A Political History
of the Bible in America

PAUL D. HANSON

Purchase Now from Your Preferred Retailer

amazon.com

BARNES & NOBLE
BN.com

WJK WESTMINSTER JOHN KNOX PRESS
PUBLISHING EXCELLENCE SINCE 1858

The Thoughtful Christian.com

INDIEBOUND

Cokesbury.com
Resources for the Christian Journey

Christianbook.com
1-800-CHRISTIAN

WJK WESTMINSTER
JOHN KNOX PRESS
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

Scripture quotations from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible are copyright © 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and are used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked RSV are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1946, 1952, 1971, and 1973 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., and are used by permission.

Most Westminster John Knox Press books are available at special quantity discounts when purchased in bulk by corporations, organizations, and special-interest groups. For more information, please e-mail SpecialSales@wjkbooks.com.

Contents

Prologue

Story, Identity, and Making Sense of the Bible

I can only answer the question, "What am I to do?" if I can answer the prior question, "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?"

—Alasdair MacIntyre[1]

ENABLING STORIES

At the end of an archaeological season, it is a pleasant sight to ascend the photography tower and look back over a freshly dug section of the *tel*: A checkerboard of five-meter squares separated by walls, called balks, consisting of one meter of soil that has been left undisturbed. In the soft light of the sinking sun, the one-meter balks stand out, revealing through their hues of tan and red and gray the layers of civilization that have been uncovered in the past months of digging. Records have been kept of the findings discovered in each square, and the evidence from those excavated areas survives only in the notebooks of the field supervisors and in buckets of carefully numbered shards.

From a material point of view, archaeology is a destructive science. What has taken millennia to deposit can be removed in a season. Therein lies the importance of the meter-wide balks that remain: A trace of history is left for future generations to revisit in the ongoing task of recovering the past.

---

1. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 250.

Looking closely, the observer detects colored tags attached to the balks at what appear to be random intervals. But they are not arbitrarily placed, for they mark significant strata in the long sequence of humanity's mute deposit. A gray layer flecked with black chunks of charred wood is interpreted as evidence of Thutmose III's destructive invasion of Canaan. A reddish layer is tagged as belonging to an early stage of the Iron Age on the basis of a distinctive pottery type interpreted by the expedition director as evidence of newcomers in Canaan whom Pharaoh Heremhab had named "the people Israel." In this manner, pieces of evidence are assembled that shed light on the development of civilization and offer glimpses into our shared identity as human beings.

The "stratigraphy" preserving traces of our past is also found closer to home than a Middle Eastern archaeological site. We grow up surrounded by stories in both written and oral form, some describing our ancestral roots in terms of religious traditions, some drawing on our nation's Epic, some retelling personal experiences. Such stories play an important role in the way we live and the choices we make, for the values and aspirations that guide us generally take less the form of abstract principles than of inclinations and intuitions rooted in our sense of origins.[2] By *sense* of origins, we imply something quite distinct from an objective newsreel account. What we retain and what guides us are not an exhaustive documentary, but a personal narrative with a plotline defining us as heirs to a distinct legacy. This is to say that we understand our essential being in historical terms, defined by philosophy as *historical ontology* and by ethnography in terms of myth/epic and ritual. Highlighted, like the colored tags in the balk, are episodes that retain for us a special significance in shaping our understanding of who we are and what purpose guides our lives into the future. We call such special memories *paradigms.*

As I look to my own past, I recall vividly the following episode that, in its blending of tradition and personal experience, imprinted itself on my consciousness in such a way as to assume paradigmatic force in shaping my sensibilities. When I was nine I received my first weapon, an air rifle. Brimming with manly pride, I entered the forest behind my home; spotting movement in a tree, I took aim and fired. Much to my surprise a bird fell to the ground, a very colorful bird that turned out to be a downy woodpecker. Not knowing whether to be proud or ashamed, I carried it home. My father chanced to meet me as I entered the yard. A conversation ensued that amid parental reprimand and juvenile sobbing became etched into my memory and helped shape my attitude toward nature for the rest of my life. To be sure, my heart had already been prepared for such a lesson by Sunday school Bible stories like Noah's ark brimming with beautiful creatures. Future experiences amplified the lesson taught by my father's

2. In many traditional cultures, storytellers are venerated for the role they play in keeping alive the values of a tribe that are embedded in their stories. Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia expresses this point succinctly: "[Storytellers] are the memory of the people, because they preserve the values of the tribe in the absence of any written form" (*African Vitalogy: A Step Forward in African Thinking* [Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications, 1999], 157).

reaction to my kill, like my study of Native American tradition in college that added Chief Seattle's letter to Congress to my personal canon and powerfully reinforced my respect for all forms of life and my abhorrence of wanton slaughter. Later still, I embraced as a model the delicate balance achieved by medieval Benedictine monasteries between human needs and the dignity of all other forms of life.

Page by page our life stories unfold. From them we derive a sense of direction, ethical values, and in fortunate cases generosity of spirit and contentment with life. For many, an important dimension in the life story is religious in nature.

A number of years ago, a handful of students and I invited to lunch a professor of psychology to discuss his research on the roots of human happiness. One student asked, "Aside from the genes we inherit, please name the source of happiness that most clearly emerged from your study." "Religion," my colleague replied. Something deep inside of me nodded assent, for I have long experienced weekly celebration of the Eucharist as the wellspring of a profound sense of peace and joy. That is understandable, given the fact that that simple meal was as much a staple in my childhood home as my mother's scrumptious Sunday dinner that followed.

Similarly, the fact that prayer has been a central part of my life surely has roots in my childhood experience of witnessing my father on his knees at his bedside as I passed (due to the peculiar floor plan of our modest home) through his bedroom to mine. Add to that the example of my mother, ahead of her time with her peripatetic version of "meals on wheels" for all in town who were ill and a kitchen well known to the hoboes who traveled the rail line through our mining town as a reliable source of Swedish meatballs and scalloped potatoes. Thus it was that religion, most of it embodied and unself-conscious, opened my eyes to the presence of meaning, even transcendent meaning, in all that surrounded me.

But what about the strains and pains caused by facets of one's tradition that seem inadequate in the search for an understanding of life's experiences? The intertwining of the warp of tradition and the weft of personal experience is not always genial. Knots appear. Threads fray and snap. In such cases, does one find it necessary to cast off what has been received like a tattered garment? Not necessarily, especially if one is heir to a tradition capable of transforming challenges into opportunities for growth.

Recently I began a seminar on genealogy in the Bible with an exercise in which each student presented a brief oral account of his or her life story, with attention both to events that had special importance in shaping personal identity (*paradigms*) and to the narrative thread that unified diverse life experiences into a sense of identity and purpose (*epic*). Since the setting was a divinity school, it is not surprising that religious roots were repeatedly mentioned, though there was wide variation in the nature of the relationship between student and tradition. One young woman, raised within an Irish Catholic family, had been drawn to the feminist orientation of a Unitarian Universalist congregation. A Methodist,

after being shaken by several traumatic experiences during college, found in Greek Orthodoxy a home that addressed her deepest spiritual and emotional needs. A middle-aged man, descendant from a long line of Presbyterian ministers, was receiving instruction in Reformed Judaism. A young man raised within an Amish community was exploring a decidedly Epicurean lifestyle. Other cases were characterized by a greater degree of continuity. A woman of Armenian descent described a childhood of growing up in a close-knit Eastern Orthodox community that still served her and her own family well, even though she had adopted a more critical stance vis-à-vis all institutions. A student with a history of depression had found in his family's Adventist congregation a safe and supportive spiritual home that helped him develop the confidence that he could recover from recurring dark periods of self-doubt and despair.

Walking home from class, I recalled my own pilgrimage within the Lutheran Church, one characterized by change, not only in my own religious understanding, but in some of the policies of my denomination as well. But throughout, even when introduction to a historical-critical approach to study of the Bible led me as a freshman in college into a dark period of doubt, my tradition provided sufficient constancy at the core, combined with elasticity on the margins, for me to ask questions, to test assumptions, and to grow in faith and understanding.[3]

When strains and tensions do arise in one's relation to tradition, dreams can be swift to respond. At a midpoint in career and family life, I found myself in a dream at work in my basement wood shop, where I observed cement flaking off of a section of the fieldstone wall. As I scraped off more and more mortar and began removing the granite stones, a large glass patio door appeared. Just outside of it grew a lush tropical garden, lavishly arrayed in orchids and cyclamens. Directly beyond my private Eden lay a field covered with sparkling snow, with antique farm implements protruding through the white blanket. Just as I positioned myself to slide open the door to begin exploring, I recognized that I was gazing over the backyard of my childhood home and into the face of my recently deceased mother, as she peered through the window of our little red garage and, with a sternness I had never before seen on her loving face, lipped the urgent message, "It is time for church!"

