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The Religious Philosophy of Richard M Nixon

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The Religious Philosophy of Richard M. Nixon

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A thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the College of William and Mary in candidacy for the degree of
Master of Arts

Department of History

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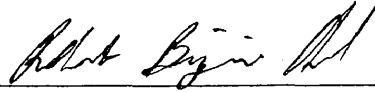
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APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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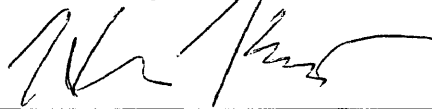
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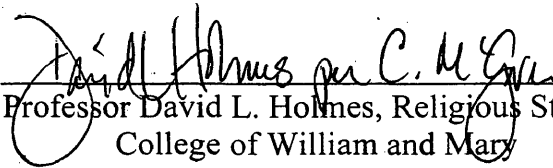


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ABSTRACT

This thesis provides a chronological and thematic analysis of Richard M. Nixon's religious philosophy. It makes particular use of archival materials that have either not yet been published or have not been interpreted through the lens of religious belief. While much work has already been done on the most prominent features of the Nixon Presidency—Watergate and his foreign policy achievements—very little of it seeks an in-depth understanding of Nixon's religious framework as it developed over the course of his life, or to place Nixon's beliefs and influences within their historical context. This thesis interprets Nixon as a figure who, despite his well-known political drive, had a discernible spiritual outlook and often described public action and service as moral goals. Nixon especially emphasized moral leadership as a means to direct a country and its people toward goals, spiritual and otherwise; he also put value on the historical process as the final arbiter of the efficacy of that leadership. Democracy was morally beneficial because it allowed all citizens to achieve spiritual fulfillment.

Nixon's religious philosophy had a strong outward orientation; religion was a tool to bring about good on earth, similar to twentieth-century modernism. As a result, for Nixon, devotional and traditional aspects were almost completely neglected. The ways in which Nixon described the purpose of public service and of his entire life owe their interpretation to modernist influences to which he was exposed at Whittier College. Furthermore, while Nixon's identification with conservative religious figures implies his own religious conservatism, an analysis of his actions and statements calls that religious conservatism into question. Equally puzzling is Nixon's emphasis on religion and morality and the apparent disconnect between theory and practice. An understanding of Nixon's unique interpretation of American Protestantism provides a new perspective of Nixon's place within the nation's political system.

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DEDICATION

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I would also like to thank my parents for their abiding support. I'm particularly indebted to my father, Robert Abel, for fostering my growing interest in President Nixon and inspiring the topic for this thesis.

Finally, I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my grandmother, Ruth Abel, to whom I owe a great deal for who and where I am today.

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I. INTRODUCTION

“He was a liberal in a conservative sort of way.”¹ So spoke Dr. Paul Smith, former president of Whittier College and instructor of Richard M. Nixon, when describing the political mindset of his most famous pupil. Smith’s definition is political, but the phrase eloquently describes the paradox of Nixon’s religious outlook as well. Nixon spent his formative years in a religious environment that cannot easily be defined as either liberal or conservative. The intensity of that environment has led many to use it as a foil for his later wrongdoings, assuming that he fell from a great moral height. While many of Nixon’s Whittier acquaintances expressed how decent and honest Nixon seemed to them, the assumption has been that Nixon internalized all of his religious instruction, only to apply it selectively throughout his life. The apparent hypocrisy of Nixon’s actions in light of his religious upbringing deserves special attention in this examination.

Opinions on the thirty-seventh president of the United States span the spectrum, but one conclusion agreed upon by most is that Nixon is one of the few American politicians “about whom it is absolutely impossible to be indifferent.”² Previous examinations of Nixon have tended to focus on his honesty, character, conservative values, personality, psychological profile, or political talent. Often missing is a concerted analysis of his religious understanding and beliefs. One reason is perhaps that those beliefs *seemed* obvious: Nixon’s friendship with Billy Graham and his ready identification with conservative religious causes made him appear a conservative evangelical. The extent to which his associations reflect his own personal views, however, is debatable and is a concentration of this study.

Works that touch on Nixon’s belief often examine it in the context of another topic or as part of a larger polemic. Such works frequently begin with a proposition of the former president’s *irreligion*—focusing on his deceitfulness and sacrilege against the nation and its institutions

¹ Renée K. Schulte, ed. *The Young Nixon: An Oral Inquiry* (Fullerton: California State University, Fullerton, Oral History Program, 1978), 165.

² David Greenberg, *Nixon’s Shadow* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), xviii. The excerpt from Greenberg’s book is a quote by Michael Korda.

which they conclude were at the root of his political activities, most notoriously his handling of the Watergate crisis. Several books and articles already bear this argument out, focusing on both his abuse of power and his use of religion for political purposes.³ Still other works offer sustained attention to Nixon's religious *practice*, but do so through the concept of civil religion.⁴ That concept is a useful, if somewhat limited, way to analyze Nixon's public religious expressions and, as such, is included as part of this study in light of newly released archival materials and in consideration of his religious views as they evolved throughout his life.

Nixon believed strongly in the functionality and application of religion to society—what he later referenced as “the morality of aspiration.” Writing in 1994, after a lifetime of living out this concept, Nixon explained: “The morality of aspiration calls for us to strive to accomplish not just the things we are required to do but all that we are capable of doing.”⁵ This achievement-based ethic of Nixon's provides the conceptual basis for this study of his religious philosophy. Preceded by an in-depth examination of his “religious chronology,” an analysis is included that seeks to illuminate the religious significance Nixon attached to the seemingly secular concepts of leadership, history, and democracy. Finally, this study will address his muscular advocacy of religion on the political scene as it so closely coincided with the burgeoning discussion of civil religion.

We shall see throughout this study that Nixon's religious beliefs were strongly outward-directed during his life, with limited insight available even to those who knew him best as to the importance inner devotion or piety held in his life, if they held a place at all. Nevertheless, his external workings as evidenced in his personal writings and relationships provide the best chance

³ See, for example Theodore H. White, *Breach of Faith: The Fall of Richard Nixon* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), 322–324. According to White, Nixon's “true crime” was that he destroyed America's civilizing myth, its “binding secular religion” of law, order, and tolerance symbolized by the office of the president.

⁴ The concept of civil religion will be developed and discussed in the section on Nixon's presidency. For the time being, it can be defined as the collection of observable religious practices by national figures.

⁵ Richard M. Nixon, *Beyond Peace* (New York: Random House, 1994), 12. The term was not Nixon's own, but was coined by Lon Fuller.

for his beliefs to be dissected even while his true inner spiritual life may remain somewhat of a puzzle. The apparent contradictions, relatively unconventional, and surprising complexity of Nixon's religious outlook and understanding are revealed in consulted materials—including those recently released to the public in July 2007 that were heretofore unavailable to researchers; in the process, they raise obvious questions as to the sincerity of Nixon's avowed beliefs. Why, for example, did he hold such theologically liberal religious beliefs while supporting so many conservative causes? Future study of the newly available archival materials on Nixon may shed further light on this and other topics surrounding his religious views, and thus, this study seeks to become part of a larger, developing investigation of Nixon's spiritual life.

II. CHRONOLOGY OF NIXON'S RELIGIOUS LIFE AND INFLUENCES

A. MIXED BEGINNINGS

Upbringing: Quaker Influences

In his writings, notably his memoirs (contained in a work of the same name), Nixon characterized his upbringing as “fundamentalist Quaker.” Family life, he said, centered upon religious activity, with Sundays taken up by four church services. His mother's side of the family was strongly Quaker, the denomination to which his father converted from Methodism. According to Nixon, most religious expression in his family was silent and personal. He wrote that his mother considered religion as “sacred:” “She did not believe in speaking familiarly about sacred things.”⁶

At the same time, the Quakerism Nixon's family followed in Southern California differed from the practices of Friends Societies elsewhere in America in that the services featured a minister, public speaking, and hymns. The Yorba Linda Friends Church, where the Nixon family worshiped, gave “culture shock” to Quakers visiting from out-of-state because of its lively

⁶ Richard M. Nixon, *In the Arena: A Memoir of Victory, Defeat, and Renewal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 89.

services and revivalist atmosphere, punctuated by its steeple and organ.⁷ Nixon enjoyed a “religiously intense upbringing,” one that was nurturing and inspirational for him, with his mother, Hannah, and his grandmother, Almira, as his formative influences and religious role models.⁸

To examine what Nixon meant by “fundamentalist Quakerism,” we must first retrace the history of California Quakerism, which had, by the beginning of the late nineteenth century, developed into two theologically opposed camps. The Whittier Monthly Meeting, the Quaker organizational unit in which Nixon was raised, was an evangelical, homogeneous, and theologically conservative group from its inception in 1887. Its second minister, Thomas Armstrong, arrived in 1890 from Iowa’s New Providence Monthly Meeting, which would gain notoriety three years later when issuing deposition measures against Joel and Hannah Bean, Quaker ministers who held doctrines antithetical to the evangelical revivalists’ tenets of “full and free salvation” and “complete sanctification.”⁹ From its beginning, the Whittier Meeting was heavily evangelical, with the community gaining “a substantial number” of members from the successes of the many revival services it had held since 1895.¹⁰

⁷ Joseph Dmohowski, “From a Common Ground: The Quaker Heritage of Jessamyn West and Richard Nixon,” *California History* 73, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 219–220. For further information, see Edwin Palmer Hoyt, *The Nixons: An American Family* (New York: Random House, 1972), 177–178.

⁸ Nixon, *In the Arena*, 84–89.

⁹ David C. LeShana, *Quakers in California: The Effects of Nineteenth-Century Revivalism on Western Quakerism* (Newburg, OR: The Barclay Press, 1969), 98–99. LeShana is quoting the phrase from Joel Bean, “The Issue,” *The British Friend* (March 1, 1881). Bean opposed the “new doctrines” of evangelicalism and revivalism, and their resulting “creedal formulations,” because they seemed to undermine the doctrine of the “inner light” and present obstacles in the way of Quakers’ traditionally understood direct access to God (see pp. 58–59 and pp. 96–99 of LeShana). Bean’s opposition to the new evangelical movement resulted in theological controversy and his eventual deposition in 1893 as a Quaker minister. After being deposed, Bean moved from Iowa to California, where he and his wife began the College Park Association of Friends in 1889.

¹⁰ LeShana, *Quakers in California*, 115.

The Whittier Meeting was a part of the larger California Yearly Meeting, established in 1895, which also assumed a strongly evangelistic character. It was, historian David LeShana writes, “a direct result and extension of the Great Awakening.”¹¹

The revival movement had now [by 1895] extended organizationally from Iowa and Kansas to California. The Yearly Meeting was officially denominated as the “Friends Church” and not as “The Religious Society of Friends.” The pastoral system was inherent from the beginning, and the “new doctrines” that Joel Bean had strongly opposed were now the basis for the yearly meeting. ... This spirit of evangelism and compassionate outreach became the trademark of the California Yearly Meeting, together with those social concerns that were the natural concomitant of the interest in transforming man and his society.¹²

The California Yearly Meeting drew inspiration from the writings of George Fox and subscribed to the tenets of the Richmond Declaration of Faith, which was agreed to in an 1887 nationwide theological conference of Quakers held in Richmond, Indiana. That declaration soon became the standard for the “orthodox and evangelical” and “gospel-ordered community.”¹³

The Whittier Meeting consciously distanced itself from the more liberal Religious Society of Friends, eschewing the use of that designation in nearly all of its literature.¹⁴ The Whittier Meeting referred to itself as a “church,” emphasized pastoral leadership, and did not specifically require all its members to worship in a non-hierarchical “living silence.”¹⁵ This differentiated it and its larger unit, the California Yearly Meeting, from the Pacific Yearly

¹¹ LeShana, *Quakers in California*, 137. It should be noted that this term refers to the Great Awakening in Quakerism, which roughly coincided with what he terms as the “Third Awakening of American Protestantism.” George Marsden describes this third awakening, which began with Dwight L. Moody, as “revivalist fundamentalism.” Its first revival service was held in 1867 in Walnut Ridge, Indiana (see p. 36 of LeShana). On the other hand, Seth Jacobs’s “Third Great Awakening” took place in the mid-twentieth century and was a function of the Cold War. See Seth Jacobs, *America’s Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 60–87.

¹² LeShana, *Quakers in California*, 120–121.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 123. The California Yearly Meeting did not officially adopt the Richmond Declaration of Faith, also known as the Authorized Declaration of Faith, until 1967, but up to that point it was the standard by which orthodox Quakers understood themselves to be practicing historic Quakerism.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 138–139. LeShana quotes the phrase from “The College Park Association of Friends,” an unpublished manuscript in the possession of Howard H. Brinton.

Meeting, which was formed as an “independent, unaffiliated yearly meeting” and was referred to early on as “Joel Bean’s Meeting.”¹⁶

The Pacific Yearly Meeting operated along more “prophetic” or social-critical lines. It grew out of the College Park Association, which was incorporated in 1889 and covenanted to “realize the Kingdom of God within the soul through the act of worship” and “to realize the Kingdom outwardly in the world.”¹⁷ The Pacific Meeting subscribed to the importance of “outward conduct”—its brief *Discipline of the College Park Association of Friends* (the Association’s statement of faith) evidencing “little concern for developing theological statements or articles of faith” while leaving membership in the sect open to all, regardless of theological orientation.¹⁸ It was non-pastoral, held theology to be divisive and unnecessary, and viewed “an open mind and heart” as key to religious experience as Quakers.¹⁹

The California Yearly Meeting, on the other hand, understood itself to be the more orthodox and evangelical division of California Quakerism. This understanding was clearly communicated by Quaker minister the Reverend Charles Ball, Nixon’s one-time minister at the East Whittier Friends Church, which also belonged to the California Yearly Meeting. Ball was interviewed as a part of the Nixon Oral History Project undertaken by California State University, Fullerton’s Oral History Program in 1969. In the December 1969 interview, Ball said, “California Yearly Meeting and Pacific Yearly Meeting have no organic relation whatsoever.”²⁰ He distinguished between the two meetings in detail, highlighting that the California Yearly Meeting was in complete agreement with the Richmond Declaration, while the Pacific Meeting was not:

¹⁶ LeShana, *Quakers in California*, 139. Indeed, Bean formed the Association and co-led it from its inception until his death in 1914.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 138, 140. LeShana writes that the Pacific Yearly Meeting was “the result of the original concerns expressed by Joel Bean” (see p. 137). Phrase quoted by LeShana from the Brinton manuscript.

¹⁸ LeShana, *Quakers in California*, 141.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 151–152. The phrase is quoted by LeShana from the “Discipline of the Pacific Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends,” 1965, 17.

²⁰ Interview of the Reverend Charles Ball by Mitch Haddad, Dec. 22, 1969, Nixon Oral History Project, California State University, Fullerton (accessed at www.yorbalindahistory.org). CSUF completed the transcriptions of the 199 interviews that comprised the Project in the late 1970s.

[The Pacific Yearly Meeting] tend[s] to be the more liberal in [theological] interpretation. Maybe I should define what I mean by the term “liberal” as far as they are concerned. It is that they would not necessarily take the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament as authority as the evangelical Friends do. We still believe that the primary source of scripture is God, the Holy Spirit, who inspired the Holy Scriptures and gave them and they are secondary. Liberal Friends would be inclined to think that the Scriptures are important, but they are important as other religious literature is important. We evangelical Friends attach more importance to them. They would perhaps not be as quick to acknowledge the deity of Christ as all evangelicals would. ... We are more insistent upon the matter of conversion and accepting Christ as Saviour than they, the liberal Friends, would be. Both groups, however, would put emphasis upon living a life according to the standards of the Sermon on the Mount.²¹

Ball also noted, when asked how the East Whittier church saw itself in relation to “liberal Friends,” that “East Whittier Friends took a positive evangelical position” and “would be more middle of the road as far as evangelical Quakerism is concerned.”²²

Thus, during the late nineteenth century, California Quakerism had developed into two antithetical branches in a similar manner and at the same time that the divide between fundamentalism and liberal Christianity, or *orthodoxy* versus *orthopraxy*, was becoming increasingly pronounced within American Protestantism. The two branches formalized their divisions much later: the Pacific Yearly Meeting published its *Discipline of the Pacific Yearly Meeting* in 1965, while the California Yearly Meeting published its agreement with the Richmond Declaration, *Faith and Practice of California Yearly Meeting of Friends Church*, in 1969.

Thus, Nixon’s family’s membership in the orthodox branch of California Quakerism elucidates what he meant by the term “fundamentalist Quaker.” Paul Smith, one of Nixon’s former Whittier College professors and president of the college from 1951 to 1969, explained further in a 1977 interview that, for Nixon, “the Quaker church influence was not as important as his home or the influence of his college.”²³ Within that home, Smith noted that Nixon’s father, Frank, was evangelical, and that “he took Dick and Don over to Los Angeles to hear evangelistic

²¹ Ball interview, CSUF.

²² Ibid.

