

The Political Theology of President George W. Bush

William J. Abraham

Albert Cook Outler Professor of Wesley Studies

Altshuler Distinguished Teaching Professor

Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University

America is...not just a country, but a metaphysical entity, an intangible abstraction always imperfectly embodied in natural reality. It is always *not yet*, it is always radically incomplete; and because the values it aspires to were seen from the first as *the* essential human values, anyone and everyone may be summoned to take part in that completion.¹

Alasdair MacIntyre

George W. Bush is the third president of the United States of America to be a Methodist.² By any standard he is one of the most openly religious figures in public life in a world where the explicit appeal to Christian language is commonplace. To say that he is the subject of hate on a massive scale is an understatement. A major leader in his own church has called for his impeachment.³ President Chavez of Venezuela famously referred to him as the devil in a speech before the United Nations. When Southern Methodist University was announced as the finalist in the site of his library, presidential museum, and policy institute, an aggressive campaign to overturn the decision was launched from within the theology faculty and quickly spread as far as England within Methodism. Clearly President Bush has touched a host of raw nerves.⁴ It is clear, moreover, that his political career raises fundamental question about the intersection of faith and politics.

In this paper I want to explore with some care his political theology. By political theology I mean here simply the theology that informs Bush's political vision and

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, "The American Idea," in David Noel Doyle, Owen Dudley Edwards, eds., *America and Ireland 1776-1976* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980), 61. The emphasis is as in the original.

² The other two were Rutherford B. Hayes and William McKinley. Hayes is remembered for having a wife who did not permit the serving of alcohol in the White House; she was known as "Lemonade Lucy". McKinley is most often remembered for being assassinated. Martin Marty's comment is worth recording. "In no one's list of great presidents would you find William McKinley. Yet in an imperial hour he somehow managed to give voice to a people's (often base) yearnings and to get assassinated. The mix of his words and that sad event helped place him in the pantheon of those who were priests of civil religion..." See his "Foreword" to Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), viii. For a comprehensive account of the relation between faith and presidents of the United States see Gary Scott Smith, *Faith and the Presidency, From George Washington to George W. Bush* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). The chapter on President Bush is indispensable reading for the topic in hand; it is an outstanding overview of relevant material.

³ For details see <http://locustsandhoney.blogspot.com/2006/05/jim-winkler-calls-for-president-bushs.html> accessed on July 4, 2007. The call by James E. Winkler, General Secretary of The United Methodist General Board of Church and Society, went nowhere

⁴ He has also the tendency to induce paranoia, exaggeration, and ridicule. See, for example, Hugh B. Urban, *The Secrets of the Kingdom, Religion and Concealment in the Bush Administration* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), David Domke, *God Willing* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), Peter Singer, *The President of Good and Evil* (London: Penguin, 2004), David Ray Griffin et al, *The American Empire and the Commonwealth of God* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), and Richard J. Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005).

policies. I want to offer an interpretation of the theological themes that have a crucial role in Bush's thinking. More precisely, I want to propose a framework for understanding the content of his political theology as a whole. That done I shall end with some general ruminations on Bush's relationship to United Methodism that naturally arise.

The topic is fraught with difficulty. Bush is the first president to come out of the world of business management and is widely known for his aversion to theoretical analysis. While personally charming, he is verbally weak in articulating his views in public. We have very limited access to all the relevant evidence. Political speeches and documents have their own peculiar hermeneutical liabilities. And the background political noise is especially shrill. In addition, it is common to dismiss Bush as an epiphenomenon. Many see him as a ventriloquist for this or that abstract causal entity, be it American imperialism, western capitalism, Texas swagger, the Bush family dynasty, or the mighty forces of class conflict and historical dialectic. On this reading we can ignore the contingencies of his personal development and convictions. Moreover, political theology – the academic arena in which our topic lies – is a new development dominated by partisan advocates and marked by contested criteria of assessment;⁵ the help in this arena is limited.⁶

However, it is important not to exaggerate the challenges. The basic contours of Bush's personal faith are no secret.⁷ A raft of speeches reveals very clearly the theological themes and orientation that are critical to his theology and his politics.⁸ It is possible to make an initial identification of the historical and philosophical trajectories that inform his political ideas, policies, and proposals. The best intellectual strategy is this point in history is to be as accurate as we can; to give him a fair run for his money; and to keep our nerve intellectually. In what follows I shall assume that we can take him at his word; I shall seek to provide a charitable as opposed to deconstructive reading of his views.

⁵ For difficulties in and around this notion see Max L. Stackhouse, "Civil Religion, Political Theology and Public Theology: What's the Difference," in *Political Theology* 5 (2004), 275-293. The radical conceptual challenges that arise are clearly manifest in the two splendid readers in the field. See Peter Scott and William Cavanaugh, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Hent de Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, *Political Theologies, Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

⁶ For two very contrasting analysis see Michael Northcott, "'An Angel directs the storm': The Religious Politics of American Neoconservatism," *Political Theology*, 5 (2004), 137-158, and Terry Eastland, "Bush's Gospel," in William Kristol, ed., *The Weekly Standard, A Reader: 1995-2005* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 170-181. See also Paul Lyons, "George W. Bush's City on a Hill," *The Journal of the Historical Society*, 6 (2006), 119-131, and Gary Dorrien, "Consolidating the Empire: Neoconservatism and the Politics of American Dominion," *Political Theology*, 6 (2005), 409-428. Gary Dorrien has also written two outstanding books that are worth consulting: *The Neconservative Mind: Politics, Culture, and the War of Ideology* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), and *Imperial Designs, Neoconservatism and the New Pax Americana* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

⁷ There is a growing wealth of useful sources. George Bush, *A Charge to Keep I Have* (New York: Morrow, 1999); Elizabeth Mitchell, *W: Revenge of the Bush Dynasty* (New York: Berkley Books, 2003); David Aikman, *A Man of Faith, The Spiritual Journey of George W. Bush* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2004); Paul Kengor, *God and George W. Bush, A Spiritual Life* (New York: Regan Books, 2004).

