

After the tumultuous '60's a revitalized America means rejecting "return to normalcy"

Going Home Again: America After Vietnam

Richard John Neuhaus

The "After Vietnam" in the title says something about the American mood, not about the military realities of America's war in Indochina. This reminder is unfortunately necessary, for too many of us seem able to forget the brutal air war in which our country has dropped more than six and a half million tons of bombs (more than three times the bomb tonnage dropped on Europe, Africa and Asia in all of World War II) on a region about the size of Texas. There is a fearful *déjà vu* about accepting an invitation to speak to "American conscience and consciousness after Vietnam," for the first time I spoke to the "post-Vietnam" situation was in 1968, and one cannot help wondering if in 1976 this present statement will seem as naively sanguine as does that of 1968. Nonetheless, and if for no other reason than to maintain our sanity, it is inevitable that we reach beyond the present horror and try to anticipate the shape of American conscience and consciousness after these years of madness.

As is the wont of people too involved in the written word, I begin by referring to what others have written; not because their analyses are so compellingly convincing but because the making of books establishes points of reference that endure beyond the haze of cocktail conversations and seminars (of which the Preacher of Ecclesiastes would no doubt say today, "there is no end"). Our texts are several very recent publications: Lowell D. Streiker and Gerald Strober, *Religion and the New Majority* (Association Press, 1972); Dean Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (Harper and Row, 1972); Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*

(Macmillan, 1972); and, finally, the Ur-text of all the above (although not always acknowledged as such), Richard M. Scammon and Ben J. Wattenberg, *The Real Majority* (Coward, 1970).

These books have in common an effort to make virtue of necessity. Increasing numbers of Americans who consider themselves liberal or radical have come to believe that somehow the struggles of the 1960's for change and justice didn't "work." The authors, each in a different way, give voice to a widespread desire to go home again, and each offers an idea of where that home might be found. Going home, settling down, calling off the revolution—these are ingredients in American consciousness "after Vietnam."

In their version of "return to normalcy," Streiker and Strober affirm Billy Graham as the man who can "catch the falling flag" and serve as the conscience for an essentially religious America in the years ahead. Dean Kelley has consulted the charts and computers and concluded that the market research favors the Southern Baptists, Missouri Lutherans, Mormons and other "conservatives." The sharp peddler of pieties will, according to Kelley, abandon the social-change field and return to the real business of religion which is religion (all of which, he admits, leaves him in an awkward position as a social ministry bureaucrat of the National Council of Churches). Novak would have us kick the habit of searching for rationality and universals—a search imposed upon "us" by the WASP imperialists—and return to thinking with the blood of our Italian, Greek, Hungarian, Slavic or whatever cultural-genetic heritage. And, of course, we are all familiar with Scammon and Wattenberg's housewife in a Dayton suburb—married to a machinist and possessing very rigid views on what they call "the social issue" (drugs, crime, busing, hippies, etc.)—who is the archetype of the Real Majority, whose hearts and minds (or at least hearts) must be won by anyone in search of a mass market, political, religious or other. (Never mind that a

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Cleveland newspaper discovered the woman who fitted perfectly the prescription; her one son was a long-haired conscientious objector and she supported McCarthy in 1968.)

There is no doubt there is abroad in the country a widespread dissatisfaction with things as they are—more than usual, or at least more universally articulated than usual. Whether one describes himself as alienated or as just fed up, he is with that majority of Americans who, according to recent polls, believes all the major institutions of the country are failing, our problems will probably get worse before they get better, and nobody who is offering solutions, from the President on up, can really be trusted. The authors mentioned above all see themselves as addressing this pervasive dissatisfaction. In a way that they possibly do not see, they are also exploiting dissatisfaction.

Each is, almost by definition, an intellectual, yet each assumes a posture of rebellion against “the intellectuals.” (We need not become embroiled in the tedious debate about who is and who is not an intellectual; I have elsewhere offered the descriptive definition, “intellectuals are those who mint and market the metaphors by which a society understands itself.”) The reader of the four books under discussion may readily get the impression that “the intellectual” is a convenient scapegoat. For Novak, “they” are the WASPs, a category that includes everyone who does not consciously celebrate a genetic history stemming from the regions of the Mediterranean or Eastern Europe. For Streiker-Strober-Kelley, “they” are the liberal churchmen, especially if they have a social action bent. For Scammon and Wattenberg, “they” are the radical-liberals who insist on confusing bread-and-butter politics with “the social issue.” Intellectual, then, often comes to mean anyone and everyone who, by word or deed, throws into question the American reality in which the majority of Americans desperately wants to believe. The common theme begins to take shape: During the 1960’s we lost our way, in large part because the intellectuals were misleading us. We will only find our way home again if we defiantly resist the influence of those who presume to be smarter than we.