²³ Schulte, ed., *The Young Nixon*, 165.

services when some preacher came to town with revival services.”²⁴ Smith described the Nixon household, however, as politically “liberal,” and as one whose role models were Woodrow Wilson, William Jennings Bryan, and Theodore Roosevelt.²⁵ At the same time Smith cautioned that any Quaker influence on Nixon’s life came through his family and not through the church itself:

I just doubt that the Quaker influence was primary in his life. I think that the Quaker influence through his mother was an influence all right. I think the influence through the Milhouses—they were all staunch Quakers—was also. Interpretation of Quakerism through family members, I think, was influential, but the organized church I don’t think was so influential. ... I think his college days were influential.²⁶

In distinguishing between the Eastern and Western Quakers, Smith somewhat generically describes the version of Western Quakerism Nixon experienced as more “evangelical” than “liberal.” A church that uses a minister instead of relying on silent meetings questions the congregation’s ability to worship according to the “inner light,” or the congregation might not realize the primacy of the inner light in worship.²⁷ In a separate interview, Nixon’s aunt, Jane Beeson, likewise described the Nixon household as “an evangelical Quaker home.”²⁸ Nevertheless, Smith acknowledged that the liberal theological influences Nixon received came not from his home environment but from his professors at Whittier College, namely professor Joseph Herschel Coffin, a “real Quaker” who was for Nixon an authentic “translation of the liberal ... Quakerism.”²⁹

Whittier College

In 1930, the teenaged Nixon entered Whittier College, an institution founded in 1887 and named after the famed Quaker poet John Greenleaf Whittier. The college was founded

²⁴ Schulte, ed., *The Young Nixon*, 171.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 164.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 166.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 170–171.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 169–170.

simultaneously with the Quaker colony of Whittier, California, and was originally named the Friends' College.³⁰ Though Whittier College was founded by the California Yearly Meeting, by the time Nixon entered the college, its faculty had become known for holding views at odds with the orthodox Quakers.

Nixon biographer Edwin P. Hoyt described how the aforementioned debate over “fundamentalism” impacted the relationship between the town and the college. In 1930, the Reverend Guy Phelps, a Methodist minister conducting revival services in Whittier, began a debate over the teaching of evolution at the college.³¹ During his services he also pointed out some theologically suspect material in Professor Coffin’s 1929 book, *The Soul Comes Back*. Phelps’s sermons raised enough concern within the Whittier Monthly Meeting to cast aspersion on the College’s curriculum and also caused Coffin, professor of philosophy and former dean of the college, to be investigated before a committee. At the same time, the Whittier Meeting and the college were not wholly opposed: Coffin was exonerated by the committee, and then College President Walter F. Dexter felt comfortable enough to announce a counter-lecture by Whittier professor S. Arthur Watson, a “devout Quaker who believed in evolution.”³²

Nixon entered Whittier at the time of Phelps’s controversy and was able to observe firsthand why his parents had expressed unease about sending him to be educated by professors who advocated theological and political views that undermined traditional belief. In fact, Nixon later related that his educational experience did exactly that. Nixon took his college education seriously, though, “spread[ing] himself out tremendously” among academic and extra-curricular pursuits.³³ His approach to academic work was pragmatic and analytical, not generally

³⁰ Charles W. Cooper, *Whittier: Independent College in California* (Los Angeles: Ward Ritchie Press, 1967), 3–21.

³¹ It is interesting to speculate what, if any, influence this event had on Nixon’s relationship with his father; the elder Nixon had converted to Methodism but retained his evangelical fervor and repeatedly called for revival services. The younger Nixon never mentioned the incident.

³² Hoyt, *The Nixons*, 199–200.

³³ Schulte, ed., *The Young Nixon*, 142.

philosophical.³⁴ Ironically, his essay for a course in philosophy allows for a very revealing analysis of his spiritual beliefs and state at that time.

That paper entitled “What Can I Believe?” comprised a series of twelve shorter essays, or “logs,” which he wrote over the course of his senior year (1933–34) for Professor Coffin’s course, titled the “Philosophy of Christian Reconstruction.” The assignment corresponding with the essays was for each student to address his or her worldview to specific topics (e.g., the evolutionary hypothesis), and to, on occasion, address assigned sub-questions as well, and relate them to his own worldview. Nixon’s thirty-three pages are an examination of why Nixon believed what he did and how (or if) his religious beliefs fit within a framework of scientific knowledge.

The scientific knowledge Coffin was interested in was primarily psychological analysis, and the scope of his course is revealing of Coffin’s educational background and religious belief. A deeper understanding of the course, and of its impact on Nixon, emerges from a brief digression into Coffin’s background, including the philosophy he presented in his writings. Coffin obtained his doctorate in psychology in 1907 at Cornell University, studying under the renowned psychologist Edward Titchener. Coffin’s dissertation, “An Analysis of the Action Consciousness Based on the Simple Reaction,” was his attempt to define and uncover the psychology behind voluntary action, and to determine the extent to which social action is voluntary or conditioned.³⁵ Titchener at that time was attempting to “establish psychology as a science by the exhibition of its scientific nature,” which could explain human actions by analyzing them to their lowest possible sensation.³⁶ Titchener came down on the structural side of the structural-functional debate then occupying the discipline in America.

³⁴ Schulte, ed., *The Young Nixon*, 142.

³⁵ Joseph Herschel Coffin, “An Analysis of the Action Consciousness Based on the Simple Reaction” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1908), 8, 20, 36–39.

³⁶ Edwin G. Boring, “Edward Bradford Titchener, 1867–1927,” *The American Journal of Psychology* 38 (1927): 497. Titchener’s goal was to give German psychologist William Wundt’s findings added credence by independently discovering them through his “Experimental Psychology” (p. 499).

After graduating from Cornell, Coffin began to apply a reductionist psychology to religion, the area that interested him, but his interests were more philosophically oriented than Titchener would have been comfortable with.³⁷ His first book, *The Socialized Conscience* (1913), sought to understand how the “greatest welfare of society” can be brought about through the “commonly accepted standard of conduct” of all individual members of that society.³⁸ Coffin viewed ethics as “the science of morality” and sought to establish voluntary action as essential to moral living.³⁹ A social structure that fostered moral improvement allowed “freedom of choice,” while one that circumscribed “a worthy end or system of ends” curtails the possibility that “volitional acts” will result in a meaningful life.⁴⁰ To Coffin, society was “good” if it was structured such that its members were able to develop their own personalities:

The supreme moral end is the *realization of the social self, or socialized personality*, and the moral criterion by which conduct is to be evaluated and directed is the *socialized conscience*, with its specific virtues of intelligence, prudence, purpose, justice, and goodwill. Conduct is *good* only as it both brings to fuller realization the total self and proves itself socially constructive. To be socially constructive it must promote directly or indirectly the efforts of the other members of society to realize the same end for themselves.⁴¹

Coffin’s “Philosophy of Christian Reconstruction” was an outworking of the thought contained in Coffin’s *Socialized Conscience* as well as in his 1929 book *The Soul Comes Back*. The course was designed to inculcate a “socialized conscience” in the students in terms of their actions as Christians. It was, unsurprisingly, psychologically oriented, and was part of the “New Curriculum” that Coffin and President Dexter began to plan for Whittier in 1923. This curriculum, later branded the “Whittier Idea,” called for measures that would better link what was

³⁷ Boring, “Titchener,” 495. Titchener had maintained that psychology should be separated from philosophy, and he enabled this goal to be achieved within academia in the early 1910s.

³⁸ Joseph Herschel Coffin, *The Socialized Conscience* (Baltimore: Warwick and York, 1913), 2. While historicizing the morality of past generations, Coffin’s goal was to “understand what the moral authority ought to be under modern conditions” (ibid.).

³⁹ Ibid., 31.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 34.

⁴¹ Ibid., 67. Italics in original. Also perhaps revealing of Coffin’s instrumentalization of morality is a passage referring to “the social molecules called persons” in his *The Soul Comes Back* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 10.

taught in class to “the concrete needs of life.”⁴² Those “concrete needs” included a religious education that would “attempt to throw into the foreground of science ... history ... philosophy and every other subject the spiritual interpretation that by our best insight we believe that Jesus would give.”⁴³ Perhaps drawn from Titchener’s experimental psychology concept, the new Whittier curriculum centered around the “Project Method” and a four-year sequence called the “Correlation Course.”⁴⁴ The “Philosophy of Christian Reconstruction” was the senior-year Correlation Course and was of Coffin’s own conception. Coffin described his course as “[a]n introduction to philosophy, including an effort to correlate the important findings of science.” Historian Charles Cooper writes, “[t]he thesis of the course [was] that the religion of Jesus furnishes the only finally workable philosophy of life ... based upon sound sociology.”⁴⁵

The soundness of Coffin’s sociology as well as the clarity of his concepts can be, and have been, called into question. *The Socialized Conscience* received an unfavorable review in 1915 for the vagueness of its terminology and its moral cloudiness, which gave it “an air of artificiality and even of futility.”⁴⁶ In fact, the same can be said for *The Soul Comes Back*. Coffin makes clear his goal in “reconstruction” is to educate “fundamentalists” into “modernists.” Modernists alone are able to “square scientific fact and law with religious experience” and see in “the perfect personality of Jesus” the purpose behind God’s “creative evolution.” Coffin’s middle ground between faith and non-belief sees the evolutionary process as “not a thrust upward from

⁴² Cooper, *Whittier*, 160. Coffin’s brief pamphlet, “The Story of an Educational Adventure: The Whittier Idea,” describes how that “the greatest single factor in [Coffin’s] formative period was the contacts in the psychological laboratory at Cornell University,” but that “these influences called forth a reaction against the distinctly structuralist interpretation of mind that was current there.” The Whittier Idea emphasized a “functional education” that presented the entire curriculum “under a spiritual interpretation.” (Joseph Herschel Coffin, “The Story of an Educational Adventure: The Whittier Idea,” 1932, *n.p.*, 9–11.)

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 166–167.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴⁶ Jno. M. Mecklin, review of *The Socialized Conscience* by Joseph Herschel Coffin, *The Philosophical Review* 24, no. 5 (Sept. 1915): 562.

below, but a pull exerted from above; in turn the ultimate basis of energy or matter itself becomes the coextensive personality of God.”⁴⁷

Plainly, Coffin saw creeds and literalism as an obstacle to a practical understanding of “the teachings of Jesus.” At times Coffin’s conception of Jesus appeared quite orthodox; mostly, however, He seemed merely to exist as an idealized literary construction found in “that great religious epic, the Bible.”⁴⁸ As is often the case, at least in American experience, Coffin’s attempt to reconcile science and religion muddled and impoverished rather than clarified the two sides, just as Benjamin Silliman and Edward Hitchcock’s attempt had done via geological science in the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁹ The same dilemmas, and others of Nixon’s own making, are addressed in Nixon’s essays for Coffin’s course. Though revealing of the extent to which he understood his own theology in comparison to the standards of the religious environment in which he was raised, they should also be read with Coffin’s ideas in mind. Furthermore, Nixon’s later statements clearly expressing the continuity of his college-age religious beliefs with those of his later years indicate that the young Nixon was not merely trying to please Coffin but had begun, at some point previously, to believe what he was writing in his essays, if Paul Smith’s statements as well as the similarity of Nixon’s and Coffin’s ideas are taken into account.

Coffin’s assignments called for a critical analysis of the beliefs one usually took for granted. As a result, in “What Can I Believe?” we have a picture of Nixon’s own religious upbringing and the extent to which, in his opinion, his beliefs changed during his college career. In his first essay, Nixon wrote that his parents were “fundamental Quakers” who warned him before college “not to be misled by college professors who might be a little too liberal in their views.” After his years at Whittier, however, Nixon found most of his original beliefs

⁴⁷ Coffin, *The Soul Comes Back*, 61, 81–82.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁹ See Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 766–767.

“shattered.”⁵⁰ At the same time, Nixon indicated that he did not come close to losing his faith: although he described his beliefs as having undergone a radical transformation at Whittier, Nixon wrote toward the end of the paper that his true faith, although private and perhaps sentimental, began where science could no longer go.⁵¹ Nixon also wrote, “[M]y education has taught me that the bible, like all other books, is a work of man and consequently has man made mistakes.”⁵² While not explaining what those mistakes might be, the context suggests they are the miracles. The apparent contradiction between Nixon’s beliefs and his faith makes sense, however, if we realize that Nixon altered or discarded his doctrinal beliefs but kept his faith, however abstract a concept it had become.

Nixon gradually worked his way through the assigned philosophical questions, but as his writing progressed, so too did his support for belief in God and the compatibility of faith with science. Nixon analyzed the “problem of God,” viewing him as the result of social necessity, something reason and logic cannot explain away:

Men always strive for something higher than themselves. They should attempt to develop their minds until they can realize the higher values of life. ... To have a faith that higher reality than ourselves does exist, means much more than to merely “reason” ourselves into the higher levels.⁵³

Although Coffin’s course was not designed to destroy but to “reconstruct” faith on modernist terms, Nixon was forced to confront matters such as the theory of evolution that would

⁵⁰ Richard M. Nixon, “What Can I Believe?” 19, 1933–34 “What Can I Believe” for course “Philosophy of Christian Reconstruction” (folders 11 and 12), box 12, Nixon Family Collection, Richard Nixon Library and Birthplace Foundation, Yorba Linda, CA.

⁵¹ In his memoirs, *RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), Nixon reproduced a portion of an essay (“My Brother Arthur”) he wrote for a freshman English course. The relevant portion reads: “There is a growing tendency among college students to let their childhood beliefs be forgotten. Especially we find this true when we speak of the Divine Creator and his plans for us. I thought that I would also become that way, but I find that it is almost impossible for me to do so. Two days before my brother’s death, ... he repeated that age-old child’s prayer which ends with those simple yet beautiful words: ‘If I should die before I wake, I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to take.’ ... And so when I am tired and worried, and am almost ready to quit trying to live as I should, ... I pray that it may prove true for me as it did for my brother Arthur,” (10–11). That Nixon remained so deeply affected by Arthur’s death many years afterward, to the extent that he was never able to talk about it with his other surviving brother Edward, would suggest that he reacted conservatively and defensively to the challenge to drop his faith.

⁵² Nixon, “What Can I Believe?” 2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 23.

create dissonance between faith and reason. In his essays, Nixon handled this by first establishing the facts as they were presented to him in Coffin's lectures; he cited Coffin's material frequently in his essays and twice reproduced diagrams Coffin drew during lectures.⁵⁴ Nixon also set the arguments in strict terms; thus, to Coffin's question, "Does evolution have anything valuable to suggest regarding origins?" Nixon wrote: "Evolution does not attempt to explain the creation of the first atoms, of the infinitives discussed in section one; that is the problem of the philosopher. ... Personally I cannot accept either of these theories [Darwin's or Lamarck's]. I like better the theory of Loyd [*sic*] Morgan, the idea of emergent evolution, and that of Bergson, creative evolution. In these theories we must have some organizing power, some great force, which I chose [*sic*] to call God."⁵⁵ Nixon concluded his analysis of evolutionary theory:

I do not believe that evolution will destroy one's religious beliefs if he accepts God as the great power behind all creation and development. There is a danger however in going too far, as I believe the behaviorists have, and in that way destroying our belief that man has something greater than animals; a spiritual attitude that did not come through evolution, but through God.⁵⁶

Coffin heavily emphasized the process of "creative evolution" in *The Soul Comes Back*. Something akin to an iron law of history, creative evolution explains "the way things came to be as they are" but also reveals the "mechanism" through which "the ultimate purposes of the universe are being worked out."⁵⁷ Dr. Paul Smith, in a colloquial manner, revealed that Coffin was expounding on the doctrine of the "inner light" in presenting creative evolution in a Quaker context:

The liberal Quaker believes in the "inner light." That is the speaking of the forces of the universe—do you listen to them? Now that is liberal, very liberal. If it is true that everything else being equal or unequal, in the long or the short run, good

⁵⁴ These diagrams appear in essays four and five of "What Can I Believe?" Another similar diagram appears in the seventh essay but is unattributed.

⁵⁵ Nixon, "What Can I Believe?" 4–5.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* Throughout his other essays, Nixon referred to this concept of theistic evolution, with the caveat that he believed God is both immanent and transcendent.

⁵⁷ Coffin, *The Soul Comes Back*, 61, 80.

triumphs over evil—which I think it does—why is it like that? ... Quakers do [believe good triumphs over evil]. It's the conscience of the inner light.⁵⁸

Nixon favored creative evolution throughout his essays. In essay four, for example, in which Nixon discussed the nature of the soul, his focus was the evolution from “personality” to “spirituality.”⁵⁹ What is remarkable about Nixon’s references to God, the soul, and other spiritual matters is that they were mostly achievement-based. He wrote: “The soul is the culmination of the development of a being, the highest level to which that being can aspire. We can maintain our concept of God; we can still say that the soul is that part of us which enables us to understand God’s works.”⁶⁰ Nixon defined the soul in essay five, “More About the Soul.” After recounting the traditional, historical concepts of the soul, Nixon evaluated the “development concept” of the soul, which means that “the soul ... is the grandest achievement of the higher levels of personality.”⁶¹ Nixon supported this concept because it differentiates animal from human life and “because the individual must develop his life and personality in order to achieve his soul in the fullest sense of the word.”⁶²

Nixon devoted space to developing a religiously based understanding of democracy in essay six. Democracy, Coffin taught, was the ideal vehicle for members of a society to develop their personalities. “Self-realization” came when equal opportunity and the absence of exploitation allowed citizens to freely philosophize and act out their ideals.⁶³

Under a system which standardizes all men, which suppresses the individual, the knowledge of the race becomes stagnant; it no longer grows. But under a system which provides for division of labor and for individual initiative, we find a

⁵⁸ Schulte, ed., *The Young Nixon*, 170.

