. The observed impact of Ahlstrom’s book led to the distinction of the post-Ahlstrom era. The goal of the post-Ahlstrom era was to move past the survey of U.S. religions towards overlooked and obscured stories of the nation. Yet, the post-Ahlstrom era can apply to his contemporaries who were active in the 1960s and 1970s. Some scholars, such as Henry May, recognized the need for a new approach to U.S. religious history. May, writing in 1964, understood what he called “the recovery of American religious history” to be a restoration of religious knowledge previously written out of the past. Catherine Brekus and Clark Gilpin explain that the late-1960s were a time when U.S. historians of religions understood “that the old Protestant model could not—and should not—withstanding the pressures of social and religious change.”

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139 O’Toole, “Religious History in the Post-Ahlstrom Era,” 16.


The “new” U.S religious history gives greater importance to “the religious eclecticism that has long been prominent,” but overlooked. In fact, the field looks to produce new narratives and new models of religious history that break free from the New England, Puritan/Protestant origin story. American religious history is no longer limited to a sliver of the nation’s population, but “involves the history of ideas, institutions, and cultures that transcend the geographic border and temporal parameters” of the U.S. and even the Americas.

In spite of the horizon expanding efforts of U.S. religious scholars, the specter of the Protestant Empire narrative continues to loom large. Its public status as the religious history of the U.S. is only beginning to be challenged. Appeals to the Founding Fathers, the Puritan settlers’ desire for religious freedom, and the claim that the U.S. was/is a Christian nation all reveal the persistence of the Protestant narrative. This narrative has become so embedded within national thinking that many do not even realize its presence or its secularized ethos. This enduring genesis story can be connected to American civil religion. ACR and old school U.S. religious history can be understood as mutually constructing each other. Through the stories of religious historians about the power and importance of Protestantism, the foundational myths of American civil religion emerge. Historian Sacvan Bercovitch even claims, “The myth of America is the creation of the New England Way.” Therefore, the next section sketches the Protestant narrative as the basis for a discussion about American civil religion scholarship.

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PROTESTANT HEGEMONY IN THE NATIONAL IMAGINARY

Stories of religion in the United States often skip straight to the Puritan arrival in New England, overlooking Indigenous traditions and the Jamestown settlement. Using the sermons and letters of Puritan ministers and leaders, historians explored the processes of New World meaning-making in relation to faith. What emerges is a narrative centered around biblical themes of covenant, choseness, and mission which become embedded in the narratives of the emerging nation as it wrestles with a common identity and purpose.

From the beginning the idea of covenant emerges within Puritan rhetoric. John Winthrop, lawyer and governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, wrote about the Puritan covenant with God. He explained, in the 1600s, that those headed to the New World “are entered into Covenant with [God]” to do his work. Yet this covenant was conditional. Only if the settlers maintained their faith and worked dutifully towards Christian ends would they remain a population of the elect. It is within Winthrop’s warning that a phrase at the heart of American civil religion surfaces: “for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us; soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us.” Yet, “city on a hill” in this context was a warning and not a call to exceptionalism.

The idea of covenant easily joined with the concept of choseness. In fact, the Puritans viewed themselves as reconstituting the covenant of the Israelites, making New England a New

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147 Cherry, God’s New Israel, 40.
Israel and the people divinely chosen. Almost a hundred years after Winthrop’s words, the famous preacher Jonathan Edwards affirms the people’s covenant and choseness, but extends this divine elected status to the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Edwards states in the 1700s, “When God is about to turn the earth into a paradise, he does not begin his work where there is some good growth already, but in the wilderness.” Here Edwards connects the “wilderness” of the New World to the notion of choseness by suggesting that the millennial paradise of God will begin and come from the New World. Yet, this paradise is only possible if the settlers uphold their covenant with God to do his work and pave the way for his return. Such millennial thinking continues throughout American history in connection with the nation’s chosen status. Perry Miller, in his 1950s monograph, picks up the thread of “wilderness” in Edwards’ and other ministers’ sermons, exploring the conversation about covenant theology as underlying American identity. He examines the presence of declension narratives and covenant theology as key components to the emergence of the nation through an “errand into the wilderness.” Through this story of Puritan New England, Miller contributes to the myth of choseness and its integration into the defining story of American history.

Together, the vision of the New World and its (Protestant) settlers as chosen, covenanted, and with a divine mission established a communal imagination that informed the narrative of the emerging nation and centuries of its policies. Nathan Hatch explains that during the Revolutionary War ministers shifted the religious battle between good and evil “to the arena of

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150 Cherry, *God’s New Israel*.
152 Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, 3.
153 Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, 12.
politics and nations.”\textsuperscript{154} In effect, the legacy of Puritanism, even in its 1700s humanist
dimensions, “provided the moral and religious background…of the people who declared their
independence in 1776.”\textsuperscript{155}

In the Revolutionary era, religion and republic became intimately connected, even more
so due to the establishment of religious freedom. The eighteenth century through the antebellum
years of the nineteenth century proved to be a renegotiation of “the relationship of religion to
government and society.”\textsuperscript{156} Descendants of the Puritans wrestled with what it meant to be a
citizen of two kingdoms, leading to “the ideal Christian commonwealth [as] indistinguishable
from that of a model republic.”\textsuperscript{157} This convergence between the new republic and New
England’s Christian community aided in extending the concepts of covenant, choseness, and
mission to the rest of the nation. Protestantism, according to Diana Eck and Martin Marty, has
continued to inform “the dominant ethos of both the public and private spheres of American life”
as a result of religious liberty.\textsuperscript{158}

Disestablishment by the Constitution did not prevent religion from maintaining a role in
public life; it instituted a separation of the governmental and religious institutions to prevent
undue influence of either on the other. Religion as belief was understood “in the first century of
the United States [as something that] could and should contribute to the morality that was
necessary for the virtuous citizens.”\textsuperscript{159} William McLoughlin critically associates religious liberty

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{155} Ahlstrom, \textit{A Religious History of the American People}, 124.
\bibitem{156} Butler, \textit{Awash in a Sea of Faith}, 257.
\bibitem{157} Hatch, \textit{The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England}, 3
and 127.
\bibitem{158} Diana L. Eck, \textit{A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously
\bibitem{159} Mark A. Noll, \textit{America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln} (New York: Oxford University
\end{thebibliography}
with the idea that Protestantism widely defined was needed “to provide the cultural cohesion needed for the new nation.” Mark Noll identifies an “alliance between Protestant theology and republican politics” as appropriating “elements of [the covenantal imaginary] for more distinctly American purposes.” In either case, the relationship between religion and the new United States was embedded enough in national culture that Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, “The religious atmosphere of the country was the first thing that struck me on arrival in the United States. The longer I stayed in the country, the more conscious I became of the important political consequences resulting from this novel situation.”

Tocqueville expands on this observation in *Democracy in America*, connecting the dominance of religion with liberty and democracy. Religion in the U.S., to Tocqueville, provided the moral foundation for democracy. For, “one cannot establish the reign of liberty without that of mores, and mores cannot be firmly founded without beliefs.” Tocqueville was not overly optimistic about the place of religion in democracy. He understood that it also posed a danger, but found the particular construction of religion and liberty in the U.S. to be successful in a way that European nations lacked. Tocqueville concluded that “nothing shows better how useful and natural religion is to man, since the country where today it exercises the most dominion is at the same time the most enlightened and most free.”

Even though the rhetoric of religion in the U.S. changed over time from being specifically Protestant to being generally Christian, the persistence of the Protestant imaginary

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164 de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 46–47.
165 de Tocqueville, 291.
can be observed throughout the 1800s and onward. The project of Manifest Destiny exudes themes of covenant, choseness, and mission. Martin Marty argues that the notion of mission develops, in part, out of the geographical positioning of the colonies. Surrounded by Catholics, “the English Protestants on the eastern coast of North America…needed to develop a sense of destiny over against these religiously hostile forces.”166 Similarly, Ahlstrom describes the doctrine of Manifest Destiny as an extension of the covenantal “dreams of a vast Christian republic.”167 With the successes of Westward expansion, the dominant populace of the U.S. reaffirmed their chosen status and established a Protestant imaginary along the frontier and within imperial endeavors.

The Civil War temporarily halted the overwhelming optimism of divine mission within the U.S., but its status as a battle for the soul of the nation placed Christianity at the heart of the conflict. Harry Stout argues that the Civil War was “the baptism of blood” that birthed the U.S. as we know it today. Even though people on both sides of the conflict viewed their cause as righteous, many others saw the Civil War as punishment for violating the covenant. This idea emerges in Lincoln’s second inaugural when he states his hope “that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue…so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether’.”168 Yet, seeing the war as God’s judgment only reinforced the idea that the U.S. was a chosen people who had displeased the Lord.169

167 Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People, 878.
168 Cherry, God’s New Israel, 202.
Following the Civil War, the grammatical construction of the U.S. solidified the existence of a national versus local imaginary. References to the nation shifted from the U.S. *are* to the U.S. *is*. In order to construct the imagined nation-state, the idea of a messianic mission as a result of a divine covenant was asserted to create a “repository of sacred rituals and myths.”

The bonding power of the old Puritan covenant is most evident in the Spanish-American War. Narratives of loyalty and sacrifice so prevalent during the Civil War were shifted from North-South affiliations towards the nation as a whole. As the U.S. fought the “Spanish oppressors,” who were Catholic, to “liberate” the people of the Philippines, the divisions of the nation unified behind the sacred mission of spreading democracy.

Historians Greg Grandin and Daniel Immerwahr highlight the significance of the War of 1898 to the cultivation of a national coalition in the United States. Senator Albert Beveridge saw the conquering of the Philippines from Spain as an extension of Manifest Destiny, a religiously imbued understanding of frontier expansion. For Senator Beveridge the Spanish-American War and its acquired territories were directed by God. The North and the South were no longer divided but were unified in making blood sacrifices for the divinely ordained work of empire building.

Religious historians concede the dominance of Protestantism in the U.S. prior to the twentieth century. There existed “a surprising intellectual synthesis” that “was a compound of evangelical Protestant religions, republican political theology, and commonsense moral

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170 Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation*, viii.
reasoning.”175 This historical synthesis was understood to be the “Protestant Establishment” that enjoyed prominence and privileges even though it was not governmentally endorsed.176 Yet, the twentieth century gets marked as the decline of Protestant dominance. In particular, the 1920s are seen to be a time that challenged the norms and mores of Protestantism given the popularity of jazz, changes in sexual norms, anti-Prohibition culture, and other activities that were understood to be counter to religious values. However, Ahlstrom notes, “the Protestant churches of America did not lose their historic hegemony during the troubled twenties, but they were made sharply aware that their ancient sway over the nation’s moral life was threatened.”177

The Scopes Trial of 1925 is often described as the ultimate challenge to Protestant moral influence. This public (and very mediated) trial over the teaching of evolution led to a distinction between “conservative” and “progressive” Protestantism that elided previous distinctions. According to George McKenna, it was the beginning of the American “culture wars” as one of the “battles between those challenging traditional social mores and those defending them.”178 What has become known as the mediated beginning of the fundamentalist-modernist divide was seen as the retreat of Protestant tradition from the U.S. public sphere.179 However, the Protestant Establishment did not disappear. Instead, the “conservative” faction relocated to the private sphere and retreated to its rural and geographic strongholds, while the “progressive” or “liberal” Protestants reconciled their faith with contemporary society.

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176 Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People, 843.
177 Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People, 915.
179 Although this project focuses on the Scopes Trial as the mediated beginning of the fundamentalist-modernist divide in the U.S., the origin of this controversy can be connected to the emergence of the Social Gospel in the late-1890s. However, as this research is focused on mediated American civil religion, the media attention garnered by the Scopes Trial is a point of interest in the public discourse that happens around the fundamentalist-modernist debate.
David A. Hollinger refers to the reconciliation of liberal Protestantism to twentieth-century culture as the result of a long-term “accommodation of Protestant Christianity with the Enlightenment.” In what is seen to be the emergence of a Post-Protestant age in the twentieth century, Hollinger, Ahlstrom, Marty, and McKenna highlight how Protestantism remained dominant but adopted a new form. Martin Marty explains that the Enlightenment in the U.S. was “absorbed into the religious claims” of the nation. Enlightenment deism and Protestantism were not necessarily contradictory, but two sides of the American imaginary that complimented and mutually supported each other. What Marty notes is the often overlooked history of how “Christianity itself was a prominent influence upon the Enlightenment.” Therefore, the liberalizing process of Protestantism, that begins in the 1800s, confronts science, globalism, and traditional orthodoxies in an attempt to “achieve a satisfactory relation with the increasingly secular culture…and the increasingly diverse population.” The Protestant Establishment then, does not disappear but shifts to attend to Enlightenment concerns and secularized religious rhetoric that minimizes the overt Protestant dominance while still impacting national culture and politics. In other words, “the majority cultures of Protestantism shaped the underlying grammar of the day-to-day vocabulary of American secularism’s dominant forms.”

This implicit Protestant influence is what I refer to as Protestant hegemony. It is “a kind of penumbra, aura, ethos, or effect that appears in the speech, action, and thought of Americans”

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even when seemingly operating within a secular public frame.\textsuperscript{185} This Protestant hegemony emerges not from the outspoken stances of what we now call the Christian Right, but Protestant liberalism whose “influence…is now visible outside the churches, and for that reason has often been missed.”\textsuperscript{186} Put another way, Protestant thought has become “like electricity…simultaneously omnipresent and invisible in the modern United States.”\textsuperscript{187} Brekus and Gilpin explain how Protestantism has become a part of the U.S. by informing its “extensive repertoire of stories, symbols, and ethical ideals” and by “so thoroughly permeat[ing] American sensibilities about space and time, right and wrong, us and them.”\textsuperscript{188} In fact, this Protestant hegemony, as Brekus and Gilpin note, assumes the basic outline of American civil religion.

The struggle between religion and national identity did not come to a settlement in the early-20\textsuperscript{th} century. If anything, it set the stage for the revivalism of the 1950s and the rebellions of the 1960s. The 1950s and its focus on the aftermath of the atomic bomb and the Cold War developed a concern for the morality of the nation and a revival of more traditional mores. The anxieties of the 1950s, according to Brekus and Gilpin, led to “mainline” Protestant America taking control of the nation’s moral structure.\textsuperscript{189} This “mainline” tradition was a new form of the Protestant center that dominated “the public imagination” and was overwhelmingly “politically active, mostly white, and theologically liberal.”\textsuperscript{190} The idea of the U.S. as a Judeo-Christian nation emerges in the 1950s. Even President Eisenhower acknowledged the importance of Judeo-Christian ideals when he said, “our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is. With us of course it is the Judo-Christian

\textsuperscript{186} Hollinger, \textit{After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History}, 19.
\textsuperscript{187} Brekus and Gilpin, “Introduction.”
\textsuperscript{188} Brekus and Gilpin, “Introduction.”
\textsuperscript{189} Brekus and Gilpin, “Introduction,” 9–10.
\textsuperscript{190} Brekus and Gilpin, “Introduction,” 8.
[sic] concept, but it must be a religion with all men are created equal.”\textsuperscript{191} The Cold War fight against Communism required the nation to double-down on its godliness in order to defeat the godless, which led to a religiously informed patriotism backed by the “mainline” Protestant center and the concept of Judeo-Christianity.\textsuperscript{192}

The hegemony of Protestantism in the U.S. prior to the 1960s made it an unofficial religious requirement to be in a position of influence.\textsuperscript{193} Yet, what many see as a decisive shift in American culture in the 1960s also has its ties to Protestant hegemony. This point is not to downplay the important social and cultural shifts that took place in the 1960s but aims to temper the revolutionary character often granted to the decade. For instance, the valorization of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a Protestant civil rights leader, over Malcolm X, a Nation of Islam revolutionary, illustrates how Protestantism remained the national norm and the center of all socio-political shifts. Similarly, Supreme Court cases on religious freedom turned to a Protestant theologian, Paul Tillich, to define \textit{truly held} religious beliefs.\textsuperscript{194}

Religious scholars have also connected the emergence of the New Left to forms of Protestantism. Doug Rossinow in \textit{Politics of Authenticity} highlights how the activist efforts of Christian organizations during the 1950s and 1960s provided the foundation of existentialism that the New Left imbued in its activism. Christian existentialism established “a strong sense of moral and social responsibility,” the importance of community, that “love was the most distinctly Christian theme of all,” and the significance of a “mystic search for something deeper in life.”\textsuperscript{195}

This Christian existentialism

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{191} McKenna, \textit{The Puritan Origins of American Patriotism}, 279.
\bibitem{192} McKenna, \textit{The Puritan Origins of American Patriotism}, 278.
\bibitem{193} Hollinger, \textit{After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History}, ix.
\bibitem{194} Seeger v. United States, 380 U.S. 163 (1965); Sherbert v. Verner, 374 U.S. 398 (1963);
\end{thebibliography}
fed a radical humanism that infused the dissident search for democracy and authenticity. The crux of the matter was the conviction that one could turn away from anxiety and toward authenticity if one made oneself open to risk; this was the existentialist faith.196

McKenna also refers to the Students for a Social Democracy (SDS) as “the Puritans of the 1960s.” He explains that “the New Left saw itself as a “prophetic minority,” a “holy community,” a people set apart, practicing what Hayden called a “socialism of the heart”.”197 Thus, the 1960s were not so much a movement away from Protestantism, but an assertion of Protestant hegemony in liberalized and secularized terms. It was a time of debate over two assumptions about the U.S. rooted in Protestantism—what is stands for and what it should stand for. This was a dispute over national imaginary that continues today in terms of the “culture wars.”198

The continued dominance of Christianity and particularly Protestantism was never doubted by non-Christians and non-whites in the United States. “Those who stand outside the Christian center have been acutely aware of the way that American Christians have shaped the nation in their own image.”199 This cultural hegemony is most prevalent in discussions of race and religious freedom. Tisa Wenger contends that race and religion were co-constituted in the U.S. from the beginning which established religious freedom as a supporter of “race-based systems of slavery and settler colonialism.”200 In fact, the ideal at the base of religious freedom “that religion should be a matter of individual conscience, not public enforcement, has distinctly

Protestant roots.”\textsuperscript{201} It is of little surprise then that religious freedom, understood as a natural and universal right, “had yielded mutually contradictory and often discriminatory results.”\textsuperscript{202} For instance, the cultivation of the Judeo-Christian U.S. emerges from minorities “well positioned on the racial-religious landscape,” such as Jews and Catholics, who could use religious freedom to situate themselves as patriotic and, eventually, even white.\textsuperscript{203}

Protestantism though, and the idea of the religious marketplace from the early Republic, remained the norm by which other religions were measured. The Protestant bias of religious freedom went so far as to claim that minority religions that could not succeed in the marketplace had their own faiths to blame rather than the hegemony of Protestantism. Instead, minority religions were encouraged to “cast off religious peculiarities so that they can participate in the thriving religious commerce of modern democracies.”\textsuperscript{204} Thus, to successfully have religious freedom in the U.S., minority faiths, including Indigenous traditions, needed to adopt a Protestant model of religiosity to be considered “proper or legitimate or acceptable religion.”\textsuperscript{205} Contemporary calls for religious freedom continue to illustrate the racial-religious dimensions of this right. Winnifred Sullivan sees these current appeals to religious liberty as “deeply and problematically connected to a politics of fear and containment.”\textsuperscript{206} One only need to look at the recent and current Supreme Court cases about the religious right to refuse service and adoption to LGBTQ families, the continued racial-religious persecution of Muslims in the U.S., the

\textsuperscript{201} Brekus and Gilpin, “Introduction,” 19.
\textsuperscript{203} Wenger, Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal, 239.
\textsuperscript{205} Wenger, Religious Freedom: The Contested History of an American Ideal, 239.
resurgence of anti-Semitism, and debates over abortion, vaccines, sex education, school choice, and many other religiously informed cases.

In spite of the continued presence of the Protestant imaginary in the U.S., the country currently has the greatest degree of religious diversity in its history. ^207 Yet appeals to pluralism and diversity as the success of the U.S. overlook its history and the continued emphasis on oneness over manyness. Tracy Fessenden argues that “a dominant Protestant presence in government, law, schools, and other civic institutions has shaped and enforced the meanings of both “religion” and “pluralism”.”^208 What remains is the imagery of the melting pot. All are welcome—the plurality—as long as differences are relinquished and they are willing to be like us—the one.^209 Oneness, then, remains a constant theme within the U.S. and establishes an “impulse toward the collapse of boundaries” only if it serves the center which, “historically this religion of oneness has been mostly Protestant, Anglo-Saxon, and white.”^210

The white, Protestant oneness becomes the myth of the American center, as outlined in chapter one. Yet, this myth of the universal center hides the enduring white, Protestant hegemony in the national imaginary. It becomes masked behind calls for unity, which is the primary aim of American civil religion. This project aims to investigate the mediated narratives of American civil religion and their discursive tension as it relates to myth of the American center. First, however, it is necessary to establish a nuanced and complete understanding of American civil religion literature.

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^210 Albanese, America, Religions, and Religion, 12.
The introductory chapter provided a brief outline of American civil religion according to Robert Bellah’s 1967 article. He defined it as “a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity” that understands the U.S. “in light of ultimate and universal reality.” In this chapter I provide a more expansive outline of scholarship on American civil religion. First, I outline the various narratives of the nation that preceded Bellah’s American civil religion. Second, I proceed with a study of the various applications of American civil religion following Bellah’s publication. Third, I examine the existence of a Protestant moral community entwined with American civil religion. This second half of Chapter Two provides a comprehensive and critical understanding of American civil religion that will be interrogated in the case studies.

Theorizing the “City on a Hill”

Before Bellah introduced the idea of American civil religion, other scholars explored underlying notions of a common ideology, faith, or belief in the United States. These explanations of an American culture or identity typically provided stories about the emergence of the nation, such as the settlement of the colonies as a Puritan “errand into the wilderness.” As such, these early works can be seen as introducing the grand narratives of the American nation. These narratives, evident in early U.S. religious history, would go on to inform the tradition of civil religion as foundational stories, structuring the way the nation understands itself in “the light of ultimate and universal reality.”

211 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
212 Miller, Errand into the Wilderness.
213 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
Fredrick Jackson Turner, a midwestern historian, wrote *The Frontier in American History* in 1893 as settlements on the western edge of the U.S. became states. Turner saw this as the closing of the frontier, which marked the end of the construction of the nation.\(^{214}\) Turner’s main argument was that American culture and identity were shaped by western expansion. He credits the moving frontier as forming the social, economic, and political structures and values of a maturing nation.\(^{215}\) It is one part of the Manifest Destiny narrative.

Conrad Cherry explains how Manifest Destiny was a form of “geographical predestination,” as western settlers understood their purpose as taking God-given land. The U.S., as God’s New Israel, was destined to spread democracy where it could.\(^{216}\) Turner’s frontier thesis supports the doctrine of Manifest Destiny by treating westward expansion as a necessity and an inevitable chapter in the formation of the United States. By calling the West, “free land,” Turner glosses over the colonial acts and horrific decimation of indigenous peoples in westward movement. Instead, he frames westward expansion as a civilizing process as Americans moved from hunters, to farmers, to ranchers, etc.\(^{217}\)

Turner’s work on the frontier demonstrates what Ernest Gellner says is an important aspect of nation formation—forgetting.\(^{218}\) The story of the United States emerging out of westward expansion becomes an embedded narrative that glorifies and romanticizes national growth. In this narrative, the oppressed and colonized are overlooked and forgotten as the weak link overtaken by Manifest Destiny. Turner secures the myth of Manifest Destiny within


scholarship on American identity and the governmental imaginary, giving purpose and necessity to American imperialism.

Perry Miller sees Turner’s thesis as opposing the metaphor of the “errand into the wilderness.”219 One reading of this conversation could be that Miller is attempting to re-center the narrative of American identity in New England, whereas Turner shifted this story west. Miller’s examination of the generational tensions about the Puritan “errand” through sermons, revives the conversation about covenant theology as underlying American identity. Was coming to the colonies a venture taken in service of God’s will or was it a Puritan business in service of one’s own interest?220 Nonetheless, Miller’s work revitalized the national narrative that the U.S. is God’s New Israel in need of perpetually living up to divine expectations.

In 1955, Will Herberg introduced the idea of an “American Way of Life” in his book Protestant, Catholic, Jew. This way of life essentially served as a common religion for the pluralistic nation. The Americanization of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism in the national melting pot of mass immigration created a national identity, which became a common religion.221 The American Way of Life is “an organic structure of ideas, values, and beliefs that constitutes a faith common to Americans as Americans.”222 At its core, the American Way of Life, is a religion of democracy, but Herberg notes that democracy has a very peculiar character in the United States. He outlines the unifying traits of this religion as the Constitution, free enterprise, equality, and a spiritual idealism.223 Similar to any other religion, the American Way

219 Miller, Errand into the Wilderness.
220 Miller, Errand into the Wilderness, 3.
223 Richey and Jones, American Civil Religion, 79.
of Life includes rituals, holidays, symbols, and saints. In many ways, Herberg provides a description of Judeo-Christian sentiment.

Sidney Mead’s 1967 article in *Church History* outlines a national faith that challenges Herberg’s. First, Mead conceives of nations as spiritual entities, meaning nations cannot be entirely secular. As a nation, the United States “has its spiritual core of which the flag is the symbol.” This spiritual core determines the form of nationalism. Second, Mead rejects Herberg’s American Way of Life, understanding America’s spiritual core as being prophetic. A prophetic national religion means “that its ideals and aspirations stand in constant judgment over the passing shenanigans of the people, reminding them of the standards by which their current practices and those of their nation are ever being judged and found wanting.” Here we see a manifestation of Miller’s declension, or jeremiad, and choseness narratives. In order to have a prophetic religion, the nation must have an example or an ideal by which it measures itself. In the case of the U.S., this is the concept of God’s New Israel. Lastly, Mead notes that this national prophetic religion has come to occupy the place of the church for many Americans. Essentially, Mead claims the national religion comes to replace traditional religion.

From Mead and Herberg we see the emergence of a national faith that serves as an identity for the United States. These religions establish a narrative of unity and common purpose as fundamental to the United States. At times these early conceptions of civil religion build off other narrations of the nation—such as the roots of national purpose in Puritan choseness and jeremiads or the significance of free enterprise and equality as products of westward expansion.

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224 Richey and Jones, *American Civil Religion*, 79.
226 Richey and Jones, *American Civil Religion*, 60.
The texts highlighted in this section are only a sample of the multiple scholars who explored the idea of a national faith before Bellah’s article came out in 1967. The existence of this literature contributes to the numerous debates that emerged about American civil religion. Ideas about a “culture religion,” “democratic religion,” or what Catherine Albanese calls “Public Protestantism” already existed. Yet these were unsatisfactory terms to Bellah for what he would call American civil religion.

In his 1967 article, Robert Bellah claims American civil religion “exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches” as a national faith that unifies a religiously pluralistic and diverse nation. He claims the United States understands its history “in the light of ultimate and universal reality.” Bellah mainly examines the presidential use of what Jean Elshtain calls “god talk,” the general rhetorical gesture to a higher power, to support his argument for a “religious dimension” to the United States. Yet, this “god talk” is supposedly not a reference to a specific deity. Bellah defines the God of civil religion as “more related to order, law, and right than to salvation and love.” In fact, this “god talk,” national rituals, and national mythology are the “social and cultural glue that binds a diverse people together and invests them with a collective sense of spiritual unity.” It is this situating of civil religion that Bellah sees as allowing it to operate rhetorically as a unifying power for the nation that overcomes religious difference and, at times, partisan politics in pursuit of a greater, higher purpose.

