Violence and Religious Life:
Politics, Culture, and the Sacred in the United States

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Introduction: Religion, Politics, and Violence in America

I will begin this discussion with a proposition: politics are often driven by religious forces, and religious life rarely lacks a political dimension. The integral mix of religion and politics in most human cultures confuses rather than clarifies lines of demarcation separating one from the other. The conceptual appeal of a dividing line between personal faith and public government, religion and politics in two discrete compartments, is the result of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinking in the creation of modern democracies, and has historically served nations claiming to protect religious freedoms. Unfortunately, the conceptual power of this false separation in the abstract—religion as an isolated, private reality removed from political, social realities in public life—frequently leads to disappointment and discouragements in real world negotiations about the shifting limits of religious freedom for some groups and the glaring excesses of religious nationalism for many political leaders from yesterday and today.

The intersections of religion and politics are easy to discern in United States history, beginning in the colonial period and continuing on into the present.[1] The myriad ways any religious community—Catholic or Buddhist, Methodist or Hindu—struggles with their place and security in American society is fraught with political issues tied to identity, safety, legitimacy, and longevity. But the politics and political participation of Jews or Christians or Mormons or any other identifiable religious group on the American social landscape does not exhaust the multiple interconnections and modes of transaction enlivening the political action of religious people or the religious qualities of American politics. The nuances and complexities of religious life in America, which again is always grounded in various political webs of meaning and action, is much more complicated than simply polling Evangelicals about their voting preferences, or covering the news about America's first Muslim congressman.

One topic that allows for this kind of complex cultural analysis, and an integral social reality throughout the course of United States history, is violence. The intimate, troubling connections between religion and violence have

preoccupied historians, filmmakers, theologians, poets, anthropologists, novelists, and others long before 9/11, a day now seared into consciousness and forever marked on the terrestrial and imaginative landscapes. But we would be overlooking so much of human history if this is only understood as an exceptional case of religious extremism, an act of terrorism fueled by delusional fanaticism or monotheism gone all wrong. Violence has long been a potent source for sacred activities, identities, and transformations in religious traditions like Judaism and Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity—all of their sacred histories and myths provide evidence that religion and violence go hand in hand, at times.

With violence as a lens to explore the relationships between religion and politics, this presentation will, I hope, open up new perspectives on American culture generally and religious life in particular. First I will briefly present tentative definitions of key words in this discussion; then I will look specifically at the role of violence in the rise of the Christian Religious Right in American society; and finally, I will argue that violence itself constitutes a sacred source of meaning and action for Americans in unique, often unusual ways that do not line up with any one religious tradition.

Key Terms and Historical Context

Politics can be defined broadly as the uses and manifestations of power that seek to impact and determine social order in human communities. It is an arena of social life that bears on patterns of power and power relations, establishes personal and group identities, and reaffirms or disrupts the status quo and mechanisms of control in society. For Karl Marx, political power is tied to economic interests; for Thomas Jefferson, political power is centered on democratic forms of government; for Martin Luther King, Jr., political power is subject to the authority of the church. But despite the wide range of theories about ultimate powers in politics, political power is never a singular force acting in the social world, exerted in one direction or the other, or emanating from only one source, like the economy, the government, or the church; instead, it is always moving in multiple directions at once, and emanating from numerous and often diffused sources, including popular mythologies, social movements, and authoritative institutions.[2]

Violence, like politics, is an integral, inescapable, and irreducible force in social life. Even more fundamental in communities than politics, it is a human trait embedded in our evolutionary past carried into the present, driving history and shaping social boundaries through time and around the globe. Violence is a social and symbolic reality tied to the use of physical force or the threat of force in the organization of power over a territory, as a mechanism for control and intimidation within and across social communities, or a point of fixation for the private and popular imagination. Violence is also unexplainable at times, a force with no logic or order that often does not make any sense at all, a point at which

theodicy for most religions serves as a bulwark against meaningless acts of destruction and suffering. The fact of violence, regardless of its form and effects, is integrally woven into the fabric of everyday life in the US, in times of war and peace, on the streets and in cyberspace, and throughout consciousness as well as lurking in the unconscious. Because of its intricate connections to ultimate matters of life and death, it is a compelling presence on the social landscape, at times revolting in its destructiveness but at other times quite alluring as a fascinating reality that draws people back for more again and again.[3]