⁵⁹ Nixon, “What Can I Believe?” 7–9.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 11. Perhaps Nixon was most comfortable with this concept because, as he says on the following page: “It does not conflict with my religious beliefs (which are surprisingly strong for a college student). ... Men may still look upon the animals and say – ‘We are God’s children, because He has given us souls with which to know Him,’” (12).

⁶³ Coffin, *The Socialized Conscience*, 152.

continual growth in the body of knowledge. Science, literature, philosophy—all benefit through such a system.⁶⁴

Just as Nixon's concept of God was one approached through vigorous activity, so too was democracy something to be striven for, not a passive goal. Working for democracy was a high calling because it laid the foundation for individuals to move to a higher religious state. Communism, on the other hand, eventually destroyed initiative (by standardizing all men), but it seemed to Nixon at the time no less pernicious than a free society that lacked the basic forms of equality. An example of this occurring in America was the "San Jose Lynching" of November 26, 1933, which Nixon discussed in one of his essays.⁶⁵ Inspiring leadership in a democracy, however, was key to its moral uplift because without it, "society, moved entirely by its emotions, forgets all the knowledge it has acquired. Crowds become primitive in their emotions and instincts, if they are not directed along the right paths."⁶⁶

If democracy was the foundation for the development of the socialized personality, a leader was necessary to direct the construction of a suitable dwelling. The leader's duty was to concentrate on "the unity which permeates the individual and the group; the sentiments of honor, of right, of morality; and finally there is the great scarcely untouched field of the aesthetic."⁶⁷ Democracy, then, was good, but the supreme good was that which "provides us ... freedom which gives the personality a chance to fully develop."⁶⁸ Nixon recognized the importance of social cohesion in the administration of democracy but gave little hint as to how this should work in reality. While individual freedom was to be granted to the greatest extent, Nixon saw difficulty

⁶⁴ Nixon, "What Can I Believe?" 13.

⁶⁵ After a prominent California citizen, Brooke Hart, was kidnapped and killed by two men, a mob broke into the jail where the men were held (they had since been captured) and lynched them. The incident became a controversy not only because of its lawlessness but because it was broadcast live over the radio and received support from the highest levels of the California government.

⁶⁶ Nixon, "What Can I Believe?" 13.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

with problems such as “crime, poverty and racial prejudice” emanating from *too much freedom*.⁶⁹ Assuming that the majority would be opposed to these problems, his solution was that “the welfare of the majority must be placed before the desires of a minority.”⁷⁰ Nixon used a similar construction in his later work *In the Arena*, in which he wrote, concerning the problem of religious tolerance: “While the majority should not impose its religious views on the minority, the minority should respect the views of the majority. Reverse bigotry by a minority is just as reprehensible as bigotry by the majority.”⁷¹

Nixon returned to his analysis of God’s purpose in the seventh essay, “The Moral and Spiritual Levels of Life.” Here, Nixon made a rare admission that God was not only a God to seek after, but is one of judgment: “God sanctioned those things which were old, those things which contributed to the welfare of the race.”⁷² In that vein, he admitted: “Moral authority comes from God; not in the literal interpretation theory of the bible sense, but in the sense that God is the perfect reality to which men are striving. God is the creative force at work in us which makes us wish to realize the higher values.”⁷³

It is easy to become confused by Nixon’s God—sometimes only a vague concept, other times referred to with the personal pronoun “he,” sometimes authoritative, and other times distant, leaving all striving up to men. When asked to define “spirituality,” Nixon wrote that it was “the supreme achievement of human personality” and “an aim toward which men can strive.” Spirituality had both an inward- and outward-directed nature such that society itself could be improved if its spirituality were directed by a gifted and able leader. But how did Nixon relate spirituality with his idea of God? His answer seemed to be that society should pursue those values that have stood the test of time, those that have been sanctioned by God; this quest toward the

⁶⁹ Nixon, “What Can I Believe?” 15.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Nixon, *In the Arena*, 91.

⁷² Nixon, “What Can I Believe?” 17.

⁷³ Ibid., 18.

“common moral code” was the road to “ultimate good,” which was “epitomized by God.”⁷⁴ At the same time, however, morality to him was more useful for its function rather than as something good in itself.⁷⁵

In his “Half Way Mark” essay, which evaluates his intellectual progress thus far during the course, Nixon reiterated how he came to the class “practically a fundamentalist,” having for the most part kept his “old beliefs,” save for those regarding the “absolute infallibility of the bible [*sic*].” Fortunately, however, the “fragments of [his] old religion” have “proved useful in building this new philosophy,” which Nixon proceeded to explain in a somewhat vague manner. What is clear from Nixon’s explanation, however, is that, according to Coffin, life developed in the order of “Cosmos, Life, Mental Life, Conscious Life, Self Conscious Life,” with God “provid[ing] the impetus and goal for our striving.” In other words, Nixon associated God with struggle, especially struggle for a worthwhile goal. In the form of earthly political systems, democracy was that worthwhile goal, for it alone allowed for the development of “that type of moral law which will most highly develop the personality along with society.”⁷⁶

The remainder of Nixon’s writing concerned the “religion of Jesus” and an exploration of how that religion could be practically applied. Nixon wrote that Jesus’ “life and teachings” embodied the “highest conception of value the world has ever known,” excluding the “miraculous events which surround his life,” which Nixon cautioned we must not “be sidetracked by.” Nixon saw the entire Bible for its moral utility, but at the same time specified that, while he personally belonged to the “Christian religion,” he preferred his Christianity “as Jesus taught and lived it,”

⁷⁴ Nixon, “What Can I Believe?” 18. Nixon allowed his essay to fall into a few contradictions, one being that he previously criticized the blind following of tradition, while specifying that traditional beliefs are usually the best because they have stood the test of time.

⁷⁵ For example, Nixon wrote in essay seven: “Morality is a growing thing. We must study, we must experiment, we must strive for that type of moral law which will most highly develop the personality along with society,” (*ibid.*, 17).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 19–20.

not “as the orthodox church represents it.”⁷⁷ Nixon’s view of the Bible was that, as a “record of man’s striving for God” and “man’s finest record of religious writings,” it “in a sense reveals God to man.”⁷⁸ That is, God was not a distinct deity but an idea that *symbolized* the highest achievement of all values. To Nixon, “Jesus’ religion was a social religion,” one that necessitated the salvation not only of individuals but “of society” as well. Democracy alone, he believed, was the vehicle for societal salvation, as it “gives men a chance” to follow Christ’s teachings such that the “kingdom of God can be established on earth.”⁷⁹

Interestingly, Nixon referred to the “What Can I Believe?” essays in both his memoirs and *In the Arena*. In the memoirs he incorporated quotes from pages one, twenty-five, and twenty-six of his essays for Coffin, writing, “This composition gives a clearer picture of my beliefs, questions, and uncertainties as a college student than anything I could reconstruct today.”⁸⁰ But in his *In the Arena*, Nixon quoted from the same passage—found on page one of “What Can I Believe?”—and then asserted: “I adhere to those same beliefs to this day.”⁸¹ Nixon devoted so little space in his memoirs to expounding upon the specifics of his religious views because the book concentrated heavily on his White House years. Of 1,090 pages, only 365 pages are devoted to Nixon’s life before the presidency (including the 1968 election), which is what anyone reading the book in 1975 would have expected. Nixon also did not feel it was the time or place to discuss his actual beliefs. The tremendous backlash resulting from the release of the White House tapes and the general feeling of corruption and manipulation hovering over his administration meant that any admission of deep religious convictions would only have tainted the religious causes with which he had been identified.⁸² By 1990, however, Nixon felt that the

⁷⁷ Nixon, “What Can I Believe?” 24–25.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 27–29.

⁸⁰ Nixon, *Memoirs*, 16.

⁸¹ Nixon, *In the Arena*, 89.

⁸² Nixon wrote to the Reverend John Pollock on December 30, 1986, that he did not want to visit the Reverend Billy Graham after resigning the presidency because he “frankly felt it would be embarrassing for

nation had moved far enough beyond Watergate that he could begin to explain himself. He wrote then (in his *In the Arena*): “One of the most unfortunate [revelations during his resignation] was the disclosure that I had used profanity. As a matter of fact, most people do, at one time or another—especially in Washington. But since neither I nor most other Presidents had ever used profanity in public, millions were shocked.”⁸³

In addition to indicating that Nixon remained surprisingly true to the religious views expressed in his college essay, the existing evidence suggests that, in particular, he retained his metaphorical understanding of the tenets of orthodox Christianity. His views on leadership and his religious conception of democracy remained as well. The relative speed of his conversion from a “fundamentalist Quaker” to a modernist (Coffin’s goal) suggests that his religious life at home, while conservative in belief to an extent, did not provide him with a strong grounding in theology, but rather gave him a sense of religion being an outer-directed function. At the same time, his mother’s influence was that true spirituality was something very private. This may have discouraged Nixon from studying theology due to its “divisiveness,” while encouraging him to view religion as a means to social progress.

The modernist strain that developed in Nixon’s views by the end of college (and remained there throughout his life) is obvious and perhaps most noteworthy of all. Coffin viewed modernism as the desirable point of arrival for his students. Yet Nixon’s talk of a “religion of Jesus” suggests a Unitarian emphasis within that modernist framework. To say, as Nixon did, that Jesus’ religion could bring about the salvation of society; that he lived and grew in the hearts of men; that “men who achieve the highest values in their lives may gain immortality;” and that “the

[Graham] and ... did not want to drag him down with [himself].” Nixon to Pollock, letter, Dec. 30, 1986, Special People A–K. Graham, Billy and Ruth 1980–1990 (folder 4), box 1, Post-presidential Correspondence, Yorba Linda.

⁸³ Nixon, *In the Arena*, 90. An elaboration on his reasoning is recorded in Monica Crowley, *Nixon in Winter* (New York: Random House, 1998): “The criticism about my coarse language bothers me, and it bothers Mrs. Nixon. If you could have spent five minutes with Johnson or Kennedy, your ears would’ve curled. All presidents swear, and everyone acted like I was the first one” (289).

modern world will find a real resurrection in the life and teachings of Jesus” is another way of saying that Jesus is metaphorically understood to be mankind.⁸⁴ Nixon meant by “immortality” the continuation of the human race, not of the individual believer.⁸⁵ Furthermore, Nixon’s writing downplayed miracles and orthodoxy, which he came to believe was missing the point, if Christ really symbolized humanity.⁸⁶

B. EARLY POLITICAL CAREER

Virtually all observers agree that Nixon had remarkable political success during his lifetime, beginning with his election to Congress as a California Representative in 1947. Some of his fortunes came from being in the right place at the right time, but Nixon also possessed the drive to succeed and the ability to realize a good opportunity for advancement when it arose. Friends and family members noticed his strong work ethic and competitive streak early on; in the academic arena, he put those traits to use, absorbing all that he could about subjects with which he was likely to become engaged. Those characteristics worked to his advantage during his major appointment to the Herter Committee, also known as the Select Committee on Foreign Aid, in 1947. Incidentally, this committee exposed him to the international scene and gave him a chance to apply his religious worldview to events and philosophies he had previously only studied. It also introduced him to his future mentor, John Foster Dulles, and gave him an understanding of European Communism that would help him so easily relate to Whittaker Chambers almost one year later.

The Herter Committee

The Congressional committee led by Christian Herter would view firsthand the state of postwar Europe, decide the extent to which American aid was needed, and then report its findings

⁸⁴ Nixon, “What Can I Believe?” 25–26; William R. Hutchison, *The Modernist Impulse in American Protestantism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 36.

⁸⁵ Hutchison, *Modernist Impulse*, 37.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

back to Congress. Nixon was assigned to the committee partly for his intellectual abilities and interest in geopolitics, and partly because those selecting the committee members felt that a new Congressman, perhaps one from California, would add a different perspective to the investigation. The committee members would sail to Europe aboard the Queen Mary ocean liner. Prior to departing, they were split into five subcommittees that would tour different countries of the continent. Nixon was assigned, along with several colleagues, to Britain, Germany, Italy, and Trieste. After the trip he produced an eighty-five-page, typewritten report full of shrewd observations about human nature and the challenges the West would face in its struggle against international Communism.⁸⁷ Altogether, the Congressmen's findings, which consisted of hard data, analysis, and anecdotal evidence gathered from extensive footwork throughout the continent, and the "legislative expert guidance" they gave Congress after returning from Europe, paved the way for the Marshall Plan to be passed by Congress.⁸⁸ In addition, many committee members left for Europe with no strong feelings for foreign aid but returned strongly advocating it; this "change in attitude" gave the plan added credence.⁸⁹

Nixon was especially impressed by the difficulties Europe faced from the well-organized and persistent Communist faction. His report was full of instances in which local Communist parties tried to coax or coerce the European citizenry into supporting them, with either food or violence. While Nixon believed that Communism must be opposed spiritually—he believed it to be a rival religious faith—he believed that religious belief needed to be directed toward an end in order to be successful. In that regard, he valued the *function* of religious belief for bringing about transformation in society. "Spirit" directs action, and Europe was in danger because the war had

⁸⁷ Nixon had held generally anti-Communist views since Whittier but had yet to view Communism as the pernicious threat that he viewed it after sitting on the Herter Committee; this particular idea is found in Irwin F. Gellman, *The Contender: Richard Nixon—the Congress Years, 1947–1952* (New York: The Free Press, 1999), 122.

⁸⁸ A. S. J. Carnahan, "Congressional Travel Abroad and Reports," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 289 (Sept. 1953): 123.

⁸⁹ Harold L. Hitchens, "Influences on the Congressional Decision to Pass the Marshall Plan," *The Western Political Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (March 1968): 62.

so diminished that spirit that other (secular, but generally non-Christian) faiths were becoming appealing. Nixon concluded several of his country reports by writing that the European people appeared to “lack the hope and spirit” needed to revive themselves. American aid was thus highly desirable as an interim solution to the crisis in Europe. Only this aid, the Congressmen argued, could prevent those nations from “going Communist” by essentially voting with their stomachs while their resistance was weakest.⁹⁰

The Hiss Case

An opportunity of a much grander scale than his appointment to the Herter Committee occurred when Nixon was offered a seat on the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). This appointment not only furthered his political career but introduced him to a man whose life impacted Nixon’s, and from whom we can gain insight into Nixon’s religious views. During one of the committee’s investigations into allegations of Communist espionage, Whittaker Chambers was subpoenaed to testify regarding disclosures he previously made about an espionage ring operating out of Washington. A former Communist, he told the committee that he had been a part of another ring during his Communist days, but had knowledge as to both the extent and members of the Washington ring. He shocked all in the audience when he named one of the members: Alger Hiss. Hiss had built his career in the American government starting with a clerkship for Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes and holding many prominent positions in various New Deal agencies. At the time of the investigation, he was chairman of the Carnegie Endowment for Peace.

Hiss, outraged by the accusation, testified before the Committee and apparently persuaded most of the committee members of his innocence. Nixon, however, suspected Hiss was lying. In his *Memoirs*, Nixon recalls, “he was too suave, too smooth, and too self-confident to be

⁹⁰ Herter Committee Trip Report (England section, p. 5; France section, p. 1), Typed Reports by Country (folder 17), Herter Committee Trip File, box 1, Pre-presidential Series 206, Yorba Linda.

an entirely trustworthy witness.”⁹¹ Nevertheless, the committee deemed it both impossible and politically inexpedient to prove that Hiss had been a Communist—Hiss’s testimony having dramatically moved public opinion to his side—but in proving that Chambers and Hiss somehow knew each other, the case and the questioning could continue. Hiss was eventually convicted of perjury for denying he knew Chambers, but was never convicted of espionage because the statute of limitations had passed. During the twists and turns of the case, however, Nixon had ample opportunity to examine Chambers’s testimony, and the result was a close and lasting friendship between them.