229 Albanese, *America, Religions, and Religion*.
230 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
231 Bellah, "Civil Religion in America.”
234 Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation*, xix.
This transcendent understanding of the U.S. is directly tied to the idea of covenant theology, which Miller, Mead, and Bercovitch also emphasize. It is also what separates American civil religion from nationalism. American civil religion narrates the U.S. as part of a divine or greater purpose, while nationalism focuses on earthly exceptionalism. This theme of the transcendent in American civil religion, as a continuation of the Puritan covenant expressed by Winthrop, articulates a particular way of understanding the United States and its global role. As a nation, the United States regards itself as a model community for the world to emulate. It is the guardian of justice, freedom, and democracy, and strives to spread these virtues around the world. This self-perception comes forward in the symbolic language of civil religion, which refers to the “city on a hill,” God, destiny, mission, duty, and sacrifice. It is through this use of rhetorical imagery that America has and continues to build itself as a “city on a hill” for the fulfillment of God’s will.

Bellah understands American civil religion as emerging throughout U.S. history in “times of trial.” The first two were the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, which established the mythology and rhetoric of American civil religion through references to Exodus, sacrifice, and rebirth. Other scholars support Bellah’s claims about the Revolution and Civil War as key moments in the canonization of civil religion. The third time of trial Bellah mentions is not explicitly stated, but given the context of the late-1960s and his references to Vietnam and the Civil Rights movement, it can be estimated that these events and other imperialistic exploitations demonstrate moral failings the U.S. will have to overcome. In fact, Bellah believes American

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civil religion has been distorted for divisive purposes, a topic he expands on in his 1975 book *The Broken Covenant*. Bellah articulated civil religion as a moral foundation of the United States. Thus, a society that embodies the ideal civil religion serves as a moral community.

Most academics of American civil religion acknowledge Bellah’s contribution to introducing a broader swath of scholars to the idea as a way of understanding American nationalist sentiment. Bellah’s achievement was to introduce “a commonly accepted concept in terms of which description, analysis, and interpretation could proceed.” His work led to a catalogue of literature focused on analyzing the various manifestations of ACR that scholars observed.

Phillip Hammond in 1976 and Gail Gehrig in 1981 surveyed the various definitions of American civil religion that emerged from publications after Bellah. Hammond defined the broad category of civil religion discussed in this literature as “any set of beliefs and rituals, related to the past, present, and/or future of a people (“nation”) which are understood in some transcendental fashion.” This broad definition highlights the debates about ACR’s meaning and its relation to secularism and/or Christianity. Gehrig notes different trends in the literature about civil religion—religious nationalism, democratic faith, Protestant civic piety, and transcendent universal ideology. Each category offers a different perspective of civil religion. Religious nationalism emphasizes a perspective that glorifies and adores the nation. Martin Marty’s concept of “priestly self-transcendent civil religion” falls into this category. Civil

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236 Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, x.
religion as a democratic faith, on the other hand, centers around “a humanistic philosophy” of American principles such as equality, liberty, and justice. John Dewey’s view of the ideal American society aligns with democratic faith. Lastly, the notion that American culture is grounded in Protestantism informs the Protestant civic piety definition of American civil religion. The ideal of a universal transcendent ideology is that it operates as an integrating force. Gehrig’s categories continue to hold sway as evidenced by Philip Gorski’s 2017 engagement with them in his book *American Covenant*.

In addition to debates over definitions and the existence of civil religion, Bellah’s work received criticism from those connected to institutional religions. Hammond, in a more recent essay, reviews how some theologians and church leaders challenged Bellah’s concept of American civil religion. Their main concern was that civil religion was idolatrous to established traditions. Another religious challenge to American civil religion comes from Richard Gamble’s *In Search of the City on a Hill*. Instead of seeing civil religion as idolatrous, Gamble seeks a return of Christian meaning, or a re-enchantment, to certain concepts. He centers this claim around the biblical phrase “city on a hill.” Gamble’s work illustrates the Protestant theological roots of American civil religion.

Regional historians also found issue with Bellah’s work. The problem here was not so much with the idea of civil religion or its existence, but the assertion that American civil religion served all areas of the country equally. Charles Reagan Wilson, in “The Religion of the Lost Cause,” argues there exists in the South a separate civil religion based on the narrative of the Lost Cause. This Southern civil religion emerged after the Civil War with its own creation myth.

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243 Gamble, *In Search of the City on a Hill*. 80
martyrs, and moral purpose—the survival of a Southern way of life.\textsuperscript{244} However, Wilson notes that the religion of the Lost Cause did not separate itself from Christianity unlike Bellah’s national civil religion.\textsuperscript{245}

Within the 21\textsuperscript{st} century alone there have been numerous publications exploring the concept of American civil religion. Christopher Chapp and Rhys Williams have examined the persistence of American civil religion within presidential rhetoric.\textsuperscript{246} Raymond Haberski explored the relationship between American civil religion and war since the end of World War II, while Harry Stout considered the origins of civil religion from a religious patriotism of the Civil War.\textsuperscript{247} Art Remillard, like Wilson, explored the varieties of civil religion in the south in his book \textit{Southern Civil Religions}, focusing on the discourses of non-whites after Reconstruction.\textsuperscript{248} Peter Gardella and Gary Laderman have written introductory texts to the idea of American civil religion, trying to summarize the concept’s complexities and manifestations within the United States.\textsuperscript{249}

Gardella studies the sacred objects and ideas of the U.S. in his introductory text.\textsuperscript{250} He details how national monuments, texts, and symbols compose the sacred objects of American civil religion, emphasizing that the national religion is “a system of nonrational commitments

\textsuperscript{244} Wilson, “The Religion of the Lost Cause: Ritual and Organization of the Southern Civil Religion, 1865-1920,” 223.
\textsuperscript{245} Wilson, “The Religion of the Lost Cause,” 232.
\textsuperscript{247} Haberski, \textit{God and War}; Stout, \textit{Upon the Altar of the Nation}.
\textsuperscript{250} Gardella, \textit{American Civil Religion}. 
that holds life together.” This definition of religion does not preclude rational thinking or reasoning for the tenants of American civil religion. Rather Gardella wants to highlight that Americans learn civil religion through emotion and ritual repetition.

Four American values compose the heart of American civil religion, according to Gardella. These values include, personal freedom, political democracy, world peace, and cultural tolerance. As the cornerstones of American civil religion, these values can be heard and seen throughout national practices and language as the case studies illustrate. They are the principles for which soldiers are asked to sacrifice their lives and they are the ideals the government is expected to uphold. This emotional understanding of American civil religion establishes the context for examining the affective responses to mediated ACR and for how individuals express ACR in their narrations of the nation.

The most recent scholarship on American civil religion positions the tradition within the nation’s ideological history. Philip Gorski in his book, American Covenant, attempts to revitalize Bellah’s concept. He advocates for a “new vital center…premised on a common vision of the American project that is grounded in America’s civil religious tradition.” Gorski establishes a three-part comparison between radical secularism, religious nationalism, and civil religion in an attempt to distinguish the “vital center” from current distortions of Bellah’s original thesis that privilege polarization. American civil religion for Gorski centers around the prophetic tradition, blending in Marty’s and Mead’s analyses. This conception of civil religion clearly comes across in American Covenant as Gorski cites the nation’s current state of crisis or time of trial.

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251 Gardella, American Civil Religion, 5.
252 Gardella, American Civil Religion.
253 Gorski, American Covenant, 2.
254 Gorski, American Covenant, 232.
around political division and truth.255 The model America should return to is the vague “vital center,” which reads like a moral framework by which to indoctrinate all citizens with the same republican, enlightenment, and religious principles without examination of the racial and religious origins of these schools of thought.

Richard Hughes and Jermaine McDonald also engage with Bellah’s framing of civil religion. Hughes, in *Myths America Lives By*, interrogates five myths he claims to be at the bedrock of American ideology and society. He argues that these myths have been “absolutized” and moved away from their true, higher meaning. Thus, Hughes moralizes the role of the myths, claiming they have an original, pure state that could improve the social dynamics of the nation.256 McDonald employs Bellah’s concept of “times of trial” to evaluate the post-9/11 United States. He situates his article in terms of Bellah’s defense of ACR in *The Broken Covenant* and argues that the U.S. was now in a fourth time of trial. This trial, the integration of Muslims into American society, required civil religion to develop the nation into a more inclusive and tolerant society.257 Similarly, Hughes’ argument against the “absolutized” myths works to find a place for minority voices, particularly African Americans.258 Thus, while Hughes and McDonald reaffirm Bellah’s moralistic civil religion, they simultaneously push for a more expansive understanding of who belongs within the “vital center.” This literature demonstrates how Bellah’s American civil religion continues to serve as a lens for examining U.S. narrative, values, and identity.

256 Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*.
In 1876, Robert Ingersoll, lawyer, veteran, and politician, pronounced, “our fathers founded the first secular government.” While Ingersoll’s statement may be true about the government, the nation is definitely not secular. The U.S. is often cited as the exception to the theory of secularization, and religion can be found almost everywhere in the country, including politics. Yet, secularization, the idea that religion will fade away in modern society, veils the fact that American civil religion is intertwined with the dominant Protestant moral community.

As stated previously, Bellah specifically distances civil religion from Christianity and any denominational religion. He attempts to outline a secular faith that has roots in Christianity and still contains biblical allusions. The legacy of the Enlightenment and the emergent secularization theory in the 1960s offer an explanation for Bellah’s positioning of American civil religion. However, a closer examination of Bellah’s ACR reveals that Protestant morals and values are not as secularized or faded as one may believe.

The Enlightenment elevated reason and rational thinking, making them superior traits. This understanding colored religion as irrational and led to the emergence of different types of spiritual traditions, such as the cult of reason. The Enlightenment emphasis on reason and rationality also set the stage for the belief that religion would eventually fade from modern society; an idea articulated as “secularization theory” in the 1960s and attributed, in part, to Harvey Cox and Peter Berger. Although some scholars, such as Berger (1996), have recanted or reformulated secularization theory its legacy in society is vast. Secularization, as part of the

261 Berger, “Secularism in Retreat.”
modern process of differentiation, crafts the narrative that religion may still exist, but it is part of a private sphere that operates separately from the civic, public realm.262 However, religion still has a very public role in American politics.

Jose Casanova attributes the public quality of religion to its deprivatization.263 He defines the deprivatization of religion as “the process whereby religion abandons its assigned place in the private sphere and enters the undifferentiated public sphere of civil society.”264 Civil religion participates in this deprivatization as one variety of public religion. He perceives public religion in civil society as consistent with principles of individual freedom and institutional differentiation or disestablishment.265 It is important to note that Casanova sees a simultaneous process of privatization and deprivatization in modern society, making it possible for personal religion to remain private and civil religion to be public.266 According to Casanova’s assessment of secularization and public religion, Bellah’s American civil religion can fit into modern society alongside a secularized government because it is a tradition “at the level of civil society.”267

The significance of secularization to American civil religion, however, persists. The importance of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s notion of civil religion to Bellah’s American civil religion highlights how the Enlightenment continues to impact the ways in which ACR is conceived. Rousseau introduced the term “civil religion” in his 1762 treatise on the structure of the modern state and civil society. Civil religion, for Rousseau, proscribes the duties of a good citizen and “has its dogmas, its rites, and its external cult prescribed by law.”268 This civic faith, rooted in reason, serves as a creation of the sovereign “as a way of promoting civil virtues and

266 Casanova, Public Religions in the Modern World, 41.
Rousseau’s civil religion, as Marcela Cristi observes, was actually a political religion serving as an instrument of the state to support the political order and state control.  

However, Rousseau does not overlook the significance of this political tool in mimicking religion. He writes, “no State has ever been founded without a religious basis,” recognizing the need for a moral foundation for the nation. Civil religion serves the same purpose as a foundational faith in a pluralistic society, but operates from a secular, civic position. Rousseau believed religion was important to creating a good man who would be a good citizen who “love[s] his duty.” Yet, civil religion should be concerned purely with the earthly realm as “social sentiments” that create a “faithful subject.” Here we can see how the structure and sentiment of religion is used to formulate a secular tradition to establish political unification and a good civil society.

Here it is important to revisit Bellah’s work and his claims about the separation of American civil religion from Christianity. Conrad Cherry recognizes the enduring heritage of Protestant rhetoric and theology within American civil religion. In God’s New Israel, Cherry demonstrates how the language of American exceptionalism, becoming great again, and sacrifice for the nation align with Protestant traditions of choseness, the jeremiad, and martyrdom. In brief, the rhetorical tradition of American civil religion, which informs national narratives, is sourced from secularized excerpts of the Bible. Additionally, the primacy of the national covenant within American civil religion (re)builds the Puritan covenant. This self-perception that

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269 Marcela Cristi, From Civil to Political Religion: The Intersection of Culture, Religion and Politics (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001), 15.
270 Cristi, From Civil to Political Religion, 25.
273 Cherry, God’s New Israel, 11.
the United States is a chosen “city on a hill” persists, although the particular biblical and Puritan sentiments have faded from the mainstream.\textsuperscript{274}

Yet, the Protestant roots of American civil religion remain and are the underlying foundation of many of the national ideals. David Hollinger and Lynn Schofield Clark highlight how the ideas of individualism, freedom, equality, etc. in the U.S. all have roots in Enlightenment Protestantism.\textsuperscript{275} Hollinger in particular, as previously noted, outlines the progression of liberal Protestant values in the U.S. from their religious affiliation to their secular manifestations. He attributes this shift to the relationship between Protestant liberalism and the Enlightenment.\textsuperscript{276} Yet again, the secular idea of the Enlightenment persists in American discourse and social organization of religion.

At this point I have demonstrated how Protestantism remains entwined with American civil religion even in a seemingly secularized form. I have also illustrated how Protestantism still serves as the dominate narrative in U.S. society. However, the persistence of Protestantism does not make American civil religion a Protestant moral community. The influence of Emile Durkheim on Bellah’s American civil religion helps to prove this point, as does some of Bellah’s own writing.

In his study of totemism in Australia, Durkheim views the totem as the basis for all social systems, whether it takes the form of clans or nations. The totem becomes the symbol of the clan, serving the same function as a flag does in modern society.\textsuperscript{277} From his analysis of this

\textsuperscript{274} Gamble, \textit{In Search of the City on a Hill}, 5.
\textsuperscript{276} Hollinger, \textit{After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History}.
“primitive religion,” Durkheim connects religion and society as one in the same. It is impossible to separate religion from the experience of sociality. Thus, totemism becomes nationalism and the sacred becomes “attached to ideas, flags, or heads of states.” We can see the strength of Durkheim’s influence on Bellah through their definitions. Durkheim defines religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things,…beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.” One of the key passages in Bellah’s “Civil Religion in America,” mirrors Durkheim’s definition almost word-for-word. Civil religion “is a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity.” If we were to look only at the underlined sections of these two definitions it could be assumed that Durkheim and Bellah are speaking about the same topic.

Therefore, Durkheim and Bellah view religion as integral for society and social cohesion, whereas Rousseau understood religion as a need. Civil religion for Bellah, given the influence of Durkheim, becomes an inherent quality of the United States and a must for the existence of the nation. Together, the importance of Rousseau’s civil religion to foster a good civil society and Durkheim’s emphasis on religion to create common beliefs and values set the framework for understanding American civil religion as occupying a contested space in public discourse about the United States. On the one hand, ACR upholds a Protestant moral community that outlines correct belief, behavior, and values. On the other hand, ACR provides a secularized,

278 Cristi, From Civil to Political Religion, 32.
279 Cristi, From Civil to Political Religion, 34-35.
280 Durkheim, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, 44.
281 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
282 Cristi, From Civil to Political Religion, 46.
Enlightenment frame that outlines the principles Gardella referenced, such as freedom, democracy, and cultural tolerance through narratives of unity.

Bellah’s reflections on American civil religion in *The Broken Covenant* also support the idea of the Protestant moral community as being one dimension of ACR. In response to his critics and the declining social cohesion and justice of the 1970s, Bellah writes about the values emerging from the national covenant:

The basic moral norms that were seen as deriving from that divine order were liberty, justice, and charity, understood in a context of theological and moral discourse which led to a concept of personal virtue as the essential basis of a good society.\(^{283}\)

Thus, American civil religion, for Bellah, provides the moral foundation of the United States. It serves a prophetic function, reminding the nation of its chosenness, ideal principles, and global purpose.\(^{284}\)

Secularization and American civil religion may appear to be unrelated, but in fact they are co-constitutive in the United States. American civil religion can exist because of the notion of a secular society that sections religion off from the public sphere, creating room for a needed civil religion to guide the body politic. Similarly, American civil religion reinforces the idea of a secular America by distancing itself from denominational religion and claiming a faith that transcends religious difference. Reason, public discourse, democratic principles, morality, and a unified community sit at the heart of American civil religion. These qualities reinforce traditional understandings of the public sphere, making American civil religion a participant in the

\(^{283}\) Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, x.

\(^{284}\) Recall that Rousseau’s conception of civil religion was as a state creation that mimics religion in order to proscribe a citizen’s duties. Civil religion, for Rousseau, aimed to make faithful nation-state subjects. It was not intended to establish a moral community.
construction of an idealized, singular public. Yet, secularization masks the Protestantism entwined within American civil religion. Looking beyond the myth of secularization reveals the presence of Protestant morality as one dimension of American civil religion and its attempts to be the moral code of the United States. The endurance of Protestant hegemony in U.S. culture causes American civil religion to occupy a discursive tension that wrestle with the narrative concepts of the one and the many. Or as this dissertation frames it, a tension between the myth of the American center that is actually white Protestantism and the democratic and humanistic framing of U.S. values in American civil religion.

CONCLUSION: THE DISCURSIVE TENSION WITHIN AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

The aims of this chapter have been two-fold. First, I have outlined this project’s historical frame within the discipline of American religious history. Second, I provided a detailed and critical overview of American civil religion. Together, an historical frame and American civil religion establish the context for the following case studies and the dissertation’s discussion overall.

There are four main impulses for the background provided in this chapter. First, I want to establish the power of historical narrative in shaping understandings of the present and the future. Highlighting how U.S. history and American religious history are constructed from within the New England, Puritan story reveals the significance of historical frames on national identity, contemporary values, and goals for the future. Additionally, one version of history cannot encompass all that has occurred or the varying points of view that lead to different actions. This variety within historical understandings leads into the second purpose for this chapter.
Second, I focus on a specific theme within U.S. religious history that can also be found within the story of the nation more broadly. In narrowing in on Protestant hegemony, I illustrate the ways historical narrative reinforce power structures that become naturalized. Examining Protestant hegemony also outlines the ideological foundation for the beliefs, myths, rituals, and rhetoric of the myth of the American center. Thus, I have situated this project within one understanding of U.S. history rooted in a Protestant imaginary that becomes secularized and establishes a progressive narrative (with moments of decline) understood in universal and transcendent terms.

Third, I establish a more nuanced conception of Robert Bellah’s American civil religion that incorporates diverse analyses and signifies the concept’s continued engagement. I aim to provide the reader with an overview of my thought processes that led to viewing American civil religion as intertwined with the Protestant hegemony of the myth of the American center. Therefore, I have outlined ACR from its beginnings in the 1960s, placed it within its scholastic genealogy, and offered various critiques of the concept.

Lastly, by exploring the Protestant moral community as one dimension of American civil religion I have established the basis for the discursive tension evident in the case studies. This tension between the one and the many challenges ACR’s goal to provide a transcendent, common narrative and purpose for the diverse nation. For this reason, I ultimately propose that studying American civil religion as a set of mediated narratives allows for a more critical engagement with the language of the United States and how the country’s culture is framed.
INTERLUDE

SAME MOUNTAIN, DIFFERENT PATHS

In undergrad I belonged to my school’s Multifaith Council. The council’s goal was to bridge religious differences to overcome intolerance and hate. It was a pretty standard interfaith mandate. We held informational sessions about different religions and engaged in roundtable discussions about various topics in everyone’s respective traditions, such as religion in politics or truth versus Truth. My role on the council was as the agnostic academic. I paid close attention to the language people used and how we framed differences between religious traditions. One linguistic practice that regularly occurred frustrated me. My peers wanted to focus on what united us instead of what divided us. This is a common refrain in interfaith work, but I believe it harms the purported goal of such conversations—learning to exist harmoniously with difference.

Stephen Prothero highlights in *God is Not One* the danger of framing all religions as fundamentally the same. He explains that the differences in doctrine, ritual, experiences, etc. may not matter to philosophers, but they have real, tangible impacts on the lives of practitioners. He acknowledges that the “all religions are one mantra” is to stop violence based on difference and hate, but it’s “an act of the hyperactive imagination.”285 What occurs, Prothero claims, in the naming of different religions as different paths up the same mountain is a form of reimagining the world. I embodied this message in college. I wanted to lean into difference and went so far as to become a point of contact for Mormon missionaries on campus. Why not try to understand what divides us instead of relying on commonalities to keep the peace?

My commitment to the concept of harmony over unity when it comes to difference remains the same. I returned to Prothero’s book as I conducted my research for the following

case study, because I saw the same refrain occurring in my field work. However, this time I tried to listen for a deeper reason for the minimization of difference. What I heard was an acknowledgement that the U.S. is currently so divided that it needs to return to a fundamental principle—we are all human. As you read the next chapter, consider this appeal to common humanity. What does it aid? What does it overlook? I struggled with this analysis, because how can someone criticize wanting to see the humanity of everyone? Prothero’s words echoed in my mind as the answer: “we need to understand religious people as they are—not just at their best but also their worst.”286 The work of reimagining the nation cannot be at the exclusion of what led to the divisions and differences experienced today.

286 Prothero, God Is Not One, 7.
CHAPTER 4

FAITHFUL CITIZENS: AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION AND THE UNITY OF THE NATION

“And if the word integration means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it…..We cannot be free until they are free.”
— James Baldwin

On May 30, 2020 members of an interfaith organization participated in a Black Lives Matter protest in Denver, Colorado. They traveled through the crowds of demonstrators with water, hand sanitizer, and masks. The organization, which I will call Faithful Citizens (FC), even had milk in their office near the capitol building in case of tear gas. The executive director of Faithful Citizens, Victoria, explained they were there “walking around with backpacks and providing support” and “partnering in solidarity.”

The presence of faith leaders and faith-based organizations at anti-racism protests is not new in the United States. At the Bloody Sunday march in Selma in 1965, different faith leaders stood with Rev. Dr. King and other civil rights leaders on the bridge. Most famously, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel described the experience as if his “legs were praying.”

This association between prayer and protest is echoed in the work of Faithful Citizens and their advocacy in pursuit of a “moral economy” for the United States that is equal and just for all.

Faithful Citizens was founded in the late-1990s by religious leaders who felt that diverse faith voices were not represented in politics or media. They are an interfaith organization “grounded in a shared value and a shared commitment to work for progressive political

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advocacy, for human rights and equality.”290 Their advocacy efforts address three umbrella areas: religious freedom, racial equity, and economic justice. Ameek, a Sikh board member, explained that these broader issues can be summarized as all concerned with justice “and justice can be about almost any topic, but it’s ensuring that you’re giving justice where it’s necessary.”291 Homelessness, women’s rights, LGBTQ rights, policing, criminal justice reform, and worker’s rights are some of the issues Faithful Citizens worked on in 2019-2020.

Faithful Citizens included legislative advocacy in their mandate from the beginning, but it was only in the last six years that the organization developed a significant footprint at the Colorado capitol. Faithful Citizens grew their reputation and advocacy impact under the guidance of executive director Victoria. Board members, staff, and friends of the organization credit Victoria with increasing Faithful Citizens’ capacity to be a force for change at the capitol.292 Their recent efforts informed various high profile pieces of legislation in Colorado, including the repeal of the death penalty, paid sick and family leave, the Enhance Law Enforcement Integrity bill, and driver’s licenses for undocumented residents.293 All of the Faithful Citizens’ work on legislation occurs in coalition with other organizations, politicians, and community leaders.294

This chapter investigates the type of national imaginary Faithful Citizens constructs through their advocacy in relation to American civil religion. The interfaith organization desires to expand the imagined boundaries of belonging in the U.S. to include those on the margins through advocating for a values-driven society grounded in human dignity. They advance a form

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290 Victoria Interview.
292 All names in this chapter have been changed. Everyone will be referred to by a pseudonym first name and their affiliation to the organization at the time of interview. Some participants have taken on new roles since we spoke.
293 Field notes and interviews.
of civic activism rooted in faith that aims to impact policy changes in the state of Colorado. In centering civic participation as the way to achieve a values-based nation, Faithful Citizens appeals to American civil religion discourse as a unified moral community. Their engagement of American civil religion, however, exists within a discursive tension. On the one hand, Faithful Citizens advocates for a yet to be realized America imagined as inclusive of all and rooted in faith-based values of human dignity. They articulate this imagined nation as fulfilling the dreams and ideals outlined by ACR and its understanding of the founding documents. On the other hand, Faithful Citizens’ use of American civil religion as a frame for their advocacy reinforces universalizing narratives that strategically minimize difference for the common good. The language and activism of Faithful Citizens reveals the possible limitations of American civil religion to serve as a shared narrative for a nation that lives up to its imagined ideals. It also suggests that the myth of the American center manifests itself within ACR calls for unity and the common good.

To examine the discursive tension of ACR within the work of Faithful Citizens, this chapter proceeds in five parts. First, I outline the data used for my analysis and the organization’s reputation, advocacy, and activities. This organizational overview is situated within current studies of the “religious left” in the United States as a challenge to the dominant public narrative that associates religion with the Christian Right. Second, I explore the ways Faithful Citizens enacts their imagined America through the recognition of difference and the uplifting of often invisible voices. These practices illustrate how Faithful Citizens works to expand the bounds of belonging in the United States by appealing to ACR narratives about the nation’s principles. Third, I interrogate how civic participation as advocacy is constructed within the language of Faithful Citizens. They uphold traditional performances of civic activism that often exclude
those on the margins. Yet, the framing of such activities demonstrates a recognition that those with privilege have a greater obligation to act, complimenting the efforts to uplift marginalized voices. Fourth, I examine the nation Faithful Citizens imagines is possible. Their work pushes forward an imagined America through the language of “moral economy” that contains echoes of American civil religion’s Protestant moral community. Lastly, I conclude by examining the call for a common narrative within Faithful Citizens’ activism and how the desire to imagine a more inclusive U.S. wrestles with the exclusionary practices of unifying narratives

FAITH-BASED ACTIVISM IN COLORADO

Over the course of twenty-five interviews and observation of twelve events, in person and virtually, I learned that Faithful Citizens has a reputation for their integrity and inclusivity. One white, Protestant board member, Ted, explained that he was attracted to working with Faithful Citizens because “I like their ultimate respect for all views, even though they didn’t align with all views. There was a basic human respect.”

Erik, a white, Lutheran employee of an affiliate organization, was impressed by the broad reaching coalition Faithful Citizens crafted. He admires the “concerted, organized, shared expression of all of these organizations together,” adding, “I was just excited at the fact that such a collaboration was emerging organically.”

The coalition does cross religious, racial, and political lines, which is a rarity in the United States these days. I observed Republican and Democrat politicians, Blacks, Latinx, Arabs, Reform Jews, Conservative Jews, various Protestants, Catholics, and Muslims at the organization’s various events. Sikhs regularly sponsored events, but their visible presence at events was almost non-existent. In spite of the organization’s efforts to welcome and reach out to

people of all faiths, the coalitions are predominantly composed of various Protestant denominations. Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Episcopal organizations were predominant, but other denominations were represented by attendees and presenters. For instance, two men, Luke and John, who identify as “evangelical,” regularly participated in advocacy efforts on behalf of Faithful Citizens. Among the staff and board members, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the United Church of Christ were represented. Other attendees at events identified as Unitarian, NONE, or, as one man explained, an “eco-feminist.”