Of the three key terms in this talk, however, religion requires a more detailed discussion because it is the most elusive of the three, containing conceptual and theoretical baggage that limits the imagination, narrows what counts as religion, and distorts the picture of how the sacred can shape religious life in a variety of forms and expressions.[4] Religion is much more complicated than the conventional view that understands it only in clear-cut terms that separate the secular from the holy, or the sacred from the profane. What would an alternative vision of religious life look like if it was not restricted by a definition bogged down with normative judgments about true versus false religion, and limited to only labels identifying religious traditions? "Hinduism," "Buddhism," "Judaism," "Islam," "Christianity," or even more absurd labels like "New Age" and "Native American," are really fictions that impose unities, commonalities, and coherence within each, but disguise the contestations, diversity, and incongruities so evident in the particularities of cultural circumstances of each one throughout history.

Instead of privileging these imaginative fictions that work in theory, a linguistic shift from the noun, "religion," to the adjective, "religious," breaks open a perspectival shift that works in practice, one that brings religious life in all of its intricately and intimately nuanced glory to public light. Rather than maintain any illusions that religious life can only be defined, named, and confined within a particular tradition, I would instead suggest that it is a ubiquitous feature of cultural life, assuming many expressions though tied to and inspired by basic, universal social facts, and fundamentally biological, embodied phenomena in human experience: suffering and ecstasy, reproduction and aging, community and conflict, health and death.

Religious thoughts, actions, behaviors, impulses, sensibilities, and communities are not all necessarily about God, or about being a good Jew, Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, or what not. They are instead grounded by perceptions and experiences of the sacred, another word like religion without a fixed meaning or reference but a social fact that inspires religious cultures, or communities tied together emotionally and cognitively, but also spiritually as well as materially by vital rituals, living myths, indescribable experiences, shared memories, and other commonly recognized features of religious life. The shape and content of the sacred depends on physical acts and social engagements embedded in everyday life as much as formal religious teaching handed down from authorities in an

institutional setting. But there is not and will never be universal agreement about the sacred. It is contested and contingent, content-less as a social category yet perhaps the most vital source for human inspiration, meaningful actions, and social identities. The sacred explains what cannot be explained, it accounts for the incomprehensible, and it communicates the inexpressible. Communities have a lot invested in the sacred—everything is at stake, so individuals will give their lives to preserve and protect it, or in other instances, profane and plunder what is most sacred to the outsider.

With these three key terms in mind, I would like to restate the contention I began with in this talk: politics is often driven by religious forces, and religious life rarely lacks a political dimension. The history of religious life in the US consistently brings power, violence, and the sacred together on the cultural landscape. From the colonial era in the distant past to the crumbling empire of the present moment, across social fields based on class, or race, or tradition, American history is overflowing with a distinctly religious politics centered on physical violence, representations of violence, and threats of violence—violent performances and utterances throughout US history, in other words, that wring the sacred from the fact and possibility of bodily harm.

The Puritan theocracy in the eighteenth century is one historical example that displays these tendencies; the wreckage and cultural transformation of Native American communities in the antebellum era is another; the theological divisions over slavery and their social ramifications before and during the Civil War would also be a revealing cultural setting to see these intersections at work; the brutal racism of the early twentieth century and rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the middle decades is yet another example from American history that illustrates how violence generates sacred politics, and contributes to the history of American religious life.

Another historical era rife with politics and power struggles, violence and fear of carnage, and religion and spiritual efflorescence is America in the 1960s and 1970s. During this era cultural revolutions at home, military battles abroad in Southeast Asia, and psychic turmoil across the nation radically transformed the religious landscapes—social as well as interior landscapes—of American culture. This is also the tumultuous cultural soil out of which many conservative and evangelical Christian communities mobilized together in common cause as the Religious Right to fight in the "culture wars," a title clearly signifying the underlying violent nature and ultimate stakes in this battle. Their mission has multiple goals, including putting an end to the perceived rampant secular violence against the individual body, represented most potently in the aborted fetus, as well as extinguishing the malevolent, corrupting forces threatening the social body, represented in recent times by gays, lesbians, and especially same-sex marriage. A brief exploration of the Religious Right can illuminate the cultural and political power of mixing violence with the sacred.