What Chambers and Nixon recorded about each other greatly illuminates the nature of their mutual admiration, and is also helpful for understanding Nixon’s religious view of the world. In *Witness*, Chambers recalled that Nixon “was a man with one of those direct minds which has an inner ear for the ring of truth.”⁹² Chambers respected Nixon, especially because Nixon alone “made the Hiss Case possible.”⁹³ Chambers’s indebtedness to Nixon was more than simple gratitude, however, for the moral support of Nixon and others who took his side. Writing in 1952, Chambers noted that the Nixon and Chambers families were close friends; the Nixons, in fact, often paid visits to the Chamberses’ farm in Westminster, Maryland:

Throughout the most trying parts of the Case, Nixon and his family, and sometimes his parents, were at our farm, encouraging me and comforting my family. My children have caught him lovingly in a nickname. To them, he is always ‘Nixie,’ the kind and the good, about whom they will tolerate no nonsense. His somewhat martial Quakerism sometimes amused and always heartened me. I have a vivid picture of him, in the blackest hour of the Hiss Case, standing by the barn and saying in his quietly savage way (he is the kindest of men): “If the American people understood the real character of Alger Hiss, they would boil him in oil.”⁹⁴

Nixon’s friendship with Chambers is important to mention for the ideological dimension Chambers encouraged in Nixon as well as for understanding the type of character to which Nixon

⁹¹ Nixon, *Memoirs*, 55.

⁹² Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1980), 555.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 557.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 792–793 n. 2.

was drawn. Chambers held a religio-philosophical view of history, seeing it as a dialectical process and moved by the struggle between good and evil. Both men emphasized struggle and crisis, but Chambers had actually lived out that philosophy in the most dire of circumstances. Nixon benefited from his relationship with Chambers not only intellectually but politically; he wrote in *Six Crises* that the Hiss Case gave him the credentials to successfully compete for a place on the Eisenhower ticket.⁹⁵

The American political environment at the time Eisenhower and Nixon took office in 1953 was so openly religious that historian Seth Jacobs termed it “America’s Third Great Awakening.” Jacobs attributed the anxieties of the Cold War and the impact of World War II to the increasing attention Americans paid not only to “religiosity” but to the future of Christian civilization in the face of an adversarial world. Americans saw in this adversarial world a variety of alternative faiths that set themselves against Christianity. Into this environment the Republican National Committee in 1955 proclaimed Eisenhower “not only the political leader, but the spiritual leader of our times.”⁹⁶ Eisenhower’s own style of speaking placed the Cold War in an explicitly religious framework. Although his oft-repeated gaffe about the importance of having a “deeply felt religious faith” regardless of specific creed is often cited as proof of a religious fad sweeping the nation, Eisenhower consistently opposed Christianity and Communism and urged religious faith as essential for American society.⁹⁷

Nixon later noted that, while Eisenhower urged him to incorporate references to God in his speeches during the 1960 presidential campaign, he felt uncomfortable doing so because his

⁹⁵ Richard M. Nixon, *Six Crises* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 1.

⁹⁶ Jacobs, *Miracle Man*, 67. Jacobs quoted Eisenhower as making the remark, but the phrase came from a resolution of support for Ike offered by the Republican National Committee; it is difficult to imagine Eisenhower speaking so vainly of himself! See “G.O.P. Chiefs Push Eisenhower Draft; He Merely Smiles,” *New York Times* (Feb. 18, 1955): 1, 28. The quote is found on p. 28 under “Text of Resolution.”

⁹⁷ See “Eisenhower Tells of Zhukov Ouster,” *New York Times* (Dec. 23, 1952): 16. Also quoted in Jacobs, *Miracle Man*, 67.

religious faith was “intensely personal and intensely private.”⁹⁸ Indeed, few of Nixon’s speeches from the period of his vice presidency contained such references; more common were those urging moral leadership that would provide for peace and freedom. Nixon did gain a sense of moral and spiritual leadership, however, from the influence of both Eisenhower and secretary of state John Foster Dulles. Dulles was more outspoken and explicit than Eisenhower in “interpret[ing] international tensions in religious terms,” specifically Christian terms. Some of his religious ideas bear similarity to those previously voiced by Nixon; Dulles called for a “new world order” that would place faith in God above “deification of the state” and would operate based on “the spirit of Christ.”⁹⁹ Only a “dynamic” Christianity would endow the nation with the spiritual strength to prevail over the eventual “battle between Christianity and Communism.” It is therefore not surprising that Nixon and Dulles became amicable colleagues while serving under Eisenhower.

Dulles had actually noticed Nixon as early as his work with the Herter Committee; the two began corresponding throughout Nixon’s early political career, Dulles being instrumental in recommending Nixon for the vice-presidential slot.¹⁰⁰ In fact, he sought to make Nixon his replacement secretary of state after 1956.¹⁰¹

Dulles and Nixon respected each other highly, and while not averse to using one another to gain political influence, the two men shared the same beliefs, including their religious outlook.¹⁰² Both men consulted each other for ideas to include in their speeches; in Nixon’s example, it is likely that the space he devoted—in sometimes very technical- and tactics-oriented material—to the importance of spiritual strength in addressing Communism reflected Dulles’s

⁹⁸ Nixon, *In the Arena*, 88–89.

⁹⁹ Jacobs, *Miracle Man*, 73. “Spirit of Christ” is a quotation of Dulles’s.

¹⁰⁰ Benjamin J. Goldberg, “The Vice Presidency of Richard Nixon: One Man’s Quest for National Respect, an International Reputation, and the Presidency” (PhD diss., College of William and Mary, 1998), 44.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 64.

influence.¹⁰³ Dulles, like Chambers, brought home to Nixon the necessity of interpreting the Cold War through a religious framework. Chambers's approach was more philosophically based, while Dulles shared with Nixon a technical and analytical approach to international relations. Nixon's personal style was to focus on the details of international events, as many of his speeches demonstrate. But he had repeatedly encountered role models who pushed him to incorporate a spiritual interpretation of how those details fit into an overall framework. These role models also encouraged in him an outward-oriented practice of religion that depended on virtually no understanding of theology or creeds, but rather on the benefits religious belief confers on humanity.

C. THE PRESIDENTIAL ERA

Church in the White House

Perhaps Nixon's most unique religious legacy as president was that he became the first president to hold religious services at the White House. Religious observance by the chief executive became a White House function during the Eisenhower Administration, which initiated the tradition of the annual Presidential Prayer Breakfasts.¹⁰⁴ The breakfasts were events at which members of both political parties would convene for approximately an hour to listen to a sermon and offer prayers for the nation. Each president after Eisenhower kept the tradition, including Nixon. However, Nixon's church services were a new institution.

For each service, Nixon approved the minister, but the order of the service was planned by White House staffers. Over the course of time, the services featured an eclectic group of ministers of a wide range of denominations, both Protestant and Catholic, and on at least one occasion a Jewish rabbi spoke. A December 1970 letter from the director of communications for

¹⁰³ Goldberg, "Vice Presidency," 73.

¹⁰⁴ Jacobs, *Miracle Man*, 69.

the executive branch, Herbert Klein detailed the affiliations of those who had presided over the services up to that point. The list reads

Evangelists – Billy Graham has been there twice
 Presbyterians – four have preached
 House of Representatives Chaplain has preached
 Baptists – five have preached
 Roman Catholics – five have preached
 Dr. Norman Vincent Peale – has preached twice
 (Reformed Church of America)
 One minister each of Jewish, Lutheran, Quaker, Greek Orthodox, United Church
 of Christ¹⁰⁵

In his letter, Klein made a point of emphasizing that the administration considered the services as “an important, non-political part of the White House”—a point also frequently pressed by Nixon, who often expressed a firm desire to avoid being seen as using religion for political purposes. Whether or not he did indeed use the services for such purposes is debatable. His own description for the reasons behind the services are contained in his introduction to *White House Sermons*, a compilation of the twenty-three sermons given at the White House Sunday services held between 1969 and 1971. In it, he stated: “When I was elected to the highest office in the land, I decided that I wanted to do something to encourage attendance at services and to emphasize this country’s basic faith in a Supreme Being. It seemed to me that one way of achieving this was to set a good example.”¹⁰⁶ He also said he initiated the services because of his “intense dislike of “going to church for show.” He continued: “In my family, worship was always a very private matter. Whenever a President goes out to church, the news media ... feel obligated to cover it. ... This is not my idea of the atmosphere that should surround a worship service.”¹⁰⁷

It is difficult to know what Nixon meant by this latter remark. If worship was for him such a private matter, why appear in church at all? That he invited countless political officials and

¹⁰⁵ Herbert G. Klein to Ted Lewis, memorandum, Dec. 7, 1970, RM2 – 1 Religious Service in the White House 10-1-70/[12-31-70], box 12, White House Central Files, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

¹⁰⁶ Richard M. Nixon, introduction in Ben Hibbs, ed., *White House Sermons* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), vi.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, vii.

well-known public figures—sometimes even international ones—of diverse backgrounds and even faiths, has been interpreted as proof that he harbored a purpose aside from personal worship. The White House services were covered from time to time by reporters, friendly and hostile, who were invited to the event. Nixon later gave other reasons for his dislike of publicly appearing in church: he preferred private services to public ones; he did not want to inconvenience a church with “hordes of pistol-packing Secret Service men;” he did not want to allow “publicity-hungry ministers” the chance to lecture him; and he “would not tolerate the spectacle of draft dodgers defiling a church by demonstrating outside because a President was in attendance.”¹⁰⁸ In 1993 Nixon echoed those same sentiments to his foreign policy assistant, Monica Crowley: “If there were a good preacher or minister, I’d go. But everyone goes about God differently. Besides, when I go, it’s like a show. Everyone is watching me rather than listening to the important things being said from the pulpit. I don’t want to take away anything from anyone else’s experience, including my own.”¹⁰⁹

Nixon’s comments notwithstanding, the White House church services received much publicity, both positive and negative, and an atmosphere of media attention did eventually settle on the services. Opinions of the services tended to be divided along party lines, but not always. Several theologians accused Nixon of inviting only wealthy supporters to the services, while others thought church services in a government building clearly violated the principle of separation of church and state. Much of the criticism from all angles, however, discounted Nixon’s intentions: the church services were one part of a larger plan to provide moral leadership to the nation. As Nixon wrote in 1962, “Only to the extent that individuals have made a personal

¹⁰⁸ Nixon, *In the Arena*, 90.

¹⁰⁹ Crowley, *Nixon in Winter*, 401.

commitment to that [religious] faith can America be truly characterized as a truly strong religious nation.”¹¹⁰

His continual focus on leadership suggests that Nixon saw himself as a leader whose purpose was to bring America to moral and international greatness. Indeed, much of the criticism against him after his resignation focuses on precisely that understanding. A close reading of Nixon’s religious writings reveals that he makes a distinction between denominational religion and inclusive religion. At first glance his references to the “Supreme Being” or to “faith in God” appear to be the mark of a man who wanted to appear religious in a manner appealing to all people. The authors of *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, for example, write that “Nixon [was] the quintessential high priest of American civil religion in its vaguest form.”¹¹¹ This supposed vagueness, combined with the administration becoming discredited by the Watergate scandal, was seen by some as evidence that Nixon was merely using religion for political purposes, while those of another spectrum were offended or alarmed that Nixon did not make a more *specific* public confession of faith, appearing to instead engage in mere “evangelical tokenism.”¹¹²

Nixon’s engagement with conservative evangelicals suggests sincere belief—nearly all his religious proclamations can be rationalized to that end—but his association with them is better explained by their shared moral and political sensibilities. On many doctrinal issues Nixon might well have been comfortable with theological liberals, but their opposition to him and his policies, combined with his disregard for theological correctness, caused him to feel more at home with those who shared his general political outlook, regardless of their theological conservatism.

¹¹⁰ Richard N. Nixon, draft copy of “A Nation’s Faith in God” for *Decision* (Sept. 10, 1962), Statements for Publication – RN, box 1 (Campaign 1962: Speeches, Public Statements, and Schedules), Pre-presidential Papers, Yorba Linda.

¹¹¹ Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1998), 206–207.

¹¹² Carl F. H. Henry, “Reflections on a Nation in Transition,” *Interpretation* 30, no. 1 (January 1976): 57.

Nixon's Enduring Friendship with Billy Graham

Throughout his political life, and continuing to the end of his life, Nixon kept a close friendship with revered evangelist Billy Graham. Graham actually met Nixon through Nixon's parents, who knew Graham through attendance at one of his rallies. Graham and Nixon became close friends during Nixon's political rise, and Graham all but endorsed Nixon during his 1960 campaign for the presidency.¹¹³ Nixon, in turn, contributed an article in 1962, titled "A Nation's Faith in God," to Billy Graham's magazine *Decision*, and both before and during his presidency spoke at several of his rallies.¹¹⁴ The two often talked about theology and politics, each asking the other's advice on many occasions regarding a broad range of topics and ideas, but questions still existed about Nixon's inner spiritual life such that the editor of *Decision*, in soliciting the article, asked Nixon's staff to focus on his personal testimony. "We would like to know a little of his own inner spiritual being," wrote Wirt, as well as his "testimony with regard to his own spiritual relationship with Jesus Christ."¹¹⁵ Throughout their relationship, Nixon and Graham exchanged books, sent each other news items, and often talked at length on the phone.

Nixon was perhaps the most open with Graham of anyone in his life when discussing religious matters, though Graham apparently did not know just what Nixon's "inner spiritual being" was in 1962. This is because Nixon and Graham were genuinely close friends who liked

¹¹³ Graham wrote and sent to *Life Magazine* an editorial endorsing Nixon but decided to withdraw it at the last minute. Graham had asked several pro-Nixon senators about the prudence of writing such an article, and nearly all voiced their opposition to Graham. Despite Henry Luce's objections, Graham decided to write another article "on why every citizen has a responsibility to vote." A copy of the draft article is found in Vice President: General Correspondence Grady, Daniel B. – Grainger, Isaac B., box 299, Pre-presidential Papers, Yorba Linda.

¹¹⁴ Nixon's article appeared in the November 1962 issue. In the article, Nixon wrote that he, his father, and his two brothers attended a revival service led by evangelist Paul Rader and "joined hundreds of others that night in making our personal commitments to Christian service." Nixon changed the phrase to "Christ and Christian service" before the article was printed in *Decision*, however. See Jonathan Aitken, *Nixon: A Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993), 48; "Nixon's Brand of Quakerism De-emphasizes Pacifism," *New York Times* (Jan. 26, 1969): 54; and Richard Nixon to Sherwood Wirt, letter, Aug. 23, 1962, Statements for Publication – RN, box 1 (Campaign 1962: Speeches, Public Statements, and Schedules), Pre-presidential Papers, Yorba Linda.

¹¹⁵ Sherwood Wirt to Richard Nixon, letter, July 31, 1962, Statements for Publication, box 1, Pre-presidential Papers, Yorba Linda.

each other as people and trusted one another completely. Graham felt comfortable advising Nixon in 1956, “Very frankly, you are in need of a boost in Protestant religious circles.”¹¹⁶ He provided Nixon opportunities to publicly express his faith in venues that would imply that Nixon adhered to orthodox Christianity as Graham did. On the surface, in fact, Nixon’s correspondence with Graham gives the appearance that both men did share the same beliefs. Nixon gave money to the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association; he ordered subscriptions for magazines that wrote from an orthodox standpoint; and he spoke with Graham as a close confidant. In fact, if an observer who had never heard of Watergate were to read through Nixon and Graham’s correspondence from the 1950s to the 1990s, he would have great difficulty detecting any alteration in the form of the two’s friendship.

Yet Graham had been hurt and embarrassed by Nixon’s actions, relating that he had become “physically sick” learning of the language used in the White House tapes.¹¹⁷ After Nixon resigned the presidency in ignominy, and during the time in which the revelations of Nixon’s profanity emerged, Graham felt momentarily betrayed and embarrassed by a man he felt he had never truly known. But upon examination of the men’s correspondence both before and after Watergate, there is no permanent discernable change in the relationship; this, however, could just as easily be explained by Graham’s character as by Nixon’s. Graham was no more guarded with Nixon after Watergate than he was before, and gave no indication that his relationship with Nixon had changed. Nixon continued to contribute personally to the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association as he did during his presidency.¹¹⁸ He wrote to the Reverend John Pollack that he intended to keep their relationship low-profile because he did not want to taint Graham’s ministry with his own bad reputation:

¹¹⁶ Billy Graham to Richard Nixon, letter, June 4, 1956, Vice President: General Correspondence, Grady, Daniel B. – Grainger, Isaac B., box 299, Pre-presidential Papers, Yorba Linda.

¹¹⁷ Billy Graham, *Just As I Am: The Autobiography of Billy Graham* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 542.

¹¹⁸ See, for example, Graham to Nixon, letters, Sept. 10, 1975, and Feb. 19, 1991, Rev. Billy Graham, box 1, Post-presidential Correspondence, Yorba Linda.

I realize that Watergate was a difficult time for Billy. ... Under the circumstances, I appreciated the fact that despite the great pressures from many of his peers, Billy did not waver in his personal friendship. I deliberately did not see him often during that period....¹¹⁹

Graham, on a number of occasions (often through journalistic columns), made public calls for the nation to forgive Nixon of his past misdeeds, thus partially laying the ground for Nixon's eventual return to the national spotlight. Curiously, Graham's letters to Nixon could be interpreted for their uncertainty of Nixon's religious beliefs. Graham wrote in his autobiography:

I had some misgivings about Nixon's religious understanding, based on what glimpses I got ... I've never doubted the reality of his spiritual concern, though, or the sincerity of his identification with the evangelical position toward the authority of the Bible and the person of Christ. He told me, "I believe the Bible from cover to cover."¹²⁰

Graham continued to press Nixon privately, however, relating in one letter that, "A Richard Nixon touched by the power of Christ could help lead this nation in a spiritual awakening that it desperately needs if it is to survive."¹²¹ It is difficult, or perhaps impossible, to conclusively determine what Nixon did believe, as he placed so high a premium on private belief. Graham, a minister, could likely detect insincere religiosity, and his responses to Nixon perhaps indicate that Graham felt Nixon was not a true born-again Christian as he was.