In 2019 and 2020, Faithful Citizens organized and participated in a variety of events at the Capitol building and churches or seminaries across Denver. They hosted a “Day at the Legislature” open to anyone with the aim of educating people of faith about the legislative process and encouraging people to testify before the Colorado Congress and speak-out to their representatives. Faithful Citizens organized a panel and workshop early in 2020 about coming together across differences—political, racial, and religious—in response to the divisiveness seen in the U.S. during Trump’s presidency. Lastly, they collaborated with other faith organizations to hold Faithful Days at the capitol building. These events were rallies in the halls of the capitol on behalf of a “moral economy” and occurred either weekly or bi-weekly until COVID-19 required they become virtual. Faithful Days included prayer, music, testimonies, and calls to action on specific policy measures. Politicians, faith leaders, and members of the community attended these events.

The efforts of Faithful Citizens follows a long tradition of faith-based advocacy efforts on behalf of civil rights and justice in the United States. Liberally minded believers fostered the

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297 All religious affiliations collected during interviews.
abolition movement of the 1800s. Walter Rauschenbusch’s Social Gospel attempted to overcome individualistic religion in favor of social deeds to further the communal quality of the common good. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s was led by the faithful, such as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Student Christian Leadership Conference. More recently, progressive religious activism has influenced national policy and informed the imagined America for some. The Nuns on a Bus, led by Sister Simone Campbell, helped push through the Affordable Care Act, also known as Obama Care. The on-going Poor People’s Campaign and the Rev. William Barber’s Moral Monday protests in North Carolina provide an example of “moral fusion organizing” that works to bring together unusual allies at the “moral center.” These faith-based efforts all hold a particular vision of the United States and work to make it real.

Progressive faith-based advocacy efforts are particularly interested in shifting the public narrative about religion in the United States. “There’s this feeling that God belongs to the Right,” says CO Rep. Shira. Faithful Citizens sees their advocacy as offering a different public narrative about the type of religion in the U.S. and its role in the country. In many ways, this effort to challenge the public narrative reflects Faithful Citizens’ vision for the nation. The organization’s efforts “give hope” and illustrate that the Religious Right’s imagined America is not “what all

301 Jenkins, American Prophets, 89.
who are faith-based see the nation as.” They put forth a vision of the United States that demands the country live up to its proposed ideals of “all are created equal” and equity in “life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.”

The following analysis looks at the imagined nation of the U.S. mediated through the events, publications, and affiliated individuals of Faithful Citizens. In many ways Faithful Citizens embodies the vision of the nation it imagines by demonstrating the uplift of marginalized people and advocating for policy change through civic participation. American civil religion frames the organization’s efforts, shaping the way they talk about the U.S. and emphasize universal values. In this engagement with ACR, Faithful Citizens demonstrates the discursive tension within American civil religion narratives as inclusive but in an exclusionary manner—essentializing or flattening difference to achieve unity.

MAKING MARGINALIZED VOICES VISIBLE

Faithful Citizens prioritized the uplifting of minority voices in their advocacy work. At their events, various speakers shared personal stories about suffering and discrimination that could be abated by a new policy. This public presence of bodies and voices regularly placed on the margins of U.S. society “elevates impacted voices” and brings into question the politics of visibility in diversifying the narrative of American experience. In being visible, these marginalized bodies (re)present the U.S. from the edges and challenge the public to revisit their understandings of the nation and its people.

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302 Henry, Ethnographic Interview with Henry, In-Person, March 10, 2020; Ben, Ethnographic Interview with Ben, Zoom, September 1, 2020.
During a rally on criminal justice and economic inequality at the capitol building, Faithful Citizens literally made the bodies and voices of marginalized folks recognized.\textsuperscript{304} One Arab, Muslim man recounted his reform journey from juvenile incarceration to university to promote an increase in prison education programs. His personal account put a face to the organization’s work on criminal justice reform. It also responded to the practices of the “martyr-savior bit that people often do,” by asking the privileged to listen instead of centering the narrative of discovering suffering and wanting to “help.”\textsuperscript{305} Staff of Faithful Citizens also saw having people speak for themselves as empowering and helping impacted individuals see themselves as part of the civic process. This formerly incarcerated man, for instance, “had never been inside the capitol, let alone testified, and so teaching him how to draft testimony, how to testify, how to tell your story and your narrative and uplifting those voices is super important.”\textsuperscript{306}

This practice of making voices visible is “actually producing knowledge; what we know about the world,” because “the possibilities of identities which people have not seen represented before” are (re)presented in-person on an interpersonal level.\textsuperscript{307} Similarly, Wendy Hesford places recognition and visibility as part of the on-going discourse about how to remedy oppressive violence. She situates sociopolitical recognition as a constant battle within American society, “which has positioned certain bodies as objects of recognition and granted others the power to confer recognition.”\textsuperscript{308} It is within this public discourse that Faithful Citizens recognized the marginalized in an attempt to incorporate them into the imagined nation. In bringing attention to the homeless, the incarcerated, the impoverished, and immigrants, this interfaith organization

\textsuperscript{304} Faithful Citizens, “Faithful Days” (Rally, Colorado Capitol, February 12, 2019); Faithful Citizens, “Faithful Days” (Rally, Colorado Capitol, April 9, 2019).
\textsuperscript{305} Interview with Kerry.
\textsuperscript{306} Zara, Ethnographic Interview with Zara, Zoom, October 21, 2020.
\textsuperscript{307} Hall and Jhally, \textit{Stuart Hall: Representation & the Media}.
\textsuperscript{308} Hesford, “Surviving Recognition and Racial In/Justice,” 536.
professed the humanity of these marginalized groups and incorporated them into America. Such inclusive efforts work to shift the national imaginary from being represented by the myth of the American center that uplifts white, Protestant narratives to embrace the real diversity and plurality of the country.

Faithful citizens also challenged the constructed understanding those in power have of the marginalized in making their voices visible. Kerry, the director of strategic engagement, explained how uplifting voices through personal experience stories forces a “reckoning” for politicians, “because the straight up truth is...when somebody’s sitting right in front of them saying, no, this is my actual experience because of a bill you signed” they are confronted with the human cost of policies.\(^{309}\) For instance, the story of an immigrant woman who felt “like a bad mother,” because she had “to live paycheck by paycheck” due to minimum wage takes the abstract debates over minimum wage and turns it into an affective moment of human dignity and motherly love.\(^{310}\) Those with the power to recognize in the U.S. are forced into an encounter with the other.

In fact, moments of encounter serve as the constitution of the subject. To recognize, to acknowledge those on the margins requires adjusting the meaning-making processes that delineate the borders of the national imaginary. Ahmed understands borders as existing beyond the physical delineations between nation-states. She treats bodies as the true physical, imagined, and sociopolitical boundaries within society.\(^{311}\) Attendees of events experienced this affective encounter, explaining “the presentations were very powerful, particularly the storytelling and the personal stories that were shared.”\(^{312}\) Therefore, encountering the story of a formerly

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\(^{309}\) Interview with Kerry.
\(^{312}\) Matthew, Ethnographic Interview with Matthew, Zoom, September 4, 2020.
incarcerated man advocating for reform or the experience of an immigrant mother who cannot provide the best life for her children given her income, positions bodies in relation to each other and forces the collision of the imagined bounds of national belonging. Privileged members in the audience are asked to affectively recognize the humanity of all.

Such affective encounters through storytelling are common within progressive faith-based activism. Through the use of personal narrative, religious activists are able to convey humanity and moralistic meaning without using explicit faith-language. Braunstein sees this rhetorical tactic as appealing to religious, secular, and policymaking populations alike. She finds that storytelling “allows progressive religious advocates to (re)frame policy debates in broad-based moral terms.” It is possible, then, for storytelling to convey faith-based morals and justifications for advocacy without excluding secular and policymaking listeners. Stories, thus, provide a common rhetorical space for people to come together and identify with a common issue or purpose.

Affective encounters in storytelling can be limiting in expanding the national imaginary. A white listener may feel sympathy and recognize the storyteller’s humanity, but the individual’s anecdote may lead more to pity than inclusion. This pity reinforces the mythos of the white savior in the U.S., as those with hegemonic cultural and political power champion causes, raise funds, and enact policies without consideration for the lives they impact. Similarly, individual stories play into the national trope about “pulling oneself up by the bootstraps” and the rhetoric around economic welfare that places responsibility for improvement on the individual rather than systemic causes. Faithful Citizens worked to avoid the issue of the individual-as-responsible by

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314 Braunstein, “Strategic Storytelling by Nuns on the Bus,” 293.
juxtaposing personal stories with state and national statistics. For instance, the story of the single-mother living off of minimum wage was shared alongside data about single-mother households living in poverty for the same reasons.\textsuperscript{316} The organization uplifted impacted voices in an effort to bring them into policy conversations. Additionally, by injecting the personal into policy advocacy, Faithful Citizens created affective encounters with the hope of encouraging the recognition of humanity in the \textit{other}, while also highlighting that the issues they address are not limited to individuals. They emphasized that issues are systemic problems at the root of the national imaginary.

However, the practice of affective recognition can also have a negative effect on expanding the borders of belonging in the imagined nation. Ahmed sees relational encounters as having the potential to reinforce the position of the \textit{other} rather than recognition leading to incorporation.\textsuperscript{317} Someone’s \textit{otherness} becomes highlighted through recognition, making visible their vulnerability, their marginalization, and all the reasons why such an \textit{other} is not permitted to participate within the public square of the United States. Hesford acknowledges this paradox of recognition and suggests that in such circumstances the \textit{other} must survive recognition in order to literally and metaphorically remain living in society.\textsuperscript{318}

For the purposes of this analysis, however, let us take Faithful Citizens’ word for their practice of recognition. This is not to say that the detriment of recognition does not occur within their practice of uplifting voices. Rather, to examine how Faithful Citizens’ advocacy exists within the rhetorical tension of American civil religion let us see the events and participation of the marginalized populations as “a shared communicative act that does not arise out of

\textsuperscript{318} Hesford, “Surviving Recognition and Racial In/Justice.”
dominance, identification, or appropriation.”\textsuperscript{319} Staff actually considered the downside of placing marginalized voices and bodies out front and in public. Zara, a Muslim woman and the child of Palestinian refugees, recounted her process of learning how “to harness my experience to advocate.”\textsuperscript{320} She explained that the act of speaking out can be detrimental to the healing process: “So one thing we have to be super, hyper aware of is that when you ask people to tell their story or to tell their narrative or use their voice, that you are not triggering that trauma and putting it on display.”\textsuperscript{321} Faithful Citizens embodied their mission to advocate for the human dignity of all people through their attention to the potential harm that can occur in uplifting voices. They did not want marginalized voices to be a token broadcast of diversity, but a heard and active participant in the civic process of expanding the rights and ideals of the U.S. to all.

Faithful Citizens’ public events and legislative testimony demonstrated an effort to expand the limits of belonging currently outlined by a white, Protestant hegemony understanding of the United States. They included the voices of individuals impacted by policies and aimed to uplift minority voices. This practice at public events produced an affective encounter that asked those in attendance, particularly white liberals, to recognize the humanity and suffering of the other and to welcome them into a national community where all deserve the same treatment and rights. State Rep. Jim of Colorado described Faithful Citizens’ commitment to engaging impacted voices as, “we’re not just speaking for you. We want you to speak in your own words.”\textsuperscript{322} Yet, in making marginalized voices and bodies publicly visible an inherent risk is involved. Individuals can be targeted for their minority status or the affective encounter can have the opposite effect than what is desired. Those in attendance may not recognize the common

\textsuperscript{319} Hesford, “Surviving Recognition and Racial In/Justice,” 554.
\textsuperscript{320} Interview with Zara.
\textsuperscript{321} Interview with Zara.
\textsuperscript{322} Jim, Ethnographic Interview with Jim, Zoom, September 7, 2020.
humanity between them and the *other* telling the story, but instead have an affective experience that reinforces the hyper-individualism of the American imaginary. A similar problem arises in the calls-to-action Faithful Citizens makes to their attendees. In the following section, I explore the limitations of traditional civic participation in expanding belonging within the national imaginary.

**PRIVILEGED CIVIC PARTICIPATION**

Faithful Citizens emphasized concrete steps people could take to advance their vision of a nation rooted in human dignity for all in their public discourse and published materials. The majority of these actions involved traditional forms of civic participation that are not always accessible to the marginalized populations Faithful Citizens aims to assist, such as voting and communicating with elected representatives. However, the language surrounding the calls-to-action reveal a moral motivation not often associated with the language of civic duty. This expression of morality connects the civic participation of Faithful Citizens to the myth of the American center within American civil religion. It reveals a tension within Faithful Citizens’ imagined nation regarding the participation of those on the edges and their relation to the center.

Faithful Citizens advances a policy-centric approach to religious activism, emphasizing the importance of influencing legislators. At most Faithful Days events, the policy director of one of the sponsoring interfaith organizations outlined the current bills coming before the Colorado legislature. They provided the numerical codes of the bills, how those in favor of a faith narrative for a moral economy would stand, and encouraged all present to reach out to their representatives to take a similar position.323 It was regularly repeated that a primary outcome of...
successful moral economy is policies aligned with values. One participant at Faithful Days explained that policies are at their best when they “serve a divine purpose.” To achieve such moral policies, attendees were asked “to live our faith and be public witnesses for those who are oppressed, downtrodden and on the margins.” It was repeatedly expressed that “as people of faith” attendees and participants “are called to put our faith in action in the public square.” This “sacred action” included calls to vote, sign letters and petitions, make phone calls, demonstrate, testify at the legislature, and generally make one’s voice heard.

The organization’s emphasis on traditional civic action is reinforced by their published guides. Faithful Citizens published a 2019 Advocacy Toolkit and a 2020 “Vote Your Values” document. The 2019 Advocacy Toolkit outlines “the tools to take charge and amplify your voice and impact.” The first section outlines the importance of voting, repeating common get-out-the-vote language of “a single vote can make a big difference.” The toolkit also provides language tables and an exercise to write a personal story with the purpose of sharing it publicly to change policy (See Appendix B). Faithful Citizens recommends sharing one’s story by calling or writing a letter to elected representatives, via a social media post, at lobbying meetings, at bill committee meetings (aka testifying), and at public events. It is not uncommon to understand civic participation in this way. Asen explains that traditional treatments of citizenship tend to focus on specific acts that an individual can take. Yet, the emphasis on the individual acting publicly comes with risk.

324 Faithful Citizens, “Faithful Days” (Rally, Colorado Capitol, February 5, 2019).
331 Asen, “A Discourse Theory of Citizenship.”
Traditional forms of civic participation and being outspoken are not always options for those included in Faithful Citizens’ mission. The visibility required to act according to Faithful Citizens’ standards has the potential of being lethal to some populations. As discussed in the previous section, Hesford’s work on race and recognition highlights how visibility sometimes leads to misrecognition or nonrecognition, the viewing of the humanity of some bodies as unrecognizable or impossible. It is these types of recognition at play in the persistent murder of and devaluation of Black bodies or the militaristic treatment of protesters advocating for racial justice. Thus, call for traditional civic participation can lead to excluding those Faithful Citizens aims to include. Certain bodies cannot survive recognition, especially when attempting to engage in civic duties (just look at the history of violence against Black people attempting to vote).

Embedded in the calls-to-action is the implication that people of privilege are called on to act more than others. Faithful Citizens did not explicitly state this, but the demographics of event attendees and language around “privilege” and being “blessed with discomfort” suggested that the responsibility of civic action lies with those who have social power. At in-person events, the majority of those I observed in attendance were white and middle-aged or retired. Younger participants were usually employees of various organizations affiliated with the events and the people of color were presenters either as faith leaders or impacted voices. However, a small group of Black women appeared at almost every event as attendees. These demographics are not surprising given that approximately 81% of residents in Denver County are estimated to be white, 29% Latino, and only 10% Black. Additionally, the events were regularly held in the middle of the day or were day-long, excluding those who could not take time off of work or

333 Field notes for rallies.
school. Faithful Citizens’ event audience, then, primarily speaks to white people of faith above the age of 50.

The recognition of this audience came through in interviews with staff, board members, and coalition participants. It seemed to be widely understood “that the dominant culture carries the burden of corrective measures.” An intern, Morgan, described the work of Faithful Citizens as “to convince people who have privilege to use it to support the people who don’t.” The director of strategic engagement also acknowledged that those who are retired or wealthy enough not to work do regularly attend events, especially white, older women. Kerry, a white, Protestant minister and Faithful Citizens employee, emphasized, however, that her goal was to ensure that the impacted and marginalized voices were heard. The voices made visible can be interpreted, in one instance, as a way to humanize difference in order to affectively motivate white people to civically act. For instance, a white woman spoke at one Faithful Days event decrying the lack of awareness of other white people. “Those of us with privilege need to open our eyes,” she explained, “to see the situation for what it is—the continuation of a history of white supremacy on this continent where underpaid and unpaid work of black and brown people builds wealth and security for the white elite.” This statement was the most explicit appeal to whiteness and white privilege witnessed at Faithful Citizens’ events.

At this juncture, civic participation and notions of the public align. These specific acts of civic participation often occur within the confines of an imagined, universal public. This public is idealized as open, accessible, and for all. In the context of the United States, this universal public functions within American civil religion narratives focused on constructing a unified,

337 Interview with Kerry.
moral community that outlines American belief and behavior. To engage in public debate in the U.S. means operating from within the American civil-religious public. Faithful Citizens, then, reconstructs barriers around civic participation by inadvertently re-centering the myth of the American center. By placing marginalized bodies in the role of public educator and privileged bodies in the position of affecting change, Faithful Citizens reveals a tension within efforts to expand the national imaginary to be all inclusive within the confines of a moral economy. In the final section, I explore how Faithful Citizens embodies the tension of the American narrative by advancing the notion of a unified, civil-religious nation rooted in a moral economy.

MORAL ECONOMY, UNIFIED NATION

Faithful Citizens attempts to expand the boundaries of the American public by enacting their vision of the imagined nation. This occurs through practices of uplifting voices, civic participation, and references to American civil religion in the narrative of a moral economy. The organization’s multi-pillared mission to advocate for religious freedom, eradicate racism, establish equity for all, and foster economic justice appeals to American civil religious narratives about the ideals and dream of the United States. This “moral economy” that Faithful Citizens pursues for the United States connects to ACR’s relationship with a Protestant moral community, as outlined in Chapter Three. Appeals to ACR in pursuit of a “moral economy” in Faithful Citizens’ event language often minimized difference in pursuit of the common good. In this final section, I explore how Faithful Citizens’ imagined “moral economy” employs ACR narratives and how it falls into the trap of strategic essentialism in order to manifest a version of the U.S. grounded in universal human dignity. Faithful Citizens gets caught in a tension between unity
and being inclusive of difference that echoes the struggle with the myth of the American center in American civil religion.

During the Faithful Days events in 2019-2020, Faithful Citizens and their coalition organizations called for the establishment of a “moral economy.” This “moral economy” was rooted in the understanding that all faith traditions are concerned with human dignity and that faithful people want policies to reflect this concern. At the first Faithful Days on Feb. 21, 2019, Victoria, the executive director of Faithful Citizens, explained a “moral economy” as:

A call to eradicate racism and to call out economic inequality. We long for our policies to be aligned with our values that see the dignity in every person. We each might be rooted in different traditions, but we hold this in common and we call for a state and a community that lives into these ways of being and human dignity.339

This interpretation of “moral economy” became connected to the American narrative over the course of other gatherings, as speakers emphasized their advocacy efforts with references to democracy, the U.S. founding, the American dream, and U.S. ideals of equity and freedom.

In revisiting the aims of American civil religion, it becomes apparent how Faithful Citizens reproduced a national narrative “in the light of ultimate and universal reality,” while also reinforcing the civil-religious goals of a single, unified public.340 Prior analysis about the inclusive spirit of Faithful Citizens and its attempts to expand the borders of the imagined nation to include all who live in the U.S. demonstrate the importance of an open and unified nation. One woman even expressed that equality for all is “the deep truth” with which “our democracy was

340 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
planted.”\textsuperscript{341} In fact, the notion of a nation accessible to all is considered to be “what this nation is built upon.”\textsuperscript{342}

Many made reference to the nation and its founding, explaining how “This country was founded on the idea that no matter where you come from, no matter who you worship or if you worship at all, we have a place for you in this great experiment called democracy.”\textsuperscript{343} From the event language, it was commonly understood that advocacy efforts were aimed at creating “the country of our dreams that the United States is the promise of.”\textsuperscript{344} Such language is situated in Bellah’s notion of the “time of trial,” during which the American population reckons with aspects of society that do not live up to equity and freedom. This American civil religion notion of a “time of trial” emerges in the language of Faithful Citizens. Event participants framed their work as “a struggle” or a “need to battle darkness with light.”\textsuperscript{345} Others called for a “founders’ mentality” in their advocacy, explaining that they were advocating for “a new nation that mirrors all of our faces, all of our hearts, all of our experiences.”\textsuperscript{346} Faithful Citizens’ advocacy for a “moral economy” becomes a part of a longer American civil religion narrative that views the U.S. as a nation progressing towards its dream. American civil religion constructs the national imaginary as incomplete and as “committed towards a more perfect union.”\textsuperscript{347}

Discussions of being in a “time of trial” also explored the need for a moral solution. The nation was regularly decried as broken, a “society that has its values out of order.”\textsuperscript{348} Faithful Citizens understands the nation as needing a faith narrative solution, which was deemed the

\textsuperscript{343} Faithful Citizens, February 12, 2019.  
\textsuperscript{344} Faithful Citizens, “ Faithful Days” (Rally, Online, June 11, 2020).  
\textsuperscript{345} Faithful Citizens, “ Faithful Days” (Rally, Colorado Capitol, April 30, 2019).  
\textsuperscript{346} Faithful Citizens, April 30, 2019.  
\textsuperscript{348} Faithful Citizens, February 12, 2019.
moral economy. In particular, Faithful Citizens recognized structures of sin within the American public, including racism, the death penalty, and economic inequality. These structures of sin are “a moral problem that requires a moral remedy.”\textsuperscript{349} Such concerns about the morality of the nation echo Bellah’s comments from the end of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Bellah followed up his seminal 1967 work with a collection of essays bemoaning the moral state of the United States. He wrote, “I am convinced that in these last years of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century the republic is in danger.”\textsuperscript{350} What Bellah saw as a possible remedy to this fallen place of the nation was a return to a national system of myths, rituals, and symbols. In fact, Bellah understood myths to be central to “provid[ing] moral and spiritual meaning to individuals or societies.”\textsuperscript{351} Faithful Citizens situated its advocacy within the narratives of American civil religion in an effort to establish a “moral economy” for a more justice and equitable nation. However, as demonstrated in Chapter Three, the morality of American civil religion can be rooted within Protestantism and reinforces the secularized, Protestant cultural hegemony.

This civil-religious positioning also interacts with Bellah’s outlined goal for ACR—a unified nation under a “genuinely American” tradition.\textsuperscript{352} Faithful Citizens spoke to this ACR concept through the language of community. Frequently during the gatherings at the capitol building, speakers would reference the importance of working together and the unity of the people. Such language participates in Rossinow’s and Hollinger’s reformed religious discourse about social responsibility and a universal public square. The idea of community also reinforces the importance of recognizing more than the groups currently engaged in public debate. In phrases such as “better together and in it to win it” along with “democracy is a team sport,” the

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item \textsuperscript{349} Faithful Citizens, “Faithful Days,” February 5, 2019.
  \item \textsuperscript{350} Bellah, \textit{The Broken Covenant}, 2.
  \item \textsuperscript{351} Bellah, \textit{The Broken Covenant}, 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{352} Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
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language of Faithful Days supported the incorporation of all into the imagined nation.\textsuperscript{353} Such phrases were usually accompanied by references to marginalized populations, including DREAMers and Muslims.\textsuperscript{354} Selected musical performances during the events also illustrated the importance of communal action. One gentleman sang “The House I Live In,” which details what “America is to me.” In this song, the lyrics highlight America as various concepts such as a home, the land, and church. Yet, the concept of the country that constantly repeats in the song is the notion of people being America. The song highlights that “All races and religions/That’s America to me” and concludes that in spite of everything else mentioned it is “especially the people/That’s America to me.”\textsuperscript{355}

Faithful Citizens’ imagined nation is unified around its people, but they often employed strategic essentialism to embody unification which only flattens and minimizes difference. The practice of strategic essentialism occurs “in a scrupulously visible political interest” with regards to the formation of a collective self-consciousness.\textsuperscript{356} Elizabeth Eide states that strategic essentialism may be understood as an “engage[ment] in an essentializing and to some extent a standardizing of their [a group’s] public image…to achieve certain objectives.”\textsuperscript{357} In the case of American civil religion and Faithful Citizens, the objective is a moral, unified nation that fulfills the American promise of equity and freedom.

Faithful Citizens’ deployment of strategic essentialism regularly occurred with regards to religious difference. Religious leaders and staff regularly repeated some formation of “all our

\textsuperscript{355} Faithful Citizens, February 12, 2019.
faith traditions uphold human dignity.” Yet, the coalition of faith organizations did not agree on all of the issues for which Faithful Citizens advocates. Catholic organizations participated in rallies and conversations about the death penalty but were absent from conversations about women’s healthcare and LGBTQ rights. These theological differences about social issues also impacted participation of different Protestant denominations and branches of Judaism.

In spite of these differences, it was continually repeated that “We stand here together, united in faith, united in our values.” Of course this strategy to overlook differences in pursuit of the “common good” is a regular practice in interfaith work. In this case, however, the use of strategic essentialism alongside ACR upholds structures of universal narratives that flatten different experiences of the United States. This flattening of difference through strategic essentialism and civil-religious constructions of the nation reinforces hegemonic Protestantism. In fact, this framing of a unified national imaginary reinforces the myth of the American center by encouraging assimilation into the “sacred center” of white, Protestant norms. Differences can be overcome if everyone uplifts the similarities that reflect the hegemonic center.

CONCLUSION: A NEED FOR A SHARED NARRATIVE

Faithful Citizens strives to expand the bounds of belonging in the American imaginary through legislative advocacy that uplifts marginalized voices. They aim to establish a “moral economy” that recognizes the human dignity of all people and forces the U.S. to uphold its ideals of equality, justice, and freedom. Although the work of Faithful Citizens is rooted in faith-based values, they engage American civil religion and its various narratives about the U.S. and the need

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359 Interviews and Field Notes.
for a unified nation. In framing their faith-based advocacy within American civil religion, Faithful Citizens highlights a discursive tension. On the one hand, they imagine a diverse and inclusive United States that lives up to its purported values as outlined in the country’s founding documents. Their actions fulfill their rhetoric as they advocate for policies that extend rights to undocumented residents, improve the lives of the unhoused and the impoverished, and protect the lives of all. On the other hand, their imagined nation requires a universal tradition in line with the myth of the American center. This “moral economy” minimizes differences that need to be reckoned with in the U.S., while also re-centering whiteness, wealth, and other privileges. The steps to achieve Faithful Citizens’ imagined nation require civic participation that often excludes those already marginalized, making those in power the main change-makers to expand the bounds of belonging. In this case, American civil religion narratives about the vision of a just, equal, and democratic society are ensnared in the underlying myth of the American center that requires assimilation for unification.

What emerges, then, is a dilemma about the common American narrative and purpose. This question emerged at various Faithful Citizens events. Haseeb, a Black Muslim man, at the final Faithful Days of 2020, stated: “we’re committed to forwarding a unifying narrative that uplifts our common faith and calls us to build human dignity in Colorado.” Then at a panel entitled “Better Together,” religious leaders debated the need and content of the universal American narrative. Panelists throughout the event shared experiences about race, cultural and political divides, and the role of religion in bridging division. Yet, the event ended with a conversation about a “shared narrative or truth” for the nation. It seemed the consensus was that a narrative is needed, because it would provide a “transcendent” thread, “something more

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than the human experience.” It was also recognized “that there is a constant battle” for control of the narrative in the cultural and political discourse of the moment. The question that remained unanswered, however, was what is this narrative and how can it support the “idea of democracy and a democracy that holds diversity and pluralism…that there is space for difference.”