⁸ The best place to begin is his inaugural speeches as president, his state of the union addresses, and his two major speeches to the Foundation for Democracy. All are readily available on the web.

Robin Lovin has suggested that politicians' moral judgments are influenced far less by today's church pronouncements than by their religious upbringing, so that the sermons, discussions, and Sunday School classes in their home congregations may be their ultimate guide.⁹ The life of George W. Bush confirms this insight as applied to his theological views. His early initiation into the Christian faith reflects the eclecticism of his later commitments and his ability to garner support across the denominational spectrum.

He started out in the Episcopal tradition, migrated with his parents to the Presbyterian Church, and ended up a United Methodist. It is tempting to say that his early education in the Episcopal Church was ephemeral, that his exposure to muscular Christianity at prep-school was transient, and that his real theological formation was most effectively tied to his conversion at the age of forty. However, we must move with caution. Bush's later and deeper initiation into the Christian faith was certainly rooted in a bible study group in Midland Texas, a practice that puts him within pietism and evangelicalism. At this point he had significant encounters with Arthur Blessitt and Billy Graham, evangelists who helped him to get his feet on the ground spiritually, a development that was as much process as it was crisis. In and around these encounters Bush's marriage was in some difficulty and his drinking was causing serious problems. It was in this phase of his pilgrimage that he explicitly owned for himself a version of the Christian faith that led to a radical reorientation of his personal life. Politically this was vital, for it enabled him to connect in an authentic manner to the growing evangelical constituency within the electorate. Yet elements of his earlier formation did not disappear, as his ready embrace of United Methodism make clear. Indeed some of Bush's central convictions lie well inside the borders of mainline Christianity in North America. All that said, nobody who knows him well doubts the difference his later faith has made to his personal life. Nor do serious observers doubt his political talents, his interpersonal skills, his resilience in the face of opposition, his decisiveness, and his determination to stay the course.¹⁰ In fact it is precisely the combination of all of these factors with his faith that has set off lots of alarm bells.

It is not difficult to identify the crucial religious themes that show up in his speeches. These include the following: generic theism, providence, the separation of church and state, the primacy of divine grace, personal transformation through faith in Christ, personal vocation, individual and personal responsibility, good and evil, religious pluralism, tolerance, compassion, and freedom.¹¹ How should we see these in the round? Are they simply the flotsam and jetsam of a practical politician? Are they the code words of a skillful political operator who knows how to exploit religion effectively to win elections? Are they just hot air? Or do they comprise an identifiable theological package?

⁹ Reported at http://www.adherents.com/people/pb/George_W_Bush.html accessed on June 26, 2007.

¹⁰ These observations dovetail with the reports of those with whom I have talked informally in Highland Park United Methodist Church in Dallas where he is a member and where I teach as theologian in residence. President Bush is invariably described as decent, honest, unpretentious, witty, friendly, reliable, straightforward, intelligent, and charismatic.

¹¹ Because of the limits of this paper I have not been able to include a raft of quotations that would represent these themes; moreover, I am well aware that my initial readings need to be confirmed eventually by access to his private papers. There is little doubt, however, about the general content and drift of President Bush's theological references and statements.

I propose that we should see these themes as the natural concepts of the public theology that is central to the identity of the United States of America as a political entity. The heavy and repeated use of these themes, I suggest, make it clear that President Bush has appropriated in spades the central elements of “civil religion”.¹² In fact President George W. Bush is the current high priest and first public advocate of civil theology in the United States. Or as James Reston has suggested: “The White House is the pulpit of the nation and the president is its chaplain.”¹³ It is this map rather than the map of moderate evangelicalism, or of mainline Methodism, or of dispensational fundamentalism, or of Christian Reconstructionism, or of Manichaeism that fits most naturally with his theological rhetoric and commitments. He lives and breathes the public theology of civil religion as naturally as he draws like a Texan; it is his native theological speech.

This is not to say that there is not more to President Bush than his civil theology. On the contrary, he is committed to a moderate version of evangelicalism that merges nicely with the *zeitgeist* of United Methodism in most of Texas.

He is a man of prayer, is relaxed in his attitude to church liturgy, and begins each day with bible study. He has used the daily devotional of Oswald Chambers,¹⁴ is theologically eclectic and nervous, and loves the hymn “Amazing Grace”. He readily draws on the social activism of the late nineteenth century, is exceptionally disciplined in his personal life, will share his testimony so long as it can be kept short and to the point, has an inclusive and catholic spirit, and stands firm on moral issues but has absolutely no interest in bashing sinners. He readily participates in church committees, fundraisers, and programs.¹⁵ He knows and believes the internal soteriological logic of creation, fall, and redemption as parsed by contemporary evangelicalism in North America within mainstream Christianity.