This is, of course, a perennially popular theme. Be there a man with soul so dead who never to himself has said, “bullshit!” when reading *Commentary*, *New York Review of Books* or even *Worldview*. We all know how parochial, presumptuous, and finally precious is so much of the analysis offered by those who presume to understand. Perhaps all of us (out of the hearing of our colleagues, to be sure) have at least once offered a heartfelt “Right on!” to Agnew’s assaults on the effete snobs. The more respectable response, of course, is to say something about Richard Hofstadter’s analysis of the abiding anti-intellectualism in American life. The less respectable, but I suspect more perceptive, suggestion is that there is an

intellectually sound reason for what Hofstadter termed anti-intellectualism. Intellectuals such as Hofstadter, Daniel Bell and others have argued that anti-intellectualism is rooted in paranoia. They fail to recognize that, as someone remarked, paranoiacs can be persecuted too. And there is a kind of persecution felt by the vast majority in the thinly veiled disdain with which they are viewed by many intellectuals. (On the other hand, one should not push resentment against the intellectuals too far, as though it can explain every social movement endorsed by the scrubbed masses and abhorred by the unwashed élite. An example of pushing this analysis too far is a piece in *The Radical Right* [1964], edited by Daniel Bell, which explains popular enthusiasm for Joseph McCarthy in the ’50’s as the masses’ way of getting back at the intellectuals who have excluded the lesser types from their charmed circle. To which Janet Smith responds, in an article in this issue of *Worldview*: “This analysis may not be paranoid, but it certainly does reflect an excessive self-centeredness on the part of intellectuals.”)

There is, to be sure, a self-serving element in the arguments of those who would lead us home again. Mike Novak was deeply impressed by Kevin Phillips’s case for creating a Republican majority through a shrewd manipulation of ethnic and regional prejudices. Being a good Democrat and erstwhile enthusiast for Muskie as the ethnics’ candidate, Novak wanted to insist that “there is no need to concede the ethnic voter to the conservative movement. . . . The election of 1972 can differ from that of 1968 if the professional elite tries to follow rather than to lead; tries to be inclusive rather than exclusive, tries to hear voices and accents against which for too long it has closed its ears.” He suggests to others his own role as “an intellectual who tries to give voice to their instincts” rather than to lecture them. To which Garry Wills responds in a perhaps unkind review: “So quickly does listening to one’s blood become a matter of sniffing around after loose votes.” Scammon and Wattenberg are even more candid about the political intent of their cultural analysis. Listened to by Nixon and embraced by Humphrey, they insist that he who would win must avoid like poison association with the “social issue” posed by the dissidents of our unruly time. Likewise, Kelley is clearly interested in shoring up what he views as the failing ecclesiastical-enterprise of which he is part.

Streiker and Strober, on the other hand, seem to be serving only their deeply felt conviction that “[Billy] Graham, who could be at home with Dwight Eisenhower of Kansas, Lyndon Johnson of Texas, Richard Nixon of California—is the man for this season, this trying time. For Graham, by combining religious assurance with the basic moderateness of traditional American concepts of morality and action,

has put it all together." If you can believe that the polarities of America's tortured consciousness are represented by Eisenhower, Johnson and Nixon, or that the present conflict is essentially a regional contest between Kansas, Texas and California, then you will no doubt be able to share Streiker and Strober's faith in the messianic mission of Billy Graham.

