

Croly, Wilson, and the American Civil Religion

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APOCALYPTIC PROPHETS who attempted to make this world into the kingdom of God were a common feature of the early Christian world. In part for that reason, perhaps, St. Augustine rejected the interpretation of the prophecy of the imminence of the millennium as an actual period of one thousand years in which the saints would rule the kingdoms of *this* world with Christ. The affairs of the city of man were not working toward any intramundane conclusion; the rise and fall of nations and empires flowed along no meaningful course, had no history in the theological or philosophical sense; and St. Augustine was no doubt aware of the spiritual consequences for true faith if Christians gave themselves up to the expectation of salvation in this life. If salvation is thought to be intramundane, political life takes on new historical importance as it becomes enveloped in the history of salvation; and politics becomes the field of prophecy.

Nevertheless, the symbolism of the *new Jerusalem* (Rev. 21:2), from which God Himself directs human events without the mediation of worldly government; the symbolism of the *millennium* (Rev. 20:2), that period one thousand years in advance of the final judgment of man when the saints rule with Christ in a kingdom established in this world; the symbolism of *universal world peace* when "One nation shall not raise the sword against another. . . ." (Isaiah 2:4); the symbolism of the *reconstitution of nature*, also found in Isaiah when he prophesied that a time will come when "the wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid. . . ." (11:6-9); the symbolism of Daniel (Chapter Seven) that a *fifth monarchy* will come which will last forever, and effectively terminate history, are deeply rooted in Western historical

consciousness. They are so deeply rooted that the temptation to identify oneself as the efficient cause of these eschatological events has proven irresistible to countless numbers of persons.

Needless to say, examples of political millennialism are not lacking in American history. The titles of two recent books illustrate how our public myths have been colored by the enduring presence of such eschatological religious speculations: Ernest Lee Tuveson's *Redeemer Nation* (1968) and Conrad Cherry's *God's New Israel* (1971). In these works, and in many others, you will find examples of men and women who have seen in our politics and national life signs of the fulfillment and end of history.

Were historical consciousness not the hallmark of Western civilization, we could allow these effusions of secular prophecy to pass without comment. But historical consciousness does define the essence of our understanding of ourselves, our fellow citizens, and the world. The mystery of being in which political community shares, and which its public myths articulate, evokes an experience of history: that the origins of historical political communities are providential; that community exists under the sovereignty of God and serves some purpose; that man, society, and God are participants in the movement of being. These are dimensions of the Western concept of history. This view of history past, history present, and history future shapes our identity as persons, as citizens, and as a nation.

We are in possession of a consciousness of history which includes, Gerhart Niemeyer has written, "an irrevocable and eternal past, an informed but yet unknowable hopeful future, [and] a present responsibility before a time-

transcending God whose will appears in an apodictic law." The present is historical as seen in the movement and openness of the soul to the presence of God. The historical past is "eternal" because the special moments of past time are manifestations of God's presence which have occurred once, left their indelible imprint, and will not occur again. Our consciousness of history also contains an "informed but yet unknowable hopeful future." We find the origins of this eschatological dimension not merely in the promise of God in sacred scripture, but also in Greek philosophy.

Anaximander, the Milesian natural philosopher, wrote: "The origin (*arche*) of things is the Apeiron . . . It is necessary for things to perish into that from which they were born; for they pay one another a penalty for their injustice (*adikia*) according to the ordinance of Time." The mystery of reality was experienced by the Classical Greek philosophers as a process in time pointing ultimately towards transfiguration. And Plotinus too wrote: "The One is all things and no one of them; the source (*arche*) of all things is not all things; and yet it is all things in a transcendent sense—all things so to speak, having run back (*anedrame*) to it: or, more correctly, not all as yet within it, they will be (*estai*)."

History for men of the West, it seems trite to say, is inescapable; thus when history is deformed, when historical consciousness is lost, and replaced with a derivative, pseudo-interpretation, we can expect the costs in personal and civilizational terms to be substantial. A deformation of history, of course, has occurred. The hope for the future has become a hope dependent on human political action. The expectation of a final end *beyond* time, at the end of history, has been converted into an expectation of some immanent, this-worldly end, and thus appropriately has been called by Eric Voegelin the immanentization of history, or the eschaton. The experience of the sacredness of national life and its dependence on a higher order of which it is a participant, becomes a certain belief of divine election in which the national life transformed into the vehicle for saving acts. On this foundation of a deformation of history, a civil or political reli-

gion has been fashioned which has shaped the American political experience, has proven its capacity to inspire political loyalty, to rally the nation, and to commit national resources to particular ideological projects.