The Rise of the Religious Right:
Political Uses of Violence and the Threat of Violence

The rise of the Religious Right cannot be explained by violence alone. But violence is a crucial ingredient in their cultural and political triumphs for sure, and it bears on sacred matters of the heart, and head, for many conservative Christians who initially appeared on the fringes of American public life then quickly moved to its center. The Religious Right came of age after the Age of Aquarius made its mark in American society, not only as a political force to be reckoned with in local, state, and federal governments, but also as a bastion for cultural warriors on a mission that was and still remains violently apocalyptic in tone, tenor, and texture. Indeed the impact of cultural upheavals beginning in the mid-1960s, and bearing on gender relations and sexuality, musical expression and social protest, and religion and innovative spiritualities, crystallized long-simmering though occasionally apoplectic conservative Protestant sentiments about social change in modern America. These sentiments were generally kept out of the public eye in the aftermath of the watershed Scopes Trial of 1925, a case which ultimately upheld conservative values opposed to teaching evolution in public school but also held evangelical views up to the media spotlight where they were scorned, satirized, and savaged.

The roots of the Christian Religious Right are embedded in a longer history of evangelicalism and revivalism in the United States, and more specifically in a cultural divide within Protestant communities that took hold after the Civil War.[5] In the aftermath of this war, the evangelical culture of nineteenth-century America splintered and followed different social paths and theological trends on into the twentieth. On the one hand, reform-minded evangelicals adopted a post-millennial liberal theology that envisioned the return of Christ after a thousand-year period of gradual, progressive improvement of society by activist Christians. Liberal Protestants grew increasingly comfortable with modern culture, which included Darwin and Freud, and found ways to adapt theology to be more relevant, and empowering, in an era of dramatic social change tied to urbanization, industrialization, pluralism, scientific advancements, and other historical forces. Modern culture in turn absorbed this liberal Protestant theology and praxis in ways that ensured it remained a privileged, protected, and powerful, though generally unseen, religious force in public culture.[6]

On the other hand, more conservative forms of Protestantism enthusiastically embraced a radically different theological position known as pre-millennial dispensationalism that proved critical to Protestant fundamentalism in the early years of the twentieth century and in later years to the culture of the Religious Right. In brief, this theological outlook expects and sees compelling signs of the gradual moral decline of society, the growing presence of evil in the world, and the ultimate control of society by the antichrist. At some point during this period of moral, spiritual, and social tribulation, Christ would suddenly return, vanquish

the antichrist, and establish his kingdom on earth for a thousand years.

Pre-millennial theology has insisted from its earliest formulations by Briton John Nelson Darby in the 1870s that Christ's return is imminent, clearly a sign of how contemporary society is morally corrupt and controlled by the antichrist. But this theological position is much more than social criticism; it is a theology that trains the mind on violence, its pervasiveness and menacing presence in American society, and its impending disappearance after the apocalypse and Christ's return. While some in the true church will be miraculously and physically transported into the air to meet Christ during the rapture when he does return, most Christians remain witnesses to and on guard against the destructive powers of the antichrist. This view leads to religious but also political expectations that apocalyptic forces are at work in the cosmos and an ultimately violent but righteous overthrow of the current order is just around the corner. It also translates into a militant anti-modernism that encourages disciplined social efforts to not only ensure the corrupting, destructive influences of modernity are kept at bay, but that actions are taken to purify society and save it from these influences.[7]

By the 1920s, the siege mentality of pre-millennial theology, along with other religious shifts and movements in conservative Protestantism, was increasingly identified as Fundamentalism, a culturally viable form of Christianity that challenged new authorities in modern society, especially science, and adhered to core doctrines, fundamentals, that included inerrancy of scripture, biblical literalism, divinity of Jesus, and his imminent Second Coming.[8] It is with this theological and social background that violence can be understood as a key ingredient in the popular conservative evangelical imagination and an integral source for spiritual life, sacred investments, and political culture for in the Religious Right.

After the Scopes trial of 1925, and in the face of particularly withering caricatures of fundamentalists as crude, uneducated, and irrational religious nuts by losing attorney Clarence Darrow and popular journalist H. L. Mencken, many conservative Protestants retreated from public life and turned inward, building evangelical subcultures tied to congregations, Bible institutes, seminaries, publishers, and additional social webs to interact, collaborate, and associate with other like-minded evangelical Americans. From the late 1920s until the mid-1970s, evangelical fundamentalists found refuge in these thriving subcultures and established networks of communication and cooperation that prepared the way for the political successes in the second half of the twentieth century.[9] Although vehemently separatist and critical of modern culture, fundamentalists also ironically embraced new media technologies to spread their message to friend and foe, first on radio, then even more consequentially with television, paving the way for the rising power of televangelists.[10] In 1976, many placed high hopes on Jimmy Carter, a born-again peanut farmer from Georgia who was elected president of the United States, to lead the charge in the battle against sin and immorality. But it was the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 that truly

transformed the Religious Right into a political powerhouse and brought the culture wars into the mainstream of American life, and the violence associated with the apocalyptic imagination of pre-millennial theology into sharp relief.