Some of the currents under discussion here relate very directly to the theme of "populism" which is today much in fashion. Whether espoused by George McGovern or George Wallace, and whether it cultivates the label "new populism" or unashamedly identifies with the populism of eighty years ago, populism is a rebellion of the common man against the intellectuals, of "the people" against every élite that restricts, instructs and strangles the popular impulse for a better society. (Populism, I suspect, has been much maligned by writers such as Hofstadter and Oscar Handlin, who have too often written in precisely that "paranoid style" which they attribute to their more vulgar opponents.) Novak, Wattenberg, Kelley et al. may be understood as representing some sort of populist renaissance, speaking out for that great majority of Americans who have not been greened, to use Charles Reich's term, and who are confident there is nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by a large dose of Americanism, if only Americanism weren't in such short supply.



If these writers are populists, however, their position must be termed perverse populism. Unlike the populism of the late nineteenth century, they urge retreat rather than advance; the message is not that we are moving too slowly but that we are moving too quickly. Theirs is not a struggle for change but for cohesion (even Novak's radical ethnic pluralism is an invitation to restore and indeed to exaggerate the group identities that can only reinforce the former cohesion built on abiding injustices). Their populism is not marked by radical minority movement but by conservative majority nostalgia. Only those who see no difference between Honor America Day, on the one hand, and Tom Watson's and William Jennings Bryan's campaign against the banking and industrial interests, on the other, could believe that this literature and the mood it reflects represent a renascent populism. It may be that most every American feels like a homeless waif, but the genuinely populist way home is not to the bosom of the existing majority but to the adventure of a new community.

By the beginning of the 1970's there was a widespread feeling that things had gotten out of hand, that the country was being fragmented in unpredictable and probably undesirable ways. Things were not falling apart quickly enough to meet the revolutionary scenario that many had fashionably advocated, but, as things really did begin to fall apart, it became apparent how very few were really serious about revolution. The '70's, we began to hear it said, must be the decade of putting things together again. Where were we, the question was asked, before all this started? Where were we before the redemptive nonviolence of the civil rights movement was transformed into the bullying assertion of minority power? Where were we before the "defense of freedom" was mocked by innumerable Mylairs? Where were we before the brightest and best of our young people vomited their countercultural revulsion all over the sacred values, advantages and opportunities of the American Way of Life? The books under discussion here are the forerunners, I suspect, of a new wave of social commentary urging us to *return* home, as though we once had been there, telling us that home is where we were.

In opposition to all this, there is another stream of American consciousness that insists our society is a lively experiment and adventure, that the American home is in a future realization of America's formative vision. There is no doubt that much of the radicalism of the past decade committed a great strategic error, and even a great evil, in rejecting also this stream of American consciousness. That is, not only was the existent America repudiated by its radical critics but, along with it, the symbols that anticipated a future fulfillment of the American experiment. A Chicago-based group of Christian radicals (socialist, anti-imperialist Jesus movement types) publishes a mag-

azine called *The Post-American*. A more historically and strategically keen analysis would suggest the title "The Pre-American." Historically better, because the American experiment is closely tied to the metaphors of covenant and pilgrimage, the metaphors of testing and experiment. Strategically more effective, because no people can be asked to join an adventure if they are deprived of the symbols of continuity and hope, if they are deprived of the myths which identify the community with which they are able to travel with confidence.

Some years ago at St. John's Church in Brooklyn we held one of the first draft card turn-ins. More than five hundred radical young people gathered in a "Service of Conscience and Hope" and more than two hundred draft cards were gathered to be returned to Selective Service. At the end of the service I suggested to the other leaders that we should ask the group to sing "America the Beautiful." They were scandalized, much as though someone were to suggest to Bob Hope and Billy Graham at Honor America Day that the crowd should join in singing the "Internationale." Nonetheless, I went ahead, pointing out that "America the Beautiful" was not a description of the present America we knew but a song of hope for the America which, by actions such as the conscientious resistance of that day, would one day be realized. That night the network TV news carried the lustiest and most heartfelt rendition of "America the Beautiful" I had ever heard. Unfortunately, that alliance of radical hope and American piety was and is all too rare among those who press for change. The belief that our present situation is unworthy of America is, in some radical circles, outvoted by the dismal confidence that there is no evil not endemic to American power.