In listening to this conversation, I was shocked by how closely the panelists came to be describing American civil religion. It seemed that they were calling for a restoration of ACR just like various columnists did after the election of Donald J. Trump. Unlike those columnists though, the panelists recognized the limitations of current narratives and framings of the United States. They saw a need for a “shared narrative or a shared truth” that was inclusive of the real rather than imagined experiences of diversity and pluralism in the country. Yet, as this chapter’s analysis demonstrates, Faithful Citizens’ attempts to (re)present and co-create an inclusive American imaginary with marginalized people is fraught with a tension over its realization through the often-exclusionary practices of civic duty and the unified, Protestant moral community framing connected to American civil religion. The pursuit of a shared national narrative in the context of Faithful Citizens still wrestles with the bounds of the American imaginary framed through American civil religion narratives.

364 Faithful Citizens, "Better Together."
There is a story my mom used to tell about how I viewed the world as a child. We were visiting Hong Kong in the late-1990s and I was about eight-years-old. Apparently, I turned to my mother and asked her why everyone looked the same. My instinct in hearing this story as an adult is to cringe, but then shrug and claim kids say the strangest things. Yet, it’s a story that offers a chance to reflect on how the country gets visualized, because my younger self clearly believed that every place was as racially diverse as the United States and was shocked when it was not.

I cannot explain exactly how I developed this visual understanding of the country. Most of the media I consumed as a child in the 90s were dominated by white actors and white-centered stories. The spaces I occupied at school, where I lived, and in my extra-curricular activities were dominated by white bodies. This isn’t to say that I never encountered a person of color as a child. My school had a handful of non-white kids. I also grew up in the suburbs of Detroit and would visit the city as a child, experiencing on occasion what it meant to look around and find myself in spaces populated by Black bodies. None of this, however, explains why I looked out the window of the tour bus in Hong Kong and was shocked by the homogeneity I saw.

Then it hit me! I was already reflecting back the racialized vision of the United States at the age of eight. It wasn’t that everyone outside the bus window looked the same or even were the same. It was that my visual understanding of the people I saw was framed by the categories of race at play in the United States. Public mediations of racial difference in the U.S. most often stop at the color of one’s skin. You are either Black, White, Asian, Latino, etc. Recognition of different ethnic and cultural differences does not occur. For instance, as I write this social media
is flooded with campaigns to “Stop Asian Hate.” This slogan isn’t because Asian Americans don’t identify with their heritage as Korean American or Chinese American (or even just American). It is because the racialized lens of viewing diversity in the U.S. flattens ethnic and cultural difference.

This way of seeing diversity only goes skin deep and is replicated in media. Think about the college pamphlets that have a photo of students sitting together all with different skin tones. This image tries to convey diversity, openness, and inclusion just with the visual markers of skin. In the chapter that follows, I explore how the U.S. is visualized in artwork. I suggest reflecting on how you see the U.S. and what you think it looks like before reading it. You may be surprised that what appears to be a positive view is underlaid by a way of seeing the other.
CHAPTER 5
WAYS OF SEEING US:
ROCKWELL’S ICONS AND AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

“One belongs to a social body by virtue of what one looks like and how one sees the world.”
— David Morgan

Images are interpretations of the world. They do not merely reflect an existence but are “ways of worldmaking” that construct various forms of social existence. In the United States there are multiple visual representations for the country—the flag, the U.S. Capitol building, the White House, etc. The country also (re)presents its values and ideals through artwork. Manifest Destiny was mediated through the paintings of John Gast and Emanuel Leutze. The 2017 Women’s March was symbolized by the pink pussy hats and Shepard Fairey’s “We the People” series. The nation is awash in visual narratives. However, rarely does an image achieve iconic status like the flag or the White House. Icons endure long after the context of their creation and continue to (re)produce narratives about the nation, its values, and its people. This chapter examines a set of paintings that have become icons and visually narrate the nation. Norman Rockwell’s Four Freedoms and Civil Rights images continue to inform ways of seeing the U.S. and imagining the country.

Norman Rockwell was born in 1894 in New York City and illustrated magazine covers, articles, presidential portraits, books, and advertisements throughout the 20th century. His work became iconic of a particular U.S. aesthetic—small town, joyful, humorous, and eternally

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368 See Appendix C for the production background and context of the paintings in the 1940s and 1960s.
optimistic. His work for the Saturday Evening Post spanned over 47 years and more than 300 covers. It is this work that earned Rockwell a place in the American imaginary of family life, national values, and the youthful joy of innocence. However, he really came to national fame with his depictions of the Four Freedoms during World War II. As a result of his expansive work and popularity, news articles have routinely referred to Rockwell as “an American institution,” “Artist to the Millions,” and “a painter of and for the people.”

This chapter investigates the type of national imaginary visualized in select paintings by Norman Rockwell given his status as the painter of America in the 20th century. His Four Freedoms and Civil Rights images illustrate the nation using the framework of American civil religion to capture the “American spirit.” In engaging with American civil religion, the paintings reveal a discursive tension between ways of seeing the imagined nation as either an ideal or through a racialized perspective. On the one hand, the paintings engage a devotional view that idealizes the U.S., its values, and its people. This representation mediates American civil-religious themes of community and freedom. On the other hand, the paintings also illustrate the boundaries of belonging in the imagined nation. They portray a liminal space in which us and them are defined, re-centering the white, Protestant hegemony within the myth of the American center. The contested visual space between the idealized nation and the myth of the center continues to be a point of tension in contemporary reimaginings of Rockwell’s iconic works. These visualizations of the nation seek to uphold American civil-religious narratives about values as important to the meaning of the U.S. while wrestling with portraying the diverse experiences of what it means to be American.

To examine the ways of seeing the imagined nation in Rockwell’s paintings, this chapter proceeds in five sections. First, I situate Rockwell’s work as national icons based on his continued status as “an American institution.” Second, I outline David Morgan’s concept of “ways of seeing” in order to explain the social practice of the gaze and its implications for seeing the nation. Third, I examine how through the lens of the devotional gaze Rockwell’s paintings depict an idealized nation rooted in the values of freedom and community. Fourth, I analyze how the liminal gaze constructs boundaries of belonging in Rockwell’s images that only accounts for the white perspective. Lastly, I conclude with an examination of the recent reproductions of Rockwell’s illustrations that reimagine his works for the 21st century. It is within these images that the discursive tension within visual narratives of American civil religion continues to be visible.

NORMAN ROCKWELL: ‘AN AMERICAN INSTITUTION’

Art critics, fans, and reporters often refer to Rockwell as apolitical in his portrayals of the United States. Even Rockwell’s own son, Tom Rockwell, writes that he only remembers “Pop” as being invested in two political issues—the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and the Civil Rights Movement. Rockwell’s autobiography, however, illustrates a different perspective. It was not that Rockwell was unaware or uninterested in social issues throughout his life, but that his main focus was painting “life as [he] would like it to be.” In spite of Rockwell’s intentions

370 White, “‘Rockwell Period’ Rates Exclamation Mark.”
373 Rockwell, Norman Rockwell, Norman Rockwell: My Adventures as an Illustrator, 50.
for his paintings many of them have been used for political and governmental purposes throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} and 21\textsuperscript{st} century. However, Rockwell later changed his position on art and politics. In an interview he states, “I live to tell stories with pictures; it’s my way of communicating. Today, with the world in such a mix-up, if you can help by communicating, I think it’s better than living in an ivory tower and doing abstractions.”

Viewers of Rockwell’s works have also read into them specific understandings of the United States and its values. Some art commentators claim his paintings are emblematic of the enduring American spirit. Susan Herbst even goes as far to claim that Rockwell’s paintings provide insight into democratic public opinion during his lifetime. She states that his work “created a resonance with the American mind that few other artists or illustrators have achieved.” Similarly, Steven Heller, former art director at The New York Times, describes Rockwell’s art as suggestive of “a mythic spirit of America.” Rockwell’s portrayals of a simple life captured the banality of existence “as a kind of rough-hewn visual poetry.”

Yet, this visual poetry was particularly American, according to Herbst. “His vision (or version) of American community life, of war, and of citizenship may not be everyone’s vision, but it resonated strongly with a tremendous number of Americans, which is why Rockwell’s pictures are all around us.”

Rockwell’s view of the United States became what it meant to visualize America and continues to circulate today.

Although Rockwell’s representation of the U.S. is often considered a portrayal of white, middle-class America, the paintings shaped the image of the U.S. that dominated politics, popular culture, and public life generally throughout the 20th century. White, Protestant America was America during Rockwell’s lifetime and consciously or not the white gaze and white imaginary of the U.S. continues to be representative of public understandings of the 1910s-1950s. Rockwell’s imagery conveys this national imaginary. According to Heller, Rockwell “mirrored America’s soul, and [his works] were as integral to the American self-image as the Stars and Stripes and the national anthem.” Heller places Rockwell on par with icons of the U.S., firmly establishing his paintings as part of the nation’s visual lexicon. A fan even wrote to Rockwell in 1950 describing his work as “so typically American.” Rockwell’s paintings, then, contribute to the narrative (re)presentation of American civil religion in that they participate in circulating understandings of the nation, self, and other.

The overly optimistic tone of Rockwell’s paintings throughout his life takes on a different significance in the context of visualizing the American spirit. Instead of understanding the hope and joy Rockwell painted as naïve or avoidant, the idealism becomes representative of the nation’s hope and its people’s dreams for the country. Fred Bauer sees optimism as “deeply ingrained in our nation’s character.” To Bauer, Rockwell painted the U.S. in its idealized form rather than a nostalgic landscape of a country that never was. He spoke to the nation’s “potential over [its] problems.” Rockwell painted the nation’s hopes and dreams, traditions, and values;

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382 Mary Griffin, Fan Letter to Norman Rockwell, August 14, 1950, Norman Rockwell Archives.
what he saw as the idealized imaginary nation. In other words, Rockwell painted a faith in the U.S. and what the country hopes to be.\textsuperscript{385}

The American spirit in Rockwell’s vision was “based on popular values and patriotism, a morality that yearns above all for goodness to trump evil.”\textsuperscript{386} A 2017 \textit{Economist} article goes so far as to claim Rockwell painted what it meant to be American; he “help[ed] turn readers—whether residents with deep roots or new immigrants—into confident, robust, modern Americans.”\textsuperscript{387} For this reason, religion scholar David Morgan identifies Rockwell’s paintings as within the domain of “the collective mental space of a social imaginary.”\textsuperscript{388} Norman Rockwell’s paintings offer a visual medium through which to examine what it means to be American and how to be American. They are icons of the nation.

As icons of the U.S., Rockwell’s paintings hold symbolic meaning that “represent universal concepts, emotions, and meanings.”\textsuperscript{389} I employ Saba Mahmood’s understanding of icon which accounts for the imaginative power of images and the importance of shared and varied meanings. She defines icon as an image or object that “refers not simply to an image but to a cluster of meanings that might suggest a persona, an authoritative presence, or even a shared imagination.”\textsuperscript{390} National icons, such as the flag, are symbolic constructions of relationships between the past, present, and future.\textsuperscript{391} Viewers learn the ideas and values embedded within national symbolism, such as freedom of speech, through gazing upon these icons. Regularly seeing these images reinforces and reaffirms the visual’s significance and the social world of

\textsuperscript{385} Bauer, \textit{Norman Rockwell’s Faith of America}, 35.
\textsuperscript{387} “Norman Rockwell’s Lost America,” \textit{The Economist}, July 29, 2017.
\textsuperscript{388} Morgan, \textit{The Embodied Eye}, 105.
\textsuperscript{389} Morgan, \textit{The Embodied Eye}, 102.
\textsuperscript{391} Morgan, \textit{The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice}, 244.
American civil religion. Norman Rockwell’s illustrations serve as national icons visualizing an imagined nation that (re)presents what it means to be American.

WAYS OF SEEING IN AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

Rockwell’s paintings are (re)presentations of national understandings about the country, its values, and its people. Following the theoretical frame outlined in Chapter Two, Rockwell’s illustrations participate in processes of meaning-making that shape social reality. His images, however, do not exist in a contextual vacuum. Visual meaning-making occurs intertextually with other media, histories, and symbols. An image is comprised of “shared practices, ideas, institutions, feelings, and values” that are imagined interactively within a community.”

Similarly, the viewing of an image involves extensive communicative practices that place the viewer in conversation with the rest of society. David Morgan explains this interactive viewing of images in terms of embodiment. He explains the physical act of seeing with the eyes as a bodily act, but that the social body is also engaged in “ways of seeing.” Understanding seeing as a social practice describes the power dynamics underlying the various ways we see and unsee. It is “how we see, how we are able, allowed, or made to see, and how we see this seeing and the unseeing therein” that defines the borders of the social body. In particular, these practices of seeing play out in the public sphere within the United States and are embedded within circulations of affect that construct the boundaries of the civic social body. Together the

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394 Morgan, The Embodied Eye, 31 and 55.

social body, the power dynamics behind seeing, and embodiment inform the practices of making visible or invisible or the delineating between us and them.

I expand the theoretical frame from Chapter Two by engaging Morgan’s understanding of ways of seeing in this chapter. Morgan describes ways of seeing as “routines…[or] repeated procedures that organize elements of seeing into characteristic fields or gazes.”

Ways of seeing can be understood as enactments of discourse. Gillian Rose follow’s Foucault’s conception of discourse to define it as “a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it.” Discourse, then, outlines thought and actions based on thought. The way of seeing an image embodies the discursive structure of a particular context—within history, space, culture. The act of seeing is structured by “an entire set of beliefs and desires” or the discourse within a specific social situation.

For Morgan the concept of the gaze figures importantly. Within this concept he captures the aims of visual culture, the relation of the body to the image, and different discourses in which seeing occurs. The gaze, for Morgan, is a practice that “encompasses the image, the viewer, and the act of viewing, establishing a broader framework for the understanding of how images operate.” To gaze upon an image or an object is to participate in a visual network of social meanings.

The individual’s gaze as part of a visual network of the social body is embedded with shared moral, social, and historical norms. As Morgan writes, “People learn to see in specific

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396 Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*, 55.
400 Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 3.
ways that allow them to see with others, and thereby share membership in a social body.™ The broader systems of power and meaning-making that operate within a given society outline the norms that members impart through gaze. American civil religion operates as one of the meaning-making entities that inform moral, social, and historical norms. Some of the archives of meaning that ACR disseminates include the values of democracy as outlined by the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, notions of moral and political superiority embodied in the U.S. global presence and interference, and understandings of free speech and religious liberty (re)articulated through application of the First Amendment. Here the concepts of visibility and invisibility emerge in conversation around who is included and who is excluded in the imagined nation of America. These American civil-religious ways of seeing emerge in the creation of images, such as Rockwell’s, and in the gaze viewers practice while viewing such illustrations.

The social practice of the gaze is not universal. There are different “ways of seeing” that employ different types of gazes. Morgan outlines a typography of gazes in his book *The Embodied Eye*. For the purposes of my analysis, I use two types of gazes—the devotional gaze and the liminal gaze. The devotional gaze evokes sentiment of longing and awe that often occur when in proximity to a divine or sacred entity. Morgan structures the direction of the gaze as from the viewer to the viewed, as the devotee submits to the divine.™ In this devotional aspect of the gaze, the image depicts the sacred; it is already divine. To gaze upon the image is an act of worship. Viewing Rockwell’s paintings with a devotional gaze is an act of seeing the ideal of the United States or the ACR narrative about the country as a divinely chosen nation.

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402 Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*, 75.
403 Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*, 73.
The liminal gaze outlines the bounds or edges “that act to circumscribe a people, a nation, or even a civilization.”\textsuperscript{404} The boundaries of belonging emerge through the liminal gaze. In the liminal gaze the viewer holds the power and it is their perspective that outlines the image’s meaning and place in society. For instance, white viewers of Rockwell’s paintings in \textit{Look} define the extent to which the Black subjects of the images are included or excluded in the imagined nation. The liminal gaze, then, “marks the edge of \textit{us} and the beginning of \textit{them}, delineating those being seen and those doing the seeing.”\textsuperscript{405}

In the analysis that follows I employ Morgan’s concept of the \textit{gaze} to demonstrate how Rockwell’s \textit{Four Freedoms} paintings and his Civil Rights trio illustrate the imagined nation and the discursive tension within American civil religion. First, I examine the paintings using the devotional gaze to understand how they portray an idealized nation in line with the ACR themes of freedom and community. These themes reinforce ACR’s aim to be a unifying tradition for the nation rooted in narratives about the country’s founding principles. Second, I use the liminal gaze to analyze Rockwell’s paintings as locations where the bounds of belonging in the imagined nation are drawn. I pay particular attention to the practice of the white gaze in viewing Rockwell’s paintings given the majority white viewers of his work and my positionality as a white woman. This analysis highlights how visual mediations of American civil religion can discursively refer back to the myth of the center that privileges white, Protestant hegemony.

A COMMUNITY OF FREEDOM

Few scholars have examined Rockwell’s \textit{Four Freedoms} in the context of American civil religion. Lester Olson’s 1983 rhetorical analysis of the \textit{Four Freedoms} gestures to Bellah’s

\textsuperscript{404} Morgan, \textit{The Embodied Eye}, 78.
\textsuperscript{405} Morgan, \textit{The Embodied Eye}, 79.
American civil religion. In particular, he argues that the *Freedom from Want* painting captures what Bellah articulated as one of the core rituals of American civil religion—Thanksgiving—and that the painting “fuses family, country, and God” which is the trinity of ACR.\footnote{Lester C. Olson, “Portraits in Praise of a People: A Rhetorical Analysis of Norman Rockwell’s Icons in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s ‘Four Freedoms’ Campaign,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 69 (1983): 17.} I have not found any author that examines American civil religion in Rockwell’s Civil Rights trio. This section fills this gap and interrogates Rockwell’s *Four Freedoms* and Civil Rights paintings through the frame of two American civil-religious themes—freedom and community—in order to outline how his images mediate and (re)produce an idealized vision of the nation. This visually imagined nation upholds American civil religion and frames the U.S. through a devotional gaze.

Freedom sits at the heart of the American imaginary. It informs the nation’s celebratory discourse around religious liberty, free speech, capitalism, and many other values. Even children demonstrate the centrality of freedom to their understanding of the U.S. in retorts of “it’s a free country” to various impositions on their desires. Rockwell’s *Four Freedoms* mediate the nation’s love of the concept and its importance to understanding the values of the United States.

The *Four Freedoms* are emblematic of American civil religion in artistic form in the most traditional sense. Bellah’s initial focus in examining ACR was presidential rhetoric and the “god talk” therein and Rockwell’s *Four Freedoms* build off of Roosevelt’s words from the 1940s. Landrum Bolling even calls the *Four Freedom* paintings “patriotic sermons.”\footnote{Bolling, “Norman Rockwell’s Legacy,” 74.} However, Rockwell’s paintings take the concept of American civil religion beyond presidential rhetoric and actually supplants the place of Roosevelt’s speech within U.S. narratives. Roosevelt’s 1941 Four Freedoms address to Congress aspired to be rhetoric that roused the legislature and

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
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\bibitem{Bolling} Bolling, “Norman Rockwell’s Legacy,” 74.
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citizenry alike to the war effort and U.S. involvement, but it took Rockwell’s visualization of the freedoms to make them come to life for the nation.\textsuperscript{408}

Reactions to Rockwell’s \textit{Four Freedoms} at their publication demonstrate how the paintings made real the place of freedom in the national imaginary. Various news articles and fan letters reveal that the \textit{Four Freedoms} paintings (re)presented for viewers their conception of the United States as a nation of freedom and illuminated the importance of media depictions of this principle. One fan, R. Williams, went so far as to claim the paintings were “destined to be an important American document,” articulating their place alongside other national examples of material American civil religion such as the Declaration of Independence, the Statue of Liberty, and the flag.\textsuperscript{409} Rockwell’s \textit{Four Freedoms}, like these other artifacts of the United States, turn the abstract into something tangible and representative. Each painting “dramatizes American virtue.”\textsuperscript{410} In making the Four Freedoms come to life, the paintings demonstrate for viewers how the principles echoed throughout the nation’s history are to be embodied and understood.

“Freedom of Speech”\textsuperscript{411} epitomizes the discourses of freedom in the United States and the ideal enactment of free speech in a public space. A standing man in the middle of speaking dominates the frame and serves as the focal point for the painting. Two men stare up at the speaker, intently watching him share his views. Four other sets of eyes are aimed at the speaker, but their faces and bodies are eclipsed by other meeting attendees. The faces of the listeners


\textsuperscript{409} R. Williams, Request for Use Letter to Norman Rockwell on Four Freedoms, n.d., Norman Rockwell Archives.

\textsuperscript{410} Zachary Small, “Free Hand: How Norman Rockwell Interpreted a President’s Philosophy,” \textit{The Times Literary Supplement}, July 6, 2018, 7.

\textsuperscript{411} Norman Rockwell, “Freedom of Speech,” \textit{The Saturday Evening Post}, February 21, 1943, Norman Rockwell Archives.
appear rapt with attention, as if they could not turn their eyes from the speaker. Through the devotional gaze, these listener expressions suggest that they are posed in admiration for this demonstration of free speech. The listeners take on the position of worshipers who “submit themselves to acts of self-forgetting or intense absorption” in the ritual of freedom. Similarly, the viewer as witness to this civil-religious activity beholds the painting with reverence and the same rapt attention as the painted listeners. Rockwell’s “Freedom of Speech” communicates the significance of free speech to the imagined nation as it works to be a country “in the light of ultimate and universal reality.” The painting provides a contemplative experience where the viewer, like those in the painting, adoringly gaze upon the enactment of freedom and learn how to embody the ideal performance of it.

The Civil Rights trio also portrays expressions of freedom through an American civil religion lens. These paintings illustrate the importance of advocating for freedom and that the realization of freedom is not complete. The bleak and gruesome murder of civil rights activists in “Murder in Mississippi” communicates to the viewer “that the good-natured, democratically-driven characters from previous works were not what they seemed.” Similarly, “The Problem We All Live With” depicts freedom as an active struggle and not a given for Black children in the United States. Rockwell’s emphasis on the limits of freedom for Blacks in the U.S. in these images places the concept of American freedom in contest. The paintings highlight the limits of freedom within the national imaginary by visualizing who does not have it. Rockwell’s Civil Rights trio, then, appeals to a civil-religious narrative about freedom that articulates a nation with

412 Morgan, The Embodied Eye, 73.
413 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
ever expanding bounds of belonging. 417 In fact, the Civil Rights movement serves as a time of trial in American civil religion, according to Bellah, which leads America to further realize its founding principles, such as freedom. 418 This discourse of the nation reinforces national imaginary discourses about the idealized U.S. and it is this mediated articulation of American civil religion that comes through in Rockwell’s paintings at first glance.

“Freedom of Worship” 419 demonstrates the idealized end of civil-religious inclusion by portraying unity over divisiveness. The various worshippers in the painting exercise their faith without interruption, united in their respect for religious freedom. They embody the words painted across the top of the painting: “Each according to the dictates of his own conscience.” However, the painting epitomizes American civil religion unlike any of the other images. Its depictions of freedom and community visually represent Bellah’s understanding of ACR as the unifying tradition that brings all Americans together as Americans. It portrays the enactment of E Pluribus Unum.

A key part of Bellah’s idea of American civil religion as a unifying tradition is the use of “God” in political speech. Bellah writes that it is important to acknowledge that the presidential use of “God” is generic and does not reference key religious figures from specific faiths, such as Jesus, Moses, Muhammad, Buddha, etc. In fact, Bellah argues “the concept of God” is “a word almost all Americans can accept but that means so many different things to so many different people.” 420 Here Bellah points out that “God” as a religious term does not signify one tradition. He claims that “God” serves as a universal signifier referencing whatever the reader or listener

417 McDonald, “A Fourth Time of Trial.”
418 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America”; McDonald, “A Fourth Time of Trial.”
420 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
believes. Rockwell captures this notion in the painting as the people gaze in awe at a golden light source to the left of the image’s frame. They perform the “rapt absorption of devotees” that demonstrates an admiration or desire for the source of light. Similarly, the tone of the painting brings the viewer into the experience of the divine. The viewer is welcomed into the American civil-religious community. This nondescript divine communicates the American civil religious universal “god” that can be formed into whichever deity one desires.

Bellah takes the generic “god” idea further by participating in an age old civil-religious tradition—referencing the founders. He asserts that the founders’ use of “God” in their rhetoric illustrates the importance of a deity to American civil religion. To the founders, Bellah writes, there was a “clear division of function between the civil religion and Christianity” and the rhetorical “God” of the founders’ speech demonstrates this separation. Bellah proceeds to describe the American civil religion god:

“The God of the civil religion is not only rather “unitarian,” he is also on the austere side, much more related to order, law, and right than to salvation and love. Even though he is somewhat deist in cast, he is by no means simply a watchmaker God. He is actively interested and involved in history, with a special concern for America….God has led his people to establish a new sort of social order that shall be a light unto all the nations.”

It could be this “American god” that stands outside the frame of Rockwell’s painting. The golden glow of democracy shed by Lady Liberty’s torch or the U.S. flag under a golden hue could all be icons of this “American god” adored by Rockwell’s subjects in the painting. It is this god that

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421 Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*, 73.
422 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
423 Bellah, "Civil Religion in America."
embodies religious freedom and hands down this right to a chosen nation who, at the time of Rockwell’s painting, was being called upon to protect this God given right for the world. “Freedom of Worship” does not speak just to the idea of religious freedom in the American imaginary, but also portrays the embodiment of American civil religion as a unified, community effort. Rockwell captured the essence of American civil religion in this painting.

The unified, pluralistic nation portrayed in the “Freedom of Worship” painting idealizes the concept of national community. It introduces the importance of community to the imagined nation. Rockwell represents various types of community that are celebrated within the United States and understood to be central to the functioning of democracy within the American imagination. In particular, Rockwell’s paintings depict civic communities on local levels, neighbors, families, and other identifying markers that establish voluntary associations.\footnote{Although this project examines the content and circulation of Rockwell’s images it is also important to note the significance of community in his work process. Rockwell regularly used his neighbors as models for his paintings and incorporated scenes from his life. In fact, a lot of Rockwell’s work can be considered illustrations of his New England community.} The following analysis focuses on the paintings that portray an imagined public community since this project is concerned primarily with public discourses about the nation.\footnote{The family does play a significant role in the imagined nation of the United States. It is the focus of many culture war debates and it also connects to the Protestant understandings of right behavior and right belief that inform many cultural practices within the country.}

“Freedom of Speech” illustrates Rockwell’s conception of civic community. In fact, this painting embodies civic community while representing an idealized expression of freedom. This painting was inspired by an event at a townhall meeting in Arlington, Vermont. Rockwell recalled his neighbor standing at the meeting to speak an opposing position on the issue under debate. What inspired Rockwell was that “no one had shouted him down,” but instead let him speak his mind.\footnote{Rockwell, \textit{Norman Rockwell: My Adventures as an Illustrator}, 379.} This was free speech to Rockwell—a community listening even when they
disagree. Community serves as the vehicle through which freedom is realized. Without a unified community that upholds the nation’s values, the imagined nation cannot be a government for the people by the people.

However, community takes on a different role in “The Problem We All Live With” and “Murder in Mississippi.” The paintings communicate an ACR narrative about the importance of freedom by illustrating its violation and lack. These Civil Rights images subtly demonstrate the importance of community in realizing the idealized nation. In particular, they portray the narrative that working together leads to greater freedom and unity.

“Murder in Mississippi” depicts a group of men, Black and white, who died fighting for a more equitable American community. Similarly, “The Problem We All Live With,” conveys the federal commitment to a communal American society in the depiction of U.S. Marshalls escorting the girl to school. These paintings also tap into affective economies of common humanity and sympathy in an attempt to lead viewers to empathize and to advocate for community based on humanity rather than division based on race. These representations of advocacy reinforce American civil-religious ideas about community and freedom. They recreate the idealized narrative of the U.S. as a nation that stands against tyranny and hate, which the national imaginary has replicated to give meaning to various wars and domestic struggles throughout the country’s existence.