Nixon considered Graham extraordinarily intelligent, enough so to be a capable president, and able to evaluate personalities as complex as Nixon's.¹²² Yet an interview Nixon gave with Frank Gannon in 1983 raises serious questions about the actual nature of his belief, as told to Graham. Gannon asked Nixon bluntly: "When you went to college, your mother warned you about losing your faith. Did you?" Nixon responded:

¹¹⁹ Nixon to Pollock, Dec. 30, 1986, Yorba Linda. Nixon wrote narrative responses to Pollock's questions; Pollock was preparing what would become a biography of Billy Graham titled *Billy Graham: Evangelist to the World* (1979).

¹²⁰ Graham, *Just As I Am*, 544.

¹²¹ Billy Graham to Richard Nixon, letter, Aug. 17, 1974, Rev. Billy Graham, box 1, Post-presidential Correspondence, Yorba Linda.

¹²² Richard Nixon, notes on Billy Graham to *Life Productions* re: "Questions for President Nixon for biographical film on Billy Graham," letter, Sept. 3, 1990, *ibid*.

I would say in terms that she would describe it, yes. In terms that both she and my father were Quakers, but fundamentalist Quakers. Some of the Quakers are not too fundamentalist. They're tolerant of almost anything. But they [Nixon's parents] believed in the literal interpretation of the "Bible." Every word of it is true, including the whale story, et cetera. And, consequently, she was even concerned, for example, about my reading Tolstoy. She didn't think that sounded that good.¹²³

This statement raises questions about what Nixon meant when he told Graham he believed the Bible "cover to cover." Whether hypocrisy, Nixon's own theological uncertainty, or a misinterpretation on Graham's part is perhaps undeterminable. Other statements Nixon made in the interview related the extent to which his religious viewpoint diverged from orthodox Christianity, but leave the question as to what he did believe frustratingly opaque. Nixon was careful to hedge his statements so as not to alienate believers at opposite spectrums, but, interestingly, the way in which he hedged reveals that his terms of religious belief—or boundaries of belief and unbelief—contain remnants of the fundamentalist-modernist debates of the early twentieth century. Gannon had asked Nixon what the impact of his course at Whittier with professor Herschel Coffin had been, referencing in particular a portion from "What Can I Believe?" (The segment was that which appeared in Nixon's *Memoirs*.) After he finished reading the portion aloud, Nixon related, "Well, as you can tell from hearing that, that that would be inconsistent with what those who believe in the literal interpretation of the 'Bible' would say." Continuing, he said it would be

inconsistent with what my good friend Billy Graham and some of those who are called born-again fundamentalist Christians, would say. Inconsistent in a literal way, but not in a broader sense, because, to be quite candid with you, I would say that I am not one that says that everything that Darwin wrote is correct. I am not one that says it is impossible to have had the theory of creation being a fact. It could have happened that way. My view is that it probably didn't happen that way, but I am certainly not going to fault those who believe otherwise. So, and as I see, one can be a good Christian without necessarily believing in the physical resurrection.

¹²³ Richard Nixon–Frank Gannon interviews, Day 1, Tape 2, 01:23:21, accessed at <http://www.libs.uga.edu/media/collections/nixon/index.html>.

This statement is as revealing of Nixon's beliefs as he would allow, and reveals, among other things, that he retained the modernistic interpretation of religious belief that he had been taught nearly fifty years previously. He placed the Christian spectrum as stretching between fundamentalism and Darwinism. And he clearly came down on the side of a metaphorical, rather than a literal, understanding of Christianity and its scriptures. His "broader sense" of religiosity was that which he spoke of earlier: the teachings of Jesus and faith in a supreme being.

Finally, Nixon's philosophy of the Bible requires attention. Nixon made an effort to pronounce the Bible in quotation marks when speaking of it in the interview and in other places, which—similar to what he described in his college essay—might indicate that he did not view it as authoritative or received from God. When describing his early reading habits, Nixon noted that: "The other thing we [his family] read was the 'Bible,' and I don't say this because it's expected to be said, but the 'Bible' is not just a great book. It's—it's a great collection of books."¹²⁴ Nixon recalled that, at Whittier, one of his professors, Albert Upton, taught him that "the greatest book ever written was 'Ecclesiastes.'¹²⁵

In light of obvious theological differences with his evangelical counterparts, Nixon's easy familiarity with evangelicals such as Billy Graham might seem baffling. But that association was perhaps more a matter of sensibility than of theological agreement. Troublingly, Nixon refused to express his own beliefs more than superficially, and most likely never would have expressed those beliefs publicly. When Gannon noted an "almost mystical undercurrent" to Nixon's discussion of the China mission, Nixon replied (when asked if he felt one of his life's purposes

¹²⁴ Nixon–Gannon interviews, Day 1, Tape 1, 01:08:10.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* A prime example of how Nixon's religiosity was misinterpreted by conservative evangelicals as orthodox Christianity occurred, in fact, while Nixon was president. Nixon attempted to contact the publishers of a Bible whose translations were theologically conservative. Nixon wrote to Dr. Oswald Hoffman of the Lutheran Hour, for example, to commend his and the American Bible Society's translation. Hoffman had sent Nixon an advance copy of Ecclesiastes, which Nixon praised for the "profound meaning and depth of the philosopher's views." Nixon's words alone might appear suspect with closer scrutiny, but his mere association with the American Bible Society and the Lutheran Hour spoke loudly. See RM1 Bibles 1-1-71/[12/72], Religious Matters, box 18, White House Central File, College Park.

was to “open the way to China”), “if I did feel it, I’d never admit it.”¹²⁶ Nixon felt personally comfortable around evangelicals and other theologians that supported him, and viewed their support as a building block for the “answer of the spirit” he believed it was his mission to provide to the nation. While certain features of the Nixon-Graham relationship strongly suggest hypocrisy on Nixon’s part, the complexities of Nixon’s personality must be taken into account as well. Some appearances of hypocrisy may be judged incidental rather than deliberate because of his personal desire to keep Graham’s friendship. Nixon’s religious actions must be evaluated so as to retain a sense of perspective and explanatory power; they must be viewed neither uncritically nor with such skepticism that disregards all of his actions as duplicitous.

III. NIXON AND THE MEANING OF HISTORY, LEADERSHIP, AND DEMOCRACY

While he was vice president, Nixon wrote an introduction to a book by Ralph de Toledano, a longtime friend and confidant of Whittaker Chambers and, like Chambers, a committed anticommunist. Nixon and de Toledano became friends during the Hiss Case, and de Toledano later wrote two biographies about him, one in 1960 and another in 1969. De Toledano’s book *Lament for a Generation* partly paralleled Chambers’s *Witness* in its account of the choices made by the generations living between the 1930s and 1950s that led them either into Communism or against it. Nixon’s introduction would have been expected, as he also reviewed Chambers’s book in 1952. In that review, Nixon noted that “the verdict of history” would find *Witness* to be a worthwhile book, and he expounded on how history might reach its conclusions.¹²⁷

If history is a dialectical process, then the diversity and multiplicity of a free society are necessary to progress—which may account for the political and social stagnation which afflicts the Soviet Union.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Nixon–Gannon interviews, Day 5, Tape 4, 00:27:31.

¹²⁷ Richard Nixon, “Plea for an Anti-Communist Faith,” *Saturday Review* (May 24, 1952): 12.

¹²⁸ Richard M. Nixon, “Forward,” in *Lament for a Generation* by Ralph de Toledano (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1960), xii.

Nixon's understanding of the historical process and leadership bespeaks his religious philosophy. Searching for evidence of Nixon's religious convictions by listing the books he read or the periods of history that interested him unearths little of consequence for this investigation, but his philosophy of history can be interpreted to much benefit. Historian Peter W. Dickson interpreted Henry Kissinger's philosophy of history to similar effect in his *Kissinger and the Meaning of History*.¹²⁹ By tracing Kissinger's intellectual roots and agnosticism to his constant appeal to history as the final arbiter of moral judgment, Dickson placed Kissinger within an emerging secular era that sought to discover meaning in its interpretations and constructions of history rather than a transcendent God of judgment. Dickson's analysis also moved Kissinger closer to a traditionally Marxist understanding of the historical process, despite his professed aversion to that intellectual system. Nixon's understanding of history is strikingly similar to Kissinger's in many respects, and his appeals to and understanding of the historical process can be analyzed for similar outlines of a religious philosophy.

In his introduction to *Lament for a Generation*, Nixon expressed most clearly how he understood "crisis," the term to which he often referred throughout his writings: "Only out of a conflict of ideas and forces does man preserve his freedom. ... The struggle for freedom, however small or large a part we play in it, is man's most significant experience."¹³⁰ This conflict may be fought on the field of politics but it is resolved in the pages of history. Nixon's fascination with history is well documented. He read all of Churchill's volumes before meeting him in person, for example, and was also fascinated by the works of Arnold Toynbee, Will Durant, Barbara Tuchman, Edward Gibbon, and many others who presented history in a progressive or linear fashion. His appeal to history as the future arbiter of current disputes assigns moral leadership the role of furthering social progress, yet to be successful, that leadership must conform to the

¹²⁹ The title for and analysis within this section owe their inspiration to Dickson. Dickson's title, in turn, reflects the title of Kissinger's undergraduate thesis.

¹³⁰ Nixon, "Forward" in *Lament*, xi.

direction of history. Put differently, the historical process is autonomous from current action, while current action can be found meaningful through the judgment of history. Nixon ascribed not only significance but meaning to the historical process and understood it in moral terms. History was a field of action in which God's purpose could be striven for and revealed in the world.

This view is, of course, in direct contrast to William F. Buckley's famous call for conservatism to "stand athwart history yelling 'Stop.'"¹³¹ Nixon's understanding of the direction of history was both fatalistic and ideological; he ascribed significance to understanding and working within the direction of history. Buckley, on the other hand, viewed history from the perspective of Catholic tradition; morality informed all action, even if such action required bucking what appeared to be an inevitable trend. Nixon believed that Communism must be opposed, but that it should be opposed strategically and pragmatically. His moral understanding of history put a premium on the possible, not the desirable. Nixon's understanding of the goal (or direction) of history can be fruitfully evaluated for its religious content. The influence of two specific thinkers, Whittaker Chambers and Arnold Toynbee, is illuminating for this examination.

Nixon's interaction with Whittaker Chambers during the Hiss case provides an adequate starting point. Nixon's relationship with Chambers began almost by accident but helped to solidify his philosophical understanding of history. It also exposed him to a more sophisticated understanding of foreign policy in terms of a moral direction of history. The two men met during the chaos of legal research that the House Committee on Un-American Activities was undertaking in order to prove that Alger Hiss knew Chambers. Nixon only gradually came to trust Chambers, but eventually valued him as much for his friendship as for his religio-political insights. Chambers likewise appreciated Nixon's intelligence and political talent, but saw these abilities as directly stemming from Nixon's morality and ability to think ideologically.

¹³¹ George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 152.

Why Chambers might have admired Nixon is revealed in his review of Arnold Toynbee's *Study of History*—a review published in the March 1947 issue of *Time* announcing the abridged version of six of Toynbee's twelve-volume work. Toynbee's work was a voice calling for "God as an active force in history," Chambers wrote; it laid the groundwork for an anti-Communist faith, in which "the goal of history ... is the Kingdom of God."¹³² In similar vein, Nixon wrote at Whittier that "the modern world will find a real resurrection in the teachings of Jesus."¹³³ Toynbee's interpretation brought forth the notion that an ailing sick society could only be rescued by a "creative minority," which was also quite possibly the "losing side" (as Chambers referred to the Christian West) in the battle against international Communism. Toynbee's interpretation was correct in Chambers's opinion as well because it placed psychic factors rather than materialistic ones at the fore of historical progress; societies are moved by ideas and forceful thinkers, not by economic forces. Thus, the "savior" who appears on the political scene, and who understands the crisis of civilization, has the task of leading society toward its "transfiguration" when it strives toward the ethic of Christ.¹³⁴ It is probable that Nixon viewed his duty in these terms, given his repeated emphasis on spiritual leadership and struggle for peace and freedom.

There is no evidence to suggest that Chambers read Nixon's "What Can I Believe?" essays, or that he saw the germ of similarity to Toynbee's thoughts in Nixon's other early writings; yet Chambers did perceive an intellectual depth in his discussions with Nixon. It is also unclear whether Nixon had read all twelve volumes of Toynbee's study before he met Chambers, although he did read them during his "wilderness years" of 1963–1968.¹³⁵ Regardless, Chambers either recommended Toynbee to Nixon, brought the historian up in conversation, or Nixon was already disposed toward the elements of Toynbee's theory of history that would provide an

¹³² Terry Teachout, ed., *Ghosts on the Roof: Selected Journalism of Whittaker Chambers, 1931–1959* (Washington, DC: Regnery Gateway, 1989), 142. Chambers's review is reprinted in *Ghosts*, a collection of Chambers's journalism compiled and edited by Teachout.

¹³³ Nixon, "What Can I Believe?" 26.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 148.

¹³⁵ Aitken, *Nixon: A Life*, 336.

intellectual basis for the struggle against Communism. Nixon considered Chambers a valuable resource for understanding the dynamics of this struggle, asked Chambers for book recommendations “not only on communism but on history at large,” and worked diligently to understand the deeper nature of the issues.¹³⁶ It is plausible that if Nixon had not read Toynbee but had expressed congruent views, Chambers would have introduced Nixon, given that Chambers considered him as the hope of the right.¹³⁷ In any event, Toynbee seems to have made an deep impression on Nixon, as will be further discussed.

Nixon greatly admired Chambers and continued to quote him in his later books. In his 1952 review of *Witness* for the *Saturday Review*, he wrote: “*Witness* is the first book of its kind which acknowledges the great hold of Communism on the human mind—which does not dismiss it as a cellar conspiracy which can be abolished by police methods. Communism is evil because it denies God and defies man.” The review’s title, “Plea for an Anti-Communist Faith,” is indicative of both his understanding of *Witness* and his own desire for “a faith based not on materialism but on a recognition of God.”¹³⁸ Nixon did not further explain the tenets of this faith, but it is clear that he believed the highest aspiration of a society would only be realized through spiritual development; as he was taught at Whittier, spiritual concerns lay higher on the process of creative evolution than materialistic philosophy.

Chambers biographer Sam Tanenhaus believes that Nixon saw and admired qualities in Chambers that reflected his own.¹³⁹ While Chambers did air some reservations about Nixon in a

¹³⁶ Sam Tanenhaus, *Whittaker Chambers: A Biography* (New York: Random House, Modern Library Edition, 1998), 454.

¹³⁷ See Chambers to Buckley, letter, June 12, 1957, in William F. Buckley Jr., *Odyssey of a Friend* (Washington, DC: Regnery Books, 1987), 177. Chambers described Nixon’s “greatness of grasp” in understanding “history as tragedy” and the true nature of struggle. Nixon “knows what is at stake,” and within him Chambers perceived “the seed of growth.”

¹³⁸ Nixon, “Plea,” 12–13. Journalistic practice often assigns the writing of titles to editors; Nixon may not have coined this title, yet the article’s argument clearly places Communism as the antithesis of Western Christianity.

¹³⁹ Tanenhaus quotes Nixon’s description of Chambers found in *Six Crises*: “Like most men of quality, he made a deeper impression personally than he did in public. Within minutes the caricature drawn by rumormongers of the drunkard, the unstable and unsavory character, faded away. Here was a man of

letter to William F. Buckley Jr., Nixon and Chambers were both Quakers and held generally compatible worldviews.¹⁴⁰ When Nixon showed Chambers he was aware of a “problem of history,” he manifested traits that Chambers thought were crucial in a leader. He and Chambers both felt that works of history could speak to the present, and that history repeats itself because human nature is unchanging. Their studies of history taught them that great leaders (“saviors”) appear from time to time, yet always eventually failing to fulfill their mission. As Chambers wrote in his *Time* review, “only one transfiguring Savior has ever appeared in human history: Christ—the highest symbol of man’s triumph through ordeal and death.”¹⁴¹ The meaning of history, then, was to be found in “psychic” factors, not materialistic ones, as Chambers wrote regarding Toynbee’s *Study of History* and as Nixon wrote about *Witness*. Man’s response to the challenges of other, competing ideologies was the driving process of history.