Though some religious communities construe tradition as a rigid edifice guarding occupants from the world outside and accordingly repudiate the challenges of the wider culture, my experience was more flexible. In my life there has always been time for church. But the biblical-confessional congregation of

---

3. As if I were in need of a reminder that not all who are raised within a religious tradition respond to intellectual challenges to their faith in the way I did, I recently read a blog about Todd Stiefel, an ex-Catholic and currently the generous financial supporter of a nationwide atheist movement, in which he is quoted describing his response to encounter with a historical-critical approach to the Bible in a course at Duke University: "Wait a second, is what I believe in really the truth or is it really the accumulation of myths bundled in a package? That was the end of my faith right there." "The money man behind atheism's activism," http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/03/23/the-money-man-behind-atheisms-activism/

which I am a lifelong member has welcomed dialogue with other perspectives and has not shied away from social challenges.

My spiritual growth can be compared to the dwelling in which Cynthia and I raised our children and continue to live. After taking occupancy as a young couple, we converted its Victorian single-family configuration into a 1970s-style commune for ourselves and two other young couples. As our family grew, walls were moved, an addition was built, and a fence was placed around the yard. What remained constant were roof, walls, and hearth providing safety and warmth against the rain and cold. Continuity and change similarly have characterized my religious home, for it has fostered a living faith, compassionate ethical principles, and examples of virtue that have provided direction throughout my life, but never in such a way as to stultify the benefit of encounters with alternative perspectives on life.

Flexibility capable of accommodating change becomes particularly important in the encounter with cultures or religions differing from one's own. Some religious groups respond defensively, either by avoiding contact with "the other" or permitting contact strictly on unilaterally determined conditions. Why people erect walls of defense is understandable: To be genuinely open to an understanding of life that differs from one's own can be threatening, especially to one who is less than secure in one's own spiritual home. But walls diminish rather than enhance understanding, while border crossings can lead to remarkable enrichment of the stories that guide and shape us.

Consider this family experience. Our family was in the midst of a sabbatical year in southern Germany when the question arose: Should we take our three young children to Dachau? Not irrelevant to the question is the fact that Cynthia and I are heirs to a religious tradition rich in cultural and intellectual achievement, but disgraced by the complicity of the *Deutsche Kirche* during the Third Reich that culminated in the Holocaust. After considerable heart searching, we boarded a train to face the dark side of a tradition whose founder, Martin Luther, had authored alongside brilliant theological writings vitriolic diatribes against Jews and Turks.

The Dachau visit was traumatic beyond anything we could have imagined. Most deeply affected was eight-year-old Mark, whose innocent mind grasped what few adults can comprehend, that Evil can grow into monstrous proportions, defying limits we normally attribute to individual humans. We began to doubt our parental wisdom: Had we not elevated moral rigor above simple loving care of our children?

Then a miracle unfolded. A stranger crossed over a border to join us on the picnic blanket where we were trying in vain to comfort our distraught son. Though Sid Feldman's manner was informal, he possessed the rare gift of a *hacham* (wise teacher). "What did you folks do this afternoon?" "How could Hitler do that to those good people?" Mark sobbed. "Because he was a very sick man . . ." and the message with which Mr. Feldman continued in a language comprehensible to children was essentially this: "Hate is a terrible and scary

thing. It hurts good people. But there is something very beautiful and far stronger in the world than hate. It is love."

We learned that it was love that each year brought this man from Hartford, Connecticut, to Dachau, to the very prison that had etched the number tattooed on his arm. His message was as simple as it was profound: "Love is more powerful than all the hatred in the world."

In the months that followed, in which Mark awoke from nightmares screaming that Hitler was pursuing him, it was Sid Feldman's words that were most effective in calming his soul. Long after the terror had gone, the childhood family experience of border crossing imprinted indelibly onto Mark's life story a lesson regarding what it is to be authentically human. As for my own story, I remember that the *shalom* with which this wonderful man bade farewell embraced in an exquisite moment all the stories of bondage and freedom and the ultimate triumph of universal love that I as a Christian have received from his people's Scripture.

FRIGHTENING STORIES

Thus far we have been reflecting on the interplay of personal experiences and inherited tradition as a basically positive phenomenon, not without tensions to be sure, but in balance leading to a sense of self within the larger world that equips one for the new challenges that life is sure to bring. Sadly, though, memory can also become the repository of an inner turmoil that obstructs efforts to find happiness and meaning. Many people are crippled by intimations of dread rooted in experiences of violence at the hands of those responsible for their safety. Particularly pernicious is the experience of abuse within one's own household, for if one cannot depend on protection from cruelty and shame within one's home, on what basis can a foundation of trust be built for other relationships? Commonly the deposit of inner chaos left by domestic abuse gives rise to depression and suicidal tendencies as well as the perpetuation of abuse in succeeding generations.

A *Boston Globe* report on domestic violence described the plight of eighteen-year-old Tammy Jo, a victim of abuse at the hands of her mother's boyfriend since the age of eleven: "Rarely leaving her father's one-bedroom apartment, she chain-smokes cigarettes that engulf her in a haze of smoke symbolizing her inner confusion. 'I guess I need help,' she says. 'I'm all stressed out. They say I'm depressed. I don't know what's going to happen to me.'" The probation officer assigned to Tammy Jo's case observes that her plight is endemic to the poverty-stricken sections of rural and small-town Massachusetts: "The chaos is a diversion from the boredom, from the feeling of uselessness and powerlessness in these communities. These people live life really on the cuff. They go from emotion to emotion. For them to maintain any kind of purpose in their lives, they truly need this chaos."[4]

---

4. Ellen O'Brien and David Armstrong, "Rape, child abuse, neglect," *The Boston Globe*, March 10, 1997, A6.

The downward spiral that traps people whose chaotic past vitiates hope for the future and a sense of direction in life is like a black hole ever sucking in new victims. Abuse breeds abuse and consumes victims and perpetrators alike. Caregivers working with such people are often plagued with the fear that they are dealing with insuperable odds and have arrived on the scene too late to help.

The disintegration of the sanctity and safety of the home and the breakdown of personal self-respect and purpose rapidly spread their cancerous effects into the larger society. School safety is jeopardized by rifle-bearing pupils. Adolescents developmentally at a stage for watching cartoons and building with Legos enter streets prepared to kill, lest they themselves fall victim to rival-gang assaults. Humans cannot thrive in the absence of a story, and lacking the positive kind of story that fosters self-worth, love of learning, and the patient pursuit of vocational goals, an alternative story marked by self-destructive habits and violence is likely to grow, ensconced in the motto of Nick Romano in the 1950s novel *Death at an Early Age*: "Live fast, die young, and have a good looking corpse," a motto that has modulated into an even more lethal version in contemporary rap glorifying cop killing as a prelude to getting one's own brains blown out.

The young authors of these sinister stories are not acting on their own but are participants in a wider loop. Their tutors and editors come from many segments of society: parents more committed to professional careers than nurturance of their children; politicians ranking reelection ahead of bipartisan strategies for accessible health care, equal vocational opportunity, and quality education; leaders in the advertising and entertainment industries flouting moral principles in promoting their products; and financiers showing no shame in their public display of greed and profligate luxury.[5]

Unfortunately, forgetfulness is one characteristic with which prosperous Americans seem richly endowed, forgetfulness that economic bubbles burst, inequality in the distribution of wealth is self-propelling, the ensuing social unrest spawns violence, and a chain is forged that historically has led to the decline and fall of proud empires. Also forgotten is the sobering fact that the plotline tracking the fate of a nation arises from an anthology in which the stories of all of its citizens are brought together, from those suffering deprivation in inner-city slums to those living in gated communities protected from angry fellow citizens by private police. The failure of our society to clarify its public values and to set priorities for improving the quality of life of *all* citizens is threatening to split the American epic down the middle, with one half trumpeting the smug theme, *We've worked hard and deserve our wealth and bear no*

---

5. An impassioned plea for moral awakening: "I think that we have lived for a very, very long time in a beautiful country, in a beautiful life, and it's made us quite lazy—certainly to the extent that we can barely remember that we are at war—because we don't have to give *anything* up, at any moment in our life. We have no seeming responsibility to a larger whole. This book is a call to that responsibility, a call at least to consider it, because the father is saying to his thrice-blessed sons, 'You have a responsibility to the world. You can't have received so much, and be willing to only follow your own heart's desire.' I think that's really endemic to our country right now, and it's something that I am very obsessed with" (From "A Conversation with Ann Patchett," one of several postscripts included in her novel *Run* [New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007], 9).

responsibility to others (or as Elizabeth Warren formulated it in her 2012 Democratic convention speech, "I've got mine, the rest of you are on your own"[6]), the other half sizzling with a countertheme, *Playing by the rules is futile when the rules are rotten, so we write our own rules to get our share.*

MISSING PAGES AND THE MENTORING ROLE OF SOCIETY

Life stories, besides containing positive and negative pages, sometimes include blank pages or pages missing entirely due to disruptions in the normal course of things or tragic events. Not uncommonly we read the story of an individual, separated since infancy or early childhood from a parent due to adoption or war, embarking on a search for a lost past. More is at play than an exercise in genealogical research, for something deep down feels an attachment to the missing person. Until the lost one is found, an aspect of one's identity remains enshrouded in obscurity. Blank and missing pages thus underscore the key role played by story in the human endeavor of identity formation and discovery of direction and meaning in life. The pages that are missing from the plotline of many individuals place upon the wider community a particularly solemn responsibility.