From the 1980s into the present century, violent fantasies and realities have played a vital role in the religious power, and political effectiveness, of the Religious Right. Whether the conservative Christian Right has God on their side or is mistaken about its divine mandate in American society, fixations on violence both in the present day and to come at a future point at the end of time is a sacred source for religious life that binds communities, shapes moral systems, carves out personal and social identities, and identifies ultimate investments in transcendent, transformative powers. No other issue captures and conveys the sacred value of violence for the Religious Right quite like abortion, one of the defining causes at the heart of this political movement.[11] Indeed, in 1981, a year after Ronald Reagan's election as President of the United States, Francis Schaeffer wrote *A Christian Manifesto*, one of the key texts in the early years of the movement. In it, he identifies abortion and what was understood as the misguided, if not downright immoral, 1973 Supreme Court decision from *Roe v*. Wade that legalized abortion, as the frontline in a literal battle against the forces of evil aligned with secular humanism and a nation cut off from guiding principles of biblical literalism.[12]

The rhetoric around "the sanctity of life" that was associated with abortion both rallied the troops in the Religious Right to political action and concentrated their energies on the fetus, which became a peculiar fetish that must be protected and defended at any and all costs regardless of differing opinions about its status and context. The extremism of this position has led to real acts of violence against doctors who perform abortion, intimidating threats of violence by protestors at abortion clinics, and repeated proposals requiring legal sanctions against perpetrators of abortion, including some who believe doctors who carry out the procedure should be executed.[13]

Abortion has real-world implications in a nation overrun by secular humanists with relativistic morals. But it also has symbolic resonances in a worldview shaped by cosmological struggles between good, pure Christians and evil, corrupt minions serving the antichrist, conflict inevitably heading toward Armageddon, death, and destruction for most, though eventual salvation and eternal peace for the true church. In this cultural milieu, where politics and religion are indistinguishable one from the other, violence is a fact of life but also a theological frame by which to interpret and live with this fact—the knowledge of God's plan makes any tragedy explicable and morally relevant. In the wake of the horribly violent and destructive Hurricane Katrina, for example, televangelist and public spokesman for many in the Religious Right, Pat Robertson, proclaimed that God himself had unleashed this devastation and ruin as punishment for legal abortion.

The essential opposition between forms of righteous violence linked to good

fighting evil (cultural warriors against individual doctors, for example, or God's wrath in the form of natural disaster) and sinful violence provoked by moral corruption perpetuated by godless government (allowing innocent babies to be murdered during abortion, for example, or social disintegration encouraged by legal protections based on individual rights) inspires unifying sacred commitments, locks in rigid sacred values, and ensures the sacred remains at the heart of this political movement. The political mileage provided by this sacred view of violence is also evident in their attitudes toward homosexuality, another social issue connecting perceived immoral treatment of the individual body with threats against the social body in a larger cosmic, apocalyptic framework.

Like abortion, homosexuality became a driving theological and social preoccupation for the Religious Right, especially after the election of Bill Clinton as president in 1992. Once again, a siege mentality characterizes the position of the Religious Right, which flourishes by identifying dangerous bodies that are understood as vital threats to Christian principles and need to be controlled, particularly because alternative views about human sexuality are involved. In this case, non-heterosexual orientation and same-sex marriage were not simply social issues reflecting differences of opinion, but a mortal threat to the core social unit in national life for conservative Protestants that must be preserved and protected at all costs, the family. Many leaders from the Religious Right identify this problem as a scourge on America, and thoroughly expect God's wrath to rain down on the US for harboring such iniquities. Jerry Falwell, the leading light in the Moral Majority, framed the problem in explicit Old Testament terms, a common tactic in this discourse, relying on the story of Sodom and Gomorrah to warn of divine punishment likely to be inflicted on the country.[14]