Rockwell’s paintings mediate an idealized imagined nation as seen through the devotional gaze. The *Four Freedoms* and Civil Rights trio (re)present the founding principles the nation claims to value—freedom for all and a diverse but unified social body. These principles are central to Bellah’s American civil religion. The paintings, therefore, mediate American civil religion and situate the tradition within the idealized imagined nation. Rockwell uses American
civil religion to visually portray the United States as “a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as men can make it, and a light to all nations.”

THE NATION AND THE OTHER

Contemporary critics of Rockwell’s illustrations often highlight the lack of racial diversity in his images, referring to the U.S. he portrays as “visions of an America that never was.” This observation about Rockwell’s work often limits itself to his Saturday Evening Post covers and the on-going connection between Rockwell and “an idealized, conservative, white American past.” Rockwell’s portrayal of Blacks and other people of color at the Saturday Evening Post was limited by editorial policy. In an interview, Rockwell revealed “the Post made me paint out a colored person that I had put into a group picture. Negroes in those days could only be shown as servants.” These limitations did not exist at Look when he joined the magazine as an illustrator in the 1960s. Rockwell painted his Civil Rights trio while working for Look and began illustrating a position on race relations in the United States.

The historical and editorial context of Rockwell’s paintings provide insight into how he was allowed to mediate race in the United States. Yet, the cultural significance and endurance of his images demonstrate how the image itself and public responses are more important to the impact of Rockwell’s portrayals of race on the American imagination. Rockwell’s depictions of race in the Four Freedoms and the Civil Rights trio engage in politics of visibility. Black bodies

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427 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
are represented within Rockwell’s vision of the U.S., but are also placed in a location that can be consumed by the white gaze. They are simultaneously recognized as within the imagined nation and outside it as the liminal gaze marks the boundary between us (white Americans) and them. In brief, Rockwell’s (re)presentations of race in the U.S. illustrate the ambivalence of visibility within American civil religion and the affective formation of the social bounds of what it means to be American through the social practice of the gaze.

“The Problem We All Live With” was the first Civil Rights painting Rockwell published and unlike his previous portrayals of race, blackness serves as the focal point in this painting. The dark skin of the girl is contrasted by the bright white of her dress, hair ribbon, socks, and tennis shoes. In her hand she carries school materials such as pencils, a ruler, and two books or notebooks. Rockwell portrays the girl as innocent and occupied with heading to school, positioning her as any other child. Her gaze is straight ahead facing the left-side of the image and she appears to be unaware of what is occurring around her. As the gaze leaves the child’s perspective and looks upward at the backgrounding wall, the n-word becomes visible in large, faded black letters. Beside the pejorative tag are bright red splatters of tomatoes that paint the concrete while the juices from its rupture drip like blood down the wall. The threat to the girl on her way to school becomes shockingly apparent once the surrounding landscape is seen.

The power of visibility in this painting emerges from the viewer’s perspective. At first the Black girl is made visible through the painting’s use of perspective which places her at eye-level, making her visage the first point of connection between viewer and painting. The viewer is asked to relate to the girl as a child, pushing the viewer to imagine themselves as a child performing a similar activity. Discomfort sets in as the viewer takes in the rest of the painting.

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Bridget Cooks highlights how the viewer embodies the role of perpetrator of violence against the girl given the framing of the painting. Instead of embodying the role of child, the viewer becomes the one who threw the tomato or even the one who spray-painted the pejorative word. It is impossible for the viewer to not be implicated in the painting’s scene.

This practice of the gaze calls attention back to the painting’s title and the significance of the scene represented. Rockwell suggests that race is a problem whites also face reinforcing conceptions of community as the way forward toward a more equitable nation. This message seems to be particularly resonant with the predominantly white readership of Look at the time of its publication. One reader from Tennessee wrote, “I have never been so deeply moved by any picture…Thank you for showing this white Southerner how ridiculous he looks.” Another viewer of the painting in the 1960s expressed sympathy for the child in the image: “That magazine tells you to “look,” and I sure did…You look at her and you begin to feel sorry for her.” A Mrs. W. E. Leverett thanked Rockwell for his work and expressed that she hoped that “the pathos of it [would] affect [others] with as much heartache as it did” her. These positive and hopefully transformative responses to Rockwell’s painting portray what Gallagher and Zagacki call the recognition of common humanity. They argue that in making the plight of Black school children visible, Rockwell rhetorically shifted the knowledge whites had of race in the United States. Similar arguments can be made about Rockwell’s other portrayals of race in “Murder in Mississippi” and “New Kids in the Neighborhood.” These illustrations similarly ask

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432 Cooks, “Norman Rockwell’s Negro Problem.”
the viewer to experience the brutal violence of racism and the innocent curiosity of children in an effort to establish a common humanity across racial divisions. Yet, these optimistic viewings of Rockwell’s paintings only take into account one dimension of visibility and the affective experience of the gaze.

Rockwell’s paintings reveal the discursive tension within American civil religion when it comes to conversations of inclusivity and progress. On the one hand, the representation of Black people in the Civil Rights trio reflect a shift in who can be portrayed as American and exist in public spaces. These depictions also encourage viewers to see Black people as human, experiencing human emotions such as fear, loss, curiosity, and death. On the other hand, Rockwell’s paintings keep the white gaze as central and privileged. Morgan explains that the liminal gaze places the viewer in a position of power over the subordinated object being viewed. In this socialized way of seeing, “the viewer achieves invisibility while the subject becomes spectacularly and transiently obvious.”437 This hyper-visibility and the removal of subject-hood leaves the power of inclusion in the hands of white viewers.438 The liminal gaze of whiteness can either grant Black bodies legibility within the imagined nation or reinforce their position as outsiders inside the spaces of belonging in America.439 Instead of a white viewer benefiting from the concept of common humanity, it reinforces practices of white hegemonic power and traditions of Black bodies as objects rather than subjects.440 The experience of race in the United States is framed through events and tragedies whites can understand. It is the white understanding that shapes how Black people are incorporated into the imagined nation. The

438 Hesford, “Surviving Recognition and Racial In/Justice.”
white gaze surveils the Black bodies in these paintings to determine if their humanity is the same, if their suffering is worthy, and if they are behaving acceptably enough to be considered American.

For example, the white children in “New Kids in the Neighborhood” examine the Black children. The tension of the situation is readily visible on the Black girl’s face. She stares tentatively at the white children with a look I can only describe as apprehension, holding her cat for security. Additionally, barely visible in the background of the painting a white person peers out from behind their curtain to surveil the scene for appropriate interaction. In this case, the centrality of the white gaze and the visibility of the Black children does not embrace them into suburban America but reinforces the dangers of being seen and the necessity of right behavior for safety. Suburbia is marked as a boundary space where belonging is reinforced through the liminal way of seeing, claiming the location for us rather than them.

These paintings reveal the dark side of community in the United States, which I refer to as the narrative of unity or the embodiment of E Pluribus Unum. In “Murder in Mississippi” and “The Problem We All Live With” the perpetrators of violence kill and harass because Black bodies that do not conform to specific standards of the imagined community. Specifically, they are not white. The shadow in “Murder in Mississippi” are white men killing others because they challenge the unity of Southern whiteness. The author of the n-word and thrower of tomatoes in “The Problem We All Live With” harass a child for transgressing the bounds of the imagined American school community. In both cases, community becomes assimilation into

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442 Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*.
443 Carson, “The Awakening of Norman Rockwell.”
preordained understandings of belonging—whiteness. One can join the community of the
American imaginary only if one is willing to assimilate to become part of the one.

Rockwell’s paintings serve as virtual encounters between the white gaze and Black bodies creating a space in which circulation of affective economies occurs. The affective experience of viewing Rockwell’s representations of race in the United States are part of the meaning-making processes that delineate the bounds of who is and is not American. The paintings try to circulate the emotion of “sameness” as white viewers recognize the humanity of Black people. Yet, the power of affective recognition lies with the white viewer. Maybe the white viewer accepts the humanity and “sameness” of the represented Black body and integrates them into one understanding of the imagined nation. Such a positive interpretation of the affective encounter reinforces ACR narratives of progress and naively overlooks the power of the gaze. However, the scenes Rockwell paints place the onus on Black bodies to do the work of assimilation. It is the Black girl who must unify Americans in schools. It is the Black children who must integrate into suburban ways of play. It is the Black civil right worker who must martyr himself to overcome racial divides. In other words, “racial others can do the work of adding themselves to the idealized vision of the American dream.” The white gaze requires the labor of Black bodies to shift the bounds of American identity and to allow Black people to move from visibility to inclusion.

A similar virtual encounter occurs with religious diversity in “Freedom from Worship.” At first glance the painting depicts people of different faiths harmoniously practicing their religions as they wish. Closer examination of the painting, however, leaves the viewer wondering

about the religious diversity of the worshippers. Symbols of specific religious traditions are mainly absent from the painting, except for the beads one woman holds in her hands. This imagery invokes the Catholic rosary suggesting this worshipper is Catholic. Another man holds a book with golden page edges in his hands. The viewer cannot see an inscription on the text and it is left to the imagination which sacred scripture the man holds. His headwear, which vaguely resembles a kufi, and his skin coloring, whether the result of shadows or intentionally done, suggest he may be of Middle Eastern descent. This drawing of ethnicity often serves as visual shorthand for Muslims. Additionally, another man near the upper left corner holds his chin in a pose that brings to mind Rodin’s *The Thinker*. This lone figure does not embody a typical prayer pose suggesting a different reading of the gold lettering that runs across the top of the illustration. Perhaps he is agnostic or an atheist. Yet, the majority of the people in the painting hold their hands together in a traditional Christian pose of prayer.

The inability to definitively identify non-Christian traditions within the painting illustrates the embedded Protestantism within American civil religion and the imagined nation. This painting affirms an identification of *us* with Christianity and reinforces the concept of assimilation for other religious traditions. Protestantism holds cultural dominance in the United States, as I outlined in Chapter Three, and it determines the boundaries of religion in prioritizing “right belief or faith” over action, the authority of the individual over the organized group, and the separation of the spiritual and the temporal.⁴⁴⁶ Therefore, the rituals of Catholicism become muted and represented by a strand of beads in the painting. Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and other traditions modify their practices and the public expressions of their beliefs to reflect the

Protestant norms of society. “Freedom of Worship” mediates this Protestant bias by depicting religious difference as minute and practically invisible. Plurality is only given a semblance of visibility while the visual community of faith is dominated by Protestant norms. The painting illustrates the privileging of Protestantism’s emphasis on belief over practice and private, internal faith over public worship within the imagined nation.

Winnifred Sullivan and Tisa Wenger acknowledge the problematic manifestations of religious freedom within the U.S. legal system. Framed as one of the core ideals in the U.S. and credited with being a cause for the secularity of the government, religious freedom actually perpetuates a Protestant norm. Sullivan concludes that religious freedom is impossible since the drawing of the line between religion and not-religion centers around Protestant understandings of belief, ritual, the divine, and the place of religion in society. Wenger takes Sullivan’s critique a step further, by placing religious freedom within a racialized colonial context. She analyzes how religious freedom is an imperial discourse that equates religion with race. In the U.S., Wenger contends, to be Christian was connoted as whiteness and to be affiliated with Anglo-Protestant values and norms. These values and norms reinforce white, Protestant hegemony within the United States.

Therefore, the liminal gaze mediates visual delineations between white, Protestant hegemony and the other in Rockwell’s paintings. The affective encounters between the white viewer and Black bodies or Protestantism and assimilated traditions highlights the question of (re)presented community and unity within American civil-religious discourse. The “we” in

Rockwell’s paintings and in the rhetoric of the United States continue to be rooted in white, Protestantism or the myth of the American center. The negative affective responses mediated by the liminal gaze are more direct in their expression of the myth of the center, as they clearly delineate between us and them. The positive affective responses actually cloak the liminal boundary formation that requires assimilation to whiteness within American civil-religious appeals to progress and national ideals. The idea of who is American mediated in Rockwell’s paintings reveal the ambivalence of belonging in the imagined U.S. and the discursive tension within American civil religion. While it can be stated that change occurred in the visualized America as mediated in Rockwell’s Civil Rights trio, the invisibility of non-white Americans and non-Protestant traditions in the *Four Freedoms* as the most circulated of his images places the bounds of American identity firmly at the edge of whiteness and Protestantism. Additionally, the movement from visibility to inclusion relies solely with the other under the surveillance of the white gaze. Rockwell’s paintings, then, express a civil-religious narrative of idealized values and rights, but illustrate how the imagined nation’s understanding of its people and the application of those rights remains entrenched within the myth of the American center.

**CONCLUSION: RECLAIMING THE IMAGINED NATION**

Rockwell’s images extend their cultural significance as they continue to circulate today, remediating the discursive tension within American civil religion. Some of the circulations are reimaginings of the original paintings, “updating” them for a 21st century United States. These reimaginings of Rockwell (re)present narratives of American civil religion that portray the values and principles of the national imaginary. They also offer a new way of seeing America through a diverse and progressive imaginary. In this final section, I examine how contemporary
reimaginings of Rockwell’s paintings wrestle with the discursive tension outlined in this chapter by remediating the values of freedom portrayed in the original images while placing them in a different visual representation of the American community. The contemporary reimaginings of Rockwell’s paintings aim to reclaim the narrative of the imagined nation, framing it as a country founded on principles of freedom and inclusion that still has work to do to realize these values.

Artists who reimagined Rockwell’s work shared a common refrain—the paintings needed updating for the 21st century. In interviews with seven artists who have reimagined Rockwell’s illustrations, portraying a contemporary United States was of the upmost importance. Each artist explained that Rockwell’s paintings no longer represent the racial and religious demographics of the United States. These artists had the chance to visualize a 21st century America in 2018 when three different projects were undertaken to reimagine Rockwell’s Four Freedoms.451

The central change almost every artist made when trying to update Rockwell’s paintings was to change the racial demographics represented in the image. The For Freedoms artist collective included depictions of different types of families in their reimaginings of “Freedom from Want” and “Freedom from Fear.” They included inter-racial families and families with two dads. The reimaginings of “Freedom from Want” go a step beyond representing different types of families to suggest that family includes who you choose. Although most images include faces across the age spectrum, the congregation of different people who do not look related references the contemporary tradition of Friendsgiving. Massachusetts artist “Pop” Peterson took a similar approach. He portrayed him and his husband as the hosts in what he calls “Thanksgiving Gay

Dinner.” His intention with the name was not to suggest that the table is “a bunch of gay people,” but to recapture the word’s older meaning of “light-hearted and carefree” or, as Peterson stated, “it’s all going to be gay.” These reimaginings of “Freedom from Want” work to recapture the value of community in the imagined nation while shifting the public narrative around family, friends, and who visually represents the United States.

Reimaginings of “Freedom from Fear” explore how American families are not just the white couple putting their children to bed as represented in Rockwell’s original painting. The For Freedoms artists demonstrate in their recreations that although families may be of different races, sexualities, or religions, all parents want to put their children safely to bed. The reimaginings highlight the unity of American families in their common practices of caring for children through the depiction of difference as minor and subtle. A reimagining of “Freedom from Fear” for *Smithsonian Magazine* extended the familial concern for children to migrants and refugees. Edel Rodriguez, who came to the U.S. as a child from Cuba, pulled his inspiration from headlines and personal experience. For his interpretation of “Freedom from Fear,” Rodriguez wanted to turn “this ideal Norman Rockwell vision on its head” by “placing it in a detention camp in America.” He depicts the same scene as Rockwell, a mother and father tucking their children into bed, but flips the discourse of the original painting by representing a family in a place of fear and discomfort. The background to the image challenges viewers understanding of the immigrant experience as the barred window, barbed wire fence, and armed guards evoke images of World War II concentration camps. The harshness of the background and the image’s red and blue tones are juxtaposed with a gentle, private family moment unexpected in such surroundings. Rodriguez

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challenges “this vision of America as this ideal place” created by Rockwell and forces viewers to reflect on their views of immigrants.\textsuperscript{454} He calls out the narrative of the imagined nation by bringing the viewer to real American experiences of the country’s idealized values.

Other artists pulled their inspiration from headlines and current events to challenge viewers about the realization of the freedoms for all it claims to uphold. Melinda Beck included visual markers of current public debates in her reimagining of “Freedom of Speech.” The pink hair of the Black woman speaker calls back to the pink pussy hats of the 2017 Women’s March, while the pink origami birds she speaks are covered in messages of “Me Too” and “Equal Pay.” Beck’s goal was to represent the America she grew up with and to illustrate how free speech is “for everyone, like really everyone. For women, for people who aren’t white. It’s for people who aren’t heterosexual, it’s for everyone.”\textsuperscript{455}

Tim O’Brien expressed a similar sentiment as Beck in describing his motivation behind re-envisioning “Freedom of Worship.” He wanted to move beyond “the hint of the other” found in Rockwell’s original to not depict an America “centered on a New England notion of religion.”\textsuperscript{456} Given the persistence of Islamophobia in the U.S., O’Brien said he “felt obligated to center on a Muslim.”\textsuperscript{457} Like Beck, O’Brien wanted to visually extend the principle represented in Rockwell’s painting to everyone to express “that no religion has the right to say that theirs is the religion [emphasis added].”\textsuperscript{458} Attention to those excluded and oppressed by the imagined nation was also the focus of Peterson’s reimagining of “Freedom from Fear.” In it he highlights the fear and anxiety of Black parents as they tuck their children into bed. The light source in

\textsuperscript{454} Rodriguez; Tucker, “A New Vision of Norman Rockwell’s America.”
\textsuperscript{455} Melinda Beck, Ethnographic Interview with Melinda Beck, Zoom, October 27, 2020.
\textsuperscript{457} O’Brien, Interview with O’Brien.
\textsuperscript{458} O’Brien, Interview with O’Brien.
Peterson’s image comes through the window and the father looks out back toward it. This lighting is suggestive of police car spotlights highlighting and blinding the outsider inside. Such a reading of the image is only enhanced by the “I can’t breathe” headline on the paper the father holds.

These artists aim to make viewers uncomfortable to highlight the possibility of the United States. They are not trying to categorize the American project as bad but want to highlight how the nation could do better to live up to its lauded values and principles of freedom and community. They place their reimaginings in context, stating that Rockwell’s idyllic illustrations were “the kind of image that people wanted” for his time. The Four Freedoms were created at a time that was “either do or die,” according to Rodriguez, and “if you have an idea to give hope to people in the middle of a war that’s a different thing.” Yet, they view the message of Rockwell’s original paintings as still important for the conception of the U.S. in the 21st century. The For Freedoms artists describe their reimaginings as trying “to capture the magic of these iconic images.” The artists recognized the continuing significance of Rockwell’s paintings as images “meant to illustrate the best of us.” The original Four Freedoms in depicting the “best of us” addressed the values “we hold most dear,” according to Emily Shur, and she believes “the idea and concept of it is still a beautiful and very relevant idea.” Brandin Barón, who created a new image about freedom for the Norman Rockwell Museum, explained that his inspiring question was “how can all of these things [diversity, difference, pluralism, etc.] live together?” Barón believes that “if we all live by this rule of the four freedoms, then I guess there’s a way we
can make a go of it.” His response reveals the enduring power of the ideals portrayed in Rockwell’s paintings. Through the values and principles of freedom and community, the United States can become the nation it narrates itself to be through American civil religion.

The Rockwell reimaginings remediate American civil religion narratives about freedom and community while portraying a contemporary national imaginary that embraces diversity. They highlight the discursive tension within Rockwell’s mediations of American civil religion. Rockwell portrays the imagined nation as an inclusive, universal project while also overlooking the practices of exclusion and assimilative repression that are required to belong within the national imaginary. On the one hand, Rockwell’s paintings capture the “faith in America” that is crucial to American civil religion. His images represent the ideals of the nation and demonstrate their embodiment. On the other hand, Rockwell’s work depicts the myth of the American center that is connected to American civil religion. Community and freedom may be principles of the imagined nation, but they are not all inclusive. Unifying a country above divisions of race and faith to be a “light unto all nations” requires sacrifice, but the sacrifices being made are in the name of homogeneity. The others in the American imaginary hold responsibility to “do the work of adding themselves to the idealized vision of the American dream.” The United States may rhetorically be a nation of “we the people,” but the “we” of unity masks the underlying discourse of assimilation into the center.

The reimaginings continue to represent the national narrative of American rights as belonging to everyone in the country. These freedoms are “rights that all Americans should be enjoying” and the images visually represent broad access to rights that are, in practice, not
always extended to minorities in the United States. They also work to reinforce notions of community that are embedded within American civil religion. In working to echo the spirit of the original Rockwell paintings, the reimaginings provide an “immediate read” of the original images while placing them in a contemporary context. The referential style of the images help the viewer connect the values and ideals of American civil religion portrayed in the 1943 paintings with the updated message about diversity and difference for the 21st century. The style “conjures the old and the new, kind of coming full circle,” visually narrating that the U.S. and its values can be extended beyond the myth of the center to embrace the diversity of community that civil-religious narratives claim are central to national identity.

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467 Shur, Interview with Shur.
468 Shur, Interview with Shur.
469 Shur, Interview with Shur.
I have a catalogue of TV shows that I would love to one day examine as (re)presentations of national myths. This catalogue began a few years ago as I tried to think about the media examples I would use for this dissertation. Or, to be brutally honest, I began developing it while I watched TV as a break from schoolwork.

The first two TV shows I included in the catalogue screamed American civil religion to me as I watched them. “Turn,” a television adaptation of a book about George Washington’s spies during the Revolutionary War, explored the theme of a republic city on a hill. It was constructed along the common good guy (the patriots) versus bad guy (the British) storyline. “Hell on Wheels,” a show about westward expansion and the railroad, (re)produced Manifest Destiny narratives. It conveyed the glory associated with taming the wilderness. From these shows the traditional myths of the nation could be learned. The United States triumphed over British tyranny. The U.S. spread democracy across the continent. America was a chosen promised land. In many ways these two shows reproduce the myth of the American center.

These shows did challenge traditional narratives on occasion by highlighting the oppressive treatment of enslaved Africans Americans, Chinese rail workers, and the Indigenous populations. However, these glancing nods to the nation’s history did not challenge what I knew about the U.S. from other media and how I constructed meaning about the nation and myself as an American. The stories told in “Turn” and “Hell on Wheels” did not cause a reckoning with the past.
As I wrote this dissertation the new generation of Marvel universe TV shows were released. The question of Captain America as a symbol of the U.S. dominated the plot line of “Falcon and the Winter Soldier.” I watched this show with an eye for how it portrayed the U.S. and discussed what it meant to be Captain America. To the annoyance of those I watched it with, I regularly paused the show to talk about how some line, creative shot, or backstory connected to my dissertation. “Falcon and the Winter Soldier” was a show that reckoned with racism in the history of the U.S. through the super soldier program. It was a show that highlighted the discursive tension between the symbol of Captain America and the reality of the new man chosen to be him. This was a show that explored what it meant to embody the struggle between American civil religion and the myth of the American center.

Now, my reading of this show cannot be separated from the context of 2020 and the increase in anti-racist conversations within my social circles. This context was probably also a consideration in the writing of the show (or at least it seemed pretty obvious to me that it was). Yet, I share my reading of “Falcon and the Winter Soldier” to highlight how the media we consume are in conversation with other aspects of our lives as we navigate what it means to be ourselves, American, religious, a family member, etc. The narratives we hear and the stories we tell are expressions of the mediated meaning-making process we perform as individuals.

The following chapter explores the individual meaning-making process through stories. Before you continue, think about what stories you learned about the U.S. and where you learned these narratives. School? Books? TV? Family? I also want you to ask yourselves the question I asked in my interviews. Can you tell the story of the U.S. in your own words? What are the values of the United States? What does it mean to be American? Is there a piece of media you think represents the United States?
CHAPTER 6

ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE U.S.:

TELLING THE STORIES OF AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

“Being American is more than a pride we inherit. It’s the past we step into and how we repair it.”
— Amanda Gorman

This dissertation examines the role of meditated meaning-making with regards to American civil religion narratives. A central theory in this project is that “narratives are a process whereby we weave together sometimes disparate, contingent elements of life into a story that at least aspires to coherence.” In interrogating mediated American civil religion I have observed a discursive tension within the language of a progressive interfaith activist organization and Norman Rockwell’s iconic paintings. Individuals also inhabit this discursive tension as they navigate their own sense of belonging and understandings of the United States. Many of the people I interviewed for this dissertation expressed a desire for the country to live up to its imagined identity. They believe that the U.S. can be a place of equality, inclusion, freedom, and community. However, they also echoed Amanda Gorman’s words from the inauguration of President Biden—to be American requires reckoning with the past and repairing it for the future. Many people felt both hope and embarrassment about the country. They embodied the discursive tension explored in the previous two chapters.

This chapter revisits the interviews with the employees and participants of Faithful Citizens’ events and the artists who reimagined Rockwell’s paintings to interrogate how individuals navigate the discursive tension within American civil religion narratives. In conversations about U.S. history, national values, national identity, and representative media, the

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471 Hoover, Religion in the Media Age, 92.
people I spoke with aimed to reckon with the myth of the center in order to reclaim the dream of America expressed within American civil religion. In this last case study, I examine the conversations I had to demonstrate how American civil religion provides hope for individuals, but also requires a reckoning with the past.

This chapter proceeds in four parts to examine the individual embodiment of the ACR discursive tension. First, I explore how individuals imagine the U.S. through their own narrations of the country’s history, its values, and its purpose. In this examination, I see individuals engaging with a particular form of American civil-religious rhetoric, the jeremiad. Through the rhetorical use of jeremiads, participants situate their histories of the U.S. within ACR narratives. Second, I study the affective framing people expressed about the U.S. and what it means to be American. A range of emotions arose during our discussion from anger and disgust to pride and hope. Examining how people articulate their feelings about the U.S. and what they believe it means to be American highlights the role of affect in meaning-making or imagining the nation. Third, I interrogate how people’s media consumption connects to their imagined nation. Many people unconsciously related the media they were currently consuming with their understanding of the nation and their affective positioning in relation to the United States. Since this project proposes viewing American civil religion as a set of mediated narratives, it is crucial to interrogate how the media that people consume impacts their understandings of the nation, its values, and its people. Lastly, I conclude that individuals demonstrate an embodiment of the discursive tension observed in this dissertation through their personal narratives of the nation. Through affective meaning-making and media consumption, individuals felt the nation’s divisions and express disgust and desire. They articulated a dream of America that implicitly
engages a desire to reclaim American civil religion for the cultivation of a more just nation in the future.

JEREMIADS AND HOPE IN TIMES OF TRIAL

Nearly every person responded with feelings of being overwhelmed when I asked them to tell the story of the U.S. in their own words. The affective responses I observed demonstrated an understanding that the national narrative is a grand story including various perspectives. As a result, the stories told focused on more formative periods or, in Bellah’s words, times of trial, such as European treatment of Indigenous peoples, slavery and the Civil War, the Revolutionary War, and Manifest Destiny. The stories also employed a rhetorical device of American civil religion—the jeremiad. In using the jeremiad, participants were able to be highly critical of the U.S. while still upholding American civil religious ideas of choseness and democratic principles.

The jeremiad, with its biblical roots in the Book of Jeremiah, is a particular rhetorical tool within ACR narratives that decries the backsliding of the American people from their divinely elected position while calling for a better, redeemed future. Bercovitch and Marshall view Winthrop’s *A Modell of Christian Charity* as the original American jeremiad. As examined in Chapter Three, Winthrop situated the Puritans and the colonies within a fail or succeed model, reminding the settlers of their covenant. This covenant in Bellah’s American civil religion becomes “a society as perfectly in accord with the will of God as men can make it, and a light to

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472 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
all nations.” Additionally, Bellah’s “times of trial” represent moments of prophetic reckoning that highlight the nation’s need for active change to restore the country’s purpose.