Social environment is a factor in moral development that is ignored at great peril. Since the quality of a society depends on the quality of its citizens, and at the same time environment affects human development, we are viewing a circular process. Complicating the picture is the debate among psychologists regarding the relation between nurture and nature. Rather than becoming mired in what is likely an insoluble conundrum, it is wise to acknowledge the irreducible mystery that is an essential part of every person. Do we not observe cases in which individuals rise above impoverishment and suffering to build lives filled with dignity and purpose? At the same time, common sense leads us to conclude regarding the interrelation between a good society and good citizens that one cannot exist without the other. Therefore, it should be accepted as a moral mandate that every civilized society create for all of its citizens (and especially its most vulnerable members) a stable and supportive environment conducive to fulfillment of life's full potential.

This in turn makes it the moral duty of every citizen to commit to the public task of ending inequality, discrimination, and unequal opportunity, which—sadly in the case of the United States—continue to spread in the very face of an accelerating concentration of wealth within 1 percent of the population. For far too long a land of promise has shirked its responsibility to foster an environment

6. "Transcript: Elizabeth Warren's Convention Speech," ABCNEWS.com, last modified September 5, 2012. http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/OTUS/transcript-elizabeth-warrens-democratic-convention-speech/story?id=17164726&singlePage=true. Compare the economic philosophy of Ayn Rand as seen through her protagonist John Galt in works such as *Atlas Shrugged* (New York: Plume, 1999).

in which each citizen has a fair chance to compose a life-affirming story. But this returns the discussion to the perennial circle: such an environment can be constituted only by a citizenry equipped with the requisite virtues to comprehend the severity of, and then take incisive action against, hunger, racism, classism, prejudice, and global conflict. But how in a religiously and ideologically diverse society that is respectful of liberty and religious freedom can such virtues be defined and cultivated?

FAMILY AND COMMUNITY AS THE PRIMAL TUTORS IN PERSONAL INTEGRITY AND PUBLIC VIRTUE

The launchpad for the cultivation of integrity and virtue is the individual's *primary* environment, namely, home and community, for there is written the introductory chapter that sets the direction for all that follows. This is a conclusion that has taken shape over the course of my forty-five years of teaching. Repeatedly my puzzling over the contrast between students who view the future with courage, hope, and generosity and those who labor under the burden of prejudice and insecurity that shrinks vocational plans to a competitive zero-sum contest aimed at wealth accumulation has led me back to the phenomenon of story. Aside from the genes we inherit at birth, what seems most determinative of happiness and fulfillment is the quality of the love and nurturance experienced in the seventeen years leading to high-school graduation. From my vantage point as a college professor, healthy students arrive with positive scripts. In conversations they speak fondly of relatives, teachers, religious leaders, and, above all, parents and guardians who have contributed to a robust sense of personal integrity and respect for others. By fostering in a child a vivid sense of his or her membership in a community of nurturance and purpose, by cultivating a home environment in which ample room is provided for reflection on childhood experiences as they unfold, and by providing a healthy balance between affirmation and moral expectations, parents and other involved adults function as tutors and editors in the important process of each child's writing a life story. With steadfast, loving cultivation, that story provides the foundation for a life filled with integrity, compassion, and moral principles. And one by one, citizens are trained in a life philosophy that can renew the moral vitality of a society.[7]

7. The strong influence of family experience on childhood development is supported by recent research. Bruce Feiler writes: "The single most important thing you can do for your family may be the simplest of all: develop a strong family narrative." He summarizes the findings of two psychologists, Sara Duke and Robyn Fivush: "The more children knew about their family's history, the stronger their sense of control over their lives, the higher their self-esteem and the more successfully they believed their families functioned" ("The Stories that Bind Us," *New York Times*, March 17, 2013, Sunday Styles, p. 10).

STORIES WRIT LARGE: GROUP IDENTITY

The line between individual identity and collective identity is fluid, for personal stories provide the threads that are woven into the narratives that craft a sense of honor and destiny for groups of people, whether defined by nationality, race, or religion.[8] The importance of a group's story is especially vital in the case of people with a past scarred by injustices and cruelties. "We don't know who we are apart from a history of oppression," wrote Debra Dickerson.[9] She described how groups of African Americans in the Chicago area assembled memorabilia of their parents' Mississippi homes in the effort to recover their sense of history. Alex Haley's book *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* and the television series that followed struck a deep chord in the American consciousness because African Americans as well as their lighter-skinned neighbors recognized in its chapters a poignant illustration of the importance of a communal account of origins. Especially within the ethnic diversity of American society, a sense of a people's past becomes an important part of its identity.

As other groups celebrate their festivals and customs, it is essential for the development of an individual's positive self-image to be able to display in story and enactment what it is that makes one's own group unique. Like the nautical chart spread out beside the captain at the helm of a ship, a sense of ethnic origins guides a community through a wide spectrum of ways of being human. Identity rooted in history becomes especially important when a group is assailed by the public display of negative images that can tear into the sense of pride and self-worth.

In the history of the United States, black churches (and more recently mosques) have contributed powerfully to the restoration of a sense of history to a people torn violently from their places of origin and then subjected to the dehumanizing effects of institutions (e.g., slavery followed by Jim Crow) designed to obliterate awareness of rooted identity. As James Cone has shown,[10] Negro spirituals blended biblical motifs with lived experiences in a way that fomented resistance to the twisted worldview of slave masters and built up a vision of the day when slaves could cast off their chains and be free at last.

The potential for reform that resides in tradition is illustrated profoundly by the life of Martin Luther King Jr. In one leader's career the biblical office of prophet was charged with a fresh formulation of the biblical themes of justice, compassion, and liberty, with the result that a movement that had languished since the evisceration of the Sixteenth Amendment by Jim Crow legislation was

---

8. Story is intended here in the broad sense of an account fulfilling an etiological function. As for specific genres, it may take the form of extended genealogy, historical narrative, epic, or myth.

9. Greg Jaffe, "Chicago Club Helps Blacks Reclaim their Southern Past," *Wall Street Journal*, March 12, 1997, A1.

10. James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York; Seabury Press, 1972).

put back on a track with unstoppable force.[11] But reform is not a one-time event; it must be renewed in every generation.

Sadly, the miscreants of complacency, greed, and moral impoverishment staunched hopes for a just society in the decades following MLK's assassination. In a nation lacking the civic resolve to sustain a united offensive against economic injustice, a broken urban school system, inadequate health services for the poor, and a penal system more effective in criminalization than in rehabilitation,[12] frustration grew. The Occupy Wall Street movement provided a channel for the peaceful expression of dissatisfaction with the status quo. But unless business leaders begin to self-regulate on the basis of transparent ethical norms and members of Congress rediscover a productive bipartisan way to meet their constituents' demands to take action on the huge problems facing the nation, those dedicated to peaceful demonstrations could be sidelined by those disposed to violence. As in tragic moments of the past, the nation's story could turn ugly.

To the facile optimists and their prophets of weal who argue that the lessons of the past are sufficient to prevent the nation from falling into another major crisis, moral realists must point to the precipitous fall of Germany in the 1920s and '30s. Deep divisions over foreign policy combined with economic volatility handed to unscrupulous leaders the opportunity to produce a revised version of the nation's story that scorned all respect for historical fact, censored criticism, and punished dissent. National pride and the illusion of racial superiority trumped moral principles in promoting a policy of hatred, exclusion, and the resolution of domestic and international problems through military force. Leaders, disdainful of any aim besides the ultimate victory of their Fascist ideology, played on the wounded national pride that resulted from defeat in World War I and the perceived injustices of the Versailles Treaty to indoctrinate a whole generation of youth in the superiority of their race and the threat to purity posed by the mentally impaired, Roma, and Jews.

To be forgotten at great peril is the fragile nature of the stories to which nations appeal for identity, patriotism, and group pride. While national legends and epics can play an important humanizing role, it is sadly the case that tradition can be degraded to serve the goals of tyrants and demagogues. In the case of Nazi Germany, an Aryanized gospel wedded to a Teutonic myth of motherland produced a story promoting a nationalistic idolatry that in one crushing blow abolished the ethical standards of the Hebrew prophets, the reconciling gospel of Jesus Christ, and the whole span of moral philosophy from Plato and Aristotle to Kant and Hegel. Once the theocratic principle of the sole sovereignty of God was supplanted by idolatrous allegiance to the Fuehrer, and love of neighbor by unqualified devotion to the Aryan race, the moral restraints of law—whether construed in terms of natural law, civil law, or biblical tradition—evaporated. No longer was the

---

11. Cf. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954–63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988).