Furthermore, Nixon and Chambers held generally similar views toward religion; both men on occasion expressed what could be interpreted as a metaphorical rather than a literal understanding of the Bible and a conception of religion as an instrument in an ideological struggle. For example, Chambers once told his children, “Bethlehem ... is our hearts.”¹⁴² He also compared himself to Lazarus after emerging from the Communist underground. Lazarus,

extraordinary intelligence, speaking from great depth of understanding; a sensitive, shy man who had turned from complete dedication to Communism to a new religious faith and a kind of fatalism about the future. One thing that especially impressed me was his almost absolute passion for personal privacy. He seemed particularly to want to spare his children any embarrassment from what he had hoped was a closed chapter in his life. His wife, Esther, was exactly like him in this respect.” See Tanenhaus, *Whittaker Chambers*, 240; also Nixon, *Six Crises*, 22.

¹⁴⁰ Buckley, *Odyssey*, 287. Chambers’s doubts were perhaps aired in temporary despair, for the archival materials reveal that he wrote to Nixon on February 2, 1961, encouraging him to run for the California governorship. Chambers, knowing his health was failing, wrote from the heart: “Almost from the first day we met (think, it is already twelve years ago), I sensed in you some quality, very deep-going, difficult to identify in the world’s glib way, but good, and meaningful for you and the multitudes of others. ... Service is your life. You must serve.” (Chambers to Nixon, letter, Feb. 2, 1961, Vice President: General Correspondence, Chamberlain, Charles E. – Chandler, Dr. L. R., box 141, Pre-presidential Papers, Yorba Linda.)

¹⁴¹ Teachout, *Ghosts*, 148.

¹⁴² Chambers, *Witness*, 75.

incidentally, is a motif Arnold Toynbee uses in his *Study of History* to represent the act of an individual returning to society from a state of withdrawal or inward meditation.¹⁴³

Chambers's calling was to expose what he considered the moral failures of Communism while at the same time rallying the West toward spiritual renewal. He considered Communism to be, above all, a religious movement. And, as he had been articulating since he began writing for *Time*, the only way to fight against one religious philosophy was with another, better religious philosophy.¹⁴⁴ Chambers furthermore emphasized the same themes of crisis and tragedy in the world-historical setting that Nixon emphasized in his writings. In fact, the "tragedy of history" of the Hiss case was that good men like Hiss had been led astray, in the end destroying themselves, Chambers believed.¹⁴⁵

Communism, Chambers thought, was effective insofar as it masqueraded as goodness. Evil made this masquerading possible, enabling the molding of a society's ideas and thus guiding a people through history without their knowing it.¹⁴⁶ Chambers's concept of the Devil, as described in his well-known *Time* essay of the same title, was of a being that learned at the dawn of the Enlightenment how to trick humanity into doing evil while believing it was doing good.¹⁴⁷ To Chambers, the accompanying crisis of history was that so many, especially fellow conservatives, were so slow to grasp that reality. They failed to understand the direction of history—a failure that, according to biographer Sam Tanenhaus, Chambers believed would hasten them to their well-merited destruction.¹⁴⁸ They were blind to the choice being demanded of them,

¹⁴³ Chambers, *Witness*, 25. Chambers writes, "In 1937, I began, like Lazarus, the impossible return."

¹⁴⁴ While many of Chambers's writings had wide influence, they were published unsigned according to the editorial policy of his department. Nevertheless, it is certain that he made Nixon aware of them once they became acquainted—although Nixon, with his wide reading and interest in the very matters Chambers was writing about, would doubtless have already read them. Literary critic Terry Teachout has consolidated and published many of Chambers's anonymous writings in *Ghosts*.

¹⁴⁵ Chambers, *Witness*, 3.

¹⁴⁶ Whittaker Chambers, *Cold Friday* (New York: Random House, 1964), 79.

¹⁴⁷ See Whittaker Chambers, "The Devil," in Teachout, ed., *Ghosts*, 166–174.

¹⁴⁸ Tanenhaus, *Chambers*, 488.

the choice between God and Man. This, precisely, is how Nixon came to view Communism for its emphasis on “materialism” rather than spiritual ideals.

Chambers was drawn to Communism because Communists were men of action who understood the “drift of history” and were superb at navigating the currents, precisely because they were not weighed down by principle or obligated to tradition. Nixon struck Chambers because of his ability to grasp this complexity. Although viewed by conservatives with suspicion for his “ideological flexibility,” Nixon’s tendency to view the world in terms of interests, motivations, and historical forces rather than ideas unchained to reality allowed him to pursue Communism through—in the minds of other conservatives—equally ideological tactics.¹⁴⁹ Nixon psychobiographer Fawn Brodie believed that Nixon took on Chambers’s description of the “Stalinist mind” and with it the focus on politicization and power, but did not internalize Chambers’s understanding of evil in the world or his messianism.¹⁵⁰ Evidence indicates these failures were not wholly the case for Nixon, however. Nixon did remain a pessimist with respect to human nature, however, and understood human agency as a dependable avenue through which social structures could be altered and lives improved. This focus on history as a revelator and a guide to action has the irony of placing Nixon closer to Communist ideology than his career and personality as a whole would indicate. Furthermore, his positive orientation to crisis and struggle as the determinants of historical progress—though that progress is expressed in terms of returning morality, order, and decency to the nation—make clear that Nixon used ideological tactics to combat other ideologies.

It is also debatable whether Nixon’s philosophy contained no concept of messianism. His interest in Toynbee’s writings bring this to light and are key to understanding what Nixon meant by his religious sense of mission. Toynbee himself saw this in Nixon. Nixon took the occasion to

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, Sarah Katherine Mergel, “A Report Card for Nixon: Conservative Intellectuals and the President” (PhD diss., George Washington University, 2007), 69. Mergel quotes Russell Kirk worrying about Nixon’s “tendency to be receptive ‘to new ideas of every description.’”

¹⁵⁰ Fawn M. Brodie, *Richard Nixon: The Shaping of His Character* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), 207.

write the eminent historian for his eightieth birthday, praising his work as having “placed generations of men and women in [his] debt” and acknowledging his impact among “school children as well as in the highest government circles.”¹⁵¹ This is likely an oblique reference to Toynbee’s influence on Nixon. Toynbee replied to Nixon a week later, and his letter elucidates Toynbee’s philosophy of leadership as well as demonstrates how Nixon was viewed by others, including Toynbee himself, as an exemplary individual. The letter, minus salutation and closing, reads:

I had the honor of meeting you at the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Harvard Business School. You were then Vice President and were the School’s guest of honor. It was only a glimpse, but I watched your deftness in dealing with people. If, by accident of birth, you had been born a Greek or an Arab, I am sure you would have been a star muleteer or camel-rider, because these creatures are as hard to coax along as the most willful human beings. I also had some impression of your unbeatableness in pursuing any goal that you set for yourself. A French general is said to have complained that an English army won because it did not know when it had been beaten. I think you are like that, and I am sure that this is the spirit that the world needs. I will venture to offer a prayer which is, I believe, in everyone’s heart today. May God find in you the skillful, resourceful physician and the indefatigable, indomitable leader who will heal our world’s wounds. May God bless you and help you.¹⁵²

This letter reflects both men’s belief in the secular importance of the self-driven individual, adding a religious undertone to the importance of striving for a goal. Yet both Nixon and Toynbee are frustratingly vague on why striving is important. Nevertheless, Nixon seems to have been most affected by Toynbee’s theory of “Withdrawal and Return;” of all the portions of Toynbee’s *Study of History*, he brought it up repeatedly among friends and quoted or alluded to it in his writings. The idea is that great individuals “pass first out of action into ecstasy and then out of ecstasy into action on a new and higher plane.”¹⁵³ Nixon felt his life experience validated the theory and notes that his own “wilderness years” were such an occasion. In fact, Nixon begins

¹⁵¹ Richard Nixon to Arnold Toynbee, letter, April 12, 1969, Arnold Toynbee, box 16, White House Special, College Park.

¹⁵² Arnold Toynbee to Richard Nixon, letter, April 16, 1969, *ibid.*

¹⁵³ Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, abridged by D.C. Somervell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), 217.

“Wilderness” chapter of *In the Arena* with a description of Toynbee’s theory.¹⁵⁴ Toynbee’s thought resonated with Nixon because it focused on forces of history being shaped by great individuals with overarching moral vision; it historicized mere “religion” while treating it as a tool for higher uses. Above all, it was a practical guide to spiritual leadership or, as Toynbee described, the “kindling of creative energy from soul to soul,” which Nixon sought to practice.¹⁵⁵

As has been made clear, Nixon was fascinated by individuals with strong character and moral fiber. Many of his public speeches voice concerns over “softness” of character that will cause the Cold War to be lost. The great civilizations of Rome, Greece, and ancient Persia, for example, “died ... not when they were weak and not when they were poor, but when they were rich.... They died because as they became wealthy, they became soft....”¹⁵⁶ This softness was a stage of spiritual decadence above all, but such decadence could be overcome through struggle and an understanding of the world-historical crises that faced the nation. This is the meaning of Nixon’s famous phrase in his first inaugural address, “to a crisis of spirit, we need an answer of the spirit.”¹⁵⁷ One of the clearest examples of Nixon’s ideal leader is presented in a letter Nixon wrote to his friend Hobart Lewis, publisher of *Reader’s Digest*. Nixon was writing about U.S. Naval Captain Jeremiah Denton, who, after eight years as a prisoner of war in Vietnam, vowed to write a book about his experiences. Denton was, Nixon wrote,

one of the most impressive men I have ever met. ... For four and a half years he lived in a cell in complete solitary without ever seeing another American. ... He is terribly concerned about the issue he discusses so perceptively in his letter—the moral and spiritual deterioration that he sees in America as a result of what he calls a ‘soft environment.’¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴ See Nixon, *In the Arena*, 26–45, esp. 26.

¹⁵⁵ Toynbee, *Study of History*, 216.

¹⁵⁶ Richard Nixon, Remarks at Ceremonies Honoring Billy Graham in Charlotte, NC, Oct. 15, 1971, American Presidency Project, University of California, Santa Barbara.

¹⁵⁷ Richard Nixon, First Inaugural Address, Jan. 20, 1969, *ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ Richard Nixon to Hobart Lewis, letter, March 14, 1973, Hobart Lewis, box 11, White House Special File, College Park.

Clearly, Nixon was highly interested in expounding on his theories of leadership, history, and societal change with close acquaintances. On one occasion, Nixon discussed Toynbee's theory during a 1972 breakfast with Congressmen Hale Boggs and Gerald Ford. After the breakfast he asked General Alexander Haig, then deputy assistant to the president, to find, duplicate, and forward the passage on to the congressmen. After Haig found the passage, he sent it to Nixon to review. Haig evidently had found the correct passage, and Nixon wrote on Haig's memo: "Send copies of this excerpt to Tricia, Julie, & Ed Cox (I talked to them about it at dinner) ... also send 2 copies to John Moore (our Irish Ambassador)—one for him & one for the Irish Foreign Minister [Patrick Hillery]." ¹⁵⁹

The passage contained Toynbee's theory of "Withdrawal and Return" arguing that society is advanced through the leadership of individual demigods (Toynbee uses the term "creative genius" or "creative personality") who appear episodically throughout history to lead their people toward spiritual fulfillment. This process is not restricted to one religion; it is meant to indicate a spiritual state above all faith traditions. These individuals emerge from normal humanity, and through a process of withdrawal from the general culture become transfigured into a state of higher spirituality. This higher state endows them with a superhuman spiritual and physical strength so as to lead the populace into a period of growth.

Haig copied only half of the passage to which Nixon had referred. Nixon alludes also to the first section, titled "Society and the Individual," of Toynbee's chapter on the "Analysis of Growth," on a number of occasions. Indeed, a further study of Nixon's theory of leadership, and an examination of the traits he admired in leaders (including himself), suggests that Toynbee's message struck a chord in him. It is important to analyze just what Toynbee meant by his theory

¹⁵⁹ Alexander Haig to Richard Nixon, action memorandum, July 29, 1972, Arnold Toynbee, box 16, White House Special File, College Park. Haig found the passage in the abridged version of Toynbee's *Study of History* (1947).

of leadership to illuminate the depth of Nixon's thinking on the matter as well as the religious sense he attached to the term.

Toynbee saw society as a "field of action," in which "the source of all action is in the individuals composing it."¹⁶⁰ Those individuals who lead society, however, "are more than mere men. They can work what to men seem miracles because they themselves are superhuman in a literal and no mere metaphorical sense."¹⁶¹ In describing the emergence of that individual into society, Toynbee quotes French philosopher Henri Bergson:

But, just as men of genius have been found to push back the bounds of the human intelligence ... so there have arisen privileged souls who have felt themselves related to all souls, and who, instead of remaining within the limits of their group and keeping to the [restricted] solidarity which has been established by nature, have addressed themselves to humanity in general in an élan of love. The apparition of each of these souls has been like the creation of a new species composed of one unique individual.¹⁶²

Again, Toynbee refers to Bergson when describing the genius as his personality is being formed during the withdrawal from society:

The soul of the great mystic does not come to a halt at the [mystical] ecstasy as though that were the goal of the journey. The ecstasy may indeed be called a state of repose, but it is the repose of a locomotive standing in a station under steam pressure with its movement continuing as a stationary throbbing while it waits for the moment to make a new leap forward. ... His desire is with God's help to complete the creation of the human species.¹⁶³

On a number of occasions—both in Nixon's college essay and in his later books and other writings—Nixon exhibited an surprisingly consistent affinity for those leaders who superhumanly overcame difficult situations and whose personal discipline and courage made them famous. Yet Toynbee's philosophy also occasioned a great deal of historical fatalism in Nixon as well as possible antagonism toward non-supporters. The "creative personality," Toynbee taught, must be successful in transforming the "social milieu" of the "inert uncreative

¹⁶⁰ Toynbee, *Study of History*, 209.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁶² *Ibid.* Toynbee notes that his quote comes from Bergson's *Les Deux Sources de la Morale et de la Religion*.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

mass” or risk “los[ing] the will to live.”¹⁶⁴ As Nixon’s daughter Tricia explained as Nixon was considering running for President in 1967, “If you don’t run, Daddy, you really will have nothing to live for.”¹⁶⁵ Nixon explained that he “had a fatalistic, almost deterministic, view of history—that history makes the man more than the man makes history.”¹⁶⁶

But if Nixon was attracted to Chambers’s version of ideological struggle through existential crisis, and if Nixon venerated individuals with the moral fiber to overcome near-impossible circumstances, how can this contradiction be explained other than through a sense of historical forces at work? *History* brought creative personalities to the fore. As Nixon explained over one year later, in his first inaugural address:

Each moment in history is a fleeting time, precious and unique. But some stand out as moments of beginning, in which courses are set that shape decades or centuries. This can be such a moment. *Forces now are converging* that make possible, for the first time, the hope that many of man’s deepest aspirations can at last be realized.¹⁶⁷

Catching the drift of history and correctly judging its direction were certainly Nixon’s strengths; what is less clear is the place of God and tradition in his philosophy. This new philosophy, occurring in a time of spiritual crisis, is vividly demonstrated in John F. Kennedy’s inaugural address; ironically, its “theme of sacrifice and toil, with no assurance from on high,” fit better within a Marxist framework that places its “faith in the course of history.”¹⁶⁸ Indeed, Henry Kissinger and Nixon both approached peacemaking as a “historical process” and not as a “permanent achievement.”¹⁶⁹ “We are moving with history,” Kissinger wrote in 1972, objectifying foreign policy as “anticipating the movement of history” rather than as a meeting of

¹⁶⁴ Toynbee, *Study of History*, 213.

¹⁶⁵ Nixon, *Memoirs*, 292.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 291.

¹⁶⁷ Nixon, *First Inaugural*. Emphasis added.

¹⁶⁸ Peter W. Dickson, *Kissinger and the Meaning of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 11, 12.

¹⁶⁹ Dickson, *Kissinger*, 22.

specific, well-defined goals.¹⁷⁰ Both men valued struggle through crisis over “morality and justice” in a world of conflicting powers.¹⁷¹ In the end, meaning could be gleaned from the seemingly “endless historical process” by shaping the future and forcefully “imposing order” on a chaotic world.¹⁷²

Nixon made an intriguing comment on the nature of history during his 1983 interview with former staffer Frank Gannon. When Gannon asked Nixon how he thought history would judge him, Nixon replied,

Here is something we have to understand about—what is history? How does history judge John Kennedy? How is history going to judge Lyndon Johnson? How is it going to judge Richard Nixon? That is beside the point. You’ve got to find out what history is. ... Winston Churchill said, “History is going to treat me well, because I intend to write it.” And he did. When we talk about history, what we have to recognize—that history is not a single impartial judge. The verdict of history is rendered by a jury of historians.¹⁷³

Is Nixon saying, then, that he believed that the writing of history was simply a subjective construction, an imaginative fiction? He most likely meant that the process of struggle is carried out through the writing of history, which does not occur from a privileged moral vantage point somehow outside of history itself. Nixon appealed, as he did many times elsewhere within the interview, to history as existing within the domain of power politics and thus being subject not to higher morality but to the ability of the historian to shape the future.