He has preached without undue strain in Second Baptist Church in Houston.¹⁶ He has prayed without embarrassment and extemporaneously with President Trajkovski of Macedonia, a fellow Methodist who tragically was killed in a road accident. Even though

¹² I use scare quotes because this is the best language I can find initially to capture the complex reality that is at stake; in time we may well have to invent a whole new vocabulary to do justice to what is at stake and to avoid distractions because of historical associations. The seminal essay on this topic is Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus*, 96 (1967), 1-21. For a fine reader see Russell E. Richey, Donald G. Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974). Martin Marty’s essay in this volume, “Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion,” is especially interesting. For an important updating see Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). For a summary of pertinent observations see his “Divided We Fall: America’s Two Civil Religions,” *The Christian Century*, April 20, 1988, 395-399. For a sustained critique of Bellah see Marcela Cristi, *From Civil to Political Religion, The Intersection of Culture, Religion and Politics* (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001).

¹³ As quoted in Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, 284. This whole text is a penetrating discussion of the place of the president in civil religion in North America. For a discussion of related issues as they apply to President Bush see Gary L. Gregg II, “Dignified Authenticity, George W. Bush and the Symbolic Presidency,” in Gary L. Gregg II, Mark J. Rozell, eds., *Considering the Bush Presidency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 88-106.

¹⁴ See Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (New York: Dodd and Mead, 1980).

¹⁵ Some of this, of course, does not apply since he became President due to the demands of the office and the constraints of security.

¹⁶ His sermon, entitled, “Faith Can Change Lives,” can be found in David Aikman, *A Man of Faith*, 205-213.

the language may still puzzle him, he can speak without undue strain of being converted, of Christ as his personal savior, of scripture being the foundation of the church's life, of loving the neighbor, and of caring for the poor and needy. He has ready access to a raft of personal spiritual advisors who are soft, moderate, middle-of-the road conservative Christians.¹⁷ President Bush is a moderate, even liberal,¹⁸ evangelical shaped by the spiritual warmth, the ad hoc social activism, the reserved moralism, the friendly fellowship, the wariness of alcohol, and the theological fuzziness of United Methodism in Texas. He is an insider to the jargon, the ethos, and the practices of contemporary evangelical Methodism as found in mainline United Methodism in Texas. What is important is that this additional theological layer fits entirely naturally with his commitment to the civil theology of the United States. Indeed the two dovetail nicely together.

What do I mean by civil theology?¹⁹ Essentially I mean the canonical theology enshrined in the scriptures of American civil religion,²⁰ developed by its Pilgrim and Founding Fathers,²¹ elaborated by its canon of theologians,²² celebrated in its high and holy days,²³ evoked by its prophets,²⁴ demarcated in sacred sites,²⁵ and mythologized in its hagiography.²⁶ The canonical creed of American civil religion is short. It runs something like this: The world owes its existence to a benevolent Creator; human beings are all equal and are given freedom to choose good or evil; God helps those who help themselves; God works providentially in history to reward virtue and punish vice; God has a special mission for the United States of America in the world; God desires all to be happy; God has so designed the world that church and state should be separated. In and

¹⁷ The Rev. Kirby John Caldwell and the Rev. Mark Craig are pastors of United Methodist megachurches who are especially important. They are not in the least theologically doctrinaire and are well known for their social activism in their local communities.

¹⁸ I speak of liberal evangelicalism here in contrast to conservative evangelicalism. The idea of liberal evangelicalism is well known in British evangelical circles and is best represented today by open evangelicalism within the Anglican tradition. Bush shows no real interest in or knowledge of, say, detailed theories of the atonement or of the inerrancy of scripture, hallmarks of conservative evangelicalism in the twentieth century.

¹⁹ For a fascinating pioneering study see Conrad Cherry, "American Sacred Ceremonies: The implications for the Study of American Religion," *American Quarterly*, 21 (1969), 739-754.

²⁰ Most notably the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Gettysburg Address. It is no accident that a fine study of The Declaration of Independence is titled "American Scripture." See Pauline Maier, *American Scripture* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1997).

²¹ Most notably George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson. For a recent review of the theological themes of the Founding Fathers see David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2006).

²² Most notably Jonathan Edwards, Reinhold Niebuhr, Michael Novak, and Richard John Neuhaus.

²³ Most notably, The Fourth of July, Memorial Day, and Thanksgiving Day; minor days are constituted by Veterans' Day, Labor Day, and the birthdays of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King, Jr..

²⁴ In the nineteenth century, Abraham Lincoln, and most recently Martin Luther King, Jr.

²⁵ Most notably the Arlington National Cemetery.

²⁶ For a recent example see David Gelernter, *Americanism: The Fourth Great Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2007). The classic historical discussions have been deeply instructed by Alex De Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, published in two volumes in 1835 and 1840. I should add that there is a very particular iconography that emerges but it is beyond my competence and knowledge to pursue that topic here. There is a striking example as it applies to George Washington on the cover of the volume by Pierard and Linder.

around the creed there are a network of recurring code-words and slogans: one nation under God, inalienable rights, religious liberty, choice, free enterprise, private property, tolerance, sacrifice, rebirth, manifest destiny, New Jerusalem, Mount Zion, the New Israel, a chosen nation, mission, frontier, covenant, great society, the invisible hand, the rule of law, the land of free, and the home of the brave.