12. A poignant description of our failed prison system can be found in Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012).

intrinsic dignity of every human being taught to the young. Gone was the goal of harmony among all the nations as an inference drawn from the notion of universal human rights. The pursuit of international understanding through negotiation yielded to a policy of world conquest. The execution of those who dared oppose the crimes of the regime demonstrates the moral abyss into which a nation can plunge, once it replaces a national conscience imbued with universally recognized moral principles with values predicated on the divinization of native land. The lesson taught by history is clear: a nation's story may enjoy monumental intellectual formulation in philosophy and theology as well as magisterial expression in art, but once hubris defeats modesty and racial supremacy extinguishes a deep respect for all cultures, calamity lurks in the gathering darkness. To our understanding of story a sobering dimension is thus added: stories stand in need of constant surveillance and critique, provided in the case of individuals by candid family members and friends and in the case of nations by a free press and the freedom of religious bodies to send their prophets to the citadels of economic, political, and military authority to speak truth to power.

Rather than learning from history, however, humans frequently choose to *repeat* history. In the decades following World War II the hatchet-style division of the spoils among the Allies and the subsequent growth of the Soviet Union into a nuclear world power again cast a dark cloud over the family of nations. Yet in less than a half century and with unexpected rapidity, the crumbling of Soviet control over eastern Europe culminating in the collapse of the Berlin Wall led to jubilation over the passing of the most recent example of nationalist idolatry and police-state control.

Though the restoration of liberty and the opportunity to rebuild democratic structures in the countries formerly under the repressive control of the Soviet Union awakened hope for a new era of world peace, that hope once again was short-lived. With the resurgence of ideological conflict and racial cleansing in Serbia, Bosnia, Rwanda, Zaire, the Sudan, Mali, and Syria, it has become clear that the assault on human rights has not ended, but merely morphed into a pernicious regional guise. Tragically, the tutoring of each new generation of youth in ethnic and religious intolerance and the practice of settling grievances through violence rather than arbitration has continued unabated into the opening decades of the third millennium. As a result, the global catastrophe that was averted with the thawing of the cold war is being stealthfully accomplished by starvation, HIV/AIDS, and regional conflict.

THE AMBIGUOUS NATURE OF STORIES
AND THEIR ACTORS

To this point we have discussed positive stories and negative stories, which could suggest a world unambiguously divided between good and bad, light and darkness, the evil and the righteous. Such a Manichean worldview is often favored

by national leaders seeking to consolidate citizen support. It has the twin advantages of imbuing complex situations with the appearance of moral clarity and of portraying homeland as the divinely appointed agent of world order. But it is no friend of the techniques of arbitration and reconciliation that moral philosophers have long recognized as the most dependable guidelines to conflict resolution.

Individuals and their leaders alike are reluctant to acknowledge that human affairs are generally marked by moral ambiguity. After all, most individuals fit the mold of neither Mother Teresa nor Adolf Hitler, but rather Malcolm X or Richard Nixon, even as most nations resemble neither Augustine's City of God nor Idi Amin's Uganda, but rather Japan or the United States. What is more, people often disagree in their evaluation of individuals and nations. The reason for disagreement is clear: we scrutinize and assess not from a neutral perspective, but on the basis of specific moral presuppositions. Such presuppositions are an essential part of the conceptual worlds within which persons and groups live, for they provide grounding for their identity-shaping stories. The alternative to morally constructed competing worldviews is anomie, a chaotic universe in which ethical discourse becomes impossible, due to the fact that the contestants are unable to identify the standards of right and wrong that shape each other's judgments. Acknowledging the importance of moral presuppositions, however, does not solve the problem posed by diversity, but rather places it in sharper focus. At this point we shall turn to a historical retrospect intended to provide an adequate framework for examining the challenges contemporary societies face as they struggle to integrate into purposeful dialogue ideologically and religiously diverse constituencies, each seeking to preserve and be guided by its particular traditions and practices.

HOW WE GOT HERE: A HISTORICAL RETROSPECT

Most early societies developed their stories on the basis of a higher degree of group solidarity than is characteristic of modern societies. Moral discernment in the case of the former was quite straightforward: does an action conform to the group's definition of the good and the right? In contemporary life that simpler world of moral evaluation can be observed in pockets of traditionalism referred to as affinity groups, that is, circles of people holding certain values and standards in common. It is also preserved in regimented professions like the military.

Consider a hypothetical episode in which a military council is evaluating the record of a soldier who has been recommended for a citation of bravery. Let us imagine that the criteriology of all of the officers is shaped by an Aristotelian understanding of their profession, and from that perspective they ask, "Has this individual exhibited the courage, high spirits, and loyalty of an excellent soldier?" The process moves smoothly to a decision. Or consider a church's political action committee evaluating, on the basis of a shared Calvinist model of civic

virtue, the record of a mayor seeking reelection: "Has our mayor remained true to his election promises by funding programs for improving the quality of our schools, increasing the safety of our neighborhoods, and encouraging job creation in the private sector?" In both cases the homogeneous framework within which each group conducts its evaluation imputes a clear definition of goals as well as the virtues requisite for reaching those goals. The resulting process of discernment is quite straightforward.

These days, however, such homogeneity of purpose is uncommon beyond such pockets of the like-minded. More typical is a college seminar where diversity rather than commonality of perspective prevails. Feminist voices are heard taking issue with traditional Roman Catholic positions, Buddhist insights challenge Western theistic presuppositions, and atheists deny the need for a transcendent basis for ethical behavior. Rather than drawing the conclusion that such diversity necessarily leads to impasse, picture the possibility that the ensuing discussion proves to be beneficial to all participants, demonstrating that civil discussion is possible in a pluralistic setting. Possible, but not inevitable, for discord rather than engagement would have ensued, were it not for preliminary agreement on basic rules such as commitment to finding common ground and willingness to compromise. The effectiveness of such civil discourse has been demonstrated on a larger scale in the approach to regional and international conflict resolution developed and effectively applied by Roger Fisher.[13]

Theories explaining the basis upon which productive dialogue can be carried on in a religiously diverse society include John Rawls's neo-Kantian theory of "overlapping consensus"[14] and Jeffrey Stout's more pragmatic understanding of productive goal-oriented strategy and action.[15] To this important issue we shall return in the epilogue. At this point it is sufficient to be open to the possibility of productive public discourse within a pluralistic society and even to the suggestion that discourse can be chastened and enriched by the questions and challenges posed to one another by participants comfortable with explaining their particular points of view while listening attentively to the arguments emerging from other traditions.[16] To be sure, that ideal is easiest to visualize for those who already have experienced the deep satisfaction that arises from transcending differences to reach goals in which all parties benefit and no one leaves the table with a sense of having been marginalized.

13. With notable success, this approach to arbitration has been developed by Roger Fisher, author of *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1981).

14. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).

15. Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994).

16. Cameroonian philosopher Martin Nkafu Nkemnkia describes the discovery of "making oneself one with the other persons of different cultures" in terms of a "resurrection." "[I]nstead of losing oneself and one's own culture, the meeting with different cultures becomes an enrichment, thus inaugurating in us a new way of seeing the world, God, ourselves, our neighbour and a whole new field of vital values" (*African Vitalogy*, 13).

To be productive, however, the vision of building trust dedicated to the common good must not be confined to an elite coterie of thinkers, aloof from the messiness of everyday life. There seems to be abundant evidence to suggest that, more than in earlier epochs, the contemporary world resembles Babel with its cacophony of voices promoting religious and ideological perspectives in such disparate language as to seem incongruous. This is not to say that sharp differences in belief and practice were unknown in earlier times. But forceful instruments of control were available for identifying and banishing "heretics" and promoting uniformity.

A common past strategy for taming the centrifugal effects of religious and philosophical discord was enforcement of "orthodoxy" through ecclesial bull or royal decree. Another was the emergence of a particular philosophical school to preeminence, such as the "reign" of Platonic thought from St. Augustine (354–430) to the early Middle Ages and the widespread influence of Aristotle and philosophy in the era of Averroës (1126–98), Maimonides (1135–1204), and Thomas Aquinas (1225–74).

The rancorous debates between nominalists and realists that followed, however, foreshadowed a tectonic shift in the political and intellectual organization of the Western world. The independence of scholarly inquiry that arose with the Renaissance, the erosion of central ecclesial authority and an emphasis on the freedom of the individual in matters of belief fomented by the Reformation, and the accompanying rise of independent princedoms and nation-states marked the end of hegemonic authority as the basis for cultural cohesion. The repercussions were vast and devastating, with the Copernican Revolution in science and the Thirty Years' War (1618–48) in politics serving as examples. A broken and divided world cried out for a new paradigm for reconstituting order.