Consider, for example, the effect of this deformation on our concept of "democracy." Irving Kristol has written:

. . . once upon a time, in this country the question of democracy *was* a matter for political philosophy rather than for faith. And the way in which a democratic political philosophy was gradually and inexorably transformed into a democratic faith seems to me to be perhaps the most important problem in American intellectual—and ultimately political—history.

Let us follow Kristol's criticisms and the criticism of many others as far as they have taken it. Kristol is persuaded that our civil religion is an attitude of mind carried by a special section or class within Western democratic society, the intellectual class. He believes that the "masses of the people tend to be more 'reasonable,' . . . in their political judgments and political expectations than are our intellectuals." Robert Nisbet has similarly argued that our intellectual class constitutes a "clerisy of power" imbued with a sense of "redemptive passion." The chief vehicle by which they wish to redeem American society is the state, and thus Nisbet believes that it is proper to say that they "have made the political state the temple, so to speak, of their devotion." Michael Novak similarly speaks of the "superculture" and its commitments to the values of modernity—science, technology, industry.

Kristol is also persuaded that the "redemptive" passion of our clerisy of power is a heritage of the millenarian or millennial elements in Western civilization John Courtney Murray called this "utopianism" a Christian heresy, at the roots of which lies the lust to replace reality as it is given with conditions more acceptable. As such, it constitutes a radical shift of focus from a view of the limited state held by the Founders. Now we have a view of an essentially unlimited state whose function is to provide for the creation of the only real heaven, the one

here and now. That this runs contrary to the public philosophy of the Founders who saw that men were limited by their natural tendency to be vicious, and the Founders' fear of an unlimited state, suggests the revolutionary change in attitude accomplished by civil religion in the American context. But it is also revolutionary in a more serious sense. If the state is to become the "kingdom of God," Kristol writes, then any regime which does not approximate the virtues of that city is unacceptable. Only the best regime, from this perspective, is legitimate. Thus the adversary stance by our clerisy of power toward the organic institutions of the American political community, and, we must add, their disillusionment with politics. Politics requires the adjustment of conflicting interests, and an attitude of mind which seeks the good in the particular. This is an unacceptably dull process to those who seek in politics a field for the actualization of their private millennial visions. Nisbet suggests that the rise of non-party movements and the decline of our political parties is a part of this attitudinal development. To the degree that pragmatic politics is rejected, we also find an all-encompassing politicization of the mind. All problems are now seen to be capable of being resolved by the application of arbitrary power in a good cause, and the grander the scope of involvement of state power, the more hope there is for the realization of utopian visions.

Two persons who represent such extreme eschatological aspirations in the American millennial tradition, persons who left a deep impression on early twentieth century American intellectual culture, were Herbert Croly and Woodrow Wilson. Herbert Croly's *The Promise of American Life* (1909) and later the journal, *The New Republic*, which he founded and edited, performed a role in shaping the political attitudes of America's intellectual elite in the Progressive era, a role which Woodrow Wilson complemented by shaping the popular attitudes of Americans towards democracy, the nature of peace, and America's destiny.

In *The Promise of American Life*, Croly wrote: "For better or worse, democracy cannot be disentangled from an aspiration toward human perfectibility, and hence from the adop-

tion of measures looking in the direction of realizing such an aspiration." That aspiration would be realized primarily, he thought, by those "exceptional fellow countrymen" of his, the American intellectuals whom he called "saints." He wrote:

The common citizen can become something of a saint and something of a hero, not by growing to heroic proportions in his own person, but by the sincere and enthusiastic imitation of heroes and saints, and whether or not he will ever come to such imitation will depend upon the ability of his exceptional fellow-countrymen to offer him acceptable examples of heroism and saintliness.

The secular saints who lead the common mass, Croly speculated, will not necessarily be conservators of the American political tradition. The realization of the promise of American life will sometimes require a "partial renunciation" of the American past and of present interests, if necessary to contribute to the "national purpose." There may even occur a sudden transfiguration by "an outburst of enthusiasm." He observed:

If such a moment ever arrives, it will be partly the creation of some democratic evangelist—some imitator of Jesus who will reveal to men the path whereby they may enter into spiritual possession of their individual and social achievements, and immeasurably increase them by virtue of personal regeneration.