Already by 1966 among peace activists there was disagreement as to whether the Indochina war was a mistake or a deliberate and essential part of the American imperialist design. More recently that argument has been taken up by Arthur Schlesinger, Noam Chomsky, Daniel Ellsberg and others in the pages of the *New York Review*, Schlesinger arguing for the mistake thesis and Chomsky for the endemic evil. On the stated terms of the debate, one may be inclined to agree more with Schlesinger, although with the reservation that he does not take seriously enough the extent to which such mistakes are built into the present systems of decision-making. Even more seriously, Schlesinger's argument is flawed because he can offer few resources for correction, since he has ruled out of court the so-called ideological resources that are formative to the American social experiment. Schlesinger is in this respect like Scammon and Wattenberg, Novak, Kelley, et al. One analyst returns to majority indifference and ignorance as the rock upon which a new America can be constructed, another returns to the ethnic passions and prejudices

of contrived nostalgia, yet another returns to the revivalist fundamentalism of Billy Graham, and Schlesinger returns to tinkering with the machinery of New Deal liberalism that somehow got out of whack during the rough ride through the 1960's. If these are the only alternatives, the revolutionary negative to the American experiment would win by default. There is yet another alternative, and I believe it is to be discovered in the civil religion of the American symbols of hope. In a sense, we must return in order to reappropriate these symbols, but the return results in a forward movement, for it is the very genius of symbols of hope, no matter how ancient, that they propel us toward the future.

Notions of destiny, whether manifest or hidden, have in times past impelled individuals and societies toward new ventures, sometimes noble, sometimes destructive. This is true perhaps of all peoples, but it is particularly true of the American people. Because of her peculiar immigrant history, American "peoplehood" cannot be taken for granted. In an especially urgent way, Americans are a people on purpose and by purpose. Talk about national purpose has extremely unpleasant overtones for many of us. "National purpose" became a code word of the supposedly pragmatic anti-ideologists of cold war religion and is today a concept appealed to mainly by the most regressive forces in our society, to whom the symbols of patriotism have gravitated by default. It is in resistance to these unhappy developments, and in resistance to those who would lead us backward to home, that we must project a new definition of national purpose capable of enlisting American consciousness and conscience in the continuing trek toward the new community for which this "almost chosen" people, to use Lincoln's happy phrase, was ordained; ordained, if not by God, at least by men prepared to gamble in hope upon divine intentions within history.

We cannot go home again toward some point in the past, probably more imaginary than real. Neither is it useful, *contra* Novak, to pretend that the divisions of the past can be uncritically celebrated, as though the center will hold as long as we pay it no mind. (An irony in Novak's description of the ethnic mentality is that he tends to repudiate what is perhaps the most universally cherished value among ethnics, the value of becoming "American.") I am saying that we *should not* follow the course advocated by Scammon, Novak, Kelley and company. But I am also saying it simply will not work in America. On the obvious level of electoral politics it has not worked. Witness the dismal failure of the Republican's 1970 congressional race strategy, starring Spiro Agnew, in which they followed precisely the prescription offered by Scammon, Wattenberg, Phillips and others. Witness the collapse of the Muskie effort for the presidential nomination, dependent as it was on

the ethnic renaissance and the assumption that the people wanted nothing more than to be reassured that things are basically all right. Witness the similar collapse of the Humphrey strategy, which had appropriated the remnants of the Muskie effort, together with large slices of the anti-Communist fear tactics left over from an earlier Richard Nixon.

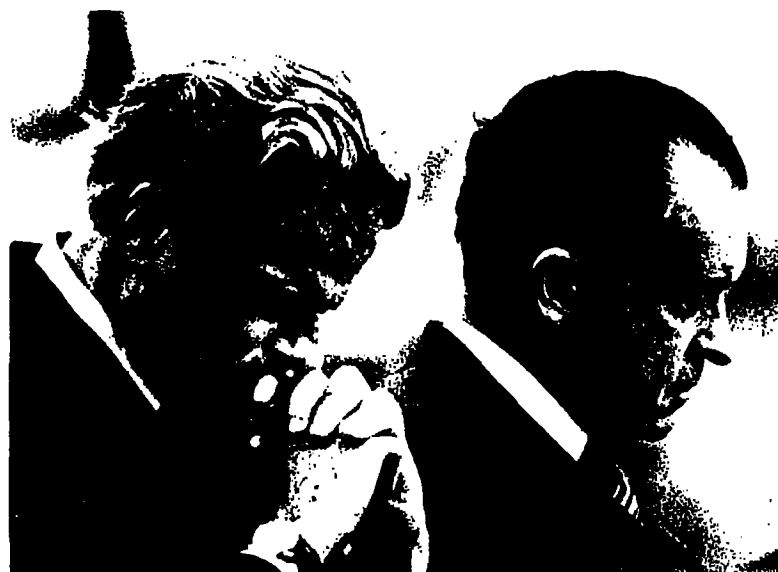
I do not suggest that it may not happen, as it has happened before, that politicians are able to succeed by exploiting the fear that seeks to return to a supposedly more secure past. But, as a general rule, successful politics is the politics of adventure, the politics in harmony with the civil religion that envisions an America of new beginnings, an America both capable and worthy of better than its present state. This is the note struck by both President and Senator Kennedy; put quite simply, "We can do better than this." Similarly, George McGovern's plea, "Come home, America," is a call to resume the pilgrimage toward the fulfillment of America's destiny as "a good and decent land." The "return" he advocates is always to "the task," "the challenge," "the dream" of America's potential, never to a past point of achievement. In this sense, far from representing a radical break, McGovern echoes the almost fundamentalist appeal of the essential American tradition.