The Enlightenment rose up to provide that new paradigm. Negatively, it indicted religion and its appeal to divine revelation as a capricious source of sectarian divisions, tension, and war. Positively, it announced a new instrument capable of banishing the contentious rival truth claims of religion and equipping humans with a tool capable of leading to genuine knowledge in the realms of science and philosophy, namely, reason. In the place of clerics, philosophers were to be the ones trained in clarifying universally valid moral principles and guiding leaders in applying them to matters of governance.

Like headstrong intellectual programs before it, the Enlightenment project soon revealed fractures in its basic claims. Having displaced the ancestral God and his earthly representatives, the high priests of the newly liberated humanity, the philosophers, could not agree on a definition of the universal good. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) explained why: the road to the Truth involved something more complicated than simply refining the learned instruments of investigation. An epistemological conundrum had to be faced: rather than *discovering* order, the philosopher was guided by internal structures of reason that *imposed* order on what was being observed.

The consequent history of post-Enlightenment thought is the history of the collapse of the ambitious project to build a universal consensus based on human reason. The nineteenth-century Danish philosopher theologian Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) marks an important turning point. While repudiating rational philosophy's attempt to establish a universal basis for truth, he argued passionately for giving wholehearted assent to an unabashedly Christian morality, based not on the alleged "proof" of reason, but as an affirmation of a human faced with the either/or decision between a self-centered aesthetic lifestyle and a Christ-centered (authentic) moral way of living.[17]

A final step into the conundrum that has imprinted the moral and political philosophy of the modern period was taken by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900). While concurring with Kierkegaard's dethronement of reason as a path to a purported universal understanding of the right and the good, he pressed toward moral anarchy by repudiating the privileged status that had been accorded traditional Christian morality and promoting the will to power as the paradigm of the future. Within the subjectivist framework of post-Enlightenment philosophy, there was in Nietzsche's view no defensible basis for privileging the love ethic of Christ over other options. The human race, emancipated from the bonds of tradition and left to its human resources, was therefore to follow the leadership of the quintessential human being, one transcending conventional human society and through his self-accorded authority empowered to impose on his weaker, less willful mortals a code of law generated by his superior consciousness. In Nietzsche's transmutation of conventional values, traditional Judeo-Christian virtues were subject to particular ridicule on the grounds that they were patterned after the docility of a submissive Christ rather than the assertive might of the Superman (*Übermensch*).

For our study, the significance of Nietzsche lies less in the specific program he promoted than in the conceptual world he introduced. Morality in that world was cut off from history and detached from collective human experience. Norms were to be dictated arbitrarily by the Übermensch without regard for obligations preceding or transcending the individual. Though no individual Übermensch was able to reign for long, a less tangible but more tenacious tyrant than Hitler or Stalin emerged on a stage denuded of moral direction. Denied recourse to the concept of universal norms and without the value and purpose imbuing a living culture's traditions and practices, an ethical open market was created with rivals such as utilitarianism, voluntarism, Marxism, empiricism, pragmatism, and fundamentalisms of different sorts, all contending for the loyalty of adherents. The winner was the contestant most in sync with liberated, "unencumbered" humanity, namely, emotivism.[18]

17. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either Or*, trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian Marvin Swenson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971).

18. Poignantly, Michael Sandel has characterized the individual living in a world circumscribed by self-interest as the "unencumbered self" (*Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996], 12).

In a society in which emotivism has triumphed, the source of moral truth no longer resides in traditions, practices, and institutions, but in the subjective consciousness of the individual.[19] If that consciousness has not been trained in virtue within the context of a clear definition of social values and commitment to a public notion of the common good (Aristotle's *telos*), it is only as reliable as the whirling compasses of unfettered human hearts. John Rawls, to be sure, sought to restore rational order to the search for a reliable moral foundation for contemporary society. But Alasdair MacIntyre has argued persuasively that Rawls's neo-Kantian attempt to restore a shared sense of justice by appeal to the perspective glimpsed from under "the veil of ignorance" and benefiting from an "overleaping consensus" was deficient, inasmuch as it perpetuated the error of the Enlightenment by not recognizing that neutral ground and objectivity are not available to humans.[20] To be comprehensible and generative of a viable society, values and moral principles need to be embedded in that society's traditions and practices.

So is the future to be conceded to emotivism? This question is one that must be taken very seriously by anyone concerned with the confusion that characterizes contemporary ethical thought, for the roots of emotivism run deeply in the culture. It did not triumph as the philosophy of choice by happenstance. Rather, it represents the most congenial philosophy for denizens of a new age who are enthralled with the immediate gratifications of a materialistic lifestyle, who celebrate emancipation from traditional duties and restraints, and who pursue personal advancement unhampered by concerns for social reform and global equality. Moreover, it would be inaccurate to view the ascendancy of emotivism as marking the end of the role played by stories in the formation of identity. What it does mean is that stories are narrowed down to private affairs within the lives of individuals and the affinity groups to which they belong. Storytelling in the traditional epic sense of the etiology of an entire state or nation becomes an endangered genre. Serious consequences follow. The effort to identify the commonalities constitutive of group identity and purpose wane, inasmuch as individual and affinity group stories promote a myopic vision of the world. Rather than building bridges, they erect walls, and the casualty is the sense of neighborliness fostered by the traditional belief that "no man is an island." In the world of "unencumbered" individualists, if an inner-city child enters adulthood with a learning disability caused by exposure to lead paint or a young man on the other side of the tracks falls victim to gang violence, citizens (or should we call them "inmates") neither hear the bell toll nor are they moved to action, for without the sense of solidarity provided by a *shared* story, we feel no personal diminution through the loss of anonymous others, or in the case of humans on the other side of the globe, through the loss of anonymous millions!

19. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*.
20. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*.

Emotivism then does not promote lively public dialogue but promotes an antisocial climate in which individuals become so enthralled with schemes for personal gain that they become blinded to the commonweal. In such a climate CEOs of corporations prioritize lucrative contracts above the interests of laborers and consumers on a scale that astonishes even their counterparts in the other industrial nations. And in ever-increasing numbers voters are losing confidence in the representatives they elect and whose salaries they pay in anticipation of efficient, bipartisan service dedicated to the common good. The reason for their cynicism is clear. In response to daunting fiscal, social, and international threats, they witness ideological gridlock, campaign-motivated rhetoric, and petty-mindedness tarnishing the stature of the nation's highest office holders.

In spite of the enormous popularity of emotivism, however, its continued grip on society should not be regarded as a foregone conclusion. Clear voices can be heard in defense of the traditional American republican virtues of public-spiritedness and a value system that transcends individual self-interest.[21] These voices look with cautious hope to the future on the basis of lessons, both positive and negative, from the past. They stress the importance of story as a source of identity and purpose for both individual and the wider society. But they also recognize a formidable challenge facing those dedicated to a communal approach to creating a good society for *every* individual and enlisting *all* citizens in contributing toward that goal. The challenge arises from the phenomenon that most emphatically distinguishes modern societies from earlier ones, namely, proliferating religious and philosophical *diversity*.[22]

Diversity on the visceral level of the beliefs and values that define us and structure our lives can generate deep-seated anxiety. Two common responses are withdrawal into self-validating enclaves and its polar twin, an aggressive campaign to impose one's own philosophical/religious position on others. Far more difficult is engagement in a process in which commitment to unprejudiced inclusivity draws citizens into developing a mode of civic discourse and political action in which all voices are heard.

Right at the point where the goal of enlisting the whole range of viewpoints into civil discourse seems within reach, however, another threat to political discourse and action arises. What makes its challenge the most difficult of all is the fact that its proponents come from the ranks of the most tolerant, public-minded members of the society. We are referring to a discursive etiquette that,

---

21. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent*, 12.
22. Alasdair MacIntyre has reminded us that in the modern world public discourse is fraught with difficulty. He points out that once cut off from community and ascribed solely to the individual, the language of virtue and morality lapses into incoherency. And with the accompanying loss of a public sense of human purpose (Aristotle's *telos*), the disparate constituencies making up the society go their separate ways resulting in "incompatibility" and "incommensurability." Traditional terms like liberty, freedom, and rights, to be sure, continue to be used, but for different groups they have widely divergent meanings derived from the incompatible moral worldviews within which they have been shaped and the parochial stories and practices in which they are embodied (MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 125).

for fear of conflict and with commitment to goodwill among all citizens, strives to find a middle ground by bracketing out of public debate the deepest moral insights drawn by faith communities from their respective sacred writings and traditions.[23] The dreary end products of such polite debate are often anemic lowest-common-denominator strategies and policies lacking the passion and vitality capable of lifting a community's sights to a higher moral plane.