Let us reassemble the parts of Herbert Croly's political religion before examining the political evangelism of Woodrow Wilson. Dominating his civil religion is the view of a national purpose to be realized in public affairs. The realization of that purpose requires secular saints, themselves led by a messiah who will reveal the true path. This transfiguration will come because the American nation itself is formed by a democratic ideal which is working its way in time towards full realization. Before this can occur, this democratic ideal, always a promise, must be fully articulated, its creed formulated now, so that the

American people may believe once again in the promise of American life.

A critique of Croly's civil religion requires that we return to basics. Politics is a science requiring rational judgments informed by an awareness of circumstances, by a proper assessment of the limits of government and potential abuses of state power, by a concern for institutions which limit power, and by the prudent knowledge of the common good. But Croly's call for secular saints who will conduct us into a condition of reconstituted and transfigured reality, has less to do with political science than with prophecy, enthusiasm, and magic. The national life is indeed informed by an idea, by public myths which articulate the commonly shared beliefs of society's members. But that idea does not exist independently nor is it working its way in human events towards a logical fulfillment. The national life can expire, change its form, become something altogether different, not by means of the twists and turns of a world spirit, but by the weakening or collapse of civic virtue and of political judgment. How swiftly such a collapse can occur, and how vulnerable the American political system is to such collapse, is visible in the influence of Woodrow Wilson's political religion.

Informing Wilson's political religion is a view of history similar to Croly's. History, Wilson believed, moves according to a plan in which America plays a major role. His view of history is one of a progressive development, moving slowly but inexorably to a condition of reconstituted reality.

In an address in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania at a Y.M.C.A. celebration on October 24, 1914, he said:

. . . no man can look at the past of the history of this world without seeing a vision of the future of the history of this world; and when you think of the accumulated moral forces that have made one age better than another age in the progress of mankind, then you can open your eyes to the vision. You can see that age by age, though with a blind struggle in the dust of the road, though often mistaking the path and losing its way in the

mire, mankind is yet—sometimes with bloody hands and battered knees—nevertheless struggling step after step up the slow stages to the day when he shall live in the full light which shines upon the uplands, where all the light that illumines mankind shines direct from the face of God.

The role of America in this plan of history, Wilson was persuaded, was shaped and directed by God from the beginning. This, he declared on one occasion, is a nation God built with our hands. To what end, we might ask? In an address before Confederate veterans of the Civil War on June 5, 1917, Wilson declared that "we are to be an instrument in the hands of God to see that liberty is made secure for mankind."

Wilson's view of history in which America and mankind were moving to a world-immanent transfiguration of the human condition was not an isolated facet of the thought of an otherwise pragmatic man of affairs. Instead it was an integral aspect of his attitude towards life and the skills required if political life was to be governed rightly. Politics, for Wilson, required "vision," and vision for Wilson meant knowledge of God's purpose in history. In his First Inaugural, Wilson was speaking of his own visionary politics when he described his task as "no mere task of politics." The politics of Wilson were not "mere politics," they were a special capacity to announce the immanence of a new age certified by the political leader who experienced a special revelation.

Woodrow Wilson's vision of America was one of a nation ordained to play a mighty role in history; it was only fitting, therefore, that American should be perceived as different from the rest of the peoples of the world. We, for example, entered World War I "for no selfish advantage." Our troops were "the armies of God." Accordingly, America undertook missions of redemption. At St. Louis, Missouri, September 5, 1919, Wilson observed that:

(America) . . . has said to mankind at her birth: "We have come to *redeem* the world by giving it liberty and justice." Now we are called upon before the tribunal of mankind to redeem that immortal pledge.

Wilson was an idealist in the sense that T.H. Green defined an idealist as one who seeks to “enact God in the world” by the pursuit of ideals not given in experience. Wilson was committed to the ideal of a world absent of war, a world he believed to be within the grasp of a civilized world. And America’s entry into World War I was largely motivated by the desire to attain such an ideal. That it was to be accomplished by violence did not dismay Wilson. It is important to understand that Wilson’s desire to involve us in World War I was grounded in his will to destroy the system of balance-of-power politics. Wilson’s oft repeated assertion that America had no selfish interest to be satisfied by her entry into the war, that we sought no territory, no concessions, was his way of expressing utter contempt for balance-of-power politics. On July 10, 1919, in his address to the United States Senate presenting the treaty of peace with Germany, Wilson proclaimed:

Every true heart in the world, and every enlightened judgment demanded that, at whatever cost of independent action, every government that took thought for its people or for justice or for ordered freedom would lend itself to a new purpose and *utterly destroy* the old order of international politics.