The canonical creed of American civil religion, moreover, is embodied in a narrative that has a set of turning points: the exodus from tyranny in the Revolution, the fall into judgment and exile in the Civil War, the resettlement into prosperity and into world history in the two World Wars of the twentieth century, the quest for purity in the Civil Rights struggle, the interlude of tragedy in Vietnam, and the triumph over the great enemy of communism in the birth of a New World Order at the end of the Cold War. The ethos that correlates with the creed of American civil religion is, as Bellah notes, “activistic, moralistic and social rather than contemplative, theological, or innerly spiritual.”²⁷ Its adherents are optimistic rather than pessimistic, even though there are plenty of jeremiads for those who prefer to see the glass half-full. The religion in which it is embedded is also radically Protestant rather than Catholic in sensibility, providing a big tent that is generally relaxed and self-assured in its attitude to critics, dissenters, wayward children, and rebels. The creed also goes along with a characteristic canon of virtues: thrift, simplicity, pragmatism, common sense, orderliness, punctuality, independence, individualism, hard work, technical ingenuity, innovation, and tolerance. There is also a characteristic network of vices.

To begin exploring the vices of American civil religion we need to get some background music in place. In a very perceptive short essay C. S. Lewis once drew attention to the characteristic temptations that go along with different ways of working out a political vision of Christianity. Those who are convinced that temporal welfare can flow only from a Christian life and who see nothing but trouble in democracy will readily look to an authoritarian state to sweep away the last vestiges of the hated liberal infection. They will tend to think that fascism is not so much an evil as a good perverted. They are therefore tempted “to accept even Fascist assistance, hoping that they [he] and their [his] friends will prove the leaven in the lump of [British] Fascists.”²⁸ Those who stress the prophetic and the dominical denunciations of riches and are certain that the historical Jesus demands of us a Left revolution face a different challenge. They are tempted “to accept help from unbelievers who profess themselves quite openly to be enemies of God.”²⁹ Those who are acutely aware of the Fall, who are convinced that no human being can be trusted with more than a minimum of power over others, and who are anxious that to preserve the claims of God from being infringed by Caesar, readily see in democracy the only hope of Christian freedom. They too have their trial, for they are tempted “to accept aid from champions of the status quo whose commercial or imperial motives bear hardly even a veneer of theism.”³⁰ This is a prescient observation of what has emerged for western democracies in general and the United States in particular.

²⁷ “Civil Religion in America,” in Richey and Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion*, 34.

²⁸ C. S. Lewis, “Meditations on the Third Commandment,” in *Christian Reunion and Other Essays* (London: Collins, 1990), 63. Lewis refers to this option as that of Philarchus.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 64. Lewis refers to this option as that of Sparticus.

³⁰ *Idem.* Lewis refers to this option as that of Stativus.

Alasdair MacIntyre develops a more precise set of temptations and the accompanying vices in his reading of the situation in North America. MacIntyre's quarry is somewhat broader than civil religion, but he aptly captures the internal tensions at the heart of America's public commitments and how these play out in its social and political life. He rightly notes that the idea of America is best seen as a drama of complexity, contradiction, and tragedy. Thus it is committed to the principles of equal rights and liberty but there is "an equally profound commitment to individualistic practices that generate inequality and unfreedom."³¹ There is a stress on the importance of property, but, as the history of slavery shows, Americans had difficulty in recognizing that this involved slave-owning. "The slave owner likes to think, has to think, that he is a man like any other men – except, of course, his slaves. He merely happens to own slaves as a man might own racehorses or mouse traps."³² Money is crucial to Americans; it is no accident that they invented *Monopoly*. Americans are aware, to be sure, that the rabbis and the gospel make it clear that the co-existence of riches and poverty deforms both the rich and poor. Yet Americans have turned the corruption they know that comes with money into a dazzling, aesthetic vice.³³ Technical invention is also a hallmark of America. Yet technical invention feeds social inequality. "...it is the exercise of the freedom assured by rights, it is the release of human energy and potentiality provided by political freedom, which embodies itself in social, financial, and technical inequality."³⁴

We see in these cases of property, money, and technical invention how coherence comes at the cost of self-deception.³⁵ This process can be traced at a deeper level of American culture. While Americans know that they have a complex contingent history at their formation, they readily discard a sense of the past. As a result, there is a naiveté about their virtuous intentions, an inability to understand other cultures, a readiness to oversimplify, and a tendency to reduce problems to matters of money and technical efficiency.³⁶ On the world scene, Americans are keen to help, but, as the Vietnam war showed, the benevolence of American assistance turns out at times to be "more terrifying...than the malice of many other people."³⁷

Returning to the tension between commitment to equality and freedom and the commitment to forms of power that generate inequality and unfreedom and how this meshes with a forgetfulness of history, MacIntyre has this to say about a certain kind of radicalism that recurs.

...[American radicalism] begins with a very simple contrast between what is right and what is, between the ideals of liberty and equality and the inequalities and unfreedom of America at any

³¹ "The American Idea," 59.

³² *Idem*.

³³ I am reminded of Professor Basil Mitchell's witty comment after a tour of Dallas: "Outside America houses are expensive because they are valuable; in Dallas houses are valuable because they are expensive."

³⁴ "The American Idea," 60.

³⁵ Another instance of self-deception that MacIntyre does not mention is that of the much-trumpeted commitment to both freedom and equality of opportunity. The latter clearly requires some form of totalitarianism.