Withdrawal into the safety of affinity enclaves, aggressive attempts to impose one's own values and policies on others, and tepid discursive etiquette: are these the only options available to a nation struggling with gargantuan domestic and international problems?

A WAY FORWARD

In invoking the metaphor of story, we have begun to build the case for an understanding of political process that reclaims the historical dimension of nationhood and the essential role of memory in fostering a vibrant and just society while at the same time taking into full account the modern phenomenon of diversity. When national identity is understood in terms of historical ontology rather than abstract theory, the question of who we are as a people invokes the historical question, where do we come from and what are the narratives and practices that shape our sense of shared goals? When those questions evoke memories of flights from bondage to freedom and an inheritance of copious streams and fecund fields, a sense of pride infuses the national consciousness. But when deeper scrutiny discloses the expropriation of those streams and fields from their native owners, the role of memory in defining national identity tempers national pride with self-critique.

To be sure, many citizens, desirous of an ebullient picture of the past, cultivate a national story that resembles fable more than fact. Patriotism becomes the pretense for bowdlerizing the textbooks teaching American history to the next generation. To pledge allegiance to the flag takes on the aura of worship that categorically erases any sense of regret or need for redress. But as we have learned from Nazi Germany, history teaches a severe lesson: if a sanitized version of the nation's story becomes official, lies trump hard truths, sanctimoniousness excludes all sense of remorse, and a climate is created in the nation's citadels of power for combative politics and belligerent foreign policy. A potentially deadly disease invades the heart of the land.

Though less pernicious than the demagogical hijacking of Scripture, another dubious interpretive practice is widespread in the United States. It involves consulting the Bible as one would a recipe book or a repair manual in search of clear answers to complex questions that deserve not facile directives but careful

---

23. Richard Rorty, *The Ethics of Citizenship: Liberal Democracy and Religious Convictions* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008).

analysis drawing on the profound moral insights of Scripture. Flat-footed proof-texting errs by failing to recognize the subjective aspect of all interpretation. The way forward must be one that courageously and patiently seeks to honor traditions by hearing them in their own voices and then patiently and diligently strives for answers benefiting from the contributions of all participants in a diverse society.

THE STRUCTURE OF OUR STUDY

Moving forward in the case of this study has as its goal the formulation of a theo-political hermeneutic capable of channeling the cacophony of religious beliefs and moral principles that reside in contemporary society into a rich and productive public dialogue. But before we embark on that theological task, our historicist perspective calls for two historically oriented investigations to provide essential background. Both will reflect the concrete cultural location of the author, one his US citizenship, the other his biblically based religious orientation.

In part 1, we shall trace chapters of a story that over the course of several centuries has fashioned the heart of US identity and, in new chapters that continue to be written, unfolds further its open-ended plot. Because of the resiliently religious character of the American people from colonial times to the present, we shall be attentive to the role that biblical tradition has played in shaping the national story. That that role was considerable is understandable in light of a shared quality: the nation's history and biblical history are both filled with identity-building stories, stories depicting origins, adjustments to new experiences, enrichment through encounters with the alien and the unexpected, and above all, a sense of purpose that asserts the need to make sense of the whole. In the case of ancient Israel, this implied the triumph of epic over myth;[24] in the case of the United States, it implied a dynamic notion of risk taking and growth into newness over a static model of eternal order.

The legacy uncovered in part 1 will be a checkered one, ranging from rank exploitation of biblical texts on behalf of national self-interest to instances of exemplary charity and self-sacrifice that bring to light the nation's potential for promoting equality, justice, and well-being both at home and abroad. But the most ominous discovery to surface will be the arbitrariness characterizing most applications of the Bible to political issues. Repeatedly one detects neither concern for the meaning intrinsic to the scriptural texts in their own setting nor sensitivity to the delicate balance between religion and state established by the First Amendment.

---

24. Cf. Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973).

Part 2 in turn will present a detailed study of politics in the Bible, beginning with tribal judges and moving on to kings, priests, prophets, governors, and seers. Framed by the challenges and crises discussed in the survey of American history, its purpose is that of securing a reliable biblical-historical foundation for the constructive task that follows in the epilogue of formulating a theo-political hermeneutic defining guidelines for the application of scriptural tradition to contemporary issues.

For the sake of clarity, we shall now give a more detailed description of the pivotal position held by part 2 within the overall structure of our study. Alexander Pope penned an apt caption for that section: "A little learning is a dangerous thing; Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring." For as noted above, our survey of the relation of Bible and politics in US history unveiled flagrant arbitrariness in the use/abuse of Scripture from colonial times to the present. In the case of a source with such latent power in a highly religious country, "a little learning" is not only dangerous; it is potentially lethal to many defenseless people at home and abroad. Serious learning is urgently called for to liberate the Bible from the control of opportunists and the unscrupulous and to place it in the hands of the meek and the poor and those who seek to restore the dignity and rights of all. Fair-minded people of all persuasions can unite in respecting the Bible as a classical source to be studied for the insights it can provide and to opposing the self-serving exercise of treating Scripture as a mirror to be peered into for the comfort of "discovering" in its pages one's own ideological views and prejudices!

Specifically regarding the political exploitation of the Bible, one discovery that emerges from a rigorous historical method is that the Bible does not formulate one monolithic, timeless political model ready to be cut out and pasted as a template for contemporary policy, but six distinct models, each the product of a community applying its central beliefs and values to the changing circumstances of its own time and place. Grasping and being tutored by the dynamic that enabled biblical communities to apply core beliefs and moral principles to the challenges raised by the concrete issues with which they contended emerges as the responsible alternative to the mechanistic practice of imposing subjectively formulated (though purportedly inerrant!) "biblical" truths on the vastly different world of modernity.

The dynamic, historically adaptable character of the Bible that emerges from disciplined research places a solemn responsibility on anyone seeking to present the relevance of Scripture for contemporary politics in a manner both sensitive to the Bible's historical richness and comprehensible to the modern reader. While attention to historical context and original meaning and function of biblical texts provides a necessary restraint on the temptation to exploit the Bible for ideological purposes, it runs the risk of overwhelming the reader interested in the contemporary political relevance of Scripture with an unfathomable welter of details. While arguing that the Bible is not a timeless manual providing ready-made answers to every contemporary issue, it would be a serious blunder to give

the impression that it is a *compendium rerum* accessible exclusively to archaeologists and antiquarians. What is accordingly called for is an approach capable of re-presenting in terms comprehensible to modern readers the biblical dynamic of fidelity to core beliefs and principles as the basis for applying the Bible to an ever-changing society and world.

Once again we are reminded of the relevance of the lessons we derived from our exploration of the identity-generating function of story for a historical approach to the politics of the Bible. Ancient Scriptures, our nation's history, and our contemporary personal and political existence constitute the threads from which we weave a sense of meaning and purpose. Attentiveness to those threads reveals the common ground shared between our ancestors, ourselves, and our progeny. The resulting generation-transcending experience fosters a sense of indebtedness to the stories passed on to us for our consciousness of self-hood and community-belonging in the present and of confidence that we are preserving for and handing on to our descendants a story that they will continue to compose.

This sense of *in medias res* given to us by the metaphor of life as story saves us from the imprisonment of fossilization (we are slaves of our past) and predeterminism (we have no influence on the future). The past that nourishes us and the future we bequeath to the next generation are dynamic in nature, creating a sense of reality that is open though not aimless, affected by events already recorded though not stuck in them. While providing us with a sense of identity and purpose, our story is not exclusive or parochial, but open and hospitable to all who are willing to contribute from the richness of their stories to the common human task of building a just and peaceable world.

This last point invites us to extend the metaphor in the direction of our goal of reclaiming the Bible for political edification: Storytellers share a very large tent. Among those accepting the invitation to participate are Aristotelians seeking to guide their society (*polis*) on the basis of a shared vision of the common good (*telos*). Joining them are those pious lovers of *torah* who perform daily acts of kindness (*miṣwôt*) because their inner being is fashioned by the *Seder* tale of an ancient act of divine mercy. Hans-Georg Gadamer's disciples join the show, with their sense of the *fusion* of ancient and modern horizons,[25] as do the students of Alasdair MacIntyre with their embrace of narratives pregnant with present-day meaning.[26] The guest list goes on, because if your invitation welcomes all who love stories and are willing to share theirs and hear others, walls are converted into bridges and dimly burning wicks turn into torches illuminating the pathway from the events that built community consciousness in antiquity to the groundbreaking experiences of our own forebears as they struggled to build

---

25. "Fusion of horizons" is a concept developed by Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 269, 302.

26. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 212, 216.

a nation and finally on down to our own involvement in the vital issues of contemporary existence.

