

# Covenant, blood, and violence: America at war with itself and others

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## Abstract

Religious nationalism is dangerous, because it tends toward violence. In the case of America, religious nationalism is preceded by, and dependent upon, a covenant with God that renders judgment against the nation when it fails to embody divine justice. The second use of the law in Lutheran theology, combined with René Girard's scapegoat theory, provides the prophetic public theologian with a searchlight to make visible the nation's justification of violence. The haunting question becomes this: should the prophetic public theologian expose the lie on which American religious nationalism is built and risk sundering human community?

## KEYWORDS

America, covenant, Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, public theology, religious nationalism, René Girard, scapegoat, second use of the law

## 1 | WINNING A WAR

During his inaugural week in January 2017, U.S. President Donald J. Trump addressed the Central Intelligence Agency. The nascent president announced that he likes to win. With the help of the CIA, America would become great again by winning. Winning what? A war?

*When I was young, we were always winning things in this country. We'd win with trade. We'd win with wars. At a certain age, I remember hearing from one of my instructors, "The United States has never lost a war." And then, after that, it's like we haven't won anything. We don't win anymore. . . . I believe that this group is going to be one of the most important groups in this country toward making us safe, toward making us winners again, toward ending all of the problems.<sup>1</sup>*

Winners require losers. When going to war, the warrior justifies in advance perpetrating violence against the enemy. That justification for war—actually, self-justification—includes, among other things, moral condemnation of the enemy. The enemy is described in advance of attack as immoral, impure, weak, and evil. By defeating what is evil, the winner in war

allegedly performs a good work: the winner saves the world from contamination by evil.

This preparation for going to war I refer to as *scapegoating*. There are two types of scapegoating, internal-invisible and external-visible. Both unite the diversity within society. Internal scapegoating sacrifices someone precious within the society, rendering that sacrifice sacred. External scapegoating—sometimes called “demonizing”—is performed when preparing for international war; it blames the nation's enemy. The former is invisible, while the latter is visible. Well, visible only for those who, as Jesus would say, have eyes willing to see or ears willing to hear. “Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear?” (Mk 8:18).

When leadership in the United States prepares for its next war, it will be pre-announced. The signs will be clear. The White House will initiate a systematic plan of cursing. The White House will self-justify by declaring some as-yet-to-be-identified enemy as immoral, impure, weak, and evil. This will be followed by eliminationist rhetoric.<sup>2</sup>

Why am I so confident in this forecast? Because it's human nature.<sup>3</sup> It's human nature as revealed to us in one and only one place, namely, the cross of Jesus Christ. Recall how from the cross Jesus said, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34). Did the crucifiers not know what they were doing?

When we today look at the cross, we see in a mirror dimly the truth about human nature. We see that we as *Homo sapiens* curse, self-justify, scapegoat, and perpetrate violence. And, when this involves the shedding of our own blood, we celebrate that bloodshed by calling it a *sacrifice*. If we interpret human behavior through the second use of the law as Lutherans understand it, we can see what the nation at war is blind to, namely, self-justification. It's what human beings individually and especially in groups do. It's what forestalls and retards the arrival of the Kingdom of God.<sup>4</sup>

America as a body politic is a spiritual body, a human community maintained by a shared myth about itself. This founding myth includes the symbols of covenant and blood, which will be explained below. Examining this myth shines a light on what is normally kept in the shadow, namely, maintaining the communal unity of the nation risks perpetrating violence based upon self-deceit, a lie that involves self-justification and relentless scapegoating.

The Christian church—the Body of Christ—differs from the national body politic. Because Jesus Christ is the final scapegoat after whom there should be no more scapegoats, the international Christian community should try to live without cursing any enemy and without blessing any warrior. The church looks forward to a post-nationalist form of inclusive community, the Kingdom of God. How should the promise of that eschatological community become the message of the Reformation prophets among us?<sup>5</sup>

Of the five tasks of the public theologian, this article takes on the prophetic task.<sup>6</sup> Here the prophetic public theologian turns on a searchlight to make transparent what is hiding in the shadows, namely, the scapegoat bridge connecting religious nationalism with violence.<sup>7</sup>

My tone here is not merely that of Momus, the god of sharp-tongued criticism who tediously berates those in political power. Rather, by shining a searchlight into the shadows of the public psyche, I hope to illuminate otherwise hidden truths to inform the public theologian who shoulders political and prophetic responsibility.

## 2 | COVENANT AND BLOOD

Christianity is a religion. America is also a religion, at least in the sense of manifesting a national spirit.<sup>8</sup> America is a civil religion in the sense that Paul Tillich would say: religion is the “substance of culture.”<sup>9</sup>

America as a religion has two foundings. These foundings take us back first to the Massachusetts Bay colony and, secondly, to the American Revolution. America “was founded at least twice,” observes Yale's Philip Gorski, “once by the New England Puritans and then again by the American revolutionaries, both real enough but sometimes mythologized as well.”<sup>10</sup> The first founding gave us civil religion while the

second gave us religious nationalism. The core symbol of civil religion is covenant. For religious nationalism, it's blood.

We today can thank Robert Bellah at the University of California for regrinding Jean-Jacques Rousseau's notion of civil religion into a lens through which we read American history. Bellah sees *civil religion* as the religious dimension of the political realm. This makes civil religion distinct from, though not separated from, organized religious denominations or movements. Dissecting the doctrines and practices of civil religion requires identifying the founding myth that binds the community politically. Such a founding myth generates a “religious dimension, found ... in the life of every people, through which it interprets its historical experience in light of transcendent reality.”<sup>11</sup>

The founding myth of the Puritans, and the revolutionaries as well, relied on connecting America's destiny with God's covenant with ancient Israel. In the seventeenth century, God was making a new covenant with America. If Americans pursued righteousness and justice, God would bless America. If Americans pursued carnal selfishness and economic greed, God would judge America with wrath. “We must entertain each other in brotherly affection,” admonished John Winthrop when elaborating on the common good; “we must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities.”<sup>12</sup> In the name of the common good, the rich should share with the poor.

The transcendent grounding of this new nation was God's plan to establish a glimmering city set on a hill, a beacon of justice for all the world to see. With this vision, the prophet could, when necessary, perceive and judge collective sin on behalf of God's standard of justice.

*We shall be as a city on a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we deal falsely with our God in his work ... we shall be made a story and a byword throughout the world.*<sup>13</sup>

Transcendent grounding provided political prophets with a criterion of judgment when Americans threatened to break the covenant.

### 2.1 | Covenant plus conquest

With the American revolution of 1776, the covenant symbolism added conquest. Although the earlier covenant idea never abated, it was supplemented by manifest destiny, exceptionalism, and expansionism. As “the dark side of civil religion,” according to Gorski, *religious nationalism* became “a red-hued canvas in heavy oils, filled with the blood and fire of war and apocalypse, and replete with battle scenes in which the forces of good and evil square off on land, on sea, and in the air ... justice and peace can be achieved only through violence and bloodshed.”<sup>14</sup> The symbols remain biblical, yet they draw the line between good and evil not through America itself but

between America and its enemies. Here is what is theologically significant: whereas for the covenant symbol God's judgment is rendered against America, for the blood symbol God's judgment is rendered against America's enemies.

Bellah's lens fell short of seeing clearly this difference between the early prophetic religion of the covenant and the later religious nationalism of conquest. "Bellah's definition of civil religion does have one major weakness," avers Gorski; "it does not draw a clear enough line between civil religion and religious nationalism."<sup>15</sup> The exceptionalism inherited from becoming God's chosen city on a hill became, over time, a justification for expansion. Biblical symbolism followed the shift, but the symbols' new task would be to justify American conquest by washing it in images of blood sacrifice.

*... the conquest narrative helps legitimate political violence, particularly violent forms of nation building. Blood helps define the nation. Shared blood (race) tells us who is and is not a member of the nation ... Blood sacrifice marks the point of divergence between prophetic religion and the conquest narrative and apocalyptic religion. It is what makes religious nationalism nationalistic: religion, people, land, and polity are all cemented together with dried blood in the form of blood sacrificed to God, blood flowing in veins, blood spilled in battle, blood showering down from heaven. Modern-day American exceptionalists may be too squeamish to speak of blood in this way. They may prefer watered down talk about "ultimate sacrifice." But their hands still drip with blood.<sup>16</sup>*

Gorski is correct, in my judgment, when he identifies religious nationalism with blood. But, this is not enough. Gorski's insight could be amplified and deepened, however, by drawing into his analysis René Girard's scapegoat theory. Girard better explains just how the mechanism of blood sacrifice works. We will develop this below.