As for the church within this larger society, I am impressed by the arguments offered by Kelley and others, that the social activism of the '60's lost the support of much of its church-going constituency. The alarm was earlier and clearly raised by Jeffrey K. Hadden in his *The Gathering Storm in the Churches* (1969). In a recent issue of *The Christian Century* ("The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Radical," April 26, 1972), I spelled out some of the changes in tactics, strategy and goals that we must make if those of us who are committed to the social witness of the churches are to be more effective in the future. But we need not acquiesce to the social indifference of those so-called "conservative" churches that seem more statistically successful. Religious statistics are notoriously unreliable and deserving of our strongest skepticism. Kelley does not cite some small and very "conservative" church bodies of the sect-type that he admires which have not experienced the supposedly strong growth patterns of Southern Baptist, Missouri Lutherans and others. Even as to the growth of conservative bodies, Glock and Stark, in *American Piety* (1968), raise the most serious questions. They suggest that, instead of strong and steady growth, the conservative bodies simply experience more in-and-out action, more comings-and-goings of membership. Most of the goings, they note, are to the more moderate mainline bodies, with very few people moving back from, say, the Episcopal Church to the Southern Baptists.

The accuracy of statistical data aside, the more typical churches have always benefited from the re-

vivalism generated by the sects. This has been true of religious revivals in the past, and I suspect it will be the case with the nationwide "Key 73" evangelistic campaign of next year, to which more than one hundred denominations and agencies have pledged their cooperation. The kind of social activism scored by Kelley and Hadden has never been a major agency of recruitment for church membership, although it was sometimes touted as such. I doubt if many people have joined churches because the church's witness was "relevant" or "with it" with regard to race, war, or urban justice. In the churches, as in the larger society, commitment to social change is a minority vocation. In a very real sense, those so committed live off of the religious resources and organization sustained by people who are church members for different, and usually quite privatized, reasons.

In this respect I am sympathetic to Streiker and Strober's admiration of Billy Graham, although for somewhat different reasons. I am generally pleased when I see the crowds at his rallies coming forward to "accept Jesus Christ as [their] personal savior." Pleased because, in most cases, the decision gives them a framework for their daily life more personally adequate than any of the other frameworks being peddled in our culture; pleased because there are, as a consequence of that decision, more people to whom one can appeal for commitment to change in the name of Christian discipleship; pleased because, even if they don't respond to such an appeal, they are strengthening the network of Christian fellowship in which others can respond. So we can wish Billy Graham, "Key 73" and the evangelism board of the Southern Baptists great success. As friends, we can urge them to be more forceful and articulate about the social imperatives of the Gospel, although we will probably be only modestly successful in that effort. What we must not do, however—and this is the essential disagreement with Kelley's thesis—is conform our understanding of the Christian mission to the dictates of market research. St. Paul said it: "[And his gifts were that some should be] apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints for the work of ministry for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:11-12).



During the 1960's some feared that the totality of the church's mission was being preempted by the devotees of social action and change. And it is true that, if the avant garde of social activism had gained control of organized religious life in the country, they would soon have run out of troops. In fact they never came close to gaining such control; they did provoke enough concern to stimulate the present recruitment campaigns for the old-time religion. Now it may be our turn again to be the anxious ones, as we were during the religious boom of the 1950's, reminding American religion that recruitment was made for mission and not mission for recruitment.