Once we as public-minded citizens have grasped the ongoing, open-ended nature of our individual and communal identities with the aid of the metaphor of story, the contribution of the two diachronic studies constituting parts 1 and 2 to our overarching topic of the Bible and politics becomes evident: biblical history, enriched by many religious and cultural traditions, flows into and is intertwined with our nation's epic, both for better and for worse. To ignore that history is to cut ourselves off from our roots and to deny the ancestral experiences that forged our individual and collective identity. Expressed in terms of historical ontology, our neglect or forgetfulness of the diachronic dimension of life is tantamount to the refutation of our authenticity and essential being, a refutation that readily leads to uprootedness and alienation.

History in the vast arc of its unfolding over the centuries and millennia is the most reliable tutor available from which to learn from our ancestors the mistakes they made as well as the things they got right. For believers of all types, as well as for historically sensitive secularists and atheists in a richly diverse society, ancient scriptural legacies (including non-Judeo-Christian traditions), as they flow into a nation's history and finally into the lives of families and individuals, can be treasured as generative chapters enriching our own sense of identity and location within the larger scheme of things.

Having secured in parts 1 and 2 the historical foundation for our theo-political task, we shall broach in the epilogue the question of the contemporary message of the Bible, keenly mindful of the dynamic phenomenon of story that furnishes the lens through which we can grasp the nature and abiding significance of both national and biblical history. Indeed, the essential lineaments of our theo-political hermeneutic should arise organically from the two historical surveys. What we shall propose is a manner of public moral discourse that invites full participation by members of all religious and philosophical groups in a robust style of engagement enriched by full expression of the deepest moral insights of each, rather than a tepid exchange of ecumenical platitudes. The universal harmony envisioned by rationalism will be eschewed in favor of the inevitable messiness of genuine debate among adherents of distinct systems of belief and morals that resists meltdown into a single mold. Deeply rooted convictions will not be checked at the door like so many colorful umbrellas, for the invitation will stipulate for open conversation respectful of the distinctiveness of each group and appreciative of the fact that values are not the products of dispassionate rational deliberations, but rather are expressions of the identities shaped by specific narrative traditions and practices. In terms introduced earlier in this chapter, beliefs, ethical principles, and the identities they shape are the products of the particular historical ontology and distinctive paradigms embedded in a given community's story.

In the public forum that we envision, fear of conflict arising from divergent perspectives is not the driving factor, but rather the appeal of substantive moral

inquiry that benefits from the mix of insights found where participants grant to others the same right of expression that they enjoy themselves. The challenge is of such complexity as to be eschewed by those who persist in pursuit of an imaginary neutral ground productive of universal principles, as well as by those dedicated to the triumph of their purported *superior* systems of belief and morals over all other *inferior* systems and wont to withdraw bitterly from public engagement when denied that triumph.

The more difficult path of discourse predicated on diversity represents in itself a rigorous moral test, since participation must extend beyond persons viewing all religious/philosophical differences from a relativistic perspective. To have any social traction, the path into the future must include those who hold a deep commitment to the truthfulness of their beliefs, values, and moral principles, while at the same time acknowledging that since no human is omniscient, enrichment from other perspectives is beneficial. Add to this the pragmatic consideration that the path of inclusive participation is the only peaceable way forward for a diverse society and one has laid the foundation for a promising model of productive public discourse. If we succeed in our investigation, we shall have demonstrated that an important aspect of that discourse revolves around the politics of the Bible.

PART 1
A Historical Retrospective
on the Relation between the Bible
and Politics in the United States

Introduction

The relationship between religious organizations and government developed over the course of US history in a way that set it apart from Great Britain and the Continent. Drawing on the lessons of the leaders of the thirteen colonies who preceded them, as well as on the political writings of French and English philosophers, the founders, though frequently differing over the specific inferences they drew from their religious and philosophical views, were able to agree upon the principle that, whatever the individual states decided for themselves, the nation as a whole was to eschew the notion of an established church. As for the citizens, their freedom to choose a particular religion or no religion was to be protected from congressional interference. Under the protective canopy of the two religion clauses of the First Amendment, older denominations as well as native-born movements developed within a climate of free expression and intense competition.

As the new nation developed, many citizens as well as their political leaders drew inspiration from the Bible and sought with varied success to achieve a more just, righteous, and compassionate society. Reformers across the generations inspired by biblical ideals sought a wide range of reformist goals. Temperance advocates sought to protect families and children from the scourge of alcoholism.

At the same time a coalition of northern Evangelicals petitioned Congress to protect the Cherokee from being expelled from their ancestral lands. Scriptural ideals of equality and liberation for the oppressed inspired Frederick Douglass, Theodore Dwight Weld, Theodore Parker, and the Grimké sisters to organize to abolish the sin of slavery from the land. During the Progressive Era a range of religious leaders sought to improve conditions for immigrants in the inner cities and to restrain the excessive power of emerging business oligopolies. As the twentieth century progressed and the United States assumed a more prominent role in world affairs, biblical ideals shaped both Woodrow Wilson in his quest for a war to end all wars and a just and lasting peace and later generations of pacifists who opposed American intervention in wars ranging from Vietnam to Iraq. Most notably in the last several generations, religiously inspired imagery and reform strategies were central to the nonviolent civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. and helped to build bridges between people of goodwill from all races and walks of life.

Yet this sketch of the positive legacies of religion in American life tells only one side of a much more complicated story, wherein Americans all too frequently failed to live up to their highest political and religious ideals. Significantly, the ideal of religious freedom remained an elusive one for many. Though the religious climate in the new land spawned numerous sectarian innovations, the yearning of many nonconformist groups to reach the status of full participation in American society was thwarted by encounters with intolerance and violence that contradicted the notion of equality under the law. Such was the case in the century and a half before the Revolutionary War, and such was the case in the era that followed. Separatists like Roger Williams and dissenters like Anne Hutchinson, who questioned the political and religious authority of the Puritan leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, fled to Rhode Island after being banished from their communities. Quakers who defiantly returned after being expelled were executed in Boston. Men and women accused of witchcraft were tried and sentenced to execution in Salem, Ipswich, and Andover. As the grinding wheels of intolerance rolled into the first century of the new nation, Mormons, in the face of lethal persecution, fled westward on a route taking them from New York to Ohio, Illinois, and Missouri before they finally found sanctuary in the wide-open spaces of the mountainous West.

As for Native peoples, they were progressively displaced from their land through intimidation by colonial leaders, tricked into shoddy land-purchase agreements, and massacred mercilessly in reprisal for their attempts to reclaim their tribal territories. As the growing young nation pressed inexorably toward the Pacific in response to its growing population, their pleas for redress usually fell upon deaf ears. Even in the few cases where their claims were brought to trial and resulted in a favorable decision, victory in court was no guarantee of justice

at home.[1] The same pattern of injustice has reached down to modern times, as demonstrated by the state of Oregon's denial of unemployment compensation to Native American employees Galen Black and Alfred Smith on the basis of their participation in tribal religious ceremonies that included the sacramental use of peyote.[2]

Given the all too frequent instances of glaring contradictions between the constitutional ideal and the persistence of discrimination against religious minorities, it is important to cultivate public awareness of our First Amendment tradition and its strengths and vulnerabilities, a goal greatly enriched by a historical perspective. In the following eight chapters, therefore, our objective is to examine the relationship between religion and politics in US history and to identify the theo-political models that were adopted and developed to shape that relationship.

1. Though the court sided with the Cherokee in *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832), both the state and federal authorities (including President Andrew Jackson, whose policy was articulated in the Indian Removal Act that he signed into law in 1830) ignored John Marshall's ruling.

2. "Oregon Peyote Law Leaves 1983 Defendant Unvindicated," *New York Times*, July 9, 1991, A14.

Chapter 1

The Theocratic Model
of the Puritans

The unique political thought of the Puritans cannot be understood without an awareness of the historical and cultural context in which it developed. During the persecutions of English Protestants that occurred under the Catholic Queen Mary (1553–58), many refugees sought asylum on the Continent. Due to the tumult of religious wars that engulfed the German states in which the Lutheran Church had taken root, most of those refugees were drawn to the more peaceful havens of Amsterdam, Geneva, and neighboring Calvinist cities. This twist of history had a lasting effect on the nature of the Christian political theory that many of the reform-minded Puritans brought back with them when the restoration of Protestant rule under Elizabeth I (1558–1603) allowed them to return to their homeland.

Once resettled in England, the Puritans set themselves to the task of preparing the New Israel for the imminent return of Christ. The Puritan divines searched the Bible for direction, being guided by a hermeneutic that sought signs not of the universal body of Christ transcending all political boundaries, in the style of Luther and Calvin, but of the reform of the English nation by God's redemptive work. Granted, the obstacles that stood in the way of reform were formidable, given their perception of corruption infecting a church with papist

leanings and kings (James I [1603–25] and Charles I [1625–49]) not hesitating to exploit the theo-political doctrine of the divine right of kings for blatantly self-serving purposes. The Puritans viewed themselves as God's agents in carrying on the holy struggle that would inaugurate the new era of righteousness and peace.