Like Nixon, Kissinger accepted Toynbee’s view of history as manifesting progress through “spiritual struggle.” Yet both men differed on what this meant; for Kissinger, history could not produce moral values because those values that survive must therefore be the best.¹⁷⁴ Yet without religious tradition, how could one judge values through history? Nixon, on the other hand, continued to interpret God as the final arbiter of the historical process while at the same

¹⁷⁰ Dickson, *Kissinger*, 22. “Moving with history” quoted by Dickson from Kissinger, U.S Foreign Policy for the 1970s—The Emerging Structure of Peace, speech, Feb. 9, 1972, 215.

¹⁷¹ Dickson, *Kissinger*, 27.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Nixon–Gannon interviews, Day 9, Tape 4, 00:28:15.

¹⁷⁴ Dickson, *Kissinger*, 33.

time holding to a view of religion that placed its use and results, not its devotional practices, at the fore. Nixon, admittedly fatalistic about the historical process, referred to his own political experience when he stated earlier in the Gannon interview that his early political career “was one of those cases where history made the man and the man was able to make history as a result.”¹⁷⁵

IV. NIXON AND CIVIL RELIGION

Nixon’s seemingly pragmatic view of religion opens him to the charge that he did not actually support the traditional Christianity he came to be associated with. By keeping high-profile friendships with Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale throughout his political career, Nixon could easily be accused of “using” religion—and, thus, even religious figures themselves—for political purposes, rather than giving the impression his beliefs sincerely aligned with theirs. A primary framework through which this type of criticism of Nixon is expressed is known as “civil religion,” a term referring specifically to Nixon’s incorporation of religion into a larger framework of national purpose.¹⁷⁶

Before investigating the application of this framework to Nixon’s specific case, it will be worth our time to explain what exactly we mean by “civil religion” and how the term has come to be understood and used over time. The concept of civil religion refers to the public, outward-directed appeal to religious belief—an aggregation of a president’s (or other political leader’s) public religious actions. Whether defined as society’s “cohesive sentiment,” “civic faith,” or even as broadly as the “American way of life,” civil religion refers to public, observable phenomena, at least in terms of national ceremony and self-reflection.¹⁷⁷ It concerns the religious references

¹⁷⁵ Nixon–Gannon interviews, Day 5, Tape 4, 00:27:31.

¹⁷⁶ Martin Marty contends that civil religion “remains chiefly the product of the scholars’ world; the man on the street would be surprised to learn of its existence or to know that he is one of its professors.” (Quoted from Martin Marty, “Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion,” in Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974): 141.

¹⁷⁷ Pierard and Linder, *Civil Religion*, vii.

made (usually by presidents) during public occasions such as the Fourth of July, Memorial Day, or other times of national significance.

The starting point for most analyses of civil religion is Abraham Lincoln; his religious references during the Civil War were later noted (most famously in a 1967 article by sociologist Robert Bellah, civil religion's "founder") for their peculiar usage. The way Lincoln used religious symbolism to confer meaning on the war was, according to Bellah, "Christian without having to do with the Christian church."¹⁷⁸ This peculiarity led Bellah to argue that Lincoln's conceptualization of the nation and its moral purpose, as well as his vision of a unified American past through his addresses during and after the Civil War, constituted a special kind of religion that borrowed from, but did not come out of, specific religious denominations.¹⁷⁹

Following in Lincoln's footsteps, other American presidents, most notably John F. Kennedy, applied similar civil religious language to their particular agendas, but, as Bellah notes, with mixed results. The religious language of the public sphere, he argued, encompasses broader themes of religiosity than one would find in a gathering of like-minded, homogeneous persons.¹⁸⁰

Sociologist Robert Wuthnow's analysis of American religion since World War II provides a helpful backdrop for understanding how civil religion is used today. He notes that while the generation of theologians before World War II saw God as equally active within

¹⁷⁸ Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in Richey and Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion*, 32.

¹⁷⁹ Bellah writes on p. 21 of his essay that "there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America." Some have argued that civil religion is therefore simply "religion in general," devoid of any real creeds, while others, such as Will Herberg, have argued that civil religion becomes idolatrous when it competes with revealed religion. In particular, Herberg argues that once civil religion begins to claim "ultimacy" or "absoluteness" over the biblical creeds from which it draws most of its metaphors, allusions, and symbolism, it becomes idolatrous. Herberg doubts that civil religion, however much it is idealized, can actually become a force for unifying all Americans. (Will Herberg, "America's Civil Religion: What It Is and Whence It Comes," in Richey and Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion*, 86–87.)

¹⁸⁰ Along with a focus on civil religion in general has come attention on the actual styles of civil religion practiced by the various American presidents. Although Bellah used Lincoln and Kennedy as his prime examples to demonstrate the existence of civil religion, other observers have taken Bellah's concept further by analyzing each president's civil religious "character" in terms of the established civil religion models. Thus, civil religion assumes a sense of given-ness, with each "character" (including Lincoln) now being appreciated for his novel civil religious approach. Students of civil religion see in the presidents different character traits than would be noticed in a study of an individual's private beliefs.

individuals and society, the postwar theologians preferred to see God and his Kingdom as “over against” that society, and “not possible to realize on earth.”¹⁸¹ There then emerged “a relatively sharp, consistent tendency toward differentiating the spiritual realm from the life of active commitment that this realm itself enjoined.”¹⁸² It is partly due to this difference that conservatives and liberals began, during the Civil Rights Movement, to realign into the two distinct political groups that they are today. The Vietnam War further encouraged this division, spawning a “new breed” of clergy who favored religious activism.

As a result of this emerging divide, interpretations of civil religion similarly diverged, reflecting the two political groups’ differing views of the nation’s goals and purpose.¹⁸³ As we shall later see, these interpretations are a prime reason why each political group became so deeply divided in their criticism of, or praise for, the manner in which Nixon presented his religion publicly to the nation.

According to Wuthnow, conservative civil religion centers around America’s Judeo-Christian heritage, its chosen-ness as a nation, and the contributions of its founders. It is a less self-critical view which emphasizes the nation’s positive qualities while deemphasizing the need for reform. Liberal civil religion, on the other hand, removes attention from the past and focuses the nation’s present responsibility for peace and social justice; it emphasizes America’s interdependence with the world and uses few biblical injunctions, unless those injunctions reflect “more universal appeals.”¹⁸⁴ Liberal civil religion focuses especially on solutions to nuclear war and views peacemaking as the highest ideal.¹⁸⁵ National pride is seen as a hindrance to religious work in the world. Instead of emphasizing America’s legitimacy, this strain emphasizes “biblical passages about the oppression of the poor, the arrogance of power, and the idolatry of military

¹⁸¹ Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 50.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

¹⁸³ Marty, “Two Kinds,” 142–145.

¹⁸⁴ Wuthnow, *Restructuring*, 251.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 251–252.

might.”¹⁸⁶ brought forth either criticism or praise for the manner in which Nixon presented his religion publicly to the nation.

Church historian Martin Marty’s article “Two Kinds of Two Kinds of Civil Religion” [*sic*] expounds upon the two existing interpretations of civil religion noted by Wuthnow and others. To illuminate his point, he uses terms traditionally used by theologians since at least the mid-twentieth century. Behind Bellah’s ideas, Marty saw the levers and pulleys that mobilized the American populace along almost-subconscious religious appeals. These appeals, he believed, were made by leaders using one of two approaches: the priestly and the prophetic. Making Bellah’s analysis explicit, Marty demonstrates through this model his belief that Americans are motivated by their underlying religious conceptions of their state. Aware of this, American leaders—the country’s “public theologians”—operate in their preferred framework (either priestly or prophetic) to mobilize the people.

According to Marty, the “priest” is positive, uplifts the nation, and treats the nation as if it were its own transcendent reality. On the other hand, the “prophet” approaches the nation in the manner of an Old Testament prophet—subjecting national policies to a higher authority. President Nixon was the ultimate priest, while his political opponent in the 1972 presidential election, George McGovern, was a prophet.¹⁸⁷ That is, Nixon seemed to praise the nation and take its goodness for granted, while McGovern called for national repentance for its past arrogance. The problem, Marty notes, is that priests are better at appealing to the people, but tend to exalt the nation at the expense of outside enemies. Prophets, on the other hand, view the nation as its own enemy.

Like Wuthnow, Marty injected political overtones into the debate by opining that different civil religious interpretations follow party lines. He wrote, for example, that when Nixon made his civil religious appeals, those of the opposite party “[struck] out in rage against the

¹⁸⁶ Wuthnow, *Restructuring*, 252–253.

¹⁸⁷ Marty, “Two Kinds,” 142.

Nixonian interpretation or heresy and point[ed] to the existence of a *true* civil religion somewhere else.”¹⁸⁸

Before turning to our discussion of Nixon as examined through the lens of civil religion, it is important to understand the controversy surrounding the term. Sociologist Robert Wuthnow notes that the use of religious terminology reflects reality on one level, but the “Great Divide” that occurred during the upheavals of the 1960s seemed to be a political realignment above all.¹⁸⁹ Even Bellah admitted as much in response to a later article by a scholar (James Mathisen) attempting to make sense of the civil religion debate. In response to the scholar’s article, Bellah said he “was particularly dismayed by the strong negative reaction” his landmark 1967 article received. Yet, two paragraphs into his response, he called his original article “deeply critical,” and continued, saying it “was an effort to argue that the civil religion required opposition to the Vietnam War, not support for it.”¹⁹⁰ This is not to say that Bellah’s pre-Nixon critique was left-wing or right-wing, for opposition to the Vietnam War crossed party lines; it simply demonstrates that civil religion began on an activist note and should not be considered a wholly objective, unbiased theory as it is often assumed to be. Rather than having description as its goal, it was geared toward political persuasion.¹⁹¹

A. Neo-Orthodox and Ecumenical Critics

Reinhold Niebuhr wrote one of the earliest and best-known criticisms of Nixon’s religious performance as president. His article, “The King’s Chapel and the King’s Court,” which appeared in the August 4, 1969, edition of *Christianity and Crisis*, criticized Nixon for creating a “conforming religion” by holding White House church services during his tenure as president. Nixon, he asserted, had thereby co-opted religion’s social-critical capacity. Such an appropriation

¹⁸⁸ Marty, “Two Kinds,” 142–145.

¹⁸⁹ Wuthnow, *Restructuring*, 222–224.

¹⁹⁰ Robert N. Bellah, “Comment: [Twenty Years After Bellah: Whatever Happened to American Civil Religion?],” *Sociological Analysis* 50, no. 2 (Summer 1989): 147.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

of religion into a political context was not only unconstitutional, it also weakened religion's primary "prophetic" role of criticizing society from the outside. That is, religion was being turned into a self-referential device and being used for uncritical, patriotic purposes—a form of idolatry, he believed. Niebuhr noted that Nixon wanted "to further the cause of 'religion,' but "did not specify that there would have to be a particular quality in that religion."¹⁹² He furthermore disagreed that "religion per se" could solve all of society's problems, and neither could "individual conversion ... cure men of all sin."

Religion needed an element of "radical religious protest" such that it could place "all historical reality (including economic, social and radical injustice) to the 'word of the Lord'"¹⁹³ The heart of Niebuhr's argument was that religion adopted by an "organization" could do little in approximating "altruistic conduct;" only individuals were so capable. His "Protestant realism" argued against anything that claimed to avoid the question of human sinfulness on a shortcut to progress, claiming that the religion proclaimed from the White House was a Progressive appeal to what T.J. Jackson Lears termed "evasive banality:" the "self-deceptive" idea that individual conversion would ensure social progress by strengthening "individual autonomy."¹⁹⁴

Presbyterian minister Charles Henderson, a "new breed" clergyman whose *Nixon Theology* continued the neo-orthodox critique articulated by Niebuhr, saw a distinction between Nixon's religious language and actions. Henderson was no fan of Nixon, but became interested in him while serving as chaplain for the Princeton University chapel. Henderson, an active participant in the religious antiwar protest movement, began where Niebuhr left off in his criticism of the Nixon administration's use of religion for political purposes. While there is no

¹⁹² Reinhold Niebuhr, "The King's Chapel and the King's Court," *Christianity and Crisis* 29 (Aug. 4, 1969): 212.

¹⁹³ Niebuhr, "The King's Chapel," 211–212.

¹⁹⁴ Ahlstrom, *Religious History*, 941–942; T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 17.

evidence that Henderson met Niebuhr while the latter was teaching at Princeton after retiring from Union Theological Seminary, Henderson emphasized the same defects in Nixon's "theology" as Niebuhr had done. According to Henderson, Nixon certainly saw aspects of the nation that needed correction, but his language did not equate the nation's problems with any sort of dysfunction of the nation itself. Instead, he saw the United States as the "active agent of social justice" that must make "value judgments."¹⁹⁵ In tying his notions of crisis and struggle to the nation while seeing the nation as a vehicle of good, Nixon was working from the obviously "priestly" assumption that the nation is therefore inherently good—untouched by original sin.

Henderson, like Niebuhr, criticized the vagueness of Nixon's religious statements, but he was more concerned about the mode of civil religion in which Nixon chose to express his views. Because Nixon tied religion to the status quo, it had turned into "an instrument of partisan interests."¹⁹⁶ But more ominously, Henderson warned that "if patriotism and piety are inseparable attitudes, as they seem[ed] to be for President Nixon, then religion can only be a bastion of established ideas."¹⁹⁷ Henderson was concerned that Nixon did not appear to think deeply about theology or spend his leisure time "with men of commanding vision."¹⁹⁸ Such a misuse of religion by Nixon meant that, ultimately, "religion cannot perform its prophetic function."¹⁹⁹

Henderson recognized a trait in Nixon in which he desired "that his decisions and acts should be not only sound, but righteous."²⁰⁰ Yet according to Henderson, Nixon had manipulated his image in order to appear religious, and was perhaps "more concerned about his religious image than for the substance of a personal faith."²⁰¹ The drawback was that the religious image

¹⁹⁵ Charles P. Henderson Jr., *The Nixon Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 22.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 207.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 207.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 203.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 207.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, xi.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 44–45.

Nixon appeared to be portraying was not congruent with Henderson's desire for social change. It was, rather, the image of a man spiritually aware but aloof to social concerns.

Henderson viewed the presidency as an office that should "exert moral leadership far beyond the requirements of the Constitution or law."²⁰² That is, it should lead the fight for social justice. Faced with the dilemma that Nixon did exert moral leadership, Henderson argued that Nixon's was the wrong kind. It was "revivalist" and "middle American liberal"—positive and idealistic without taking a hard look at human nature.²⁰³ Nixon furthermore did not seem to understand the need for transcendent judgment on his actions; he possessed a desire to control and to conquer such that America would be glorified, but because he saw the nation as its own referent and not subject to a higher morality, he impoverished the American spirit by "never actually confronting the root causes of social injustice."²⁰⁴ That is, Nixon's version of civil religion focused, according to Henderson, on *legitimation*, while Henderson's preferred version focused on *humanity*. While Nixon saw the human spirit constrained by external forces such as Communism, Henderson saw a failed domestic social policy at fault. His argument, however, inched forward to what Doug Rossinow termed the "politics of authenticity:" the desire among certain segments of the Christian youth culture of the late 1960s for a "radical vision of democracy."²⁰⁵

Rossinow saw strains of the social gospel in this "search for authenticity" and meaning.²⁰⁶ But authenticity was not understood to be exclusive to the political process, as Niebuhr argued; instead, it was viewed in a therapeutic sense as "the healing of a wound, the bridging of the awful separation of the human from the divine. Sin was treated as alienation, and

²⁰² Henderson, *Nixon Theology*, 22.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 191–193.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 193.

²⁰⁵ Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 4.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

salvation now meant authenticity.”²⁰⁷ Curiously, this view of religious experience did not preclude the institutional practice of religion in which the Nixon White House was engaging; instead, the New Left radical movement opposed the war and its political supporters, those “malign forces” that were barriers to social change.²⁰⁸ Nixon’s message was unwelcome, but the medium, perhaps instead in the hands of a McGovern, would be useful. The New Left’s struggle for authenticity pushed for social change, change which would refashion society rather than overthrow it completely.²⁰⁹

Henderson bemoaned “the alienation now prevalent” among the nation’s youth as well as the “disconnect between rhetoric and reality.”²¹⁰ Religion’s purpose, to Henderson, was to act as an “agent of social change,” identifying with “the oppressed and alien.”²¹¹ He faulted Nixon for merely using religion to echo the “liberal pragmatism of the majority” and ignoring its “satir[ic]” function, writing, “If the symbols of religion are used chiefly to sanctify the status quo, as Nixon uses them, then religion cannot perform its prophetic function.”²¹²

While Nixon publicly appeared to exalt the nation in his “priestly” fashion, and while he continued, in the view of critics like Henderson, to pass over difficult political realities with vague, positive pronouncements, he never viewed America uncritically. In fact, during his well-known trip to the Lincoln Memorial during the early morning of May 9, 1970, he spoke candidly with some student protestors about current events and the state of the nation. Nixon summarized the event the next day in a memo to Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman. Nixon included part of the memo in his memoirs, but omitted parts of it for reasons not difficult to understand. The first omission, which discusses what Nixon spoke about with the students, reads:

²⁰⁷ Rossinow, *Politics of Authenticity*, 6.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 246, 162–163.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

²¹⁰ Henderson, *Nixon Theology*, 204.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 207–208.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 207.