Once again, the terms of the debate for those within the culture of the Religious Right are rhetorically anchored in a curious vision of cosmic violence and animated by urgent lethal threats posed by these behaviors to individuals, families, communities, and the nation itself. Gay marriage, gay lifestyles, even gay ordinations are understood as "demonic" and "evil," and therefore seamlessly incorporated into discourse about culture wars in America, battles between good and evil, and apocalyptic consequences in anticipation of Christ's destructive return. Maintaining the pre-millennial theological outlook from early in the twentieth century, culture warriors in the Religious Right flex their political muscle because so much is at stake—the nuclear family, American society, even Christianity itself—in the menacing, sinful context of contemporary society. The politics of the Religious Right, on the issues of homosexuality, abortion, and other similarly imagined grave threats, is driven by a peculiar investment in violence, both as a potent symbolic force in human society and as real-world reality requiring action believed to be sanctioned by God.

Sacred Violence: War as a Religiously Creative Force

Violence does not need to be sanctioned by God or any particular religious traditions like Christianity, or Judaism, or Islam, to exert sacred force, inspire religious cultures, or determine political realities. In other words, violence can be a religious force in politics without the sanction or framework of any specific theology—it can enliven sacred powers in society that are anchored in sources of authority beyond biblical texts or theological dogmas and that promote spiritual investments and commitments not tied to one church, one heaven, or one God. The mythology of the American frontier, for example, represents the regenerative potential of violence as a compelling metaphor in the popular imagination but also as a social reality driving colonial and then national policies and practices that decimated indigenous populations from the 1600s to the Civil War;[15] the real-world politics surrounding gun control and the status of the Second Amendment, to take another example, depends on perceptions of violence and weapons that acquire sacred standing in the face of social threats to liberty; and war, of course, is the most obvious example of the intimate links between violence and the sacred.[16]

War has played a vital role in human history, shaping the destinies of individuals, families, societies, and empires. American history is a tale of death and destruction from the get go, a warrior's story unfolding in the New World that establishes warfare as a fundamental ingredient of social progress and as fundamentally religious in its social consequences. The lifeblood of the nation, its spiritual vigor and moral convictions that move the social body onward in time, is nourished by broken bones and bodies of soldiers who die violently in bloody combat or preparation for battle. From the Revolutionary War against foreign evil oppressors at its birth; on through civil wars between domestic evil oppressors for so much of its history; up to this very moment, with war being waged against unseen terrorizing evil oppressors, America is defined by violent actions against perceived enemies who must be killed and by shared grief for glorified heroes who die in the battle. Violence is in the blood circulating throughout the body politic, as a recurring historical condition and as a distinguishing cultural feature of the popular imagination.

America is one of the most violent nations in the world, a country gripped by fears of violence from others, propped up globally by threats of violent force, and fascinated by graphic depictions of violent acts. Its history and present is rife with the attendant bloodshed and murder, hatred and oppression that accompany violence. America also displays a remarkable obsession with representations of violence, from early Puritan sermons to contemporary interactive computer games. Even though many glorious counter-examples of compassion and peace from the nation's history can be listed, this penchant for violence in times of peace but especially in wartime pays many social dividends that are essential to

American life—economic for sure, political of course, and religious as well, though perhaps in some unexpected ways.

Can the violence of modern war be sacred? Is it ever anything but religious when the lives of so many are at stake? Every time America goes to war, theological questions about whether or not the current engagement counts as a just war arise, leading in many, though not all cases, to public debates and institutional disagreements over God's role in all the cruelty and carnage. This discussion, however, is missing the larger point: all wars are holy with or without God, inherently religious because the violence of war places everything that matters into bold relief, values and territory tied to group identity, of course, but also more immediate life or death concerns for the individual soldier, like maintaining the integrity of the physical body for as long as possible or risking life and limb to save a wounded comrade. Even when God is not invoked to justify violence—a rarity in western history considering the biblical basis for God to take sides in times of war—deadly battles between groups arouse religious sympathies and sensibilities that are as deeply embedded in personal transformative experiences as they are widely dispersed across a community that is held together by shared loss and common cause.