The polity that guided the activities of the Puritans blended the theocratic ideals of Geneva with an apocalyptic fervor fired by their expectation that Christ's return was imminent. They proclaimed that the nation was being summoned to submit to God's rule as revealed in the biblical commandments and to embody the purity of life that would prepare the land for Christ's triumphal return.

As seems inevitable throughout human history in the case of apocalyptically motivated political movements, the program of reform brought back by the Puritans from Geneva ended in failure. Leaders of both the church and the state, fearing that England would become consumed by the kind of religious wars that had swept over the Continent, united in repudiating their positions as extreme.[1] During the reign of James I and on into the first half of Charles I's reign, the tide flowed in the direction of reaffirming the power-sharing arrangement between monarchy, church, and parliament that left the Puritans without a base from which to create the New Israel, at least in the motherland. Increasingly they became an alienated group, and were it not for their fervent faith, they may have withdrawn altogether from politics into the solace of otherworldly sectarianism.

Deftly, though, they introduced into their vision of God's plans for an earthly habitation a significant alteration: "As sure as God is God, God is going from England," proclaimed Thomas Hooker in 1633 in his sermon "The Danger of Desertion," as he embarked from England to sail with his followers (including Anne Hutchinson) to Holland and then on to a land of promise on the other side of the Atlantic.[2] Depictions of an apocalyptic denouement remained central in his sermons and in the sermons of other Puritan divines like John Cotton; but now, instead of the motherland being the object of God's redemptive activity, England had become the satanic obstacle that God would have to remove to prepare for the establishment of the New Israel in the fresh soil of America. As John Winthrop expressed it, the new settlements would "raise a Bulworke against the kingdome of Ante-Christ . . . [and provide] a refuge for many whome he meanes

---

1. The brief triumph of the Puritan movement under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell culminating in the Commonwealth of 1653–58 is not directly relevant to our discussion of the roots of Puritanism in New England, inasmuch as it occurred roughly two decades after the emigrations that led to the founding of Plymouth Plantation (1620) and the Massachusetts Bay colony (1629). Though the Commonwealth preserved many of the religious aims of the earlier Puritans, it enacted a Shakespearean-style conflict between two formidable characters, Cromwell with his charisma and formidable military prowess and Charles I with his arrogant flaunting of power and disdain for the complaints of parliamentarians, religious dissidents, and commoners alike.

2. Thomas Hooker, *The Danger of Desertion* (1641, 1657), reprinted in Karen Ordahl Kupperman, ed., *Major Problems in American Colonial History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1993), 90–91.

to saue out of the general calamity" that was coming to the churches in Europe. Finally, Winthrop believed the whole enterprise to be "a worke of God for the good of his Church . . . which he hat reveled to his prophetts."[3]

In 1630, aboard the *Arbella*, Winthrop wrote "A Modell of Christian Charity." In this oft-quoted thesis, he described the principles upon which the new society would be built. His work is a consistent attempt to translate the teachings of the Bible into a political model. The "city upon a hill" was to be a covenant community, living in faithfulness to the laws of God revealed in the Bible, and opposing every vice and evil that would seduce the hearts of the people and lead to the same punishments that were about to visit the apostates of England. The political model he described is theocratic in nature, and there is little reason to doubt that Calvin's Geneva hovers over the experiment as a source of inspiration. By interpreting the Bible typologically, the leaders of the early New England settlements were able to identify their bridgehead on the American continent with biblical Israel's entry into Canaan. For example, William Bradford, the founder of Plymouth Colony, adapted Moses' words to the Israelites recorded in Deuteronomy 26 to the Pilgrims: "May not and ought not the children of these fathers rightly say: Our fathers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilderness; but they cried unto the Lord, and he heard their voices, and looked on their adversities."[4]

The theoretical foundation of the relationship between church and state in early New England can best be explored by a close examination of the Cambridge Platform, which was composed in 1648. The seventeenth chapter seeks to delineate the responsibilities and limits on both sides of the divide. Churches have rights that are unique to themselves and do not, for example, need the permission of the state in order to meet. The church and the state should be mutually supporting communities within the larger society. The ministers should counsel obedience to the magistrates, just as the magistrates should aid and support the church. Yet there are clear limits to this relationship. The magistrates, for example, have no authority to compel church membership or

---

3. *Winthrop Papers,* II, 1623–1630 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1931), 138–40; cited in *A Documentary History of Religion in America to the Civil War*, ed. Edwin S. Gaustad (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 105.

4. William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620–1647* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1981), 71. Biblical scholars use the term "typology" for this kind of application of Scripture to a contemporary situation. The biblical theme of exodus remains to the present day a very popular one for typological interpretations, even as it has enjoyed an honored place in the long history of biblical interpretation, having been adopted and applied by an anonymous prophet of the exile heard in Isaiah 40, by the Essenes of the Dead Sea Scrolls, by John the Baptist according to Matt. 3:3, and by liberation theologians and other reform-minded prophetic crusaders throughout history. Here for comparison is the passage from Deut. 26:5–8 that Bradford was paraphrasing: "You shall make this response before the LORD your God: 'A wandering Aramean was my ancestor; he went down into Egypt and lived there as an alien, few in number, and there he became a great nation, mighty and populous. When the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, by imposing hard labor on us, we cried to the LORD, the God of our ancestors; the LORD heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders.'"

participation in the ritual of communion. The platform expresses this separation in the following terms: "As it is unlawful for church-officers to meddle with the sword of the magistrate, so it is unlawful for the magistrate to meddle with the work proper to church-officers." Yet this separation seems profoundly limited to a contemporary sensibility. Magistrates were specifically authorized to punish "idolatry, blasphemy, heresy, venting corrupt and pernicious opinions, that destroy the foundation, open contempt of the Word preached, profanation of the Lords day, disturbing the peaceable administration and exercise of the worship and holy things of God." Finally, the magistrates were even given authority to intervene in churches that were deemed "schismatical," out of communion with other churches, or acting "incorrigibly or obstinately." These strictures were composed in an atmosphere where only church members in good standing were eligible for the franchise, and ministers were specifically barred from holding political office.

The Puritans thus saw church and state as separate institutions with separate leadership, but mutually reinforcing and supporting. Instead of a wall of separation dividing the two, church and state would provide two of the three pillars, the third being the family, for the growth of a godly commonwealth.[5] Parents publicly testifying to their conversion and manifesting saintly behavior, children raised in obedience to biblical laws and gaining admission to communion through an account of their own experience of rebirth, magistrates ruling in conformity with orthodox Calvinism, admonished and supported by a patriotic body of clergy: such was the harmonious whole envisioned by the first and second generations of the Puritans as the commonwealth willed by God and attainable through the diligence and commitment of its citizens.

Though the ideal envisioned by the first Puritans was thus theocratic in nature, the communities to which they gave birth soon began to evolve in a different direction. As George Armstrong Kelly explains the distinction, "the Calvinist regimes in Massachusetts and Connecticut were not 'theocratic' but secular: the ecclesiastical and civil governments were not coterminous, although 'saints' were presumed to possess indispensable qualities of leadership."[6] A theocratic state is based upon the principle that the religious laws received through tradition determine both the religious norms and the political structures in a seamless unity. But among the early settlers were many who understood the political implications of the Bible in ways that differed from the theocratic views of Puritans like John Cotton and Thomas Hooker.

Though disagreeing among themselves on matters of polity and belief, business leaders with mercantile interests, farmers and small business owners with responsibilities that often clashed with Sabbath laws, and religious dissidents

5. *A Platform of Church Governance . . .* (Cambridge, MA: Samuel Green, 1649) Evans Collection of Early American Imprints, 5938, 10 in the Archive Americana produced by the American Antiquarian Society, 25, 27–29.

6. George Armstrong Kelly, *Politics and Religious Consciousness in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 27.

guided by their own interpretations of Scripture and their perception of the promptings of the Holy Spirit found common cause on one front: their opposition to the theocratic tenets of the Puritan leaders. But the consequences of their opposition varied: those buttressed by sufficient political influence and economic leverage were tolerated and ultimately influenced change in the web of relations between religion and politics in Massachusetts; those made vulnerable by accidents of gender or station in life were ostracized or executed; those falling betwixt those two categories either managed to escape or were banished.[7]

Purchase Now from Your Preferred Retailer

---

7. The trial of Anne Hutchinson occurred in 1638, after which she managed to escape to Rhode Island and then Pelham, New York. In 1692 and 1693, nineteen men and women charged with practicing witchcraft in Salem and surrounding towns were sentenced to death by hanging, an act of brutality supported by the Puritan divine Cotton Mather.