If we are committed to America's lively experiment and to the church's mission for the long-haul, for the duration, we should not and need not cave in before the dismal arguments of the Wattenbergs and Kelleys. I realize that, on the question of the future of civil religion, many people despair of revitalizing the American symbols of hope. Yet it seems to me that we are facing a perhaps unique moment of opportunity. I believe, with Sydney Ahlstrom (*Worldview*, August, 1972) and others, that the severe break in American political piety dates from the depression of the 1930's. That is really not a very long time, only forty years, as one reads the histories of nations. Since that time we have tried to muddle through, shoring up our corporate consciousness with a combination of war-induced solidarity, secular-technological pragmatism, and a strong dose of cold war panic. As a consequence of the tumultuous '60's all these contrived solutions now seem discredited and impotent for the task of restoring American confidence.

The responses to the delegitimation of our past ways are various. In addition to the counsel of those who would take us home again there is a serious and influential flirtation with various forms of Marxism. As influential perhaps are the ideologists of the environmental movement who would have us abandon history in favor of Nature and give up on the political task itself. (This option I have analyzed at length in my book *In Defense of People* [1971].) For various reasons I do not believe these solutions are likely to "take" in the American consciousness, and, if they did, I suspect their consequences would be disastrous both for our domestic life and for the role of American power in the world.

In discussing alternative models for reconstructing the American reality I do not wish to seem more certain than our experience with history would warrant. Nor do I mean to suggest that there are various deposits of metaphors among which we may pick and choose and then quite mechanistically conform American consciousness to those we have selected. For, to be sure, it often seems that Huxley was right when he said that history is just one damn thing after another; we are all acted

upon at least as much as we are actors. Nonetheless, unless we are ready to resign ourselves passively to the fates, we do decide and we do act. Knowing that decision and action are a gamble, I believe the best game in town is the interplay between explicit Christianity and America's civil religion. Both require careful nurture and constant re-examination. They exist in a symbiotic relationship, each supporting and, to some extent, checking the other. Explicit Christianity is not coterminous with American civil religion, nor is the civil religion, left to itself, harmoniously in accord with Christian imperatives.

Of the various themes in the civil religion the single theme or metaphor that seems to me most compelling and promising in our time is that of covenant. It is firmly rooted in the most hallowed statements of American purpose and consciousness. It is emphatically historical in character, keeping present reality in tension with future contingency. It comprehends the experience of judgment, of betrayal and healing, of repentance and forgiveness. After the Indochina horror, the divisiveness of myriad racisms, and the corporate death wish indulged by assassinations, the American people long for judgment. I doubt if the vast majority thinks of itself as totally innocent, as being perfectly all right, if only it were not for "them"—for the blacks and hippies and other troublemakers. No, there is, I believe, a pervasive feeling of unworthiness, of having fallen short of a noble calling, of being in need of judgment. But most Americans will, quite understandably, not accept the word of judgment from those who seem to be bent on their destruction; and among the tragedies of the 1960's is that the most pointed social and moral criticisms seemed to be more aimed at humiliating and destroying the American reality than at healing and reconstituting that reality. If you will forgive what may be a Lutheran hang-up, one can only really hear the law when it is accompanied by the Gospel, and the Gospel when accompanied by the law. It may be an impossible dream, but I believe we should work to create a climate within which a Lincoln might arise, a climate prepared for such a great theologian of the civil religion who can turn confusion and remorse into the paths of healing. At present those who see the horror of what America has become seem to believe not at all in what America might have been and might yet be. Those who most loudly proclaim their confidence in America, on the other hand, are exposed as fraudulent because they refuse to acknowledge the horror. So long as this situation prevails, most Americans will continue to lie to themselves in order to keep from hating themselves and will hate themselves because they have to lie. As difficult as it may seem, as much against the trend of the moment as it may seem, those who have a broader vision of social ethics must more persuasively tell the story of human failing and redemption in a way keenly attuned to American experience and sensibilities. For

we are, after all, storytellers, people who develop a frame of reference within which, in a particular moment of history, we may choose between good and evil. The title and theme of the American story is "covenant."