Wilson’s desire to “utterly destroy” the reality of balance of powers was yoked with his desire to destroy “autocratic authority.” He was persuaded that only governments governed by majority rule, not by autocratic minorities, could truly seek peace. As a consequence, he sought to destroy autocratic governments, in the present instance, the government of Kaiser Wilhelm. In such a “good cause” Wilson believed that the maximum use of force was acceptable. Wilson saw a “halo” around the musket over the mantle of the citizen soldier who fought to redeem the world, and around the returning American troops. Force apparently was not to be disdained when executed by the “armies of God.” Wilson was in search of a “cause” in which to destroy the existing world order and found it in “the terrible war for democracy and human rights.” The war was “ter-

rible” no doubt in part because the winners of the conflict, “the only people in the world who are going to reap the harvest of the future are the people who can entertain ideals, who can follow ideals to the death.” But the war would be “terrible” also because Wilson saw the war in apocalyptic terms. This war had eschatological significance. He called the war a “final contest” which would bring about a “final emancipation.” And if America did not join the League of Nations he foresaw another “final war”; for surely there would be war again, he said, one that would bring the evil policies of the powers of this world to a close. Looking at history as a progressive movement towards a transfigured condition of peace and justice, Wilson saw himself as living in the last days when heroic acts were necessary to bring history to fruition.

The tragedy of Woodrow Wilson is magnified since it was shared by the people of the United States. His view of history, politics, and peace have become aspects of America’s self-interpretation of itself. To the degree that his (and Croly’s) view of history has saturated our political consciousness, it can be said that we have experienced a loss of history. Our public past, the history of the collective life of the nation, must express an experience of our participation in the mystery of being or its public myths will become distorted. All Americans will readily admit, for example, that our history has been particularly fortunate. Since 1775 approximately 650,000 Americans have been killed in foreign battles, a smaller figure than the number of Russians killed during the nine day siege of Leningrad in World War II. The mystery of why we have been so fortunate should yield the balanced judgment that God’s providence cannot be understood completely. From the perspective of Wilson’s civil religion, however, Americans are a chosen people, spared the holocaust for some great event to come in the future which will bring to an end, once and for all, the suffering of all mankind. History is given an *Ersatz* interpretation, a pseudo history is created, and national consciousness is distorted by an arrogance, for which, unfortunately, Americans have been too well known.

Woodrow Wilson suffered a disabling stroke towards the end of a national tour in which he attempted to bring pressure upon the Senate to ratify the Covenant of the League of Nations. During those waning days of his tour, days filled with train stops and multiple speeches in American cities, Wilson repeated the theme that over 55,000 Americans died to save the world in a war to end all wars, and that if the Covenant was not ratified by the United States, those men died in vain. Why, he asked, should mothers of sons killed in the war come to see him and speak to him during his trip? After all, he said, he sent them to their deaths.

The visionary politics of a politician for whom politics is a religion, for whom politics is a field in which to attempt to realize an ideal which is not given in reality to be attained, is, since Woodrow Wilson, the hallmark of American politics. Recall the following passage from the Inaugural Address of John F. Kennedy:

Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.

The difficulty that this ideal presents has often been commented upon after the toll of deaths of Americans in Vietnam had been counted. First, it is not the liberty of the American political community which is to be defended, but liberty in general. Second, our friends are put on notice that they will be judged by the standards of an ideal liberty

evoked by the president. Our relationship will be based not on mutual interest, but on their willingness to impose uniquely Anglo-American concepts of civil liberty upon their own societies. Third, it overestimates the capacity of America to pay "any" price, "any" hardship, and bear "any" burden. In the economy of real possibilities, such an aspiration is potentially dangerous. It also fosters a cynicism about politics, because such ideals are never attainable, and vast dislocations in civil society are brought about in the attempt to realize them. The population eventually becomes skeptical of the claims of all politicians. In turn, some politicians overreact by pursuing a ruthless, supposedly "realistic," politics. Policies which seek to maintain a balance-of-power in world politics, or more immediately seek to preserve our national interests, have to be promoted within an idealist framework in order to avoid the rebuke that we are selfish, and untrue to American tradition. Lastly, the failure of the symbolism of such policies leads to a general revulsion against all politics, and the search for the non-politician, the outsider, the uncorrupted one, to lead the national life. He in turn will reassert the idealism of the "true" American tradition, the pursuit of policies because they are right (to the exclusion of ones in our national interest). And the cycle of ideological rejection of political reality begins anew.*

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