Yet even beyond the range of complex, contradictory emotions of soldiers in battle and communities in mourning, the social realities of combat and scenes of battlefield carnage are shot through with sacred potentialities and religious possibilities especially for political cultures supporting war. The meaning and purpose of war is often framed in ways that overcome and transcend personal experiences of individual soldiers dying violently during the conflict but that reiterate and ground cosmic principles about national identity through the ultimate sacrifice of martyred soldiers dying collectively for a just cause. The political uses of this civil religion frame have been an effective, creative resource for real-world efforts—like recruiting more men to fight in the battle, or rallying Americans to support the military against a mortal enemy, or inspiring social leaders who justify violence as righteous action with regenerative powers. The old adage, there are no atheists in foxholes, is on to something, not about how mortal fear drives unbelievers to God, but about how warfare can generate religious commitments and cultures.

So how does violence in war bring the sacred to religious life? First and foremost is the sacrificial principle at the heart of any war, the idea that an individual soldier's violent death has special power for the larger group, is indeed noble but holy as well, a form of martyrdom in modern times not necessarily for the glory of God but generally for the glorious nation. More than just an idea, this principle is put into practice in every American war, when presidents and other leaders establish the spiritual truth that young men and women who give their lives fighting to preserve the nation's ideals, such as freedom and democracy, do not die in vain. Instead, in the famous words of the sixteenth president Abraham Lincoln while standing among fallen Union soldiers at

Gettysburg, they have the power to consecrate—to make sacred—the physical landscape and also the military resolve to continue fighting and dying for the ultimate cause, national continuity and progress. While God is often invoked in this sacred equation, the religious consequences of sacrifice in war are not always theological elevations of the soul but can often satiate and fulfill more primitive urges, when the spilling of real blood becomes a primal strategy for establishing social order and political authority through rituals and myths that give meaning, ultimate meaning, to violence.[17]

War is a sacrificial ritual that simultaneously promises social chaos and human destruction along with moral inculcation and miraculous transcendence. For soldiers of all ranks, war can indeed be hell but it is also a redemptive process that saves even as it destroys, a ritual process with transformative powers, turning individual death into a source of cultural regeneration, cruel acts of violence into noble acts of virtue, and gratuitous killing into a vehicle for social revitalization. The commingling of literal flesh and blood from individual soldiers who fall in battle with symbolic life forces animating the social body during warfare is more than an exploitative rhetorical tactic to sustain if not reinvigorate social solidarity; it is a sacred exchange, so common in the religions of the world, where death is a condition for social life and cultural expression. But the religious potentialities of warfare are not limited to the sacrifices of men and women who are transformed from living, breathing, distinct individuals into collective political symbols with social value for the promotion of religious nationalism.

Violence in war establishes sacred bonds between the living and the dead that are foundational to national life and public memory, for sure, but it also creates a special kind of sacred community for soldiers within the military itself, one built on the close, intimate reality of death, the complex relations and rituals among soldiers and officers, and a peculiar form of love that under girds the phrase, "brothers in arms." These intimate connections between soldiers in peacetime but especially during combat, perhaps experienced erotically, perhaps only in terms of kinship, perhaps with the Divine in mind, bear familial fruit—in other words, new families are born from war that are as equally sacred as the bonds that tie biological families together.

Finally, the sacrificial violence from warfare produces glorified, revered heroes, cultural icons who are not quite celebrities but something slightly different, still mythical and sacred to many, but more vital to national as opposed to purely personal interests and identities. The war heroes who are worshiped by Americans, some like George Washington uniformly venerated, others like Stonewall Jackson arousing often conflicting loyalties, impress the cultural imagination with figures to emulate and valorize, warriors whose courage and character, deeds and daring, inspire the armed forces with ideals that drive them onward to face the threat of violence that is always just around the corner, destruction on a scale unparalleled in civilian life, and death itself. Throughout United States history, warriors who prove their mettle in battle with heroic acts,

who are transformed by their encounter with violence in war either by surviving or by dying, are sacred exemplars that have brought into national focus ultimate questions the nation might not otherwise ask itself, such how to distinguish good from evil, right from wrong, valor from cowardice.[18] Perhaps no other cultural hero is as bound up in sacred violence in the American imagination than the soldier.

Concluding Remarks

Violence is not always political, nor is it necessarily religious. But it can play an important role in religious cultures struggling for social power. The two religious cultures explored in this paper, tied to the Religious Right and American nationalism, display how violence can be a sacred generator of mythologies and rituals, rhetoric and mobilization in the political life of communities, whether these communities are connected to a specific religious tradition like Protestantism, or to a more diffuse compelling sentiment, like patriotism. The reality of violence, destruction and death; the perception of violent threats to individual bodies and the body politic; the righteous arrogance of justifying certain forms of regenerative violence; the fixation on violence in the popular imagination—these are only a few of the ways violence can permeate the social fabric and serve as a springboard for sacred activities and attachments.