In what follows I will demonstrate that the second use of the law in Lutheran theology, especially when amplified by scapegoat theory, could shine a searchlight on the trail of dried blood left by religious nationalism in American history. The divine law in its second use is the prophet's searchlight that helps us see blood stains darkened by America's shadow.

### 3 | THE LAW'S THREE USES: SIMPLY A REMINDER

Before we proceed to put American civil religion and religious nationalism under the searchlight, let's focus briefly on the three uses of the law. Lutherans and Calvinists order them

differently, but the point is the same.<sup>17</sup> Here we'll follow the traditional Lutheran order: first use: civil order; second use: judgment; third use: guide.

Whereas the purpose of the first use of the divine law—the civil or political use (*usus civilis, usus politicus*)—is to establish a just human community in relation to God, the purpose of the second use—the theological or spiritual or pedagogical use (*usus theologicus, usus spiritualis, usus paedagogicus*)—is to expose our failures when we fall short of establishing that community. The second or spiritual use of the law exposes us as sinners, as persons in need of divine grace. Sin includes lying to ourselves about sin; it includes hiding the truth in the shadows of our awareness. The second use of the law is the prophet's searchlight, illuminating what we had hidden in the dark. The third use—according to third-use advocates—provides guidance for those who realize their liberation from the first two uses.<sup>18</sup> Note: all three uses can have a political valence, a social or civic value in that all presupposes that a just and harmonious human community on earth is God's intent.

"Because the civil use [of the law] concerns the relation to the neighbor in ever-changing circumstances," it applies to "all creatures ... These laws apply to all, but not all phrase it in the same way," writes the late Vitor Westhelle.<sup>19</sup> The first use of the law maintains a specific community according to a shared moral universe, according to the principles of universal justice specifically applied. Westhelle refers to the process of applying universal justice to the specific community as *communicative reason*. "This communicative reason is what can be exercised across human communities regardless of religious allegiances. And the end of reason is to prevent chaos, produce equity (*Billigkeit*), and bring about civil justice and peace."<sup>20</sup> According to the first use of the law, justice—distributive, retributive, and restorative justice—establishes and maintains peaceful community. In principle, this applies as well to the third use of the law. But, what about the second use? Might the second use lead to destruction of the very community sought by the first and third uses?

#### 3.1 | The second use of the law uncovers injustice

The divine law in its second use shines a light on a grim human truth. "The real problem is presented by the prophetic recognition that all history is involved in a perennial defiance of the law of God."<sup>21</sup>

Now, let me try to connect this discussion of law with the relationship of nationalism to violence. Existing human communities, including nation states, are built on injustice, not justice. Oh yes, the rhetoric of the body politic frames social unity with platitudes of justice. The divine law in its first use finds its way into political speeches. However, this rhetoric frequently consists of a pack of lies to cover over

the real source of unity, namely, the scapegoat. The scapegoat becomes the victim of group violence, especially national violence. Indirectly, the scapegoat blesses the nation state with its sense of spiritual unity.

This is not all bad. Self-congratulatory political rhetoric reveals something positive about modern society, namely, that we human beings aspire to genuine justice. The ideal state is the just state. The law in its first or third use capitalizes on this widespread human aspiration for the ideal by declaring it to be God's will that we order our nation on justice. In the case of the United States of America, this nation enjoys a covenant with God according to which the nation will be judged by the degree of its empirical embodiment of justice.

God's law in its second use becomes the criterion by which prophets expose the actual injustice on which communal unity is built. The second use of the law—if it exposes how we lie to ourselves—will undermine the structures of injustice upon which most political bodies are built. Should we shine the light of the law's second use in such a way that truth exposes untruth?<sup>22</sup>

### 3.2 | Showing how political unity is founded on the scapegoat

What Luther left unclear and what we in our time need to clarify is this: what passes for human community can be—and almost always is—constructed on a foundation of injustice that benefits an in-group at the expense of an out-group. Human political community flourishes only when someone is excluded from it.

Excluded enemies play the role of visible scapegoat, and their exclusion becomes the very warrant for in-group solidarity. In addition, the in-group may also add a second scapegoat, an invisible scapegoat. This invisible scapegoat belongs to the in-group, but is sacrificed so that it can play the role of the sacred. The sacred sacrifice, like the scapegoated enemy, plays a complementary role of political unifier, integrator, peace-maker. Both external-visible and internal-invisible scapegoats gain their status from the process of self-justification undertaken by the particular body politic.

The scapegoat mechanism requires an undisturbed and agreed-upon lie. Such a social lie blinds as it binds. If the scapegoat mechanism were to be exposed through the application of the second use of the divine law, then the pattern of self-justification would collapse and the community dissolve. The sacred would be removed, and only lies would remain visible. Neither lies nor the judgment against lies will suffice to bind plurality into unity.

Political prophets within the Lutheran tradition need to ask the ethical question: should the second use of the law be employed for the purpose of exposing the lies that blind and

bind the body politic? Or, recognizing how political communities stand on a basic foundation of injustice and self-told lies about those who are scapegoated, should Lutherans refrain from exposing the truth in order that human community may be kept intact?

With the second use of the the divine law as well as scapegoat theory in hand, let's shine the prophetic searchlight in the direction of America to see what gets illuminated.

## 4 | THE NATION'S EXTERNAL SCAPEGOAT: THE ENEMY

If the White House wishes to ready American society to go to war, it will have to select a scapegoat. Rhetorically, Washington will need to heap upon the head of the selected scapegoat appellations of evil. The sign that the selection of a scapegoat is nigh is cursing.

During the month of October 2018 a migrant caravan of refugees from political and criminal violence in Honduras began the more than thousand-mile walk from their homeland through Mexico to the southern border of the U.S. The Mexican government estimated the caravan to be carrying 3,600 persons, whereas the White House put it at 7,000. President Donald J. Trump, along with ICE agent David Ward, described the caravan as an “invasion” of U.S. sovereign territory. White House spokespeople began systematically cursing the caravan by describing the walkers as immoral, impure, weak, and evil. In White House words, these invaders were described this way: “dangerous,” “criminals and Middle Easterners,” “impoverished,” “malnourished,” and “bad people,” and that “[m]any gang members and some very bad people are mixed into the caravan heading to our southern border.” They carry diseases such as leprosy, smallpox, and tuberculosis and that they are going to “infect our people in the United States.” Such cursing justifies shunning and perhaps even violence against those cursed.<sup>23</sup>

Deep down, our individual human psyche—and our human society—wants to be right, good, strong, and honored for our merit. To make ourselves believe we are justified in this self-understanding, we draw a line between good and evil and place ourselves on the good side of the line. On the other side we place our enemy. Just before pulling the trigger or dropping the bomb, we curse the enemy. To curse, we rhetorically denounce the enemy as immoral, impure, weak, and evil. Then comes eliminationist rhetoric. Like excrement, the enemy is someone who should be flushed away from us and maybe even herded out of existence. We scapegoat our enemies. By scapegoating we declare ourselves to be good and we justify committing violence against the scapegoat.<sup>24</sup> I forecast that when a nation readies itself for war, we will hear such scapegoat rhetoric.

## 4.1 | Non-nationalist scapegoating

This scapegoat mechanism clicks in to foster group unity at the expense of the enemy in groups of any size, not merely nations. In fact, we can forecast for the medium range future a decrease in international war and an increase in civil war combined with terrorism within nations. Yet, the scapegoat mechanism still provides an explanation.

“The nature of conflict is changing,” observe Weisi Guo, Kristian Gleditsch, and Alan Wilson. “Wars are waged less often between states, but are increasingly within them by armed groups ... Advances in technology make attacks more precise, coordinated, and deadly. Civilians are increasingly targeted.”<sup>25</sup> If we are to upgrade artificial intelligence (AI) to forecast and to limit war, these scientists surmise, then we need to know the mechanisms of violence. What are those mechanisms? They don't know. “Conflict researchers have yet to develop a universally agreed framework of theories to describe the mechanisms that cause wars.”<sup>26</sup>

What I suggest here is that if we can recognize when the scapegoat mechanism is at work, we can then forecast the likelihood of violence. Whether scapegoat theory *explains* human violence or merely *illuminates* it, scapegoat theory can provide predictive value.