Some of the informants’ stories employed the jeremiad by positioning the U.S. as beginning with a good ideal but falling short in its execution. Hasseeb described the story of the U.S. as starting as “a wonderful idea that was created by people who thought of one of the greatest social experiments I’ve ever heard of, and that social experiment is that we bring people by choice or not by their choice together, and we ask them to coexist and abide by this shared identity.” Similarly Zara explained how “the history of the United States, I would say that it was founded on the principles of all people were created equal and that we believe in the true tenets of democracy.” Others articulated the narrative of religious freedom as the positive ideal the nation was founded on. In this category, the United States began as a “beautiful and generous and respectful land,” but became “ruined” through exploitation of the land and people and other various sins—genocide, slavery, obsession with acquisition, imperialism, individualism, etc. What unifies these narratives of the U.S. is the jeremiad structure that highlights the need to return to an ideal.

It would be incorrect, however, to view the jeremiad as purely religious. The American jeremiad serves as a political sermon uniting the earthly and the divine. The narratives recounted in interviews did not frame the U.S. as a divinely elected nation or make reference to God choosing the country. Instead, the idea of America’s choseness gets expressed in the significance of the founding principles. In phrases such as “the United States began with a noble

475 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
477 Interview with Zara.
478 Bryan, Ethnographic Interview with Bryan, Zoom, October 19, 2020; Vera, Ethnographic Interview with Vera, In-Person, March 12, 2020.
479 Interview with Kerry; Interview with Vera.
480 Bercovitch, The American Jeremiad, xiv.
idea” and “there’s a deeper truth” a special status for the nation comes across.\textsuperscript{481} Respondents expressed this chosen status of the nation in articulations of national principles that were embedded in the founding, but not yet realized. The U.S., then, is not just any other country; it is the light of democracy for the world and an unfinished project.

The jeremiad structure of the stories recounted to me also attended to narratives of hope. They established a critical discourse about the past and present state of the country while imagining an ideal future. Bercovitch explains that the American jeremiad serves “to create a climate of anxiety that helped release the restless ‘progressivist’ energies required for the success of the venture.”\textsuperscript{482} Bellah described this hope in terms of “prophetic voices” that proclaim the jeremiads that foretell the fall of the nation while also outlining actions that return the nation to its divine path.\textsuperscript{483} American jeremiad narratives walk the line between despair and hope for the future.\textsuperscript{484} It is within the incitement to act that hope is visible. For instance, Matthew highlighted the importance of “visionaries” or prophets to the redemption of the nation’s principles. He expressed gratitude for the “visionaries who see a value in the inclusion of all the rights of all…fortunately the country has had a lot of those visionaries.”\textsuperscript{485} Through this emotive dualism of despair and hope, the jeremiad aids in reminding the American people of their chosen status and of the important future they must progress towards.\textsuperscript{486} In this way, the jeremiad stories reproduced basic tenants of American civil religion that highlight the idea of times of trial, choseness, and democratic principles.

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\textsuperscript{481} Layla, Ethnographic Interview with Layla, Zoom, October 13, 2020; John, Ethnographic Interview with John, Zoom, September 24, 2020.
\textsuperscript{482} Bercovitch, \textit{The American Jeremiad}, 21.
\textsuperscript{483} Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
\textsuperscript{484} Chapp, \textit{Religious Rhetoric and American Politics}, 33.
\textsuperscript{485} Interview with Matthew.
\end{flushright}
In walking the line between despair and hope, narratives recounted in interviews viewed the nation as an unfinished project ever reaching for the horizon. They highlighted civic action as a crucial step to realizing the hope for the idealized nation in the future. Ibrahim, an immigrant from Germany who has been in the U.S. for years, recognized the call-to-action of “prophetic voices” in the advocacy work of BLM and others. He explained:

However, what I find beautiful in this country is that people are speaking up, people are reacting to the history of this country and they're trying to find ways and answers to respond to the past. So people are not taking the history of this country as just a given and as an axiom that it will not change.487

In this passage, Ibrahim echoed others’ hope for the nation as it reckons with its past. However, Ibrahim placed hope in the current embodiments of U.S. principles. He recognized the work being done rather than being stuck in the dismay of the jeremiad. Optimism existed in most of the informants’ narratives as they articulated where they see steps happening “to live up to the values that it [the U.S] was born with.”488 In particular, they used the rhetoric of the jeremiad and expressions of hope in imagining the U.S. as “a reckoning of trying to actually live up to those [democratic] ideals.”489

This reckoning or eternal hope for the future of the nation was expressed in terms of the U.S. as an unfinished project along an arc toward justice. The artist Emily was challenged when I asked her to recount the story of the U.S. because “there’s no beginning, middle, or end.”490 Tim and others described the story of the nation as “an evolving one.”491 This notion of the U.S. as

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488 Interview with John.
489 Austin, Ethnographic Interview with Austin, Zoom, August 26, 2020.
490 Shur, Interview with Shur.
491 O’Brien, Interview with O’Brien.
evolving and unfinished reinforces the ACR time of trial framework. American civil religion through times of trial sees the nation as dynamic instead of as a static system of institutions. Bellah highlighted the role of ACR in shaping the future of the nation at the end of his 1967 article when he wrote, “it is a heritage of moral and religious experience from which we still have much to learn as we formulate the decisions that lie ahead.” This idea of looking forward and evolving is echoed in Ben’s description of the United States, which he sees as “an ideal that is impossible for us to live up to.” Ben understands the U.S. as “moving towards a horizon” of justice that “is a project that is forever ongoing.” The United States, as a project always reaching for the horizon, can always be moving closer to equity and justice since, in the words of Rev. Dr. King, “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.”

The arc toward justice frame within some of the informants’ stories made central the hope for the future rather than the dismay of the past and present. This frame diverges slightly from the traditional jeremiad in that it does not see the nation as remaining in a state of downfall but already on the rise. Stories from this perspective emphasized the need to confront the country’s past and to have an on-going reckoning with the nation’s ills, but also that the U.S. was on a hopeful path of progress in the 21st century. For instance, Kerry began her narrative of the U.S. with various acts of violence and oppression, but she transitioned to explaining how “over time” rights have expanded. She concluded with hope, saying “there have been times of reckoning that have punctuated our history. And my prayer is always that. That each time of reckoning might move us forward, even though I know the pendulum swing sometimes takes us

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492 Gorski, American Covenant, 2017.
493 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
494 Interview with Ben.
495 Interview with Ben.
backwards.” Here Kerry echoed sentiments that Bellah held in his articulation of American civil religion; through times of trial the nation addresses core questions of identity it must navigate. Jermaine McDonald extends this idea to a post-9/11 U.S. by outlining how ACR served to position Muslims within the imagined nation. Jonah also echoed McDonald and Bellah in understanding the U.S. as a people who can “see our flaws and strive to correct them, sometimes kicking and screaming, as in the case of the Civil War.” Thus, hope within national narratives view the United States as in a time of trial that is “reckoning” with the past in order to realize a more just future. The imagined nation, in this context, will forever be unfinished. Cycles of jeremiads and times of trial repeat, upholding the narratives of American civil religion as the nation remains “to be continued.”

Informants engaged with American civil religion to express their hopes for the future of the United States. They employed the rhetoric of the jeremiad and times of trial to illustrate the on-going project of the country in its pursuit of equality, justice, and democracy. These individual narrations of the nation demonstrated a desire to reclaim the founding principles and language within American civil religion while reckoning with the country’s past sins. Through the jeremiad and the arc toward justice frame, informants wrestled with the endurance of the myth of the American center that privileges white, Protestant hegemony while partaking in a discursive tension within ACR that imagines the nation as redeemable and able to live up to its principles.

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497 Interview with Kerry.
498 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
499 McDonald, “A Fourth Time of Trial.”
501 Interview with Haseeb.
NARRATING WHAT IT MEANS TO BE AMERICAN

The struggle to reconcile the nation’s past with its ideals also manifested in how people narrated themselves as American. Participants struggled with their emotions about the country expressing the same duality they recounted in stories of the nation’s history—upset but hopeful. However, this discursive tension around American identity was expressed through affective meaning-making in relation to familial history and current events. The common affective refrain across the interviews about being American was, in brief, “it’s complicated.” Through narratives about ancestors and the events of 2016-2020, the informants constructed their personal American identities and affective orientation in relation to the United States. This storied meaning-making “acknowledges that identity construction is a process” and highlights how the discursive tension within ACR narratives occurs in personal understandings of what it means to be American. Additionally, respondents engaged in affective meaning-making through their personal stories that encountered affective economies attached to narratives about immigration, belonging, obligation, and current events. In stories of hope, gratitude, shame, and disgust respondents affectively constructed meaning about the country and their place within it. They outlined what it means to be American in narratives that echo the jeremiad’s duality of despair and hope while personalizing the imagined nation through their own experiences. In exploring their feelings about the nation, informants told stories about the nation and themselves that occupy the contested discursive space of American civil religion as they attempted to weave together national and personal narratives about the United States to outline the bounds of their American identities.

502 Ethnographic interviews.
503 Campbell, “Understanding the Relationship between Religion Online and Offline in a Networked Society,” 74.
Many respondents contextualized their national identity within familial stories of immigration and refuge. These stories replicated ACR narratives of the United States as a place that embodies the words of Emma Lazarus inscribed on the Statue of Liberty: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Shira, a Jewish CO State Representative, explained that the U.S. meant to her “a fair shot for everyone” as her family escaped pogroms in the early-1900s “and they believed that America was the place where anyone could succeed and be themselves…that’s why they came here.” This practice of narrating one’s identity as American through their ancestors was common across the interview. Victoria and Erik highlighted their familial participation in settling the West and Upper Midwest respectively. Jim, another Jewish Colorado politician, acknowledged that he lives because of “immigration policies in the late-1800s when [his] grandparents came here.” These familial stories inform how participants situate themselves within ACR narratives about immigration, exclusion, and connection to U.S. history. In particular, respondents used their family histories as a lens for critiquing current debates about inclusion and exclusion. Jim explained that he experiences “an element of fear and anger” when he sees “people using the flag as an excuse to dominate others” because of his grandparents’ experience with oppression in Europe and refuge in the United States. Similarly, Shira understood her role as a U.S. citizen to “hold the value of a fair chance for anyone to succeed” just like her family did, but she also recognized the “systemic oppression and racism” that prevents others from having a similar experience today. Participants imagined the nation through familial stories and affective orientation towards the
opportunities afforded their ancestors. They cultivated an American identity built on the hope of their predecessors and narrated promises that situate them as belonging within the boundaries of the imagined nation, which understands itself as a nation of immigrants.

Pastor John, “a first-generation kid,” also placed his American identity in the context of his Latino father’s experience. His father’s story shaped how he understands the narrative of opportunity and the American Dream. John explained how his “dad had five bucks in his pocket when he got here and…he was an executive on Madison Avenue within twenty-five years.” This story reinforces a common narrative within American civil religion that upholds the myth of the American center—that of the “self-made men whose hard work and common sense took them from rags to riches.” Hughes refers to this as the myth of capitalism and Bellah expanded Max Weber’s argument about Protestant ethic in Broken Covenant by connecting the American dream to Protestantism and early-U.S. commerce. These stories “reinforce Americans’ patriotic pride [and]…that America is a good and just society.” For instance, John embraces the American Dream narrative as “one of the great things about this country” and understands his location in the imagined nation in terms of the affective economy attached to the self-made man mythos. Henry also situated himself within the American Dream because he “was absolutely dirt poor and…was able to obtain wealth through hard work.” These personal narratives of immigration and the American Dream uphold the myth of the American center according to Barthe’s interpretations of mythologies as making “natural” particular views.

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510 Interview with John.
512 Hughes, Myths America Lives By; Bellah, The Broken Covenant, 65.
513 Wuthnow, American Mythos, 105.
514 Interview with John.
515 Interview with Henry.
516 Barthes, Mythologies.
narratives of celebrated immigration and the economics of the American Dream outline the U.S. as a land of opportunity that makes one out of the many. Yet embedded in these narratives are the ideas of assimilation and individual responsibility of white, Protestant hegemony which become invisible as they are normalized into social discourses. In fact, the engagement with stories of success and opportunity “collectively reinforce the idea that America is still a land of opportunity, that it is a place where newcomers from diverse backgrounds are not only welcomed but given the freedom to fulfill their highest dreams.”\textsuperscript{517} To succeed and to belong in the U.S. one must uphold these myths through individual labor and overlook systemic issues.

Many respondents, however, wrestled with the myth of the American center embedded in narratives of immigration and the American Dream. Rather than accept the messages of assimilation and individual responsibility, participants’ narratives of American identity occupied a contested space that tried to weave together disparate stories to reconcile the idealized nation with the myth of the American center. In particular, they emphasized the moral community of ACR as requiring social accountability rather than individual responsibility in their narratives.\textsuperscript{518} Zara, whose parents were refugees, views herself a “the product of the American Dream,” but also recognized that it “is becoming harder and harder to realize.”\textsuperscript{519} Respondents did not view their families’ success stories and translate them into individual responsibility. They each expressed a dissatisfaction with the current state of the U.S. and its realization of the American Dream. John explained he feels “tension” or “a tightness” due to the stress he experiences about the country. He holds out hope, but for him progress “is growth inwardly and growth toward greater equity in our world and in our culture.”\textsuperscript{520} Zara wants to use her “experiences to afford

\textsuperscript{517} Wuthnow, \textit{American Mythos}, 112.  
\textsuperscript{518} Wuthnow, \textit{American Mythos}.  
\textsuperscript{519} Interview with Zara.  
\textsuperscript{520} Interview with John.
[them] to everyone” because she thinks “that should be in the story of what the United States is.”

Zara, John, Shira, and Jim narrated what it means to be American for themselves by contextualizing their family experiences within American civil religious narratives. These ACR narratives perpetuate myths of the American center, but the personal identities of Zara, John, Shira, and Jim allow them to affectively challenge these myths while reclaiming national principles within ACR.

These personal narratives of family led a few people to say they felt they belong in the United States. Most of the people who narrated themselves into the national imaginary are white, including Erik, whose ancestors immigrated from Scandinavia, and Victoria, whose family participated in westward expansion. There was a recognition that their sense of belonging or feeling of safety in the U.S. does not extend to everyone. Kerry, Vera, Henry, Victoria, and Ted all acknowledged the privilege of their whiteness in their successes and sense of belonging.

However, the caveats that white participants added to their familial stories of immigration and success were not present in Black narratives. Instead, the discursive tension between the ideals of American civil religion and the hegemony of the myth of the American center were built into stories of Black American identity. For instance, Layla, a Black pastor, also situated her national belonging within family history. However, her description of belonging highlights the tension within ACR narratives of the U.S. as a welcoming nation. She explained:

I mean, my family have been here over four hundred years...there was someone who wrote this article, you know, about the life of African Americans and our various skin tones. And she said, you know, so many of us have what she called

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521 Interview with Zara.
522 Interview with Erik; Victoria Interview.
523 Interview with Kerry; Interview with Vera; Interview with Henry; Victoria Interview; Interview with Ted.
raped colored skin, and I call it—it’s American colored skin. This is part of who we have. You know, this is generations of people here. And I can, you know, this is my home. This is where I’m from.⁵²⁴

This passage highlights what Ahmed describes as the emotional requirements of belonging. Ahmed explains how a nation can “cohere in recognition of the longevity of a history it can call its own” and Layla expressed the “requirement to be sympathetic” to a shared history of oppression.⁵²⁵ This sentiment of sympathy serves as an example of an affective orientation towards the nation that occurs within what Ahmed calls affective economies. Layla, and the others who say they belong, have been “touched into citizenship” through the circulation of affect connected to “the trauma of a past and the prospect of its conversion.”⁵²⁶

However, the meaning-making that occurs through affective economies does not rely on the interior narrative of belonging. Ahmed emphasizes the need to understand emotions outside the interior state of the individual as circulating objects and signs that transfer affect “to materialize the surfaces and boundaries that are lived as worlds.”⁵²⁷ In the case of those who feel as if they belong, they narrate themselves through their encounters with ACR narratives that support familial history and experiences such as the American Dream. Others who do not feel as if they belong still affectively align themselves with the nation. They all expressed an obligation to participate in improving the nation along the lines of the arc of justice frame. Morgan explained that even though they do not feel as if they belong because of their gender identity:

I also feel like there is a responsibility as an American not to just leave but to try to do something good while I'm here. I and I don't know, I feel like I have loyalty

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⁵²⁴ Interview with Layla.
to the people who are here, but that is like loyalty to helping the people who are here, who, who want to stay here, who are given the short end of the stick and aren't treated well.\textsuperscript{528}

This narrative of civic duty connects to an understanding of national sentiment I refer to as critical patriotism.

Critical patriotism unifies the despair and hope expressed in the American jeremiad with affective economies of national symbols and principles. This love of country, for it still is a national affection, resides within the imagined nation. Christopher Parker and Heidi Hamilton examine rhetorical differences in expressions of patriotism, distinguishing between symbolic patriotism or love of principle versus blind patriotism or love of country.\textsuperscript{529} This patriotic binary mirrors the discursive tension of ACR narratives observed in this dissertation. On the one hand, people can be critical of the U.S. and experience emotions of shame, disgust, and embarrassment. On the other hand, critical patriotism allows them the discursive space to express affection for the country’s principles and imagine a nation that lives up to ACR narratives of democratic principles. Ted exemplified critical patriotism when he noted, “And I think we're very confused about what patriotism means right now. Patriotism should be a critique to make it better always. It should always start with Yes, we're proud of what we've accomplished, but we are not done yet.”\textsuperscript{530} Personal narrations of American identity go beyond stories embedded in the myth of the American center and actually engage in the “prophetic voices” of ACR through critical patriotism.

\textsuperscript{528} Interview with Morgan.
\textsuperscript{530} Interview with Ted.
These affective orientations critical of the nation serve to “align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments.”\textsuperscript{531} For instance, Austin, a Black food writer, described his feelings about the U.S. as “an unrequited love; it’s a place of partly fulfilled promises,” but it is still his home.\textsuperscript{532} Others described their feelings about the U.S. as “embarrassed,” “ashamed,” “disappointed,” “disgust,” and “indifference” as they reflected on Trump’s presidency and the global pandemic.\textsuperscript{533} The strength of participants’ response to questions about the U.S. reveal the attachment they have even if they are critical. Vera, a white, retired woman, initially responded with a facial reaction of disgust. She described her affective response to my question as her “stomach going ‘grrrrr’.” She explained, “I feel disgust, especially at the federal level. I feel depressed and saddened and angry, you know.”\textsuperscript{534} Ahmed explains the ambivalence of disgust as it mediates withdraw and desire. She notes that the performative speech act of naming disgust sticks the emotion to an object, but it is this object that must first be encountered.\textsuperscript{535} In the case of Vera, she named the object of her disgust as “Trumpers” in her family.\textsuperscript{536} Here Vera demonstrates the affective attachment Ahmed outlines as delineating the boundaries of belonging. Vera’s disgust performs affective meaning-making as she draws the borders of what she desires America to be and what repels her about the current nation. The majority of the informants performed similar affective meaning-making as they situated their negative affective orientations toward criticisms of the racial, economic, and other social injustices in the U.S. while simultaneously imagining a nation in line with values outlined in ACR narratives.

\textsuperscript{531} Ahmed, “Affective Economies,” 119.
\textsuperscript{532} Interview with Austin.
\textsuperscript{533} Interview with Morgan; Interview with John; Angela, Ethnographic Interview with Angela, Zoom, April 24, 2020.
\textsuperscript{534} Interview with Vera.
\textsuperscript{535} Ahmed, \textit{The Cultural Politics of Emotion}.
\textsuperscript{536} Interview with Vera.
Critical patriotism and negative affective orientations connect with an imagined community or social space such as the dream of America outlined in ACR narratives that use the jeremiad. A place where equity, justice, and freedom for all are actually embodied and practiced. Victoria described the ability to critique the nation as “America at our best” and Ben sees “something beautiful about the struggle.” Ben’s imagined nation embraces “the conversation” and disagreement. He explained that his frustration and dislike of the current status of the U.S. “doesn’t mean I’m going to leave it…what it means for me is that I am now obligated to act. I am, I am obligated to work to improve this country that I believe in and love and is a part of me.” Similarly, Ted said that as a white, privileged male in the U.S. he has an obligation “and critique is part of the obligation.” Here personal narratives of American identity illustrate how individuals embody the disparate stories of American civil religion narratives and the myth of the American center. Shira affectively connected her critical patriotism back to the immigrant experience of her grandparents. She explained that in spite of the negative aspects of the country she still cries when the national anthem is sung because of her gratitude and love for the ideals of the nation. For Shira and the other informants being critical of the nation and disgusted with current events is an affective performance of their desire for an imagined nation based on the principles in ACR narratives, such as unity, triumph over tyranny, equity, and freedom.

This tension between disgust and desire, belonging and exclusion, familial past and future in the personal narratives of what it means to be American illustrate the role of affect theory in meaning-making about the nation. Such meaning-making occurs through the affective economies attached to ACR narratives and the discursive tension between desired principles and disgust for

537 Victoria Interview; Interview with Ben.
538 Interview with Ben.
539 Interview with Ted.
the myth of the center. Ted, in particular, highlighted the tension within the narrated affective meaning-making of what it means to be American. He quoted a Robert Frost poem: “Home is that place that when you go there, they have to take you in.”

For some of the people I spoke with Frost’s words echoed true as they narrated themselves at home in the U.S. through stories of immigration, success, and opportunity, while others called the U.S. their home where they are not welcomed. Yet, alongside these self-descriptions of belonging and experiencing ACR narratives, people critiqued the nation and affectively performed disgust. Their personal narratives of being American illustrate how “the national body can then appear to love diversity at the very same time as requiring those who embody diversity to give their allegiance to its body.”

In other words, the stories individuals tell to themselves and perform for others about their American experience reveals how American civil religion narratives circulate affective economies of desire and disgust. Through affective encounters people wrestle with personal connections, ACR principles, and the hegemony of the myth of the American center. They reconcile the discursive tension between critique and love through personal narratives that make a cohesive whole out of the national story. It is a story of hope for the future and a reckoning with the past. It is the dream of America.

CONSUMING STORIES OF THE HYPERMEDIATED NATION

Various themes emerged from the different stories people recounted about the U.S. and their personal encounters with national narratives. In the first section, I explored how respondents framed the American story using the rhetoric of jeremiad and arc toward justice. The second section highlighted how people affectively make meaning about what it means to be

540 Interview with Ted
American through familial history and critical patriotism. The recounting of these stories and the meaning-making that occurs through them does not happen in isolation. Just as with the discussion of intertextual meaning-making in Chapter Five, this case study situates the narratives informants shared within broader public conversations that occur through media. For, “the stories we hear provide templates for telling our own stories.” In this final section, I explore how media the informants consumed connect to how they narrated the nation and imagined America. In particular, the media participants cited as being representational of the U.S. signal how the pervasiveness of media in today’s society inundates meaning-making with daily gestures to the nation. This hypermediated nation places personal narratives in conversation with public circulations about the United States. As informants related their media consumption to narrations of the nation along themes of personal experience, critical patriotism, and national values they demonstrated the significance of examining American civil religion as a set of mediated narratives since media in all forms dominate contemporary society.

Some of the media people cited were representative of their individual experiences of the United States, demonstrating the on-going processes of meaning-making about the nation and self that occur even when consuming entertainment. Similar to how informants connected affective meaning-making to familial stories, the reflection of personal experiences in media highlights “people’s efforts at making meaningful, coherent narratives of themselves” with, through, and alongside the national narrative-building that happens in public media from the news to entertainment. For instance, Henry’s connection to the American Dream and his own rags to riches story were reiterated in his entertainment media.

542 Wuthnow, American Mythos, 112.
543 Hoover, Religion in the Media Age, 20.
Oh. Well, my favorite show right now is probably “Stumptown” an ABC show….

You got an underdog person that's got a lot of baggage that is a private
detective.\textsuperscript{544}

Henry identified with the character in “Stumptown” as the show (re)presents his own American experience regarding struggle and success. Similarly, his favorite movie is “The Wizard of Oz” because of its hope and focus on “empowering individuals that are flawed and making them a
unified unit.”\textsuperscript{545} Henry’s meaning-making process in both the TV show and movie illustrate how his understandings of the U.S., his American experience, and the way he imagines the ideal nation occur in conversation with the entertainment media he consumes. For Henry, the U.S. is about individual triumphs and overcoming obstacles in pursuit of unity. In this way, Henry’s consumption of national narratives through entertainment media uphold American civil religion’s goal of providing a moral community unified by values such as hard work.

Shira’s media selection also resonated with her personal narrative of being the grandchild of Jewish refugees. In fact, she choked back tears as she realized that her favorite book was inscribed by her grandmother. The book, \textit{Henrietta Szold: Record of a Life} by Rose Zeitlin, recounts the biography of Szold who helped bring the cure for trachoma to Israel. Shira called this story “my America” and saw Szold as the “ultimate problem solver.”\textsuperscript{546} Besides the fact that Shira, as a Jewish state representative, has also committed her life to solving social issues, the story of Szold represents the diversity, creativity, and drive that is what it means to be American to her.\textsuperscript{547} Shira saw herself in her media selection, and through this book reinforced her personal narrative of the U.S. as a place that welcomes immigrants and upholds freedom and justice.

\textsuperscript{544} Interview with Henry.
\textsuperscript{545} Interview with Henry.
\textsuperscript{546} Interview with Shira.
\textsuperscript{547} Interview with Shira.
Other participants connected their media selection to personal experiences of the U.S. like Henry and Shira, but Zara’s media example also reflected the theme of critical patriotism. Zara spoke about photographic journalism published in 2020 from anti-racism protests. She explained these photos “embodied what I aspire to or that are an accurate description of the pulse of our nation right now.” Images of protest and enacting the ideal imagined nation of equity and justice resonated with Zara as she ran for state office and recounted her experiences with racism and bigotry as the daughter of Palestinian refugees. Erik also selected “protest literature” as his representative media. He saw a connection between the broadsides published during the Revolution and social media calls for protest during the summer of 2020.

Zara’s and Erik’s media selection embody the values of their imagined nations. Erik explained how protest materials “of like let’s show up and demonstrate and claim the mantle of this value...encapsulates the American ethos.” This emphasis on action to realize the imagined nation and being unified by common national values came through in Zara’s recounting of engaging with protest photography. She explained, “I have to tell you, though, even yesterday I saw this one photo of a Biden supporter with a huge Biden Harris sign wearing a mask shaking hand with a Trump supporter with a huge Trump sign. And I was, like, this is what it should be, right?”

What Erik and Zara touched upon in their discussion of coming across images or using social media to arrange protests is the idea of hypermediation or how media are so pervasive in daily life that narrative consumption happens constantly.

Interestingly, informants related media examples of hypermediation with national values. Ted, Haseeb, and Ibrahim cited social media platforms as emblematic of the United States.

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548 Interview with Zara.
549 Interview with Erik.
550 Interview with Erik.
551 Interview with Zara.
Social media (re)represented “a spirit of democratization” to Ted who equated it with the burdens of the First Amendment. Here Ted unified the hypermediated society with American principles and attached ACR narratives of free speech and democracy to social media. Similarly, Haseeb identified YouTube as “an extremely powerful representation” because of the broad array of content the platform holds. He saw YouTube as a form of the idealized public square where everything from “the mundane to the most bizarre things” are circulated. Social media becomes (re)presentative of the values of the United States as a place where “you hear everybody” and are able to understand “where people are coming from, what people are thinking about.” This hypermediation of social media, then, serves as an ideal public square where people can encounter the other and (re)form their understandings of what it means to be American.