³⁶ "...counseling and "How to do it" manuals stand to sex, marriage, and child care as auto mechanics stand to automobiles. And if it is pointed out that tenderness, compassion, and insight are left out, these are promptly labeled "the problem of values" and become one more set of variables for technical manipulation." *Ibid*, 62.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 63.

one time. Its primitive expectation is that it will only take the announcement in suitably dramatic terms of the abject failure of the real to accord with the ideal to secure immediate national repentance and reform; when this primitive expectation is disappointed, as it always is, the abstract moralism of this approach responds by dividing the social world into the good and the evil; it is because of some conspiracy of evil people that the real and the ideal come apart. The politics of this sort of radicalism consists therefore of a series of preachings against evil; it relies on arousing a peculiarly American capacity for instant moral indignation, a capacity which itself depends on seeing all evils, sufferings, unfreedoms, and inequalities, as something that someone ought to have done something about by now. Such a radicalism is by no means a prerogative of the American Left; it has its right-wing versions too. But when it does appear on the Left, its abstract moralism distances itself not only from European Marxism with its strong sense of history and its inheritance from Marx himself of a suspicion of all moralizing, but even more from the concrete and practical concerns of the American labor movement. The abstractions of such radicalism derive from the fact that its moralism has no historical roots; it aspires to absolute judgments, independent of time and place. It sees nothing specific in American culture, and it does not see itself therefore as an expression of the way of life which it aspires to disown. It is therefore rootless and although – like the great Protestant revival movements to which it is heir – it often has great drawing power when it first appears – for it appeals to parts of the cultural self that it does not acknowledge – it is apt to disappear with equally surprising rapidity.³⁸

This is a brilliant comment that is matched by an equally discerning final set of observations. What in part lies within this radicalism is a tradition which begins with a contingent past but keeps constantly moving into a universal future, "...a tradition that in becoming genuinely universal could find a place within itself for all other particularities so that the Irishman or the Jew or the Japanese in becoming an American did not cease thereby to be something of an Irishman or a Jew or a Japanese."³⁹ Whereas in England democracy kept intact the notion that spiritual goods are graded so that one public gets the top grade and another the inferior, in American democracy the claim of excellence had a universal claim so that the preoccupations of the elite ought to become the preoccupations of all. "There is nobody so deprived that he ought not to try to become Thomas Jefferson; and at the heart of trying to become Thomas Jefferson there has to be the knowledge of all that historically separates and united him or her from Jefferson, of that identity of contradiction and complexity which they share."⁴⁰

That contradiction and complexity becomes manifest in the peculiar American way of being Anti-American, felt in genuine form only by Americans. It is an anti-Americanism of a divided self where the political self is not fully disengaged from the cultural self; where one constitutive ingredient in one's identity is pitted against another constitutive ingredient. This sort of anti-Americanism is radically different from another form of anti-Americanism which makes manifest the hidden power of the American drive to the universal.

There is a kind of Anti-Americanism...which we ought unequivocally to repudiate. This is the kind of anti-Americanism which seeks to make the United States the scapegoat for the sins of Western modernity, the kind of anti-Americanism which being unable to discharge the tasks of modernity itself leaves them to the United States and then with passionate complacency blames the United States for everything that goes wrong. This kind of anti-Americanism is one of the

³⁸ Ibid, 64.

³⁹ Ibid, 66.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 67. One thinks immediately of William Jefferson Clinton from *Hope* Arkansas who became the forty-second president of the United States.

luxuries of certain kinds of European politicians – it has flourished among certain types of French Gaullist, among the right wing of the British Conservative party and the left wing of the British Labour party – and among non-political people too. When it appears, it is always a sign of failure to recognize that in the democracies of the West you cannot reject America because in the end, if you are honest, America is you. Every American has two nationalities, his own and that from which his ancestors originally sprang, whether in Europe, Asia, Africa, or in North America itself. But the counterpart to this is that free persons anywhere also have two nations, whether they like it or not – their own and the United States.⁴¹

My aim in the preceding section has been to provide a compressed overview of one way of thinking about civic religion and political theology in the United States of America. We can discern a characteristic set of theological dogmas nested within a civil religion with its own scriptures, fathers, canonical theologians, liturgical calendar, prophets, sacred sites, and hagiography. That religion has its own code words and shibboleths; and it has its own contested story line that liberally makes use of a narrative of creation, liberation, wandering in the wilderness, rebirth, and final universal consummation. It also generates its own political system, namely, that of a republic, of a representative form of democracy with characteristic institutions and mechanisms for change, and with a clear differentiation of church and state. This political religion also generates its own internal ethos marked by identifiable contradictions and incoherence that in turn foster its own characteristic virtues and vices. Even anti-Americanism has its own peculiar form when practiced by Americans. It remains to round off the description by noting that American civil religion is marked by internal division.

The most marked form of division is that identified by Martin Marty as its priestly and prophetic versions. In its priestly mode, civil religion provides comfort, reassurance, legitimation, and inspiration. It fuses positive national sentiments with relevant elements in the public theology so as to foster unity and national stamina in times of trial. In this instance the President operates as a priest, as Dwight D. Eisenhower did during the cold war “when the nation needed its anxieties ministered to and when it needed divine sanction for its adventures.”⁴² Or as Lincoln did when he sought to bind up the wounds of the nation in his Gettysburg address. In its prophetic mode, civil religion provides resources for sharp denunciation and a change of direction. In this case the nation is called into question by its own public theology; it is brought under the judgment of God and excoriated for its arrogance, hypocrisy, idolatries, and failures. The appeal to transcendence operates in this instance to afflict the comfortable rather than comfort the afflicted. John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson readily represent this vision of civil religion in the nineteen sixties in dealing with poverty and racism.

Robert Wuthnow additionally suggests that the priestly and the prophetic correlate with the conservative and liberal strands in American Christianity.

The conservative vision offers divine sanction to America, legitimates its form of government, explains its privileged place in the world and justifies a uniquely American standard of luxury and morality. The liberal vision raises questions about the American way of life, scrutinizes its political and economic policies in the light of transcendent concerns and challenges Americans to

⁴¹ Ibid, 68.