## 4.2 | Racial scapegoating

Widespread racial prejudice, for example, signals that violence will manifest itself from time to time. Racial prejudice constitutes a perpetuated form of scapegoating. America, for one, is perpetually at war with itself over race. White Americans of European descent consolidate their sense of racial unity by externalizing Americans of African descent. Unrelenting mob rule manifests itself over centuries as cursing—spreading a myth that black people are immoral, impure, weak, and evil—and this same mob rule episodically explodes into lynching.

Black theologian James Cone compares Jesus' cross with the American lynching tree:

*As Jesus was an innocent victim of mob hysteria and Roman imperial violence, many African Americans were innocent victims of white mobs, thirsting for blood in the name of God and in defense of segregation, white supremacy, and the purity of the Anglo-Saxon race. Both the cross and the lynching tree were symbols of terror, instruments of torture, and execution ...*<sup>27</sup>

Racial prejudice sponsors a pernicious form of scapegoating within a nation that sustains class violence. The victims of the scapegoat mechanism are visible, but the perpetrators render their own violence invisible by telling themselves a lie.

The lie is this: by ascribing goodness to ourselves—the modern equivalent of medieval merit—we justify perpetrating violence against a scapegoat, thereby repudiating the very goodness we had claimed to embody. This mechanism works only if it is silent, hidden, unexposed. The scapegoat mechanism includes a lie we tell ourselves. Theologians name it *sin*. And sin lodges right in the heart of our pursuit of justice, goodness, and moral triumph.

To be clear: the scapegoated enemy is visible. What is invisible is the lie we tell ourselves.

I dub this *self-justification combined with scapegoating*. It may appear on the surface that we justify ourselves because we want others to think highly of us. “People *want* to justify themselves because they are dependent on the recognition of others,” says Christiane Tietz.<sup>28</sup> This is true, to be sure. Yet, I believe our motive for self-justification is rooted in something deeper than social approval. It is rooted in what we deem to be immortal, perhaps even eternal. We declare ourselves just by identifying ourselves with *eternal* justice. It would be intolerable for us to think of ourselves as unjust, as immoral and hence temporal or passing. The good justifies us. The good eternalizes us. Well, at least we think so.

## 5 | THE NATION'S INTERNAL SCAPEGOAT: THE SOLDIER

In the rhetoric of an American president, or any other national leader for that matter, the external scapegoat needs to be made visible so the nation will know whom to view as enemy. The visible scapegoat becomes the victim of our cursing and perhaps even our violence. It's obvious who the enemy is. It's obvious that we muster *esprit de corps* through cursing the scapegoat. What is invisible is the lie we tell ourselves. The invisibility of the lie we tell about foreign enemies is upstaged only by a second lie, a lie we tell ourselves about the second scapegoat, the invisible scapegoat.

Just who is the invisible scapegoat that unites America? I nominate the U.S. soldier. What? That's right. The U.S. soldier is the invisible scapegoat whom we sacrifice, declare sacred, and around whom we secure national unity. The sacrifice of the U.S. soldier binds American society into a unity while blinding Americans to the mechanism by which we justify ourselves. The cost of *e pluribus unum* is the blood shed by the U.S. soldier that gives expression to the revolutionary myth, the second component to America's founding symbology.

Is America, then, at war with itself? By no means! The self-sacrificing soldier is friend, family, flesh-of-our-flesh. It makes no difference if that soldier is African American, European American, Hispanic American, or Asian American. The unity is *American* unity. His or her sacrifice is our sacrifice, a self-sufficient atonement that mandates God to bless America.

## 5.1 | Covenant and blood in Abraham Lincoln

In his second inaugural address, on March 4, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln appealed to both covenant and blood. Because of America's covenant with God, his nation is subject to divine judgment. The Civil War is that judgment. This judgment has been rendered by God against the injustices of slavery, with both Northerners and Southerners suffering from divine wrath.

In addition to appealing to the covenant, we also find reference to the shedding of blood. Yet, the blood shed is not that of the soldier in sacrificial atonement. No. Civil War blood is shed as divine punishment for violating the covenant.

*Fondly do we hope, fervently do we pray, that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."*

*With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.*

This is America's covenant at work as judgment.

Here in his second inaugural address, Lincoln wants national unity, but not a unity founded on the blood of a scapegoat. Lincoln's use of the word *blood* does not belong to the second founding, but rather the first. This is how Gorski interprets it. When Lincoln used the term, "the blood was exacted as punishment, not given as a sacrifice."<sup>29</sup> Like the prophets of ancient Israel, Lincoln could invoke divine justice to judge his own nation.

However, blood-sacrifice, at least by allusion, was scripted by the same President Lincoln in his civic liturgy at Gettysburg, two years earlier. On November 19, 1863, the president concluded that memorable address on the site where 50,000 human beings as well as countless horses perished: we must resolve "that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." The deaths at Gettysburg have everlasting significance.

The blood of soldiers, both Yankee and Rebel soldiers, have consecrated the nation's land. With this blood, God will sanctify the nation and guarantee that its light on a hill will shine in perpetuity. The first and second foundings converged into a single scapegoat myth at Gettysburg.

## 5.2 | Symbol-stealing in twenty-first-century political rhetoric

Twenty-first-century civic liturgies take place regularly on festival days such as Independence Day, Memorial Day, Veterans Day, as well as military funerals.<sup>30</sup> At one such civic liturgy honoring U.S. soldiers on Memorial Day 2011, President Barack Obama linked today's warriors into a chain with our first patriots in the Revolutionary War of 1776; and he linked this chain with God's holy word. Note the allusion to both the covenant and blood foundings of American civil religion:

*What binds this chain together across the generations, this chain of honor and sacrifice, is not only a common cause—our country's cause—but also a spirit captured in a Book of Isaiah, a familiar verse, mailed to me by the Gold Star parents of 2nd Lieutenant Mike McGahan. "When I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here I am. Send me!'"<sup>31</sup>*

Regardless of the specific text, the mere allusion to the Bible in a political speech connotes sacred presence, blessing, and reverence. But, note the symbol theft. The call of God to the prophet has become transmogrified into the call of America to the soldier. Whereas the ancient Hebrew prophet answered God's call to deliver the divine word, America's soldier answers the same divine call to enter into combat. To fight for America is a holy calling, says the president.

With an ascending rhetorical crescendo, the president ritually recalled the sacrifices that founded his nation. Patriotic sacrifice stands on the same level as religious sacrifice. Or, perhaps more precisely, patriotism becomes the spiritual bond.

*That's what we memorialize today. That spirit that says, send me, no matter the mission. Send me, no matter the risk. Send me, no matter how great the sacrifice I am called to make. The patriots we memorialize today sacrificed not only all they had but all they would ever know. They gave of themselves until they had nothing more to give. It's natural, when we lose someone we care about, to ask why it had to be them. Why my son, why my sister, why my friend, why not me? ... We remember that the blessings we enjoy*

*as Americans came at a dear cost; that our very presence here today, as free people in a free society, bears testimony to their enduring legacy.*<sup>32</sup>

To sacrifice for America's freedom is to offer the ultimate sacrifice. There is none higher. And we today—those of us who are Americans—enjoy the blessings of the salvation wrought by our soldiers' sacrificial blood.

The redemptive power of death expressed in today's patriotism represents a symbolic theft, the theft by the state of what was once a Christian symbol, the cross. There is power in Christ's death on the cross. There is power in the death of the Christian martyr willing to die innocently as did his or her Lord. Now I ask: is this redemptive power transferrable to the secular soldier?

Is the stealing of Christian symbols for nationalistic purposes uniquely American? By no means. Jürgen Moltmann dates the theft of the cross's meaning by the military with Roman emperor Constantine in the fourth century. Nations today with a Christian heritage adopt the Constantinian way of doing things:

*The first model of self-sacrifice was that of the Christian martyr in the times of Christian origins who gave his or her life for Christ and with Christ for the gospel and the faith. The martyr followed her or his conscience and, in discipleship of Christ, stood at the side of poor and oppressed people. The Constantinian change of affairs turned the Christian martyr into the Christian soldier ... The crown of the martyr was changed into the medal of honor for bravery and victory. In this way the death of the soldier received a religious halo, and it was sanctified and glorified by the understanding that they died that we may live. They died for us.*<sup>33</sup>

Moltmann was speaking here of the situation with the German military. Yet, it applies to the American situation equally. The sacrificial death of the scapegoated soldier redeems the nation. So we tell ourselves.

Even without the pivotal role played by Constantine in Western history, I believe that society's scapegoating of its own soldiers might take place in this form. What the Constantinian theft of Christian symbols provided was a way for American presidents to self-justify with persuasive civil rhetoric.