Informants viewed the ability to access information almost anywhere, anytime as an opportunity for education and hearing diverse voices. A few people named media about the U.S. as a way to access “the point of view of the disenfranchised.” Howard Zinn, David McCullough, and Zora Neale Hurston were a few authors named as representing the American experience. The informants who cited these books emphasized the importance of understanding the nation’s past and the various experiences of Americans. The musical “Hamilton” and the 1619 Project were other media sources identified as providing a (re)presentation of the U.S. that could reshape how the nation is imagined. Brandin Barón, an artist, saw these media as working to “get everyone excited about the story of how this country was started so

552 Interview with Ted.
553 Interview with Haseeb.
554 Interview with Ibrahim.
555 Interview with Angela.
556 Victoria Interview; Interview with Vera; Interview with Angela; Interview with Ben; Barón, Interview with Barón.
557 Interview with Ben; Interview with Vera; Barón, Interview with Barón.
that…moving forward then we can be” a country of “every ethnicity and every race and every age and every gender.”\textsuperscript{558} The constant circulation of information in the hypermediated nation can be a conversation starter that allows for the arc toward justice imagined nation to be mediated or it can be a distraction. Layla brought up a book about the “power of spectacle” during the Roman Empire. She saw “parallels in our current life” with the “fascination of spectacle” illustrated by reality TV and the 24-hour news cycle. Layla touches upon the hypermediation of information but sees it as a boundary rather than idealized public sphere. She explained it as all “kind of a spectacle out here…that serves to keep us from seeing each other truly.”\textsuperscript{559}

However, the idea of media as a conversation that grants access to different voices dominated in the interviews. It was especially prevalent for those who named music as representative of America. Haseeb and Jonah each selected a genre that represented their imagined nation of various voices and unheard stories. Haseeb named hip-hop as (re)presentative of his American experience. He described hip-hop as “a media with which people express their realities that weren’t being covered or being cared for.”\textsuperscript{560} For Haseeb, hip-hop serves as a media location that can challenge dominant national narratives and offer space to cultivate a different self-understanding of oneself as American and one’s relation to national symbols. Jonah highlighted a traditional ACR narrative in his genre choice. He selected folk as representative of the United States since it “in the purest definition draws from so many other traditions.”\textsuperscript{561} He placed folk music within the national narrative of immigration and diversity as the genre “draws from multi-national and ethnic traditions and creates this unique polyglot that is both universal

\textsuperscript{558} Barón, Interview with Barón.
\textsuperscript{559} Layla, Interview with Layla.
\textsuperscript{560} Interview with Haseeb.
\textsuperscript{561} Interview with Jonah.
and very American.” Jonah’s reasoning for selecting folk echoes Bellah’s description of American civil religion as “genuinely American and genuinely new.” Through hip-hop and folk various symbols, stories, and ideas about the U.S. circulate (re)presenting and (re)forming the imagined nation.

The various media that participants identified with the U.S. varied from books and movies to music and social media. In fact, many informants struggled to name just one media text or to select one from the deluge of information they consume on a daily basis. This deluge serves as one sign of the hypermediated society. Media is consumed as news, entertainment, or education even when people are not consciously aware of doing so. This means (re)presentations of the nation through mediated narratives are unceasing as people go about their lives. American civil religion narratives are constantly being circulated and informing how individuals imagine the nation and behave as American. In fact, media are the commodification of “the symbols and ideas that circulate” about the nation. It is unsurprising, then, that the people I spoke with connected their personal narrations of the U.S. and their identities as American with the media they consume given “that popular media offer discursive resources [such as American civil religion] that are available to individual actors as they articulate themselves in relationship to their communities and the state.”

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562 Interview with Jonah.
563 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
564 Hoover, Religion in the Media Age, 13.
CONCLUSION: RECLAIMING AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION AS THE DREAM OF AMERICA

Stories inform and (re)present how people see the world. In the case of the nation, these narratives construct the imagined community, delineate the boundaries of belonging, and outline correct behavior. Individuals consume these narratives through the lessons they learn in school, their family histories, and popular media. The people I spoke with for this project recounted their narratives of the United States and what it means to be American. They connected these stories to the various media they consume. My informants demonstrated the significance of media and mediation to the processes of meaning-making that shape the imagined nation. In particular, they narrated the nation using American civil religion narratives of immigration, success, and opportunity along with the rhetorical tools of the jeremiad and the arc toward justice frame.

The engagement with American civil religion narratives in the storied meaning-making about American identity challenged my expectations of progressive positionings. I anticipated participants to dismiss ACR narratives about a nation of immigrants, democratic principles, and opportunity as fabrications of an exceptionalist America that participates in an “epistemology of ignorance” about its past. Instead, informants demonstrated an affective embodiment of the discursive tension between American civil religion narratives about equity, justice, and freedom and the myth of the American center that privileges white, Protestant unity through assimilation and individual responsibility. On the one hand, their stories participated in ACR and expressed a desire to hold onto the principles the nation claims to represent. On the other hand, respondents acknowledged the country’s oppressive and racist past. They performed disgust in relation to the events that occurred in 2020 and they narrated an imagined nation that reckoned with its history.

in order to live up to its potential. This discursive tension was most apparent in informants’

try to narrate the story of the United States as they described the nation as a “flawed and

The implicit manifestation of American civil religion in the personal narratives of

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In embodying the
discursive tension within American civil religion in their own narrations and experiences of the

America is not the American Dream of opportunity and success in the melting pot. Rather, the
dream of America is the imagined nation narrated by the individuals. It is a “salad bowl” of
different cultures, ethnicities, identities, beliefs, etc. It is a version of the United States that has
confronted its past, become “reconciled to that history,” and learned from its sins to reclaim and
live out equity, justice, and freedom for all. This dream of America is articulated through
American civil religion. In fact, this dream of America is a formulation of American civil
religion that has wrestled with the nation’s white, Protestant hegemony to circulate narratives of
“a place where everyone can flourish” outside the myth of the center. The personal stories in
this case study, along with the mediations of American civil religion in progressive interfaith
activism and Rockwell’s paintings, demonstrates that contemporary ACR requires a

567 Interview with Erik; Mary, Ethnographic Interview with Mary, Zoom, November 5, 2020; Interview with Katie.
568 Interview with Ibrahim; Interview with Zara.
569 Interview with Erik.
570 Interview with Erik.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION:

A RECKONING BETWEEN THE ONE AND THE MANY

“Do I contradict myself? / Very well then….I contradict myself; / I am large….I contain multitudes.”
— Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* 571

On January 6, 2021 my phone began to vibrate with news alerts about violence at the U.S. Capitol Building. I was writing one of the case studies for this project and turned my phone on silent. My first thought was that another protest was happening and nothing new would occur. By late morning I was scanning videos of the Capitol siege, scrolling Twitter, and looking for live feeds from rioters on Facebook. What I witnessed was a mediated battle over the narrative of the U.S. and democracy. The insurrection unfolding before my eyes brought the material of this dissertation to the forefront of public discourse again.

The visual rhetoric observed at the Capitol incursion highlights the myth of the American center in a forceful and explicit manner. Christian symbolism and language pervaded the Jan. 6 attack as insurrectionists carried flags that read “Jesus is my savior. Trump is my president” and proclaimed they acted on behalf of the Lord. 572 In their minds, the 2020 election was a fraud and their Christian nationalism required they take back the “people’s house” on the day the electoral college votes would be ratified. Many wore patches on their military-style garb that read “Armor of God” or carried signs proclaiming religious patriotism as justification for their acts. 573 Marie

Griffith, the director of the John C. Danforth Center on Religion and Politics, described the scene as a place where “The name of God was everywhere, invoked by men and women claiming to wear God’s armor as patriot soldiers protecting the soul of an exceptionalist nation.” These Christian, mainly white, Americans violently and publicly declared the U.S. as a nation of white, (Protestant) Christians who imagine the nation in terms of divine choseness and sacred purpose. In other words, January 6th highlighted the messy entanglement between the myth of the American center and American civil religion as embodied by the Christian Right.

Few people explicitly connected the events of Jan. 6 to American civil religion. However, commentators did refer to the attack as a “desecration of our democracy” and a desecration of a national symbol. Mark Silk noted in a column for Religion News Service that “it’s sacrilege that takes the measure of sacredness and brings it home.” He highlights that in the transgression of the Capitol Building and the presidential election, the sacrality of such places and events becomes illuminated and central to the identity of the nation. Mark Valeri, a professor of religion and politics, places the events squarely in the tradition of American civil religion through the various media framings circulated on the day:

The commentary of much of the media and of politicians on January 6 depended on a different set of tropes, derived from America’s tradition of civil religion.


Silk, “Donald Trump and the End of the American Civil Religion.”
Several pundits and members of Congress denounced the assault on the Capitol as a desecration—the defilement of a holy site. Others spoke of the Capitol as a shrine to democracy, violated by malevolent enemies. President-elect Joe Biden referred to the sacred rite of confirming a presidential election. The rhetoric conveyed the magnitude of the offense by asserting the sacrality of America’s democratic traditions.\footnote{Valeri emphasizes the religious language of American civil religion and its significance at times of tumult. He claims, “Our references to the sacred help us to interpret our current situation in relation to transcendent realities and ideals, the disregard for which was all too evident by those who stormed the Capitol and their advocates in the ranks of Congress itself.”\footnote{Editors, “Scholars of Religion and Politics Respond to the Capitol Insurrection.”} In other words, the Christian nationalists who stormed the Capitol were not adherents to American civil religion but actually transgressors.}

Valeri emphasizes the religious language of American civil religion and its significance at times of tumult. He claims, “Our references to the sacred help us to interpret our current situation in relation to transcendent realities and ideals, the disregard for which was all too evident by those who stormed the Capitol and their advocates in the ranks of Congress itself.”\footnote{Editors, “Scholars of Religion and Politics Respond to the Capitol Insurrection.”} In other words, the Christian nationalists who stormed the Capitol were not adherents to American civil religion but actually transgressors.

The events of January 6\textsuperscript{th} and the following rededication to democracy or resacralization of the Capitol Building on Inauguration Day bring this project full circle back to the 2017 op-eds that sparked my research and the questions that drove this dissertation. Where is American civil religion? Can it provide a common narrative for the nation? How does American civil religion manifest in progressive communities? The authors cited in the introduction to this dissertation asserted the need for American civil religion in 2017 as it would restore unity and purpose to a divided nation.\footnote{This acceptance of ACR as a given institution that unifies the nation was challenged by January 6\textsuperscript{th}. In fact, the storming of the Capitol demonstrates the tension illustrated by Valeri’s claim that American civil religion’s language and significance are evident in the disregard for transcendent realities and ideals.} This acceptance of ACR as a given institution that unifies the nation was challenged by January 6\textsuperscript{th}. In fact, the storming of the Capitol demonstrates the tension illustrated by Valeri’s claim that American civil religion’s language and significance are evident in the disregard for transcendent realities and ideals.\footnote{Editors, “Requiem for Civil Religion.”}
in this project. On one hand, January 6th showed the extremism that can arise from the myth of
the American center. It was a demand for the oneness of the white, Protestant center to dominate.
On the other hand, the case studies and the denouncements of Jan. 6th demonstrate a desire to
hold on to national values and the desire for a common story rooted in some of the narratives of
American civil religion. Yet, this call for a common story must also wrestle with the myth of the
American center.

This dissertation centered mediated meaning-making as a way to examine American civil
religion as it participates in (re)constructing the nation during a highly polarized time. Three
questions drove this research: (1) Where is American civil religion in the mediated meaning-
making about the United States? (2) What kind of nation does American civil religion
communicate when examined as a network of narratives circulated through media? (3) Can
American civil religion provide a common narrative to bring a diverse nation together or is it too
deply intertwined with white, Protestant hegemony? The diverse cases in this dissertation
answered these questions by exploring how American civil religion narratives impact
progressive imaginaries of the United States and provide a foil to the employment of ACR by
Christian nationalists. These cases were selected primarily for their progressive social and
political perspectives given the public dominance of Christian Right and Christian nationalist
voices in the contemporary public, civic sphere. I was curious about the employment of
American civil religion narratives in progressive activism and how the hegemony of white,
Protestantism in the U.S. was addressed in these communities. Each of the cases contributed to
examining American civil religion in progressive communities by highlighting the mediated
meaning-making that occurs in interfaith policy activism, contemporary interpretations of
Rockwell, and the personal narratives of what it means to be American. These cases provided a
holistic examination of bottom-up embodiment and engagement with American civil religion narratives in progressive imaginaries of the United States.

The overarching conclusion of this research is that American civil religion occupies a contested space in the mediated imaginary of the nation as it wrestles with the white, Protestant hegemony at the heart of the myth of the American center. American civil religion simultaneously provides a network of mediated narratives that allow people to reclaim the values and principles of the nation in pursuit of a more just and equitable country or the dream of America. Chapter Two outlined a theory of mediated American civil religion that provides an approach to examining meaning-making about the nation, its values, and its people beyond governmental and cultural institutions which have been central to previous studies. This chapter specifically attended to media theory as a different approach to the examination of American civil religion. Chapter Three examined the co-constitutive relationship between the field of American religious history and American civil religion in the context of the myth of the American center. This overview of American religious history, national narratives, and American civil religion highlighted the endurance of a Protestant hegemony in the United States. The three case studies interrogated the imagined nation (re)presented in three forms of mediated American civil religion—progressive faith-based civic engagement, Rockwell’s paintings, and personal narratives. The case studies illustrated how a mediated approach to American civil religion reveals a discursive tension that engages with issues of national identity that reflect public debates over the history, culture, and future of the United States.
THE ONE OR THE MANY: FINDINGS ABOUT AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

The three cases illustrated that American civil religion circulates narratives about the nation, self, and other through various media. Individuals and groups incorporated these ACR (re)presentations into how they make meaning about the nation. This process of co-construction of the imagined nation highlights the significance of mediated meaning-making in articulations of American identity and the divisions that exist within the nation. Robert Wuthnow concisely summarizes the significance of national narratives as “the magnets around which narrative communities form…[and] serve less as arguments and more as the context in which the arguments take place.” American civil religion narratives, then, are the discursive space in which public debates occur about the boundaries of belonging, the identity of the U.S, and what it means to be American.

However, the narrative location of debate exists within networks of meaning that link conversations across time, space, and socio-political experiences to help individuals navigate their personal identities in relation to the American national identity. This intertextual process of meaning-making is not purely rational. Instead, personal narratives in relation to publicly mediated discourses function as affective encounters. As the theory of mediated American civil religion in Chapter Two outlined, affective encounters participate in the delineation between us and them. These encounters that occur through media circulate histories of affective economies which leave different meanings and emotions stuck to objects, people, and ideas. The case studies demonstrated how the circulation of affective economies through mediation result in the embodiment of the meaning-making processes. Together, mediation and affect theory provide an approach to examining American civil religion narratives as they circulate and (co)construct the

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580 Wuthnow, American Mythos, 219.
imagined nation through affective and public practices of civic belonging. Most importantly the interdisciplinary theory of mediated American civil religion reveals the existence of a discursive tension within ACR narratives between the center and the margins or, as described in the introduction and Chapter Three, the one and the many. This tension manifested in the case studies around questions of belonging, visibility, and national values. In particular, the cases each wrestled with the central ACR goal of a unified nation that transcends racial, religious, political, and cultural divides. The remainder of this section examines the similarities and differences between case studies in how they illustrated the discursive tension within American civil religion around who belongs, what the nation stands for, and the “vital center.”

Narrating Who Belongs

All of the cases studies addressed questions of national identity and narrating the boundaries of belonging. They engaged in practices of making visible those who occupy the margins of American society with the aim of expanding the boundaries of (re)presentation. Faithful Citizens attempted to raise the voices of the oppressed to give them a place within policy making. Rockwell’s paintings aimed to illustrate the exclusion of Black Americans from the democratic project and equal access to national rights. The artists who reimagined Rockwell’s works took this drawing of visibility a step further by painting the nation in racially and religiously diverse ways. The personal narratives gathered through interviews described an imagined nation that accounts for the diversity of experiences and acknowledges the country’s history of exclusion. In each case, the aim to expand the boundaries of American belonging engaged with narratives of American civil religion.
The Faithful Citizens and Rockwell case studies emphasized practices of literal visibility in their efforts to expand the imagined community of the United States. Both cases placed the other in public to highlight the exclusionary policies that the U.S. employed. Their justification for doing so made reference to language from the sacred documents of American civil religion (e.g. The Declaration of Independence). Faithful Citizens’ advocates positioned their practices of visibility as a corrective to the current embodiment of “all men are created equal.” They wanted to publicly demonstrate the fulfillment of this founding principle. The Rockwell paintings and reimaginings used visibility to display inconsistencies within the national narratives of diversity, equality, and pluralism. Whether it was painting Black Americans into spaces dominated by whiteness or giving a microphone to immigrant and formerly incarcerated voices, the case studies embodied the idea that public (re)presentation is the first step to inclusion. This notion of positive (re)presentation highlights the importance of mediated meaning-making in shaping the boundaries of belonging. Hall explains that the voices, bodies, and messages conveyed through media inform understandings of the world. Similarly, hearing or viewing the stories of the other challenged the dominant discourses by providing a corrective narrative that those on the margins belong, too. It is from this national principle that “all men are created equal” that the case studies operate in challenging the myth of the American center by emphasizing the previous absence of marginalized voices through practices of visibility in an attempt to hold the nation responsible for embodying its stated values.

Unlike the other case studies, the personal narratives examined belonging in family stories and historical narratives. Informants practiced visibility through their narrations of the U.S. story by placing oppression, genocide, and immigration at the forefront rather than the

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581 Hall and Jhally, Stuart Hall: Representation & the Media.
traditional ACR narrative of liberty and the rhetoric of the Revolutionary War. These histories also included familial stories about immigration and the American Dream. Here informants capitalized on traditional ACR narratives about the country as a place for all and a land of opportunity where anyone could succeed. The recounting of family successes alongside historical acts of exclusion was not a contradiction for participants. Instead, they acknowledged their experiences were not those of everyone in the United States. Such divergent narratives did not result in cognitive dissonance but instead communicated the recognition of a discursive tension within the narrative recounting of American belonging.

The discursive tension within ACR narratives about national belonging arose prominently in the Faithful Citizens and Rockwell cases through affective encounters. In both case studies, affective encounters brought members of the dominant population (white, Protestants) into contact with the other. The stated goal was to affectively position those on the margins as American by appealing to the common humanity of all. As noted, these affective encounters occurred through practices of visibility. However, visibility and the affective economies stuck to othered bodies do not always result in positive recognition and inclusion. Respondents to Rockwell’s Civil Rights paintings illustrated how visibility can cause an affective encounter of fear, disgust, and hate. Ahmed explains that relational experiences between us and them can lead to feeling threatened by the presence of the other. In the case of Rockwell’s paintings, viewers virtually encountered Black bodies and responded as if this practice of visibility threatened the hegemony of the myth of the American center.

While such negative responses were not publicly visible in the Faithful Citizens case study, structures of power around civic participation and those encouraging visibility replicated the

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myth of the American center. Those who organized and created space for marginalized voices were mainly people who could be viewed as members of dominant discourses of belonging. Most leaders of Faithful Citizens were white and Protestant (though predominantly female) and embodied social power in their ability to recognize certain voices over others. The power of the socio-political positioning of those doing the recognizing was also a consideration in the Rockwell and personal narrative case studies. Rockwell and most of the artists who reimagined his work could be read as white in American society. Similarly, most of the people interviewed for this project because of those who engaged with Faithful Citizens or reimagined Rockwell’s work were members of the American center—passing as white and/or Protestant.

The positionality of those working to expand the boundaries of belonging through American civil religion narratives raised the question of assimilation and the endurance of the myth of the American center. The narrative of making one out of the many manifested in the case studies in efforts of inclusion and practices of visibility. This narrative of unity reinforced the myth of the American center as affective encounters resulted in the labor of inclusion being placed on marginalized bodies. In the Rockwell case study, the white gaze led to the center regulating whose behavior could or could not be incorporated into the American public. The personal narrative case also occasionally highlighted the call of assimilation to the center as people recounted their family’s or personal embodiment of ACR narratives such as the self-made man, immigrant melting pot, and individual responsibility. However, as noted previously, these narratives that reinforce the myth of the American center were held in tension for people as they recounted the nation’s history and the media they consumed. Similarly, in the Faithful Citizens case study the call for assimilation took place through the boundaries of civic participation but the responsibility for action was placed on the shoulders of the privileged. Across the case
studies, the discursive tension within ACR narratives manifested as people wrestled with expanding the bounds of the imagined nation and being caught in the myth of the American center that emphasizes the unity of the one over the collectivity of the many.

Reclaiming National Values

This tension over American civil religion’s entanglement with white, Protestant hegemony also manifested in the case studies regarding national values and hopes for the future. In fact, all of the case studies demonstrated a mediated effort to reclaim the dream of America expressed in ACR by holding the nation accountable to its purported values. This reckoning with the nation’s past and present positioned American civil religion narratives as helpful to reimagining the U.S. as a country in line with its virtues of equity, justice, and liberty while also acknowledging the power of the myth of the American center.

Each case study referenced founding principles of liberty and equality as critical to the imagined nation of the future. This emphasis on a “founder’s mentality” manifested through ACR narratives that appeal to the sacred texts, rhetorical traditions, and embodied virtues. For instance, the personal narrative case study employed the ACR rhetoric of jeremiad and the arc toward justice to position the U.S. as a nation working to fulfill its promises as outlined in the Constitution and Declaration of Independence. Similarly, the Faithful Citizens and the Rockwell cases reiterated traditional narratives of the U.S. founding to demonstrate that the nation was founded on an ideal and its realization is possible through civic participation. Faithful Citizens manifested this arc toward justice version of the nation in their efforts to exemplify national virtues of equity, justice, and liberty through policy and advocacy. Rockwell illustrated the nation’s virtues in his paintings, which the artists who reimagined them explained were still
relevant today and important to the national identity. In highlighting the national virtues of the U.S., the case studies attempted to reclaim aspects of ACR narratives in an effort to form a more perfect imagined union.

This appeal to national virtues was not practiced out of ignorance of the nation’s faults. In fact, each case examined U.S. history in an attempt to reckon with the myth of the American center as the first step towards imagining a better nation. Informants in the personal narrative case positioned U.S. history within narratives of the nation’s sins and noted the importance of learning about the past in their media consumption. In particular, the media they consumed demonstrated a desire to reckon with the past and improve historical literacy about the United States, its actions, its virtues, and hopes for the future. This emphasis on education and reckoning with the past to reclaim national virtues came across in the Faithful Citizens case as advocates highlighted stories of historical oppression as the root of systemic racism and exclusion today. Surprisingly, the Rockwell paintings and the contemporary artists did not have the same engagement with history as the other case studies. Both Rockwell and the contemporary artists focused on narrating contemporary injustices to highlight national values. History, in the Rockwell case, was viewed as outdated rather than a lesson from which to learn. Yet, across all the case studies the engagement with national values and a confrontation with American sins attempted to separate equity, justice, and liberty from white, Protestant hegemony. I observed a desire to uphold the U.S. identity as a nation of democratic rights and as an ideal project in tension with a need to reckon with the country’s oppression and exclusion of those on the margins.
Reckoning with the Center

A need to reckon with the past was a reoccurring theme throughout the case studies, whether this took the form of updating paintings or expanding the scope of historical narratives discussed in public to attend to violence and oppression. In the previous section, I outlined how the case studies demonstrated a desire to reclaim national values embedded in ACR narratives. This other desire to reckon with the past highlights the contested nature of ACR in contemporary society and makes it difficult to normatively conclude whether the concept should be or should not be a part of national discourse. Instead, I find this overarching theme of wanting to confront the nation’s failures to live up to its promises as one approach to addressing the discursive tension in American civil religion. The findings in this dissertation suggest that in confronting the past the nation can reckon with the myth of the American center by revealing the foundation on which the city on a hill is built.

Reckoning with the myth of the American center does not mean the center will disappear. In fact, scholarship by Tisa Wenger and Charles W. Mills highlights how a racial and religious center exists in the basic formulation of key U.S. tenets of religious freedom and the social contract.583 Confrontation with hegemonic discourses of white, Protestant morality, however, begin with new narratives being brought to the fore. The Faithful Citizens and personal narrative case studies attempted to do this by sharing parts of American history glossed over in schools, while the Rockwell case appealed to contemporary issues of injustice to highlight those excluded from the center. In this articulation of American civil religion, national narratives and traditions resist unifying impulses but share a common message—the desire to be a nation in line with its founding principles. The United States, in this formulation, becomes a dispersed center like a

wheel; without the spokes of different cultures, stories, and identities the weight of the American project cannot be carried. The center in this imagined nation serves as a prophetic narrative that reminds the country of its failings in order to realize its dream.

This articulation of American civil religion moves beyond the idea of “tradition as palliative.” Instead, ACR narratives lead to a collective “culture that is self-conscious of its past.” Practices of reflection on the past and present would be the norm in this application of ACR, which I see beginning to happen in the circulation of different narrative movements and popular culture representations, such as the 1619 Project, Black Lives Matter, For Freedoms art installations, and “Falcon and the Winter Soldier.” These shifting narratives about the nation’s past, present, and future demonstrate that American civil religion can be “a dynamic and living tradition” that distinguishes itself from the myth of the American center by encouraging the country to be “more concerned with why we think certain [narratives, beliefs, and] actions are legitimate.”

American civil religion in the 21st century is not exactly as Bellah understood it in 1967 and it is not a revitalization of the past as the 2017 op-eds outlined. The case studies in this dissertation demonstrate that ACR is more than “a heritage of moral and religious experience” that contains “a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals.” American civil religion is a set of narratives about national virtues and principles as outlined in the founding documents that struggles with white, Protestant hegemonic discourses. To fully understand the role of American civil religion in U.S. society requires a mediated approach that attends to the circulation of narratives and the introduction of new texts that modify meaning-making processes. An

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584 Bellah, The Broken Covenant, 144.
586 Gorski, American Covenant, ix; Wuthnow, American Mythos, 221.
587 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
American civil religion as embodied in the case studies strives to reclaim national values in an effort to reckon with the past, the contradictions, and the multitudes that are contained within the U.S. project and dream.

THE QUESTION(S) OF AMERICAN CIVIL RELIGION

Scholars have wrestled with the American civil religion since Bellah’s introduction of the idea. Some academics challenged its existence while other questioned the concept’s utility as an analytical category. However, the presence of American civil religion in public discourse about the nation as evidence by the 2017 op-eds and commentary about January 6, 2021 demonstrate the idea’s on-going relevance. Additionally, this project’s findings highlight how American civil religion narratives endure and participate in meaning-making processes about the nation and self. What do these observations mean for the American civil religion?

On the one hand, American civil religion is not a clear-cut category of national identity that transcends difference. The model that Bellah put forth in 1967 no longer holds in light of current debates about U.S. culture, improved understandings of the past, and on-going conversations about institutions, racism, and systemic inequality. American civil religion needs to be problematized just like other aspects of U.S. society. In this dissertation, ACR was interrogated in relation to white, Protestant hegemony, which challenges notions of inclusivity,

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equity, and the dream of America. On the other hand, American civil religion narratives are so embedded in U.S. society that their influence is practically inevitable. What Bellah and other scholars observed proliferates American culture. Yet, instead of continuing to examine what American civil religion is, the question needs to be where does American civil religion occur? This question provides new insights into ACR narratives from the bottom-up as they become embodied and enacted in public, civic spaces. In asking where American civil religion occurs, this project studied the role of media and mediated meaning-making in the (re)circulation of national narratives and found a desire to recover or rehabilitate ACR as the common, inevitable story of the nation.