⁴² “Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion,” 147.

act on behalf of all humanity rather than their own self-interests alone. Each side sees itself as the champion of higher principles and the critic of current conditions.⁴³

Marty and Wuthnow propose, then, that we have two kinds of civil religion in America. It would be better, surely, to speak of one civil religion with a complex network of diverse resources that are called upon to fit the occasion.⁴⁴ At times Presidents act as priests, stressing the conservative, priestly side of the public theology; at others Presidents act as prophets, stressing the transformative, prophetic side of the same public theology. To use the language of Paul Tillich, there is both Catholic substance and Protestant principle. There is a network of diverse materials, practices, principles, and persons that can be called upon soteriologically to fit the occasion. However, it is hard to avoid the drift into talk of two rival versions of civil religion given the internal tensions at issue and given the political divisions and polemical rhetoric that inevitably arise.

George Bush's political theology fits neatly into the schema of American civil religion. Like most presidents he draws on the different strands within it to fit the occasion. If we use Wuthnow's categories he clearly falls within the conservative side of the divide. Consider generally his policies on taxation, on faith-based initiatives, healthcare, marriage, abortion, and stem-cell research. They fall squarely within the conservative as opposed to liberal side of civil religion. Conservatives worry about family values, about lower taxes as critical to a healthy economy, and about the ineffectiveness of government programs. They stress the importance of voluntary associations (including faith communities), religious liberty across the world, the right to life, upholding law and order, retribution, and a strong military. Liberals and progressives focus on peace with justice, environmental challenges, universal health care, the dangers of American imperialism, basic human rights, disarmament, world hunger, the Aids epidemic, the poison of riches, the abolition of capital punishment, the vices of capitalism, economic justice, and the privileging of the poor. Clearly Bush is not a liberal.

If we deploy Martin Marty's categories then the picture becomes a lot more complicated. Consider the controversial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The issues for Bush are cast in terms of a war between good and evil, where America and its allies are on the side of good and Islamist extremism and those who tolerate it on the side of evil. Bush is convinced that life in America fits God's design for humanity better than its rivals. Against the realism of his father's generation, he has embraced a sense of mission for America that fits with a neo-conservative vision of spreading democracy outward to the non-democratic world. He sees this mission as divinely underwritten, as intrinsically correct, and as crucial to domestic security. Bruce Lincoln's summary of the theology of providence in play is not wide of the mark. Reviewing the relevant texts, he writes:

All these texts convey a sophisticated theology of history that rests on five propositions; (1) God desires freedom for all humanity; (2) this desire manifests itself in history; (3) America is called

⁴³ "Divide We Fall: America's Two Civil Religions," 398. Wuthnow's categories muddy the waters somewhat but I shall leave them in place for the purposes of this essay. What may be readily missed is that both conservatives and liberals deploy both the priestly and the prophetic resources of the tradition.

⁴⁴ We should also speak of a wisdom version of civil religion or a wisdom dimension to civil religion that readily complements the priestly and the prophetic. The wisdom tradition is represented by H. Richard Niebuhr's widely influential *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

by history (and thus, implicitly by God) to take action on behalf of this cause; (4) insofar as America responds with courage and determination, God's purpose is served and freedom's advance is inevitable; (5) with the triumph of freedom, God's will is accomplished and history comes to an end.⁴⁵

Lincoln sees in this theology a combination of “an evangelical theology of “born again” compassion; a theology of American exceptionalism as grounded in the virtue of compassion; a Calvinist theology of vocation; and a Manichaeic dualism of good and evil.”⁴⁶ This analysis is headed in the right direction, but the reference to Manichaeic dualism is nonsense. Bush's insistence on a conflict of good with evil, set forth in hyperbole and in absolute terms, is a commonplace of the Christian tradition and of moral discourse more generally. If there is a vice here, it is a vice that is characteristic of American civil religion across the board. Moreover, the crucial point to observe here is that the sharp distinction between good and evil fits with the prophetic, transformationist side of civil religion. Given his conviction that freedom is a gift given by God, Bush is convinced that it is a good thing that America spread democracy in Central Asia and the Middle East.⁴⁷ This is the liberationist, emancipatory side of his theology in full song. He excoriates those who in their day argued that Germany, Japan, American minorities, and the Soviet Union were incapable of handling political liberty. He insists that moral and anthropological principles are at stake as well as American domestic and security interests. It is not accidental that some have referred to his theology as a version of liberation theology, even as they despise his policies and actions.⁴⁸ In fact we can see Bush's campaign in Iraq as one way of trying to take American civil religion to the Middle East and then onward into the Muslim world.

Let me press this point by returning to Bellah. Bellah in his original essay had spoken of a trial - a third trial - for civil theology that is relevant at this point. The first trial arose over the question of independence, and the second over slavery. The third is “the problem of responsible action in a revolutionary world, a world seeking to attain many of the things, material and spiritual, that we have already attained.”⁴⁹ Vietnam showed how easy it was to misread the situation and to yield to the temptation to rely on overwhelming physical power. Happily the prophetic voices represented by Senator J. William Fulbright and by figures from the civil rights movement were in place to bring the nation back on track. Bellah hoped that in due course a refurbished version of civil religion would emerge.

There seems little doubt that a successful negotiation of this third time of trial – the attainment of some kind of viable and coherent world order – would precipitate a major new set of symbolic forms. So far the flickering flame of the United Nations burns too low to be the focus of a cult, but the emergence of a genuine trans-national sovereignty would certainly change this. It would necessitate the incorporation of a vital international symbolism into our civil religion, or perhaps a

⁴⁵ Bruce Lincoln, “Bush's God-talk,” in Hent de Vries, Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds., *Political Theologies*, 275.