### **5.3 | To Iraq and Afghanistan: Wars one, two, and three**

The United States attacked Iraq in 1990 and then again in 2003. Angry over the first U.S. invasion of Iraq along with many other provocations, in 1998 the notorious terrorist

Osama bin Ladin made public his long-range objectives for retaliation. One of bin Laden's published objectives was to draw the United States into a war in Afghanistan that would last ten years. Bin Ladin had seen how this scenario had bankrupted the Soviet Union in a previous war, so he thought he could sucker the other superpower into the same quicksand. His plan worked. Immediately after the September 11, 2001 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City, then-President George W. Bush sent American troops to Afghanistan in search of Al Qaeda. The troops remained in that country for more than a decade, funded by money the White House borrowed from Chinese investors.

Once the war with Afghanistan had begun, President Bush set his sights on a parallel war, this time with Iraq. Just as the senior George Bush had previously cursed Saddam Hussein by associating the Iraqi leader with Hitler, so also did the junior George Bush curse the Iraqi leader with duplicate scapegoating rhetoric. The second George Bush even coined a new phrase, "the Axis of Evil," applying it to North Korea and Iran as well as Iraq.

Verbal cursing in itself is not unusual, of course; but employing vilification to justify military invasion raises the stakes. The White House set out to persuade Congress to authorize a second war. On what grounds? Such a war could be justified for three reasons. First, Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein, is evil, and America would be justified in ridding the world of evil. In addition, secondly, Iraq is a haven for Al Qaeda, bin Ladin's terrorist organization. Third, Iraq's Saddam Hussein was allegedly developing a cache of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Such WMDs pose a threat to both the United States and its principal ally, Israel. Iraq must be stopped, argued the White House, before the threat grows beyond control. America's invasion would constitute a pre-emptive defensive initiative.

In October 2002, then-Senator Barack Obama spoke on the Senate floor against the White House proposal to invade Iraq. "I don't oppose all wars. What I am opposed to is a dumb war. What I am opposed to is a rash war ... But I also know that Saddam poses no imminent and direct threat to the United States, or to his neighbors."<sup>34</sup> Saddam Hussein might be all the awful things he is said to be, but, because he poses no threat to the U.S., the U.S. has no reason to invade Iraq. Even though we can draw a line between good and evil and place Saddam on the evil side, said Obama in effect, this does not justify initiating war. Cursing does not mandate violence, said Obama.

Without Congress actually declaring war, the White House ordered the invasion of Iraq to begin on March 20, 2003. The invasion began with a bombing mission on the capitol, Bagdad, described by U.S. government spokespersons as a mission of "shock and awe." To tag the incursion, U.S. Army General Tommy Franks used the code name, "Operation Iraqi Liberation," later changed to "Operation

Iraqi Freedom.” Terms such as *liberation* or *freedom* justify military action because America is fighting for these good things.

Eventually Saddam Hussein was captured and executed. A supervised democratic election was held in 2005, and a Shi'a government began its rule over Shi'as, Sunis, and Kurds. Civil war between these groups continued to bog down U.S. troops until 2011, when most of them departed and returned home. The departing troops left Iraq in shambles, infrastructure destroyed, and approximately 4,000 Americans dead, with perhaps 150,000 people of the region having perished in violent deaths.

Undisputed evidence demonstrated that no WMDs could be found in Iraq. No havens for Al Qaeda existed in that country. Saddam Hussein was dead.

#### 5.4 | Economic greed and deception

It might be illuminating to say a few words about the \$1.7 trillion it took to finance the war. It is worth mentioning that then-Vice President Dick Cheney had previously been president and CEO of the Halliburton Company from 1995 to 2000. Halliburton became the contractor of choice for building military bases and overseeing the reconstruction of Iraq. The company spent \$2.5 billion in taxpayer money—not investment money but tax revenues—to restore Iraqi oil production. Without competitive bidding, Halliburton received another government contract for \$7 billion. Company profits skyrocketed.

It is also worth mentioning Condoleezza Rice. Rice served as national security advisor to President Bush from 2001 to 2005, and then became secretary of state. Prior to her placement in the White House, Rice headed the committee on public policy of the Chevron Corporation. Chevron is an energy company, dealing in 180 countries with gas, oil, and geothermal power. In the year 2000 Forbes named Chevron the “largest public company.” Chevron honored the secretary of state by naming one of its oil tankers after her.<sup>35</sup>

By 2002, the U.S. military was needing large quantities of petroleum to fuel its tanks and jeeps and trucks. Chevron's stockholders felt a windfall as profits soared to obscene highs. Just days prior to the departure of George W. Bush from the White House in 2008, the president decided to fill to the brim all U.S. oil reserves. He paid \$140 per barrel. As soon as the president departed office, the price per barrel dropped on the world market to \$40.

On one occasion during the war an estimated \$12 billion in newly printed \$100 dollar bills was transported into Iraq. Planeload after planeload of cash landed in C-130s, and forklifts moved the cash into pick-up trucks. Those trucks drove off and disappeared. When the White House was asked to account for the whereabouts of this money, the president's office could supply no answer. It simply “disappeared,” a

spokesperson said. The disappearance was said to be due to “poor management.”<sup>36</sup>

What this history suggests is that the ideals which might draw a young man or woman into serving his or her country by fighting in foreign lands hide from view the financial greed and economic strategies that operate at hidden levels. To blow the whistle by announcing publicly that the 4,000 U.S. troops who died in the Iraq conflict died for the profits of Halliburton or Chevron would profane the sacred. To acknowledge that these 4,000 deaths gave freedom to nobody would shatter the blood myth. No one who dares to utter such a prophetic judgment would be welcome in his or her own country.

#### 5.5 | Back again to the soldier's blood

During his State of the Union address on January 28, 2014, the otherwise lackluster speech was nearing its conclusion when President Obama turned his hand and pointed to someone sitting in the balcony. To the immediate right of First Lady Michelle Obama sat a soldier in uniform, Sergeant First Class Cory Remsburg. To Cory's right sat his father, evidently his family support. The television cameras locked onto the threesome, with Cory in the middle. The president's voice began to rise toward a grand finale.

At the podium America's leader took the time to rehearse Cory's biography. On his tenth deployment to Afghanistan, said the commander in chief, this young soldier was nearly killed by a massive roadside bomb. When his comrades found him he was face down, underwater, with shrapnel in his brain. He was rushed to the hospital, where he remained in a coma for weeks. He recovered, though he is still blind in one eye and struggles to coordinate his left side. The president lauded this valiant hero's courage, tenacity, and drive. “My recovery has not been easy,” said the president, quoting Cory: “Nothing in life that's worth anything is easy.” Then the floodtide of the president's passion erupted into a rhetorical crescendo:

*Cory is here tonight. And like the Army he loves, like the America he serves, Sergeant First Class Cory Remsburg never gives up, and he does not quit. My fellow Americans, men and women like Cory remind us that America has never come easy. Our freedom, our democracy, has never been easy . . . The America we want for our kids—a rising America where honest work is plentiful and communities are strong; where prosperity is widely shared and opportunity for all lets us go as far as our dreams and toil will take us—none of it is easy. But if we work together; if we summon what is best in us, with our feet planted firmly in today but our eyes cast towards tomorrow—I know it's within our reach.*

*Believe it!*

*God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.*<sup>37</sup>

With this everyone in the House chamber stood to engage in thunderous applause. The standing ovation lasted for more than two minutes, the longest single applause of the evening. Significant was that John Boehner, Republican speaker of the House, who routinely sat stone-faced on nearly every previous occasion when the Democratic president's remarks elicited applause, stood and clapped vigorously for the entire two minutes. All eyes were directed to the uniformed hero standing next to the first lady. It was a holy moment for religious nationalism.

Even though the scapegoat appears before the entire nation's eyes, he is invisible. His role is disguised by the lies that blind while they bind. Despite the animus and vileness of the rivalry between Republicans and Democrats that virtually and literally shut the federal government down during this president's second term, this moment of applause signaled unity, fraternity, singleness. No one in that chamber would have considered not participating in the applause. It was a sacred moment. The invisible scapegoat provided the foundation for this communal bonding experience.