Religious life in America is too capacious and intricate, too complex and primal to be constrained by religious traditions, institutions, and identities. Through the prism of violence, sacred forms and commitments that confuse conceptual boundaries and disrupt lines of demarcation separating political realities from religious ones are brought to analytical light. Theology is not the only strategy available that translates violent acts into a form of sacred politics. Multiple social forces get behind this cultural work, some monotheistic to their core, but others less concerned about God above and more attuned to other kinds of boundaries—between the living and the dead, for example, or those separating insiders in common cause from outsiders who pose grave threats—that have ultimate meanings and value in shaping identities, orienting communities, and providing hope. I hope this discussion of violence, politics, and the sacred makes a convincing case that there is more to religion in America than belief in God or church attendance rates, and that Americans are more religious, and more religious in culturally complicated ways, than scholars and journalists have estimated in their research and reporting.

Notes

1. Noah Feldman, *Divided By God: America's Church-State Problem—and What We Should Do About It* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2005); Emilio Gentile, *Politics as*

Religion (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2006); Robert Booth Fowler and Allen D. Hertzke, *Religion and Politics in America: Faith*, *Culture, and Strategic Choices* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995); and David Chidester, *Patterns of Power: Religion and Politics in American Culture* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1988).

2. Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006); Chidester, *Patterns of Power*; and Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writers*, 1972‒1977, ed. Colin Gordon (NY: Pantheon Books, 1980).

3. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 2000); *Violence and Politics: Globalization's Paradox,* ed. Kenton Worcester (London: Routledge, 2001); and Robert McAfee, *Religion and Violence* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1987)

4. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993); Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); and *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

5. Without rehearsing that entire and complicated history, it is enough to identify the revivals from the early decades of the nineteenth century as a crucial turning point in American Protestantism. These revivals, often referred to as the Second Great Awakening, nurtured a religious culture that was shaped by democracy, populism, and pietism, and guided by a deeply personal experience of a new birth in Jesus Christ and by a fervent zeal to spread the gospel and reform society. Most of New England, the Mid-Atlantic States, and the Southeast were swept up in the evangelical enthusiasm emanating from the revivals, and by the mid-nineteenth century Baptists and Methodists in the South were bringing evangelical culture to the western frontier. The political leanings of nineteenth century evangelicals is difficult to characterize, though the conservatism of the South tied to upholding slavery and strict biblical literalism is often contrasted with liberal expressions in the northeast, often though not exclusively associated with the Social Gospel movement, and including anti-slavery movements, temperance crusades, and urban reform, see Randall Balmer, *Blessed Assurance: A History of Evangelicalism in America* (Boston: Beacon, 2000); Mark Noll, *American Evangelical Christianity: An Introduction* (Boston: Blackwell, 200); George Marsden, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995); and George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991).

6. James H. Moorhead, *World Without End: Mainstream American Protestant Visions of the Last Things*, *1880‒1925* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1990); Catherine Albanese, *American: Religion and Religions*, fourth ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2006).

7. Albanese, *America*; Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism*; and Chidester, *Patterns of Power*, 273.

8. Robert Fuller, *Naming the Antichrist: The History of an Obsession* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), 108‒164; Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism*; George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, second ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 2006); and Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us Again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999).

9. Randall Balmer, *The Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America: An Evangelical's Lament* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), xvi.

10. Susan Friend Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2001).

11. Balmer, *Kingdom*, 21–22.

12. Francis Schaeffer, *A Christian Manifesto* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1982).

13. Balmer *Kingdom*, 1–34.

14. Balmer, *Kingdom*, 29–34; Dan Wakefield, *The Hijacking of Jesus: How the Religious Right Distorts Christianity and Promotes Prejudice and Hate* (New York: Nation, 2006); and Chidester, *Patterns of Power*, 237.

15. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier*, 1600–1860 (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 1973).

16. Chris Hedges, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Anchor, 2003), discusses mythologies and realities of war that get at this point.

17. For one of the best discussions of sacrifice as primitive fact of life for the American nation, see Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. For more comprehensive analysis, see Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1972); and R. Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Rowan and Littlefield, 2000).

18. Edward Tabor Linenthal, *Changing Images of the Warrior in America: A History of Popular Symbolism*. New York: Mellon, 1982.