I urged them [when traveling] to start with the United States. I said there was so much to see in this country. I told them that as they went West, that I particularly thought they should go to places like Santa Fe, New Mexico and see American Indians. I pointed out that I knew that on their campuses that the major subject of concern was the Negro problem. I said this was altogether as it should be because of the degradation of slavery that had been imposed upon the Negroes and it would be impossible for us to do everything that we should do to right that wrong, but I pointed out that what we have done with the American Indians was in its way just as bad. We had taken a proud and independent race and virtually destroyed them, and that we had to find ways to bring them back into decent lives in this country. I said along the same lines that they would find in California that the Mexican-Americans were even from an economic standpoint worse off than the Negroes. I said that in both cases we needed to open channels of communication to Indians, to Mexicans as well as to Negroes, and I hoped that they would do so.²¹³

This passage seems completely out of character for the so-called “civil religious priest” that Henderson, Niebuhr, and other critics considered Nixon to be, showing that, in Nixon’s case, a simple characterization would not fit him. In Nixon’s mind, he *was* surrounding himself with “men of commanding vision,” as he continually liked to emphasize in his book *Leaders*. It is also possible he thought often about theology, although his lifelong religious record would suggest that this “theology” comprised the intricacies of a foreign policy that that would spread “peace and freedom” as far as realistically possible. Given Nixon’s modernist roots, from which he did not appear to stray, he combined a metaphorical understanding of Christ’s divinity with a near-deification of peace and freedom as essential structures for worldwide moral progress.

Finally, it is simply unfair to expect Nixon to conform to the desires of the counterculture Henderson and Rossinow describe if doing so would require him to step out of “the pretensions of power”—in effect, to switch parties, disarm the nation, and thus violate the will of his electoral majorities. Historian Leo Ribuffo notes that differing interpretations of civil religion can have disastrous effects; President Jimmy Carter’s “prophetic” definition of national greatness, for example, was that of a nation “humble and not blatant and arrogant;” this resonated with voters

²¹³ Richard Nixon, Lincoln Memorial Visit, memorandum, May 9, 1970, President’s Personal File: Laxalt, Paul to Mindsenty, Joseph Cardinal, box 11, White House Special File, College Park.

after Watergate and Vietnam. Reagan's style resonated with voters, however, at a time when, with the Iranian Revolution as a backdrop, voters preferred a "muscular Protestant."²¹⁴

While Nixon often mentioned his allegiance was to the concepts of peace, freedom, and moral progress, he occasionally observed that the nation was *under God*, and was able to step out of his priestly character in order to perform the "social-critical" function of civil religion in objectively criticize the nation he led. "Too often I think," he related at his last National Prayer Breakfast, "we are a little too arrogant. We try to talk to God and tell Him what we want, and what all of us need to do and what this nation needs to do is to pray in silence and listen to God and find out what He wants for us, and then we will all do the right thing."²¹⁵

Nixon intellectually apprehended the essence of Henderson's argument while at the same time being unable or unwilling to refrain from using the religious environment for political purposes. To Henderson's credit, the true complexity of Nixon's religious character was much more difficult to piece together at that time. The rubric of civil religion focuses on the outward, visible signs, seeking to isolate them, but is a weak tool for analyzing the "whole person" in any place but the public square. It describes, but is less helpful for offering advice for the way in which social alienation may be realistically overcome.

B. Evangelical and Conservative Critics

After Nixon's downfall, the groups with which he had the most in common—the conservative, traditional-values, middle-class Americans—felt betrayed and abandoned. Yet despite this momentary setback, Watergate and the Nixon tapes actually helped further the conservative renewal throughout the 1970s—the "social and political counterrevolution" that sought to roll back the values of the 1960s and that became widely commented upon only in the

²¹⁴ Leo Ribuffo, *Right Center Left: Essays in American History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 248.

²¹⁵ Richard Nixon, Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast, Jan. 31, 1974, American Presidency Project, UCSB.

years of Reagan's presidency.²¹⁶ While Nixon was still in office, evangelicals had wanted him to reference his religious views in a more doctrinally specific manner. They voiced criticisms of the seemingly "vague" nature of his religious expressions because they either did not go far enough in emphasizing America's Christian roots, or were not specifically Christian in appearance. Those who found themselves intimately involved in religious matters at the White House, such as Billy Graham, suffered a loss of prestige in the aftermath because it appeared—to others, at least—they had allowed themselves to be used for political purposes.

They did not, however, lose their political influence. Historian Philip Jenkins notes that, beginning in the late 1960s, a conservative "Protestant religious revival" was forming that would combine political activism with "a revived emphasis on traditional theological orthodoxies and biblical literalism."²¹⁷ Conservatives quickly understood that religion had become politicized by the White House, and after Nixon's resignation, they became—at least for a short time—more cautious about government involvement. They also distanced themselves from civil religious rhetoric, which they came to believe was simply a form of religious whitewash devoid of any true meaning.

Evangelicals such as Graham felt drawn toward government since the Eisenhower administration, and found themselves accepted during the Nixon years because, it appeared, Nixon believed in, and encouraged, their message. His use of religion was political, but it seems that those willing to become associated with the administration felt the benefits outweighed the negatives. Nixon understood this dilemma well, writing in *In the Arena* that it was *he* who counseled Graham not to publicly endorse him before the 1960, 1968, or 1972 elections so as to

²¹⁶ Philip Jenkins, *Decade of Nightmares: The End of the Sixties and the Making of Eighties America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 5, 48–49. Jenkins notes that the 1970s were a time of conservative reorganization, but that most observers analyzed this reorganization as if it happened after Reagan took office. Yet it is more accurate to say that Reagan "gave form and direction to powerful social currents," and "join[ed] a revolution already in progress," (8, 22–23).

²¹⁷ Jenkins, *Decade*, 83–85.

keep Graham's ministry untainted by partisan politics.²¹⁸ The impression of Nixon having to restrain an eager Graham is unmistakable, but the point is that Nixon was interested in *religion*, while his administration seemed to attract the support of specific Christian denominations. Later observers were dismayed that Nixon did not attempt to relate his own religious feelings in a time of crisis; Charles Colson and Billy Graham both thought Nixon "went to the brink and backed away" during his 1974 Presidential Prayer Breakfast remarks.²¹⁹

After Watergate and the resignation, religious conservatives felt they had been used by the Nixon Administration, but this is perhaps because of the acute embarrassment they felt when presented with the deeds of the man with whom they were publicly associated. In one sense, the evangelicals were correct: despite Nixon's personal intent of keeping *ministers* out of politics, many of his aides later made clear that the White House Prayer Breakfasts and Church Services *were* used for political purposes. One example is especially representative of how, in the attempt to cultivate a relationship with Oregon Senator Mark Hatfield, an outspoken evangelical, religion was manipulated in a manner so seemingly irreverent that Nixon's conservative critics were correct to sense that they, too, might have dabbled too deeply into government affairs.

The courting of Hatfield was part of the Nixon team's efforts to secure support for the nomination to the Supreme Court of Clement F. Haynsworth, Jr., of South Carolina. When two vacancies emerged on the Court, Nixon successfully nominated Warren Burger, and then selected Haynsworth as a part of his "Southern Strategy." Nixon had needed a Republican Senator to "go

²¹⁸ Nixon writes: "I advised him not to endorse me, or for that matter any other candidate for office. I also urged him not to join the Moral Majority, not because I do not support most of the candidates they do, but because I believe a minister cannot carry out his major mission in life as effectively if he dabbles in politics. (Nixon, *In the Arena*, 90.)

²¹⁹ See Charles Colson, *Born Again* (Old Tappan, NJ: Spire Books, 1977), 183. In a February 2, 1974, letter to Nixon, Graham wrote: "Your remarks concerning the spiritual life of Lincoln were deeply appreciated. I had rather hoped that you would go from the wonderful expression about Lincoln's dependence on the Lord in times of crisis, to your own personal experience. I think everyone was waiting for it and expecting it. As one Senator said to me afterward, 'he went to the brink and backed away.' In any event, everyone was appreciative. While I know you have a personal and private commitment, yet at some point many are hoping and praying that you will state it publicly..." (President's Personal File: Materials Removed from President's Desk, 1969-74, box 188, White House Special File, College Park).

to bat” for Haynsworth, but some of Haynsworth’s previous legal decisions raised questions in the matters of race and financial misconduct. By the time Hatfield was approached, in late October, the Haynsworth matter had turned into an all-out battle, but most Senators finally voted Haynsworth down on November 21.²²⁰

During the October 21, 1969, Presidential Prayer Breakfast, White House staffer Bryce Harlow was seated across from Senator Hatfield. Harlow, whose tactic was “us[ing] pet projects as incentives,” soon became aware of the “startling reactions that [Hatfield’s] efforts [were] producing in foreign countries...”²²¹ Senator Hatfield had become a prestigious figure after the prayer groups he had been promoting abroad became highly successful fixtures of many foreign governments. Harlow related this news about Hatfield in a memo, adding: “But more to the point: the prayer breakfast Thing is a superb ploy from which to gravitate into the Haynsworth matter, and I would like very much for the President to discuss Haynsworth with Hatfield.”²²² Nixon met with Hatfield for half an hour on November 11, 1969, and according to a November 24 memo written by Harlow to the staff secretary, the meeting was cordial but not as successful as hoped.²²³ Nevertheless, Nixon’s staffers considered Hatfield a valuable contact because of his many international connections.

²²⁰ Dean J. Kotlowski, “Trial By Error: Nixon, the Senate, and the Haynsworth Nomination,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 77, 80–82; Robert Mason, *Richard Nixon and the Quest for a New Majority* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 54–55.

²²¹ Bryce Harlow to Bob Haldeman, memorandum, Oct. 27, 1969, RM Religious Matters 1-1-73/7-31-74, box 3, White House Central Files, College Park.

²²² *Ibid.* Haynsworth is often confused with Nixon’s other Supreme Court nominee G. Harrold Carswell, who was also defeated during the nomination process. Carswell was defeated when revelations of his past views on segregation and white supremacy came forth in the nomination hearings. See Mason, *Richard Nixon*, 55, 89.

²²³ Bryce Harlow to staff secretary, memorandum, Nov. 24, 1969, RM Religious Matters 1-1-73/7-31-74, box 3, White House Central Files, College Park. Emphasis in original. According to Harlow’s memo, Hatfield began by discussing his “leadership in prayer group activities in a number of nations overseas.” The president was interested and directed that Hatfield be given copies of the White House Sunday Service booklet. Hatfield then brought up an issue regarding a logging problem in Oregon, which also evoked sympathy from Nixon. Then Nixon asked for Hatfield’s support for Judge Haynsworth. Hatfield demurred, uncomfortable with Haynsworth’s “civil rights convictions.” Despite Nixon’s attempts to persuade Hatfield to the contrary, the meeting ended with Hatfield’s promise to “consider carefully the President’s view.”

The point Nixon's conservative critics routinely missed was that Nixon was interested in moral leadership and saw conservative religious figures as his allies in that endeavor, but that he was unwilling or unable to use his office as a "bully pulpit" to drive the nation in the explicitly Christian direction its citizens desired. While Nixon agreed with their views, he usually did so in private, whereas he saw the public sphere as the place for a more overarching form of religious leadership. Despite the fact that his political rhetoric was replete with appeals to morality and to the necessity of religious faith, the conservatives thought this was simply an exercise essentially in civil religion—which they opposed because it appeared Christian in form but religiously meaningless in substance.²²⁴

V. CONCLUSION: NIXON'S RELIGIOUS IMPACT; THEORY VS. PRACTICE

Two years after Nixon's resignation, Carl F. H. Henry, theologian and editor of *Christianity Today*, attempted to make sense of the Nixon he had observed since meeting him in 1962. During that 1962 meeting, Henry noticed that Nixon was "remarkably imprecise about spiritual realities and enduring ethical concerns."²²⁵ To Henry, Nixon regarded himself as "the confident champion of a free world where divine Providence benevolently guarantees America's ongoing global leadership, rather than, as in the Bill of Rights, towers as the supreme Source, Sanction, and Stipulator of universal human rights."²²⁶ Henry, tactfully subtle, accused Nixon of harboring a "vague" religious sense that enabled him to bypass American legal strictures in light

²²⁴ For example, Martin Marty paraphrased Senator Hatfield as remarking at a Presidential Prayer Breakfast during Nixon's presidency that "America should not worship the captive tribal god of civil religion but should be open to the God of biblical faith" (Marty, "Two Kinds," 141). Another theme of opposition to civil religion centers around possible abuses by the state of denominational religion. Theologian Herbert Richardson, in his article "Civil Religion in the Theological Perspective," made the allusion to Nazi Germany, one of the most troubling examples in recent memory of co-optation of the church by the state. Richardson saw in Bellah's argument hints of this co-optation, and wrote that "there is nothing the church (or anyone else) believes that cannot be woven into the state's mythology" (Herbert Richardson, "Civil Religion in Theological Perspective," in Richey and Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion*, 180–182).

²²⁵ Henry, "Reflections on a Nation," 56.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

of the greater goal of “global leadership.” Yet Henry blamed the evangelical right for not reigning Nixon in or taking him to task for such theological vagaries:

American evangelicals are sometimes a strange lot: as a condition of church membership they demand articulate doctrinal subscription and a vital personal faith; at the same time they read evangelical commitment into the circumstance that a president entertains an evangelical in his home or attends a crusade meeting ... or occasionally attends a prayer breakfast.²²⁷

Henry argued that frequent display of civil religion in general was a sign of national spiritual malaise; all instrumentalized notions of power led to “reliance on unjust means to defeat all opposing views and priority of political power over God.”²²⁸ Once religion had become separated from tradition, both the left and the right sought to “exploit the nation’s possibilities for selfish gain.” But “fundamentalism,” Henry wrote, went too far, putting too much “faith in democracy as the political exegesis of revealed religion.”²²⁹ As a result, evangelicals like Graham were shocked because they had become deeply involved in the political process.

Despite Nixon’s focus on the spiritual aspects, Henry noted that the nation actually became spiritually impoverished because its leaders, Nixon at their head, had set forth a doctrine of spiritual direction that did not ask God for guidance. It rather viewed individual spiritual commitment as requisite for a greater national mission that did not necessarily take God into account. Henry was not simply advocating “prophetic” civil religion, however; he believed the concept of civil religion missed the point altogether: it used reason and relegated religion to subordinate status, not understanding that both God’s judgment and blessing are transcendent and not residing in the linguistic structures of “prophetic” or “priestly” models of civil religion. Henry’s evangelical critique called for “a sense of historical perspective” in order to temper any “arrogance” and “conceit of power” within America leadership.²³⁰

²²⁷ Henry, “Reflections on a Nation,” 56.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 57–58.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 57, 59.

Interestingly, Nixon's Whittier professor Paul Smith made similar observations as Henry in his 1977 oral history interview. He regretted not teaching Nixon about another historical figure from California who had fallen to great depths after holding high office.²³¹ Smith's conclusion was that Nixon approached all problems with a lawyer's mentality, which was simply to "go to the limits of the law in winning."²³² Smith did not regard Nixon as immoral, but rather a successful politician with a great deal of ambition, whose drive needed tempering by moral constraint.

The success of correctly judging Nixon's actions, especially in light of the premium he placed on spiritual leadership, is one of standards. It is simple to conclude, as James David Barber did, that "Nixon was a bad man," but judgments employing two obvious polarities have little nuance or explanatory power.²³³ Nixon may well have been a good man—good, that is, in his intentions and beliefs—who simply failed to live up to his avowed moral standards. One possible explanation for the conduct of which people of both parties disapproved, the language on the White House tapes and his handling of the Watergate affair, is that his view of morality placed little emphasis on personal actions. National progress through spiritual renewal was a large idea; belief in a God who judges personal actions and holds all persons accountable, perhaps was less important to Nixon.

His faults aside, Nixon held a relatively stable religious philosophy throughout his life. Any large-scale alteration in his belief, if it occurred, did so during his college years; his later professions appear to be merely variations on a theme anchored in modernism with hints of his Quaker upbringing. Upon gaining political experience, Nixon adopted a theory of history and religious leadership that would fit within that structure of belief. He retained his metaphorical

²³¹ Schulte, ed., *The Young Nixon*, 157. Smith was referring to Pio Pico, the last Mexican governor of Alta California who became impoverished through careless living, including debt and gambling.

²³² Schulte, ed., *The Young Nixon*, 181.

²³³ James David Barber, *The Presidential Character: Predicting Performance in the White House*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985), 366.

understanding of Christ and God, and he mentioned “spirit,” but he does not seem to have viewed these three concepts as his own version of the Holy Trinity. He was often mistaken as an orthodox evangelical for his close association with Billy Graham and other conservative causes. However contradictory, inconclusive, and theologically unsatisfying, his belief held together, above all, under the ideal of achievement, a fitting system for that ambitious and driven politician.

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