What's invisible? Not Cory the soldier. Cory is quite visible as a hero, to be sure. But Cory's role as a scapegoat was drowned out and obscured by the laudatory applause. What is invisible is not the presence of the scapegoat per se, but rather the scapegoat mechanism by which we justify ourselves, our way of life, our structures of power, and the violence one's nation perpetrates around the world. No doubt that Cory as a soldier is in fact a hero and properly deserves the gratitude of his people. But his invisible role as an accomplice in patriotism, nationalism, and jingoism is unknown to himself, to his commander in chief, and to the American people. The invisible scapegoat is blinding while binding.

I watched this State of the Union address on television. I texted a friend to mention that we were looking at the invisible scapegoat mechanism at work before our very eyes: Cory is the president's scapegoat, our nation's scapegoat. My friend zipped back a text, "Don't tell Cory!" This is right. As soon as the truth be told, the invisible scapegoat would lose its unifying power. If the prophetic public theologian spoke truth to power, the ability of the scapegoat to unify the body politic would immediately evaporate. Should the prophet speak, or hold that tongue?

Finally, note again the difference between the visible and the invisible scapegoat. The visible scapegoat is an enemy—Saddham Hussein, Osama bin Ladin, Iraq, Afghanistan—we semi-consciously sacrifice in order to create or sustain our community. The invisible scapegoat is sacrificed—either by the visible scapegoat or by our own bureaucracy—and, in this sacrifice, provides a sacred center around which our community feels validated. The invisible scapegoat blinds while

it binds; most importantly, it binds. Both types of scapegoat serve the same function, namely, to create national solidarity through public self-justification. Both the visible and invisible scapegoats justify the violence of religious nationalism.

## 6 | JESUS CHRIST: THE FINAL SCAPEGOAT

Because we are attempting to make transparent a mechanism that lies hidden before our eyes, we need to look and look again at what is going on. What we see is that funeral orations are the most effective moments for uniting the nation around a secular sacred. The funeral oration, as Pericles discovered 2,400 years ago in Athens, filled the hearts of the *hoi polloi* with warmth. Pious rhetoric generates a spirit of collective unity that shuts off criticism, judgment, and the call for repentance. A soldier's sacrifice saves us from tyranny. A soldier's heroic dedication grants us freedom. A soldier's funeral or memorial or even march in an Independence Day parade lays the foundation for an American spirituality apart from any religious institutions. The American soldier is the scapegoat for American unity, just as the generic soldier has served as the scapegoat for nation after nation throughout civil history.

Although it might sound like an exaggeration, we could think of the entire New Testament as a funeral eulogy for Jesus of Nazareth. But this eulogy differs greatly from those delivered by Pericles or modern American heads of state. Jesus differs from the soldier in that he did not engage in national defense, or even self-defense, for that matter. He did not elect to perpetuate the cycle of violence that creates or sustains communal unity. Rather, the New Testament remembers his death as standing in judgment against those who would sacrifice a scapegoat. The Bible stands against declaring the scapegoat sacred, against demanding peoplehood or nationhood or patriotism in his name. The Bible tries to remove the blindfold that blinds as it binds.

### 6.1 | The gospel tells us who we are

We have dubbed the divine law in its second use the prophet's searchlight. This light shines like a laser when enhanced by the gospel. Philip Melancthon combines law and gospel into a dialectic. "The law shows sin, the gospel grace. The law indicates disease, the gospel points out the remedy."<sup>38</sup> Yes, but the gospel is also revelatory. The gospel too tells us who we are: namely, sinners welcomed by God's grace.

Martin Luther distinguishes law from gospel. "The law commands and demands of us what we are to do ... The gospel, however, does not preach what we are to do or to avoid. It demands nothing of us, but instead reverses the matter, does the opposite, and says, 'This is what God has done for you.'"<sup>39</sup>

Yet, according to Article V of the Formula of Concord, the gospel, like the law, also uncovers something otherwise hidden about human nature. “The gospel is, strictly speaking the kind of teaching that reveals what the human being, who has not kept the law and has been condemned by it, should believe: that Christ has atoned and paid for all sins and apart from any human merit has obtained and won for people the forgiveness of sins . . . and eternal life.”<sup>40</sup>

In sum, the law in its second use reveals to us that we are sinners. The gospel, in dialectical response, reveals to us that before God we are justified because of Christ's atoning accomplishment. The gospel should come to us as good news. The gospel is “nothing else than a proclamation of comfort and a joyous message which does not rebuke nor terrify but comforts consciences against the terror of the law, directs them solely to Christ's merit, and lifts them up again through the delightful proclamation of the grace and favor of God, won through Christ's merit.”<sup>41</sup>

Our inclination and temptation to legalize the gospel struck fear into the authors of Article V of the Solid Declaration: “we must diligently preserve this distinction [between law and gospel], so as not to mix these two teachings together and make the gospel into a law. For this obscures the merit of Christ and robs troubled consciences of the comfort that they otherwise have in the holy gospel.”<sup>42</sup> The value of the gospel as gospel and not law is that our consciences become calmed, tranquil. Honest consciences no longer frighten us with their judgments. If we avoid twisting the gospel into a new law, we can relax in the comfort and joy afforded by the gospel. If we refuse to accept the comfort and joy offered by the gospel, we are capable of turning even the gospel message into a new law that will either condemn and terrify or tempt us to lie and scapegoat. Having affirmed the distinction between law and gospel, we might still acknowledge that the gospel, like the law, has the power to reveal.

## 6.2 | What is the gospel again?

What is the gospel again? In brief, the gospel is the story of Jesus told with its significance.<sup>43</sup> Part of the gospel's significance is that it functions like the law, namely, to reveal to us who we are and how we are ordinarily gripped by Satan rather than by God. “Jesus is the unjustifiably sacrificed *lamb of God*,” writes scapegoat theorist René Girard; “the biblical tradition punctures a universal delusion and reveals a truth never revealed before, the innocence not only of Jesus but of all similar victims” of scapegoating.<sup>44</sup> Or, elsewhere Girard says, “Christ, the son of God is the ultimate scapegoat—precisely because he is the son of God, and since he is innocent, he exposes all the myths of scapegoating and shows that the victims were innocent and the communities guilty.”<sup>45</sup> We in the community are guilty when forming community around the one sacrificed.

Here is a Lutheran version of what Girard is saying: “In the incarnation of his Son—in his Cross and suffering—God holds up a mirror in front of us.”<sup>46</sup> In this mirror we see ourselves as crucifiers, as sinners yet welcomed by the God of grace.

To repeat: the gospel is the story of Jesus told with its significance. And the significance for you and me is that we are justified by God's grace. If it is God who justifies us, then our own self-justifications are invalidated. None of our self-justifications count in our relationship with God. The only thing that counts is God's disposition of grace and the gift of forgiveness. As soon as we realize the truth of the gospel, then we can let our lies go. We no longer need them. We no longer need to be justified by our own claims. We no longer need to draw a line between good and evil and place ourselves on the good side. We can freely step over onto the evil side of the line and enjoy our fellowship with God, who is already there. We can join those whom we would have scapegoated, both our out-group enemies and our soldier friends.

What is key for our discussion here is that the death of Jesus reported in the gospel desacralizes the scapegoat. “Christ became a scapegoat in order to desacralize those who came before him and to prevent those who come after him from being sacralized,” observes Girard.<sup>47</sup> The New Testament memory of Jesus dismantles any community oriented around the sacred; and it does so by exposing the ugly truth regarding how this or any community is established or sustained. The death of Jesus makes visible what had been invisible. The death of Jesus shocks us with truth, with revelatory truth. One of the clear messages of the New Testament that becomes habitually garbled, muddied, and twisted in modern civic and moral rhetoric is this: *No more scapegoats!*<sup>48</sup>

## 7 | THE SECOND USE OF THE LAW AGAIN: THE PROPHET'S SEARCHLIGHT

To scapegoat is to sin. Indirectly, to scapegoat is to reject the New Testament message that, after Jesus Christ, no more scapegoats!

“Scapegoating is one of the deepest structures of human sin, built into our religion and politics,” observes S. Mark Heim. “It is demonic because it is endlessly flexible in its choice of victims and because it can truly deliver the good that it advertises. Satan can cast out Satan, and is the more powerful for it.”<sup>49</sup> We victimize others in the name of the good. Because we believe we are doing good, the evil we do becomes invisible to us. Our virtues reap as much violence as our vices.