Although I observed in the cases a desire to reckon with the nation’s past and to negotiate a reconciliation with American civil religion narratives, I remain skeptical of ACR’s rehabilitation. My skepticism is not an out-right rejection of rehabilitating American civil religion, because that would suggest I refute this project’s case study findings. Instead, I remain skeptical because I am of two minds about the future of American civil religion. On the one hand, I hope the reckoning and reconciling outlined in the case studies can occur to illuminate the persistence of white, Protestant hegemony and the need for decentering whiteness and Christianity in U.S. narratives. On the other hand, I worry this approach to rehabilitating ACR is overly idealistic and does not take into consideration the current media age of hypermediation, post-truth, and distrust. The remainder of this section explores my hesitancy to claim ACR can be rehabilitated as outlined in this project.

Charles W. Mills in his monograph on the inherent racism of the Western social contract described this “Racial Contract” as a recognition of “the actuality of the world we live in.”

589 Mills. The Racial Contract. 130.
offers a different description of political systems in an attempt to begin the necessary work of removing the veil of ignorance and to observe the actual origins of inequality and injustice in a Whiteness dominated world.\(^\text{590}\) I see the participants in this project as doing similar work in their enactments and embodiments of American civil religion narratives and their call for a reckoning. There exists a hope that in sharing more stories and lifting the veil of ignorance about the past that the future of the U.S. can live up to its dream and its promises. Gorski also supports the idea of adding more stories to American civil religion, explaining “the meaning of those lives and [foundational] texts is always and ever subject to debate…New founders and texts may be discovered and incorporated. That is the source of the tradition’s dynamism.”\(^\text{591}\) In both Gorski’s estimation and the case studies, the dynamic quality of American civil religion serves as the basis for recovering the soul of the nation through new narratives.

This solution to the myth of the American center echoes U.S. sentiment about speech. That more speech is better as it will lead to the drowning out of “bad” ideas. Yet, recent years have demonstrated that more speech, more stories, and more myths do not always lead to the triumph of reason, equity, and justice. The existence of a post-truth world where the proliferation of myths is endless, and the very question of fact is up for debate, suggests that more stories can be dangerous. The deep polemic within U.S. society that American civil religion should resolve is only heightened in a hypermediated society where structures of informational authority, such as mainstream news, are distrusted and dispersed media production leads to filter bubbles. Therefore, reckoning with the past through revised stories and narratives of reconciliation resound in echo chambers. When a new narrative escapes its filter bubbles the result these days is not to develop community and collaboration through American civil religion. Instead, new


voices and stories often encourage differences to become more entrenched as witnessed in the on-going debate over Critical Race Theory in education and professional development.592

The idea of expanding American civil religion narratives to be more inclusive, equitable, and just appears to be a solution to reckoning with the myth of the American center, as the case studies demonstrated. Yet, I worry this answer is too easy. In today’s age of fake news, distrust, and hypermediation more information does not always provide benefits to society. For this reason, I hesitate to claim American civil religion can be rehabilitated and distinguished from the myth of the American center across the nation. However, I hold on to the hope expressed by participants that the dream of American can be realized through American civil religion given its narratives pervade society and its continued existence is inevitable. I believe that by shifting the focus of ACR research from what it is to where it is serves as a first-step towards understanding the current and future place of American civil religion in a United States dominated by ubiquitous, instantaneous, and varied mediations of reality.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The three case studies examined disparate mediations of American civil religion narratives that inform meaning-making about the nation, self, and other while highlighting a discursive tension within ACR between national values and white, Protestant hegemony. However, the primary contribution of this research and the empirical data is the development of a different theoretical approach to analyze American civil religion and its impact on public

discourses about policy, culture, and identity. In developing a theory of mediated American civil religion, this project attends to the processes of meaning-making that regularly occur as groups and individuals encounter various narratives, objects, and people that must be reconciled with previous stories and experiences. This theory shifts the direction of scholarship on American civil religion from a focus on institutional rhetoric, national celebration, and intellectual histories towards an emphasis on bottom-up engagements with ACR.

Additionally, this project demonstrates the need for a different approach to examining American civil religion given the concept’s continued reference in conversations about the state of the United States as a polarized society. Various events over the last five years, from the election of Donald Trump to the storming of the U.S. Capitol, have employed American civil religion as a framing for understanding the nation’s past, present, and future. In particular, the theory of mediated American civil religion can attend to the hypermediated and digital quality of events that publicly demonstrate the divisions over national identity. This attention to mediated forms of American civil religion takes seriously the impact of media in contemporary society and the significance of mediation in the (re)formation of personal and national identities, behaviors, and beliefs.

Mediated American civil religion also expands the possibilities for analyzing ACR in contemporary society. For instance, current projects attending to changing national narratives, such as the 1619 Project, can be examined using mediated American civil religion and understood as participating in the dynamic tradition of narrating the nation. Also, the way contemporary Americans engage with national institutions differs due to the hypermediated qualities of society. This information saturated world requires an alternative way of understanding the impact of presidential rhetoric and national holidays on Americans, which can
be provided by a theory of mediated American civil religion. Similarly, the understanding of religion today has shifted since Bellah’s introduction of American civil religion in the 1960s. There is a need to examine the implications of implicit versus explicit religion in public discourse. This project has touched upon the impact of implicit religion in the form of white, Protestant hegemony in the myth of the American center. However, further attention to implicit versus explicit religion in its contemporary formations is necessary, especially in light of the growing disaffiliated population in the country, the January 6th storming of the capitol, and the efforts of progressive religious activism in response to the Religious Right in U.S. politics.

The mediated approach to examining American civil religion in this project also provides a foundation for analyzing ACR in the mundane, banal, and lived experiences of people. Most scholarship on American civil religion attends to grand moments of rhetoric and ritual rather than the circulation of narratives in daily life. Mediated American civil religion can assess how people navigate the narratives they hear about the U.S. and reconcile them to the stories they tell about themselves as Americans. In locations such as social media, popular culture, art projects, debates on immigration, antiracist education, etc., American civil religion participates in meaning-making about the nation and what it means to belong. Lastly, more research employing the mediated American civil religion approach can explore the discursive tension observed in this project. The balance between the one and the many or unity and collectivity continues to manifest in public debates over the direction of the country. Further research will help illuminate the role American civil religion continues to play in shaping the imagined nation for the future. Also, more research can interrogate how the country could be conceived as a salad blend of complimentary cultures rather than as a melting pot that requires assimilation.593 By examining

593 Interview with Ibrahim; Interview with Zara.
where American civil religion occurs can the myth of the American center be confronted and, ideally, the impulse to unify be converted to a desire to communicate across difference.


Austin. Ethnographic Interview with Austin. Zoom, August 26, 2020.


“Vermont’s Four Freedoms,” ~1940s. Norman Rockwell Archives.


**Secondary Sources**


Clark, Lynn Schofield. “Overview: The ‘Protestantization’ of Research Into Media, Religion,


For Freedoms. “For Freedoms: Where Do We Go From Here?” Art Exhibit, International Center


Thomas, Michael C., and Charles C. Flippen. “American Civil Religion: An Empirical Study.”

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Recruitment Documents

Organizational Leader & Event Planner Email

Dear [Insert Name],

I am conducting research about nationalism/patriotism and American identity for my dissertation. Part of this dissertation involves a case study about faith-based activism with a specific look at [insert organization name]. Your position at/as [insert institution, role, organization] makes you uniquely positioned to participate in the project and provide me with important information about the efforts of [insert organization name].

Would you be willing to have a 30-minute to an hour interview with me? This can be scheduled at your convenience.

If you are interested in participating, please contact Ashley Campbell by email at Deborha.cambell@colorado.edu or by phone at 248-396-5941.

Thank you for your time and contribution!

All the best,

Ashley Campbell

Organizational Leader & Event Planner Verbal Script

Hi –

My name is Ashley Campbell and I’m a PhD student conducting research about nationalism/patriotism and American identity for my dissertation. Part of this dissertation involves a case study about faith-based activism with a specific look at [insert organization name]. Your position at/as [insert institution, role, organization] makes you uniquely positioned to participate in the project and provide me with important information about the efforts of [insert organization name].

Would you be willing to have a 30-minute to an hour interview with me?
Snowball Sampling

I am contacting you because I think you could make significant contributions to the doctoral project of Ashley Campbell. She is investigating questions of nationalism/patriotism, American identity, conversations across difference. Her work is also looking specifically at the faith-based efforts of [insert organization name].

Ashley is looking for a select few participants who regularly participate in [insert organization name] events and are willing to stay in touch with her and have an occasional interview over the course of 2020. Topics covered will always be about your personal experiences and opinions.

If you are interested in learning more you should contact Ashley.

You may reach her by email at Deborha.Campbell@colorado.edu or by phone at 248-396-5941.

Thanks!

Ethnographic Interview In-Person Recruitment

“Hi. My name is Ashley Campbell and I am a PhD student conducting research on the American narrative within faith-based activism. May I speak with you for a brief few minutes?”

[if they say yes]

Thanks! One of my case studies looks at [insert organization name] and their public events. I’m hoping to speak with a handful of regular participants at these events. I’ve noticed you at a few of the past events. Do you regularly attend them?

[if they say yes]

Awesome! Would you be interested in participating in my project by speaking with me 1-5 times over 2020 for 30 minutes to an hour? These interviews are about your personal experiences in the U.S., at events, and your opinions. Participation is completely voluntary and you can stop at any time.

[at this point, if they say yes I’ll exchange contact information with them and/or answer any other questions they have]

[if at any time a person says no, I will thank them for their time and part ways]
Guiding Questions for Interviews

Organizational Leaders & Event Planners
*These questions will develop further as I attend events and can draft more specific questions about the organizations.

- What is your job?
- How did you become involved in this career?
- In what ways do you see the work that you do as bridging people across differences?
- How do you take into consideration the American narrative into your work (this may require me to provide explanation)?
- Do you see yourself as contributing to what it means to be American?
- In the course of your work with others, do you ever encounter issues of inclusion/exclusion with regards to who does and doesn’t belong in the U.S.?
- What kind of national/local community do you see your work building?
- Do you think the U.S. has ideals? If yes, what are they?
- How do these ideals inform the organization’s work?

Ethnographic Interviews
*These questions will develop further as I attend events.

- How did you find out about the organizations/events?
- How do you feel about the issues the events address?
- What motivates you to attend these events which are usually during the workday?
- Do you find it important to bridge people across differences? If yes, why?
- How do you understand the American narrative (this may require me to provide explanation)?
- Do you feel like you belong in the U.S.? Why or why not?
- Can you tell me the story of the U.S. in your own words?
- Do you see yourself as contributing to what it means to be American?
- In the course of your participation in events, do you ever encounter issues of inclusion/exclusion with regards to who does and doesn’t belong in the U.S.?
- What forms of media or stories best express what it means to be American?
- What qualities does an American possess?
- What does “America” mean to you?
- How do you feel at the events?
- What does your body do at the events?
- Can you list the various emotions you experience when thinking about the U.S.?
- Are there particular tastes or smells or tactical sensation you notice are a part of your event experience?

Artist Interviews

- What led you to pursue art?
- What kind of art would you say you do?
• What was your thought process in creating the new Rockwell image?
• What is freedom?
• Do you see the connection between propaganda and the *Four Freedoms*? How does your version participate in this connection?
• Do you see your work as imagining a particular version of the United States? If so, how?
• Do you consider your work a form of political commentary or protest?
• Can you tell me the story of the U.S. in your own words?
• Do you feel like you belong in the U.S.? Why or why not?
• What forms of media or stories best express what it means to be American?
• What qualities does an American possess?
• What does “America” mean to you?

**Sample Consent and Release Form**

**Title of research study:** Imagining the Bounds of Affection: Mediated and Embodied American Civil Religion and the Multiple Narratives of the U.S.

**IRB Protocol Number:** 20-0006

**Investigator:** D. Ashley Campbell

**Sponsor:** Stewart Hoover, PhD

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to examine the experience of nationalism/patriotism in the U.S. as it relates to narrated identity, religion, and imagined narratives. Another purpose of this project is to understand how people situate themselves within the construction of an American identity and story as it relates to the current national polarization.

We invite you to take part in this research study because you are at least 18-years-old, a U.S. citizen, and speak English. We expect about 20-23 people to be enrolled in this study. This study will include an interview with D. Ashley Campbell that lasts approximately 30 minutes to an hour. The interview will be scheduled at a time that works for both of you. There may be 1-4 follow-up interviews every few months over the course of 2020 if you choose to participate in them. If you do choose to participate in the follow-up interviews, these will also last from 30 minutes to an hour. The total time commitment if you opt to participate in all the interviews is at most 5 hours over the course of 2020.

**Explanation of Procedures**

This interview will be recorded and transcribed, with your permission. The transcript will not be viewed by anyone other than the researcher and her faculty supervisor. Recordings may be used for a multi-media presentation of the project at a later date. If this presentation occurs, I will
obtain your voluntary consent for it. If you choose not to consent to the presentation at a future
date your information will not be included and there is not consequence to your choice.
This study includes 1-5 interviews over the course of 2020. Each of these interviews will last
from 30 minutes to an hour. During these visits we will discuss the events you’ve attended,
politics, your experiences living in the U.S., the media you’ve consumed about the U.S., your
faith, and other topics you find important for me to know about.

Each visit will include the same procedure. We will have a 30min to an hour conversation during
which I will ask you questions about the above listed topics, but also allow you to bring up issues
important to you. These interviews will always take place in a location of your choosing. If you
participate in more than one interview over 2020, there will be no more than one interview every
other month. All interactions will occur with D. Ashley Campbell and no one else.
Please initial below to give permission for one of the following:

___ Yes, you may record the interview and transcribe the recording for ONLY note
taking and analysis purposes.

___ Yes, you may record the interview and transcribe the recording. You may also use
part or all of the recorded material for a multi-media presentation if and only if I
am updated as to what this will eventually look like and I give informed consent
at that time.

___ No, you may not record or transcribe the interview, but you may take handwritten
notes.

Voluntary Participation and Withdrawal

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may refuse to take part in any part of the
interview or end the interview at any time without penalty. You are free to decline to answer any
particular question you do not wish to answer for any reason.

If you decide to leave the research, **there are no adverse consequences**. If you decide to leave
the research, you will fill out a withdrawal form requesting that your information and any part of
the interview completed will be deleted and not used in the study or signifying that material
collected up until the point of withdrawal can still be used in the study.

Risks and Discomforts

Given that this project includes a one-on-one interview about nationalism/patriotism, political
and religious beliefs, and conversations about difference, some discomfort may occur. This
discomfort may be psychological in nature and the researcher will discuss with you how to find
professional resources to help you deal with any side effects of discussing personal information
before and at the end of the interview. It is important that you tell the primary investigator, D.
Ashley Campbell, of any discomfort or unease at any time during the project. If you do feel
discomfort or unease, you may withdraw from the study or you and the researcher can discuss
alternatives to make you feel more comfortable. You can reach the primary investigator, D.
Ashley Campbell, by phone at 248-396-5941 or by email at Deborha.campbell@colorado.edu.
Confidentiality

Information obtained about you for this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. Research information that identifies you may be shared with the University of Colorado Boulder Institutional Review Board (IRB) and others who are responsible for ensuring compliance with laws and regulations related to research, including people on behalf of the Office for Human Research Protections. The information from this research may be published to further public understanding about nationalism/patriotism, the experience of American identity, and the state of difference in the nation; however, your identity will not be given out.

There are some things that you might tell us that we CANNOT promise to keep confidential, as we are required to report information like:
- Child abuse or neglect
- Elder abuse or neglect
- A crime you or others plan to commit
- Harm that may come to you or others

Payment for Participation

You will not be paid to be in this study.

Questions

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or think the research has hurt you, talk to the research team at Deborha.campbell@colorado.edu.

This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may talk to them at (303) 735-3702 or irbadmin@colorado.edu if:
- Your questions, concerns, or complaints are not being answered by the research team.
- You cannot reach the research team.
- You want to talk to someone besides the research team.
- You have questions about your rights as a research subject.
- You want to get information or provide input about this research.

Signatures

Your signature documents your consent to take part in this research.

_________________________________________  __________________________
Signature of subject                           Date
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<th>Printed name of subject</th>
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<th>Signature of person obtaining consent</th>
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APPENDIX B:

FAITHFUL CITIZENS’ MISSION AND TOOLKIT SCREENSHOTS

Mission Statement

The Faithful Citizens of Colorado justice, religious liberty, and interfaith understanding through building relationships in order to educate, advocate, and catalyze social change.

Vision

We envision a society where all people are free and supported to live the life they wish for. We imagine faith communities from many traditions and backgrounds who are committed to work grounded in our shared values, in order to engage in collaborative action to dismantle systemic oppression. We see people coming together across our many differences to build authentic “got your back” friendships, to celebrate together in moments of joy, to grieve together in times of pain, and to advocate and work together to improve people’s lives.

Advocacy Toolkit Screenshots

2019 Advocacy Toolkit

A guide to using your faith and values-based voice in the legislature and in your community to drive social change for equality and opportunity for all.

Back to the basics.
An effective advocate not only knows about all the tools in their toolkit but also understands the context and history of the issue. Knowing what tool/method to use, which audience to direct your message, and how to tailor your message will help make you a more effective and powerful advocate.

To get there, we must go back to the basics. (If you are already proficient with the basics, great! Pay it forward by sharing this toolkit with someone who might not be as familiar with the process and let’s keep the movement rolling!)

**Note: this Toolkit is specifically focused on advocacy in the State Capitol but we are happy to provide you with support resources for other types of advocacy.**

Your vote matters
We simply must vote for political candidates and initiatives that promote our shared values of freedom and dignity for everyone if we expect to be able to make the change we want to see in the world.

Many people feel that the system is broken, that their vote doesn’t count, or even matters. But a single vote can make a big difference – there have been more than a dozen races decided by a single vote or ending in a tie over the last 20 years. Here are the two most recent cases of this.
Why should you voice your values?
With your story, you can tell, show and explain to legislators how their constituents would or would not benefit from legislation and remind them that the personal is political.

Your voice can catalyze change, bring new perspectives to the table & impact votes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Synonyms</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>Privacy</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Basic Rights</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fundamental Rights</td>
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<td>Religious Freedom</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Liberty</td>
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<td>Opportunity &amp;</td>
<td>Equal Opportunity</td>
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<td>Justice</td>
<td>Justice, Equal Justice</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fairness, Fair Share</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Level Playing Field</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Every American, Coloradan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>Safety, Protection</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Quality of Life</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Employment Security</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Retirement Security</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Health Security</td>
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</table>

The Power of Personal Stories in Changemaking
Politics is not a battle of information, it is a battle of ideas. Facts, by themselves, don't persuade.

Begin in agreement and stay in agreement!
- This is a very old rule of persuasion.
- Dale Carnegie explained it in How to Win Friends and Influence People:
  - Don't begin by discussing the things on which you differ. Begin by emphasizing—and keep on emphasizing—the things on which you agree. Repeat you are both striving for the same end and that your only difference is one of method, not of purpose.
  - Start every argument from a point of agreement (ex. We agree that we love living in the state of Colorado and want to continue to make it a great place for all to live and thrive) and then give your audience a bridge from their preconceptions to your solutions.

The messaging triangle is a quick simple tool to use to shape your core message on an issue. To do so – you first plug in the problem, your values related to the issue, and then add the solution. Next, by including information about yourself, your story and some statistics, you can round out your core message.
Connecting Values to Votes

This is not a comprehensive guide to every measure on November’s ballot. Rather, we have selected several key ballot measures that focus most on the issues we work on. These include religious liberty and anti-discrimination, economic justice, and racial equity.

Next to each ballot measure, you will see at least one of the symbols below indicating which of our key focus areas this issue impacts.

**RELIGIOUS LIBERTY/ANTI-DISCRIMINATION**

Protecting all Coloradans from discrimination regardless of religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, and race while ensuring religious liberty for people of all faith backgrounds.

**ECONOMIC JUSTICE**

Ensuring all families have the education, employment, and housing opportunities they need to thrive in Colorado’s economy.

**RACIAL EQUITY**

Working to actively dismantle the white supremacist system and ensure equitable and just treatment of all people of color.
APPENDIX C:
PRODUCTION CONTEXT OF ROCKWELL’S PAINTINGS

Since icons refer to a “cluster of meanings” and serve as mediations of meaning across history, it is important to know the background of the images being analyzed. The Four Freedoms and the Civil Rights trio were created at key points in U.S. history, with the Civil Rights era even being referred to as a “time of trial” in American civil religion by Bellah.594 This appendix outlines the context in which Rockwell created the paintings.

The Four Freedoms Series

In January 1941, President Roosevelt spoke before Congress about a Lend-Lease deal that would allow the U.S. to send military aid to the United Kingdom during World War II.595 Within this speech Roosevelt named four freedoms that the democratic world needed to protect. These four freedoms—freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from fear, and freedom from want—were Roosevelt’s ideals for a post-war world based on a broader discussion of freedom.596 A few of the freedoms were rearticulated in the Atlantic Charter that was Roosevelt’s and Churchill’s imagination of how the world would be following World War II. Unfortunately, coverage of the speech overlooked the four freedoms and the charter did not reach a wide audience. The U.S. public did not find the four freedoms as inspiring as Roosevelt had hopednt.

594 Bellah, “Civil Religion in America.”
Yet, the U.S. government continued to campaign for public attention for the four freedoms, especially following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The Office of War Information published a pamphlet in 1942 that strived to explain the four freedoms to the U.S. public. The pamphlet, entitled *The United Nations Fight for the Four Freedoms*, included brief essays and small black and white sketches to illustrate each freedom. Critics of the pamphlet said it was only accessible to “a small intellectual elite.” James K. Kimble explains that the four freedoms were “ephemeral, lacking a clear and convincing connection to their own lives.” Further efforts by the government did not help. In fact, an internal government poll in March 1942 revealed that 61 percent of the U.S. public had never heard of the four freedoms. By January 1943 the Office of War Information declared the four freedoms “a flop.”

Norman Rockwell echoed public sentiments about the four freedoms in his biography, saying “the language was so noble, platitudinous really, that it stuck in my throat.” In spite of his desire to contribute to the war effort like he did in WWI, Rockwell’s idea to illustrate the four freedoms felt beyond him. He explained that the first idea came to him one night in bed when he recalled a neighbor standing to speak an opposing opinion at a town meeting. It was at this moment that Rockwell began to imagine painting the Four Freedoms as “simple, everyday scenes” that took the ideas “out of the noble language of the [Atlantic Charter] proclamation and put them in terms everybody can understand.” Rockwell would translate Roosevelt’s words

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603 Rockwell, *Norman Rockwell: My Adventures as an Illustrator*, 379.
into visual rhetoric that the U.S. public could relate to; he would portray them in the Rockwellian style of the banal and optimistic.

The U.S. government initially refused Rockwell’s idea for the four freedoms, claiming they wanted to go in a different stylistic direction and they did not “have the time to spare to arrange it.”605 Dejected, Rockwell stopped at the editorial offices of the Saturday Evening Post on his way home to Vermont from Washington, D.C. Post editor Ben Hibbs had the opposite reaction of the U.S. government. Rockwell recounted that Hibbs proclaimed, “Norman, you’ve got to do them for us” and instructed him to drop all other illustration assignments.606 Rockwell went to work immediately, beginning with “Freedom of Speech.” A year later, in 1943, Rockwell’s paintings were published as frontispieces to accompany articles in four consecutive issues of the Saturday Evening Post (Feb. 21, 1943—March 13, 1943). The title of this series was “The Four Freedoms For Which We Fight.”607

The paintings were an immediate success and were eventually adopted by the Office of War Information and the U.S. treasury for a war bond campaign that earned 130 million dollars and printed over two million posters.608 With their publication in 1943, the Four Freedoms paintings began their journey to “become enduring national symbols,” according to the current director of the Norman Rockwell Museum Laurie Norton Moffatt.609

605 Rockwell, Norman Rockwell: My Adventures as an Illustrator, 380.
606 Rockwell, Norman Rockwell: My Adventures as an Illustrator, 381.
607 Rockwell, “Freedom of Speech.”
609 Murray and McCabe, Norman Rockwell’s Four Freedoms: Images That Inspire a Nation, ix.
The Civil Rights Trio

In the early 1960s, Rockwell left the *Saturday Evening Post* and began a tenure at *Look* magazine. The main reason for his departure from the *Post* is disputed. Some argue it was for editorial reasons and Rockwell’s desire to do more political illustrations, while others cite Rockwell’s on-going desire to move away from the *Post* for new experiences or the fact that the *Post* was losing its popularity (it ceased publication in 1969). Rockwell’s son, Tom, writes that Rockwell had occasionally considered terminating his work for the *Post*, but in the 1960s after being approached by other magazines and more *Post* editorial changes he decided to leave. Rockwell’s last *Post* cover was December 14, 1963 and was of John F. Kennedy in memoriam of his assassination.

Rockwell’s work for *Look* took on a more political tone as he illustrated news stories about current events ranging from presidential campaigns and the Peace Corps to the moon landing and the Vietnam War. These paintings were not covers but accompanying images that gave life to “issues or subjects with which the country was enormously concerned.” Three Rockwell illustrations about Civil Rights and the national confrontation with anti-Blackness were published in *Look* from 1964-1967. These three images, “The Problem We All Live With,” “New Kids in the Neighborhood,” and “Murder in Mississippi” became viewed as Rockwell’s commentary on race in the United States. At the time of their publication the 1960s Civil Rights Movement was at its peak. The first Voting Rights Act was passed in 1964 and the March on Washington had just occurred in August 1963. Rockwell would witness the “Bloody

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611 Archival research notes.
613 A fourth image was created in 1968 entitled “Blood Brothers,” but this image was rejected by *Look* and never published.
Sunday” march in Selma and the passing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act while illustrating for *Look*. His Civil Rights paintings would reach millions during the 1960s and join other iconic images of the movement.

“The Problem We All Live With” was published on January 14, 1964 in a *Look* issue entitled “How We Live.” The illustration was not connected to a particular story but was a two-page spread following an article about housing in the United States from the inner city to farm life. The only connection between the article and Rockwell’s image is a small photographic insert of a young Black girl captioned with, “We live with the problems of prejudice.” The painting is a representation of Ruby Bridges, a young Black girl in New Orleans, and her walk to school as one of the first children to desegregate her local elementary school in 1960. However, the painting does not specifically state that Ruby Bridges’ experience inspired the work, leaving the identity of the girl in the image anonymous.

“Murder in Mississippi” is a sketch that was published in the June 29, 1965 issue of *Look* alongside an article entitled “Southern Justice.” The image depicted the murder of three Civil Rights activists discussed in the introduction to the article. In 1964, Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman were captured by Klansmen, including the local deputy sheriff. The three activists were shot dead and then buried at a dam site on the farm of one of the murders near Philadelphia, Mississippi. The *Look* article was a one-page discussion about racism in the Southern legal system and included a list of murder victims whose killers had not been identified.

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616 Rockwell, “The Problem We All Live With.”


been convicted. Originally, a completed painting was to be published with the article but the editors chose to go with Rockwell’s draft sketch instead. For the purposes of this analysis, I examine Rockwell’s sketch as it was the one circulated to millions in publication.

“The New Kids in the Neighborhood” was published alongside an article about Black families moving into predominantly white neighborhoods in an issue about suburbia on May 16, 1967. The article, entitled “Negro in the Suburbs,” recounted the experience of the Mason family as the first Black family in Ludlow, OH and the white flight of their neighbors. The two-page spread painting Rockwell completed was not a direct representation of the Masons, but a depiction of two groups of children facing each other as moving activities occur in the background.

Knowing the production context of these paintings is only part of the process to analyzing their role in visualizing the imagined nation. It is also important to have a visual framework for examining the paintings’ content within a broader social practice of seeing and unseeing. For as Hall explains, “Every image that we see is being read in part against what isn’t there.”

Viewing an image engages the stories heard and the representations seen throughout a lifetime. These contexts are situated within national understandings of the U.S., its values, and its people.

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619 Rockwell, “Murder in Mississippi,” 73.
621 Hall and Jhally, Stuart Hall: Representation & the Media.