⁴⁶ “Bush's God-Talk,” 275.

⁴⁷ For a sympathetic reading of Bush's foreign policy see Robert G. Kaufman, *In Defense of the Bush Doctrine* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2007).

⁴⁸ See Parastou Hassouri, “Bush's Failed Liberation Theology,” accessed at http://www.tompaine.com/articles/2006/11/14/bushs_failed_liberation_theology.php on July 3, 2007.

⁴⁹ “Civil Religion in America,” 38.

better way of putting it, it would result in American civil religion becoming simply one part of a new civil religion in the world. It is useless to speculate on the form such a civil religion might take, though it obviously would draw on religious symbols beyond the sphere of Biblical religion alone. Fortunately, since the American civil religion is not the worship of the American nation but an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality, the reorganization entailed by such a new situation need not disrupt the American civil religion's continuity. A world civil religion could be accepted as the fulfillment and not a denial of American civil religion. Indeed such an outcome has been the eschatological hope of American civil religion from the beginning. To deny such an outcome would be to deny the meaning of America itself.⁵⁰

What is important to note here is that Bush and Bellah occupy the same theological space. They both want to export civil religion to the rest of the world; they are liberal optimists at this point rather than conservative pessimists. They are singing from the prophetic rather than priestly song-sheet of America's canonical political theology. Furthermore, both of them see no problem in accommodating the challenge of Islam both theologically and politically. Bush sees Islam as one more religion that can accept the distinction between private religion public politics and that can be absorbed without too many adjustments from either side within the status quo. Bellah sees the issue as one of coming to terms with the revised symbols made available through the encounter with ultimate and universal reality mediated through another religious tradition. They differ, that is, on how to manage the dialectic between Catholic substance and Protestant principle within the received civil religion. They differ too, to be sure, on a host of moral and contingent judgments, say, about the United Nations, the proper use of military force, the reliability of intelligence reports, the interpretation of the wider geopolitical drama, the nature and causes of terrorism, and the outcomes of this or that policy.⁵¹ However, both believe in continuity rather than discontinuity where the future of American civil religion is concerned. It is America's public theology with its internal tensions and universalizing eschatology that makes best sense of Bush's decisions and options rather than the bogey of Manichaeism.

I trust I have provided enough for the reader to grasp the central core of my proposal concerning the best way conceptually to locate the political theology of George W. Bush. His political theology is an embodiment and development of the canonical theology of American civil religion. To be sure, this initial description needs to be filled out by exploring how Bush's Christian commitments relate to this initial map, but sufficient onto the day are the troubles thereof. Rather than explore that terrain let me finish by offering some random ruminations that naturally arise.

Consider, first, the possible connection between Bush's theology and Methodism more generally. The title of Bush's autobiography makes heavy use of the first line of Charles Wesley's famous hymn, "A Charge to keep I have". That line resonates with Bush's deep sense of personal vocation manifest in his decision to run for the Whitehouse and in his desire to do the will of God as President.⁵² Beyond that it is clear that Bush's

⁵⁰ Ibid, 40.

⁵¹ Bellah's most recent update on the resources of civil religion can be found in "Can We Be Citizens of a World Empire," and can be found at http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures_8.htm accessed on July 3, 2007. He remains there deeply committed to the core vision of civil religion.

⁵² There is much nonsense abroad on this topic as it relates to a sermon by Rev. Mark Craig but I cannot chase that rabbit here.

compassionate conservatism draws heavily on the kind of revivalism that was common in Methodism in North America in the late nineteenth century. He stumbled into this trajectory through the work of Marvin Olasky and has made it a central element in his domestic policies.⁵³ It is also clear that Bush's vision of civil religion harks back to a longstanding embrace of a similar vision by a host of episcopal leaders in Methodism in the nineteenth century.⁵⁴ Of course, we must walk cautiously here. Bush himself can joke about his theological illiteracy. He once quipped that there must be major doctrinal differences between the Episcopal Church and the United Methodist Church but he did not know what they were. There is no serious, explicit engagement on Bush's part with the Methodist tradition. For its part the United Methodist Church has next to no idea how to go about forming its many laypeople in a political theology that would be sufficiently robust to make a difference. And Bush is clearly a typical American pragmatist who will use whatever materials lie to hand on this or that issue. However, it is fair to say that there are real connections with important elements of the Methodist tradition. He is within the tent rather than outside of it.

Second, it is surely accurate to say that Bush can lay claim to stand within the United Methodist tradition as it was constituted in the period in which he came to faith. The operational (if not canonical) theological ideology of United Methodism over the last generation is constituted by a vapid pluralism that makes room for any and all the options that make the rounds. In fact one way to read the ruling orthodoxy of United Methodism as developed in the sixties is to see it as the adoption and then freezing of crucial aspects of American civil religion as it was practiced in the mid-twentieth century. It is surely no accident that the code-words of the functional theology of United Methodism are more or less the code-words of recent American culture.⁵⁵ Both are saturated with the language of diversity, multi-culturalism, pluralism, and inclusivism. Both are exceptionally nervous of any kind of robust confessionalism; both want to be formally open to evangelicalism but are paranoiac about its volatility and independence. United Methodism in the United States is an echo-chamber of contemporary American debate and political polemic.⁵⁶

The matter as applied to Bush is nicely captured in the bland and unenthusiastic comment of the Bishop of the New England Conference, Bishop Susan W. Hassinger, after his first election to the Presidency.