So we ask: should we expose the lie? Should we denounce the social lie like the prophets of ancient Israel denounced injustice? If today's public theologian elects to perform this

prophetic task, he or she will likely employ the divine law in its second use.<sup>50</sup>

The second use of the law is the same law we find in the first and third uses. But it serves a distinctive function. In its second use, the divine standard of justice judges us; it reveals that we have missed the mark. In its second use, the law exposes our injustice. Like a mirror, the law of God reveals to us our blemishes, the scars we cannot hide. Like a mirror, the theological use of the law threatens—prophetically threatens—political forms of self-justification and scapegoating, both visible and invisible scapegoating.

The revelation of what God does in Christ belongs to the gospel; but, in effect, the gospel aids the second use of the law—the gospel itself may even function as the law—in performing its revelatory task. The law in its second use tells us who we are. So also, what we see in Christ tells us who we are.

Who are we, really? We are the kind of creature who draws a line between good and evil; and we place ourselves on the good side of the line. God, in contrast, places both divine feet on the evil side of the line. “For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin” (2 Cor 5:21). When we look across the line and see Jesus on the sin side, bleeding and suffering on the cross, we must ask: why am I here while the Son of God is over there?

## 8 | SHOULD AMERICAN RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM BE OUTED?

The second use of the divine law within the context of the public theologian's prophetic responsibility to render judgment against injustice leads to this challenge: should American religious nationalism, replete with double scapegoating, be made transparent? Should the prophet stand up and denounce the lies told to justify violence against enemies and against America's youthful soldiers? Should today's political prophet in the form of the public theologian de-mythologize America's two foundings and expose the sham of religious nationalism?

On the one hand, yes. Strongly committed Jews and Christians know full well that no nation, America included, is destined by God for everlasting life. The justice found in God's kingdom stands in daily judgment against every nation's failure to meet the divine standard. No one can live in truth before God while investing in nationalistic delusion or self-justifying deceit let alone unleashed violence.

On the other hand, no. What? Why might a public theologian go easy on America when judgment is called for? The answer is subtle. The editors of the *Christian Century* observe rightly the subtlety at work here. “Theologians have long been wary or dismissive of civil religion ... Yet, because civil religion claims a transcendent purpose for the nation, it has also offered a basis for judging the nation's failures and

spurring it to reform.”<sup>51</sup> In the covenantal phase of America's twice-founded myth of origin, the call for prophetic judgment is built right in. The loss of this myth could mean the loss of the nation's commitment to justice.

Like exorcising a demon, the risk is that more demons than we can handle might invade and take over. Where are the demons lurking? In radical secularism?<sup>52</sup>

In addition to the two sources of America's founding myth, covenant and blood, there is a third tradition, *radical secularism*. In addition to covenant and blood, American history has “witnessed the crystallization of a full-blown version of radical secularism combined with libertarianism, social Darwinism, scientism, and agnosticism in varying measures. The emergence of this third tradition would fundamentally and lastingly transform the dynamics of American politics, setting the stage for the political polarization and culture wars of the present era.”<sup>53</sup> If radical secularism becomes the dominant religious substance of American culture, prophetic judgment against injustice would lose its receptivity.<sup>54</sup>

To demythologize the first of America's two foundings would risk sacrificing what is true in the substance of this culture. “To put it bluntly” avers Bellah, “religion is true.”<sup>55</sup> Of special value is the truth of divine judgment embedded in the covenantal component of the founding myth.

American civil religion, especially when based on a covenant with God, is better than most alternatives. African missions scholar Lamin Sanneh offers a most insightful perspective:

*American innocence is not about being free from sin, guilt, or moral wrong ... America's peculiar notion of innocence is that it is something yet to be realized and achieved after a process of trial and refinement made necessary by Old World corruption. American innocence is not determined by the historical record; it is something mortgaged to the future and is a function of the American character ... What makes the myth of American innocence so unique and resilient is that if Americans are forced to look at something ugly in themselves, they are more likely than any other people to do something about it because of their faith that the best is yet to be.*<sup>56</sup>

Based upon the Puritan covenant, America's justification depends on its mortgage with God's future kingdom of justice.

Here is the point that should cause trembling: within the covenant dimension of America's myth we find a healthy commitment to a transcendent standard of justice. Does the prophetic public theologian want to risk giving this up? No strictly secular national self-understanding would have even a glimmer of hope for establishing and maintaining national unity based on a commitment to justice. Gorski, for one, does

not want to surrender the covenant to radical secularism. "At the core of prophetic religion, then, is an ethic of social justice and human equality that requires that we be willing to abridge ourselves for the sake of others."<sup>57</sup>

## 9 | CONCLUDING QUANDARY

The conscientious public theologian ready to embrace his or her prophetic responsibility should pause to consider the consequences. The lies that cover over the justification of violence within America's religious nationalism are deeply layered, fervently believed, and resistant to criticism, let alone judgment. In addition, the military industrial complex reaps gargantuan profits. Profiteers will fight as viciously as deceitfully against threats to their oligarchy. Kelly Denton-Borhaug dubs this layer of lies the *U.S. war-culture*. "I define war-culture as the normalized interpenetration of the institutions, ethos and practices of war with ever-increasing facets of daily human life, economy, institutions and imagination in the United States."<sup>58</sup> Any prophetic voice shining a searchlight on the scapegoating that undergirds the war-culture is likely to be snuffed out immediately.

Yet, today's prophet hears the faint voice of God's justice ringing in his or her ears. The voice reminds us of a transcendent model of justice we know as divine law, codified in Moses' Ten Commandments and symbolized in Jesus' promise of the imminent Kingdom of God. The public theologian must ask: without rendering judgment against a nation with a culture built on layers of lies, how will God's people come to understand themselves clearly? How will the truth be able to set us truly free? How should law and gospel be proclaimed together in the public square?

Even though Christians are mandated by divine law to speak truth to power, before leaping, we must pause. Robert Benne, a most thoughtful political theologian, pauses. He worries about an America without its civil religion. "The consequences of the loss of the civil religion would be severe. Without the minimal consensus provided by the civil religion, the nation may lose a sense of identity and mission."<sup>59</sup>

So, the public theologian confronts a dilemma. Either keep quiet for the sake of civic unity at the cost of those victimized by scapegoating; or by relying on the covenant pronounce divine judgment against the sin of scapegoating and risk sundering national unity.

Is it possible for the Christian public theologian to build upon the existing covenant? To appeal to the already present tradition of self-judgment by Americans of the body politic to which they are members? Can a prophetic public theologian make the injustices of scapegoating transparent by invoking the covenant myth? What would happen? One cannot safely predict.

How might Luther's admonition to "sin boldly!" apply?

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Trump CIA speech transcript (2017, Jan. 23). *CBS News*. Online at <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/trump-cia-speech-transcript/> (accessed Dec. 21, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> In this article I examine the connection between religious nationalism and international violence. Due to the advent of cyber warfare, these dynamics may change soon. "A generation after the end of the Cold War, we find ourselves today in a Code War," asserts John Carlin. Internet attacks and defense have blurred the lines between peace and war, between private and public, between the nation-state and the individual. "It is a complicated, multidimensional, international period of tension that requires resources and attention across government and the private sector." See Carlin, J. P. (2018). *Dawn of the code war* (p. 44). New York: Public Affairs.

<sup>3</sup> *Human nature* in Christian theology can refer either to the goodness of God's intended creation or to the post-lapsarian human condition. Here I use the term in the latter sense.

<sup>4</sup> We are engaged here in an exercise in Christian Realism. *Christian Realism*, based on a theology of the cross, is the "position [that] can be characterized by its profound recognition of the sinfulness of man, its refusal to make any nation, class, or ideology into a religious ultimate, its acceptance of the Kingdom of God as exercising a continuous pressure for working toward a better society, and its limited expectation of perfection from either individuals or societies. Such a position is deeply ingrained in the American tradition. The drafters of our Constitution and our greatest statesmen have represented versions of it. It is consonant with the best of what I have called the American civil religion. It allows the Christian in politics to operate within the American system hopefully, creatively, critically, and without illusion." See Bellah, R. (1970, Jan.). Christian realism. *Theology Today* 26(4), 367-370, here 367.

<sup>5</sup> This article develops notions earlier presented in Peters, T. (2014, Nov. 22). The body politic and revelatory terror. Paper for the Martin Luther and Global Lutheran Traditions Group, at the American Academy of Religion, San Diego CA. See also Peters, T. (2015). *Sin boldly! Justifying faith for fragile and broken souls*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press. And Peters, T. (2016, Jan.). Justice, justification, and self-justification. *Theology Today* 72(4), 359-378.