To say that explicit Judeo-Christian religion and the civil religion are symbiotic means that they live together in intimate association and interdependence. It does not mean they are always complementary or mutually supportive, nor does it suggest that the degree of dependence is equal. (I can readily imagine a vital church surviving the death or reversal of America's civil religion, but it is hard to envision the opposite.) One cause of crisis in the civil religion is that many of those Christians most concerned about society lost their confidence in the explicit traditions that gave religious pertinence and plausibility to their witness. Or, to put it another way, they became so enamored with the secular order, forgetting its dependence upon the civil religion and its religious sources, that they cut themselves off from the tree's roots in order to fondle, celebrate and affirm the grace of its leaves and branches. In short, American religion has yet to get over the severe blow represented by Harvey Cox's *The Secular City* (1966). (I mention that particular book, not because it caused the loss of confidence, but because it so accurately represented and legitimated that loss.) The spokesmen for biblical religion have lost the nerve required to establish an independent ideological base from which to address, in criticism and hope, the civil religion. Of course there is nothing new about this. It was true of the false prophets condemned by Jeremiah; it was true of the religious leadership that toadied to the establishments in order to advance the religious expansionism of the 1950's; it is true of those who are now fawning for the favor of the counterculture and diverse radicalisms, just as it is true of those who pant for a preaching date at the White House. Whether one frets to be "in" with "the movement" or "in" with the White House, the consequence is equally debilitating for credible Christian witness.

There is no easy formula for restoring confidence in biblical religion so that it can, in turn, help to restore confidence in the civil religion. But I am sure that nothing very creative will happen without a major theological reconstruction. The doldrums of the American church are not caused by a lack of skill or of relevance to what is happening or of inadequate structure. Those who compulsively concentrate on practical skill, on relevance and on structure are, as one wit noted in another connection, simply rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*. What we must again focus upon are the truth claims implicit in the biblical story and what they mean for individual and social life.

Nowhere have the blows to Christian confidence

seemed so severe as in the Roman Catholic Church. In this connection, I think Andrew Greeley's analysis in *Priests in the United States* (Doubleday, 1972) illustrates the point I would make. The reasons commonly given for the departure of so many priests and the drastic drop in new recruits have to do with celibacy, the restrictions of Church authorities, the absence of significant job challenge, and so forth. If Greeley is to be believed, and on this point I tend to believe him, his extensive researches indicate that most priests are better off, and even more content, than their nonpriestly counterparts on most of these scores. The chief reason for disillusionment with the priesthood is that men are no longer very sure what it means to be a priest. If one's work is legitimated by the social change it brings about, perhaps there are other jobs equal to, or better than, being a priest. If the liturgy and sacraments are simply mechanisms by which people "experience community" or get turned on to their supposedly authentic selves, no doubt there are more potent mechanisms. If there is no distinction between the sacred and the secular, the religious and the worldly, then why hold a position that poses such awkward differentiations? In short, without a theology of the priesthood, there is little sense in being a priest. The dialectic that made sense of priesthood is lost.

Dialectic is central to the relationship between biblical religion and civil religion. (This immediately suggests, but I am not happy with, Richard Niebuhr's almost classic Christ-Culture typologies. It seems to me impossible, however, to choose between Christ Against Culture, Christ Above Culture and Christ Transforming Culture.) I have some notion of how the dialectic ought to be formulated. The formulation turns around the notion of the Kingdom of God as the goal of universal history, and of the Church as that community which signals, anticipates, celebrates and supports that oncoming Kingdom. The theological formulation of that dialectic, which some will recognize as being deeply indebted to Wolfhart Pannenberg, is the subject of another paper. The point here is that, however it is formulated, the church, and particularly those most concerned for the church's social witness, have a new opportunity to revitalize the story within which American conscience and consciousness can again be bent toward the fulfillment of America's constituting vision.

This effort can be diverted in many ways. One diversion is proposed by those who, weary of the past decade's confusion, would lead us home again to the "real majority." But our vocation, as Christians concerned for society, is a minority vocation exercised for, and indeed often it will seem against, that majority. Indeed, we should again be going home, but our home is ahead of us. If we take seriously both biblical religion and the American religion at their best, we will know that we've never been home—not yet.