United Methodists are extremely diverse, and there would be some who would take a great deal of pride [in Mr. Bush's presidency], and some would be concerned about some of his stands. I am pleased that there is a United Methodist in the White House, but I would hope hew would be a

⁵³ Bush wrote the "Foreword" to Olasky's *Compassionate Conservatism* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), the crucial text behind Bush's faith-based initiatives initially in Texas and later in Washington. See also Marvin Olasky, *The Renewing of American Compassion* (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

⁵⁴ James E. Kirby, "Matthew Simpson and the Mission of America," *Church History* 36 (1967), provides a fascinating window on the topic.

⁵⁵ I discuss this topic at some length in "Inclusivism, Idolatry, and the Survival of the (Fittest) Faithful," in Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Trier, eds., *The Community of the Word, Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity press, 2005), 131-145.

⁵⁶ The informal canonizing of Albert Cook Outler as the theologian of United Methodism in the last generation and the quasi-canonical status given to his views in the General Conference of 1972 fit nicely with this observation.

person who listens to all perspectives and I trust he will be faithful to God ...with concern for the marginalized and the poor.⁵⁷

It is interesting that Bishop Hassinger tacitly realizes that there is no longer any mileage in looking upon Methodism as a cult of John Wesley in which appeal to his vision of the relation between faith and politics can carry the day. Jim Wallis has tried pressing this option with rhetorical skill.

The real theological question about George W. Bush was whether he would make a pilgrimage from being essentially a self-help Methodist to a social reform Methodist. God had changed his life in real ways, but would his faith deepen to embrace the social activism of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who said poverty was not only a matter of personal choices but also of social oppression and injustice? Would Bush's God of the 12-step program also become the God who required social justice and challenged the status quo of the wealthy and powerful, the God of whom the biblical prophets spoke? Then came Sept. 11, 2001. Bush's compassionate conservatism and faith-based initiative rapidly gave way to his newfound vocation as the commander-in-chief of the "war against terrorism." Close friends say that after 9/11 Bush found "his mission in life." The self-help Methodist slowly became a messianic Calvinist promoting America's mission to "rid the world of evil."⁵⁸

What we have here is not so much the political theology of John Wesley but rather more the populist code words of the liberal version of American civil religion as applied to the life of John Wesley.⁵⁹ It is no surprise that it has not carried the day, for John Wesley has become a sounding board for any and every theology among Wesley scholars and United Methodist theologians and does not provide us with sufficient resources in our current situation.⁶⁰

This observation is confirmed when we look at the state of play in political theology within United Methodism. Currently we can identify at least five major trajectories of political theology within United Methodism.⁶¹ There is the aggressive, anti-American pacifism of Stanley Hauerwas and his many students. There is the stolid Christian realism of Joseph Allen, Robin Lovin, and Rebecca Miles. And there is the lively, diversified liberation theology of James Cone, Rebecca Chopp, Ted Jennings, Joerg Rieger, and Harold Recinos. Beyond that there is the muddled, left-of-center politics of the *Social Principles* and the *Book of Resolutions*, and there is the amorphous, middle-of-the road, transformationist theology of Albert Outler as updated by Bishop

⁵⁷ http://www.adherents.com/people/pb/George_W_Bush.html accessed 30 June 2007. Depending on how we might parse the phrase, "concern for poor and the marginalized," Bush could readily sign on to this agenda. The differences that arise between conservative, liberal, and liberationist approaches to the poor hinge on radically different *causal* accounts of the production of poverty. Liberation theologians tend to claim a monopoly of interest and truth on the causes of poverty. See, for example, Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), x, fn. 4.

⁵⁸ Jim Wallis, "Dangerous Religion – Bush's Theology of Empire," accessed at <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article5402.htm> on July 4, 2007.

⁵⁹ One of the best historical treatments of John Wesley's political theology is developed by Theodore R. Weber in *Politics in the Order of Salvation, Transforming Wesleyan Political Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001).

⁶⁰ I have argued the case for this in "The End of Wesleyan Theology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 2004.

⁶¹ I make no claim to being comprehensive in what follows.

Scott Jones and Randy Maddox. All lay claim to this or that element in Wesley in order press their claims within United Methodism.

We can now add one more option to the raft of alternatives available. There is the political theology of President George W. Bush.⁶² I am not sure that the great architects of pluralism anticipated this dramatic outcome, but life has certainly become more interesting and more complex for United Methodists.

⁶² No doubt we can anticipate that there will be a vigorous effort to excommunicate Bush's political theology from the canonical options within United Methodism, but this strikes me as hasty and prejudicial. On the one hand, it is surely reasonable to argue that in the arena of political theology, pluralism is exactly the way to go. This leaves open the possibility that at other levels of the church's theology pluralism is not at all a sensible option. On the other hand, while it is easy to dismiss the whole idea of civil theology abruptly, we need to come to terms with the acute problem that civil theology was invented to resolve, namely, the problem of how to develop a political theology that would work in a world that rightly rejected both radical secularism and a Christian confessional state. Bellah was correct, moreover, to reject at the outset the argument that civil theology involved idolatry; this attempt at a nuclear strike was easy to defuse. Whether civil theology can be expanded and exported, and whether it can be adjusted to accommodate Islam, are only two of the challenges that future versions of it will have to face. I have grave doubts about both these propositions, but these doubts, like all the others that we can entertain, need to be developed with care rather than dogmatically asserted.