<sup>6</sup> Peters, T. (2018). Public theology: Its pastoral, apologetic, scientific, political, and prophetic tasks. *International Journal of Public Theology* 12(2), 153-177. Online at <https://brill.com/abstract/journals/ijpt/12/1/ijpt.12.issue-1.xml> (accessed Dec. 21, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Is religion, apart from nationalism, the primary source of human violence? Some think so. "Many people assume that religion is the primary cause of violence. Adherents of this presupposition can be divided into two groups. While one group is composed of those who believe that religion inherently contributes to violence because of its exclusive worldview, the other group is comprised of those who believe that religion is exploited by opportunists who seek to legitimate their violent endeavors." See Rodriguez, W. (2018). Is religion the cause of violence. *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 13(7). Online at <https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/18> (accessed Dec. 21, 2018). The problem with asserting that religion is the primary cause of violence is that a specific definition of *religion* is missing. If religion is understood as the depth or substance of culture, then *religious nationalism* becomes a virtual tautology. Nationalism is by structure already religious, and the religion in question is already nationalistic.

- <sup>8</sup> “The nation competes with the church on the same religious grounds.” See Cavanaugh, W. T. (2011). *Migrations of the holy: God, state, and the political meaning of the church* (p. 117). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans.
- <sup>9</sup> “Culture is the form of religion, and religion is the substance of culture.” See Tillich, P. (1951-1963). *Systematic theology* (3 Vols, here vol. 3, p. 158). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- <sup>10</sup> Gorski, P. (2017). *American covenant: A history of civil religion from the Puritans to the present* (p. 37). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- <sup>11</sup> Bellah, R. N. (1975). *The broken covenant: American civil religion in time of trial* (p. 3). New York: Seabury. Lutheran theologians have not been friendly to American civil religion. “To those of the Wisconsin or Missouri Synods, any practice of the civil religion is automatically unionistic or syncretistic because it gets the Lutheran Christian involved in a doctrinally heterodox religion. To more mainstream Lutherans, the civil religion violates the demand for secularity in the left hand, or earthly, kingdom.” See Benne, R. (2005). American civil religion: Destructive? Useless? Or Beneficial? *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 5(4). Online at [https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/684?\\_ga=2.90257875.895054567.1539560906-1452451637.1492101115](https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/684?_ga=2.90257875.895054567.1539560906-1452451637.1492101115) (accessed Oct. 14, 2018). Benne offers his own judicious position. “If then, the civil religion is irrepressible and can be used for great and beneficial effect, why should we turn our backs on it and let it decline into religious nationalism? It seems far wiser to participate in it and elevate it as much as we can. This will mean striking notes—divine judgment and guidance—that are often neglected by those who want only to use it for national self-congratulation.”
- <sup>12</sup> Winthrop, J. (2004). Christian charity, a model hereof. In D. D. Hall (Ed.), *Puritans in the new world: A critical anthology* (pp. 165-170). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. See also Hughes, R. T. (2003). *Myths America Lives by* (pp. 19-44). Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press; cited by Gorski (2017), 41.
- <sup>13</sup> Winthrop (2004).
- <sup>14</sup> Gorski (2017), 35, 34.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.
- <sup>17</sup> What Lutherans refer to as the divine law in its second use, John Calvin calls the first use. “The first part is this, while it [the Law both as 10 Commandments and Natural Law] shows God’s righteousness, that is, the righteousness alone acceptable to God, it warns, informs, convicts, and lastly condemns every man of his own unrighteousness. For man, blinded and drunk with self-love, must be compelled to know, and to confess his own feebleness and impurity.” See Calvin, J. (1960). *Institutes of the Christian religion*. In J. T. McNeill (Ed.), *Library of Christian classics* (vol. 1, p. 354 and vol. 2, pp. vii, 6). Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press. Hereafter cited as *Institutes*.
- <sup>18</sup> “The third use, according to Calvin, ‘has respect to believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already flourishes and reigns’ [See *Institutes*, II.7.12]. Those believers will have a double benefit of the law: on the one hand it is admonition and motivation for their obedience, which for the old Adam is still necessary to have; on the other hand the law is ‘the best instrument for enabling them daily to learn with greater truth and certainty what that will of the Lord is which they aspire to follow, and to confirm them in this knowledge’ [*Institutes* II.7.12]. The *tertius legis* then really is directed to the *renatus*, the born again, and not to the old Adam, to the *iustus* and not to the *peccator* in order for him to keep growing in insight and the practice of God’s will. In the Reformed tradition this is called ‘sanctification.’” See Aus der Au, C. (2015). Being Christian in the world: The *tertius usus legis* as the starting point for a reformed ethic. *Studies in Christian Ethics* 28(2), 132-141, here 134.
- <sup>19</sup> Westhelle, V. (2010). *The church event* (pp. 70-71). Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 71. “Lutheran theology ... *distinguishes* between faith and politics, but does not *separate* them from each other, indeed, they belong together.” See also Jackelén, A. (2018). Introduction: The Reformation and our common responsibility for the world today. In Baldwin, J. (Ed.), *Navigating post-truth and alternative facts: Religion and science as political theology* (pp. xix-xxx, here at xxii). Lanham: Lexington Books. Italics are Jackelén’s.
- <sup>21</sup> Niebuhr, R. (1941). *The nature and destiny of man*, Gifford Lectures (2 Vols., here vol. 2, p. 29). New York: Scribners.
- <sup>22</sup> Kelly Denton-Borhaug would shout a resounding “yes” to this question. “Lutherans have a prophetic role to play, grounded in their religious heritage, vision and understanding, and in common cause with other citizens of diverse backgrounds, to name and denounce the ethical deformations and death-dealing propensities of the nation.” See Denton-Borhaug, K. (2018). U.S. war-culture: The post 9/11 unlawful alien combatant and peace in God’s world. In M. A. Failinger and R. W. Duty (Eds.), *Lutheran theology and secular law: The work of the modern state* (pp. 101-114, here 109). London: Routledge.
- <sup>23</sup> Le Miere, J. (2018, Nov. 1). Fox News guest claims migrant caravan carries leprosy, will infect our people, offers no evidence. *Newsweek*. Online at <https://www.newsweek.com/fox-news-migrant-caravan-leprosy-1192605> (accessed Nov. 1, 2018).
- <sup>24</sup> I refer to “the illusion of moral righteousness” as self-justification. “Deep down all of us see ourselves as fundamentally decent, honest, righteous, and virtuous human beings. Even perpetrators of violence are almost always convinced they do the right thing.” See Bourdry, M. (2018). The myth of senseless violence and the problem of terrorism. In D. Boonin (Ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of philosophy and public policy* (pp. 147-160, here 149). New York: Macmillan, Palgrave.
- <sup>25</sup> Guo, W., Gleditsch, K., and Wilson, A. (2018, Oct. 18). Retool AI to forecast and limit wars. *Nature* 562(7727), 331-333, at 331.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.
- <sup>27</sup> Cone, J. H. (2011). *The cross and the lynching tree* (p. 31). Maryknoll NY: Orbis.
- <sup>28</sup> Cited by Klaiber, W. (2007-2014). Justification: The term. In H. D. Betz, D. S. Browning, B. Janowski, and E. Jüngel (Eds.), *Religion past and present* (14 Vols., here vol. 7, p. 116). Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- <sup>29</sup> Gorski (2017), 91.
- <sup>30</sup> “Ritual [in civic liturgy] enacts our debt to the past, which we cannot pay via ritual but only via fresh sacrifice. In contrast, the Christian liturgy is not merely cyclical but points forward to the eschatological consummation of history in which violence and division are overcome.” Cavanaugh (2011), 121.
- <sup>31</sup> The White House (2011, May 3). Remarks by the president at a Memorial Day service. Online at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/30/remarks-president-memorial-day-service> (accessed Dec. 21, 2018).
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

- <sup>33</sup> Jürgen Moltmann (2006). The cross as military symbol for sacrifice. In M. Trelstad (Ed.), *Cross examinations: Readings on the meaning of the cross today* (p. 261). Minneapolis: Augsburg.
- <sup>34</sup> Obama, B. (2006, May 18). Honoring our commitment to veterans. Transcript online at <http://obamaspeeches.com/068-Honoring-Our-Commitment-to-Veterans-Obama-Speech.htm> (accessed Dec. 21, 2018).
- <sup>35</sup> This set of connections, according to Kelly Denton-Borhaug, should be dubbed the American *war-culture*. The public theologian as prophet should render judgment. "Speaking truth to our war culture will require a structural analysis of just how the corporate structures of weaponization/militarization, political structures, institutions of surveillance and the military, and vast reaches of supposedly civilian culture (including religion) are all intertwined in the ethos of war and militarism in the United States, promoting concealment of the reality of our war culture from alert awareness." See Denton-Borhaug (2018), 109.
- <sup>36</sup> As of this writing in late 2018, corruption and class repression is at the highest level I have seen in my lifetime. It is my fervent prayer that the nation does not seek a new unity at the price of a new scapegoat. "American democracy is suffering from a severe case of oligarchy, the principal symptom of which is corruption. More and more, the many are being dominated by the arbitrary power of the few, who rail against the state while quietly using it to protect their own interests." See Gorski, P. (2017, March 1). Becoming America. *The Christian Century* 134(5), 28-31, here 30.
- <sup>37</sup> Obama, B. (2014). State of the union. Transcript online at <http://www.mediaite.com/tv/president-obamas-2014-state-of-the-union-address-full-transcript/> (accessed Dec. 21, 2018).
- <sup>38</sup> Melancthon, P. (1969). Loci communes. In McNeill, *Library of Christian classics* (vol. 19, p. 71). When interpreting Paul on law in Romans 8:2, John Milbank contends that "St. Paul had declared that law in general—by which meant *all* ethical and political codes, cannot save us, because it cannot transform our bad desires and even collides with them." See Milbank, J. (2013). *Beyond secular order* (p. 118). Oxford, UK: Wiley Blackwell. Milbank's italics.
- <sup>39</sup> Martin Luther, M. (2015). How Christians should regard Moses. In H. J. Hillerbrand, K. I. Stjerna, T. J. Wengert (Eds.) (B. Schramm, Trans.), *The annotated Luther* (5 Vols., here vol. 2, pp. 127-152, at pp. 133-134). Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- <sup>40</sup> Kolb, R. and Wengert, T. J. (Eds.) (2000). *The book of concord* (p. 500). Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 501.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 581.
- <sup>43</sup> "The gospel is the story of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became flesh and was crucified for our trespass, raised for our justification (Rom. 4:25), and established as Lord of a new realm whenever this is preached for the ungodly. The proper function of the gospel is to forgive sins in the form of a promise that functions differently than a command." See Paulson, S. D. (2017). Law and gospel. In T. J. Wengert (Ed.), *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran tradition* (pp. 414-418, here 415). Grand Rapids: Baker Academic. When I say the gospel functions like law, I do not intend to ascribe command to it. Rather, the gospel story functions as revelatory of who we are as crucifiers.
- <sup>44</sup> Girard, R. (2001). *I see Satan fall like lightning* (p. 1). Maryknoll, NY: Orbis.
- <sup>45</sup> McDonald, B. (2003). Violence and the lamb slain: An interview with René Girard. *Touchstone: A journal of mere Christianity*. Online at <http://www.touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=16-10-040-i> (accessed Dec. 21, 2018).
- <sup>46</sup> Iwand, H. J. (2007, Spring). The righteousness of faith according to Luther. *Lutheran Quarterly* 21(1), 41.
- <sup>47</sup> Girard, R. (2014). *The one by whom scandal comes* (p. 44) (M.B. DeBevoise, Trans.). East Lansing MI: Michigan State University Press. I have benefitted significantly from the analysis of the scapegoat in the insightful scholarship of Girard. However, Girard does not distinguish as I do between the visible and invisible scapegoats. His analysis shows masterfully how the social lie binds and blinds due to the invisible scapegoat; but he does not sufficiently show the connection with the visible enemy and the cursing which accompany national self-justification.
- <sup>48</sup> See Peters, T. (1992, Summer). Atonement and the final scapegoat. *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 19(2), 151-181. See also Peters, T. (2018). Religious sacrifice, social scapegoating, and self-justification. In W. Palaver and R. Schenk (Eds.), *Mimetic theory and world religions* (pp. 367-384). East Lansing MI: Michigan State University Press.
- <sup>49</sup> Heim, S. M. (2006). Saved by what shouldn't happen: The anti-sacrificial meaning of the cross. In Trelstad, M. (Ed.), *Cross Examinations* (p. 217).
- <sup>50</sup> The Law-Gospel method I recommend here is distinctively Lutheran, to be sure. Yet, in the public square, the prophetic public theologian should enlist confreres to the extent possible from other religious and even non-religious constituencies. "To retain a true Lutheran Theology of the Cross in this time and place in North America, we must adhere to a public proclamation that promotes our *awareness of, encounter with, and sensitivity to* other religious communities that are often under-represented or victimized by a dominant culture and other Theologies of Glory in a climate of racism, xenophobia, and Islamophobia." See Grafton, D. D. (2018). Are we really a public church? Ministry in a multi-faith North America. *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 18(3). Online at <https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/1234> (accessed Oct. 14, 2018).
- <sup>51</sup> Editors (2017, March 1). Requiem for civil religion. *The Christian Century* 134(5), 7.
- <sup>52</sup> Within the radical secular camp, enough venomous hatred of religion indicates the likelihood of a faction within a secular America that could eventually scapegoat religion as the nation's enemy. When preparing for war, recall, we curse the enemy by describing it as evil. Religion is now being cursed in some secular quarters. "The Bible contains instructions for genocide, rape, and the destruction of families, and even the Ten Commandments, read in context, prohibit murder, lying, and theft only within the tribe, not against outsiders. Religions have given us stoning, witch-burnings, crusades, inquisitions, jihads, fatwas, suicide bombers, abortion-clinic gunmen, and mothers who drown their sons so they can be happily reunited in heaven. As Blaise Pascal wrote, 'Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.'" Pinker, S (1999). Whence religious belief? *Skeptical Inquirer* 23(4), 53-54, here 54. Religion must be decimated! That's the message here. Anti-religious ideology could justify its own form of nationalist violence.
- <sup>53</sup> Gorski (2017), 84. Not every Lutheran will embrace a wholesale rejection of secularism. In fact, according to some interpreters of

Luther, the secularization of law by the state enhances the liberty of the inner conscience to relate freely to God. "Law therefore has to be secular in the sense that it orders human interactions and the forms of human existence in a way that leaves the inner man subject solely to God's regime ... 'secularization' does not mean the transformation of religious into worldly power, but an exercise of worldly power that lets God rule." See Heuser, S. (2018). The contribution of law to the secularization of politics: impulse from Luther's doctrine of the two regimes. In M. A. Failing and R. W. Duty (Eds.), *Lutheran theology and secular law* (pp. 3-14, here 8).

<sup>54</sup> "America is not a Christian nation ... A million-plus Hindus live in the United States ... conceptually, at least, we are slowly becoming more like Hindus and less like traditional Christians in the ways we think about God, our selves, each other, and eternity ... A Hindu believes there are many paths to God. Jesus is one way, the Qur'an is another, yoga practice is a third. None is better than any other; all are equal ... 65 percent of us believe that many religions can lead to eternal life." See Miller, L (2009). We are all Hindus Now. *Newsweek*, August 24 and 31, 2009, p. 70. Certainly America is not a *Christian* nation when measured by current statistics of religious affiliation. When interpreting the first founding myth, however, we acknowledge that "The Puritans imagined it as a city upon a hill knit together by Christian charity." Gorski (2017), 223.

<sup>55</sup> Bellah, R. (1976). *Beyond belief: Essays on religion in a post-traditional world* (p. 253). New York: Harper. "Religious people of a conservative bent have come to believe that their country is being taken away from them by a secular elite, and they are fighting back politically. And they are employing themes of civil religion to make their cases. But liberals in an earlier day used those themes to make

the case for civil rights, universal suffrage, the war on poverty, and many other programs. Maybe they can reclaim some of those themes in the future if they haven't already made up their minds against religion in public." See Benne, R. (2005). Response to the respondents to my civil religion argument. *Journal of Lutheran Ethics* 5 (5). Online at [https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/675?\\_ga=2.245461581.895054567.1539560906-1452451637.1492101115](https://www.elca.org/JLE/Articles/675?_ga=2.245461581.895054567.1539560906-1452451637.1492101115) (accessed Oct. 14, 2018).

<sup>56</sup> Sanneh, L. (2009, June). The return of religion. *The Cresset* 72(5), 20.

<sup>57</sup> Gorski (2017), 224.

<sup>58</sup> Denton-Borhaug, K. (2011). *U.S. war-culture, sacrifice and salvation* (p. 8). London and New York: Routledge.

<sup>59</sup> Benne (2005).

## AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

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