

Some down-to-earth facts about middle America—its diversity and potential for true progress

# Civil Religion and Ethnic Americans

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My comments on ethnic Americans stem from a particular and specific frame of reference. First, I am a Catholic priest. Indeed, as another sociologist remarked (not intending a compliment): "He's nothing but a loudmouthed Irish priest." (May it be etched on my tombstone!) Still, these are my views, not *the* or even *a* "Catholic position." I very much doubt that there is a Catholic position on anything at this stage of the disorganization of the Roman Church. Secondly, I assay a tentative model, subject to empirical testing sometime in the future, about the "civil religion" of the Catholic ethnic. (I take it, by the way, that "ethnic" is merely a euphemism for "Catholic" when most people use it. Such does seem to me unfair to Scandinavians, German Protestants and even Anglo-Saxons, who, if *The Christian Century* is to be believed, are now ethnics too.)

I furthermore understand religion in the sense that it has come to be used by such disciples of Max Weber as Thomas Luckmann and Clifford Geertz. That is, religion is that symbol system which provides man with an ultimate view of reality; a basic interpretive scheme; a cultural system that answers fundamental questions about the purpose and destiny of his life; a set of unique symbols that tells him the Way Things Are and by implication the way they should be.

The civil religion is the illumination provided by the more basic of the religious symbols about the meaning of the civil and political society in which a person finds himself. It operates in a middle ground somewhere between what Geertz defines as religion and what he defines as theology. The civil religion is not an ideology by itself, though it provides the raw materials out of which many different ideol-

ogies can be constructed. Furthermore, from this perspective I would contend that to ask whether there ought to be a civil religion is about as fruitless as to ask whether there ought to be the Rocky Mountains. To ask whether the civil religion is good or bad is as foolish as to ask whether the Rocky Mountains are good or bad. There will be some sort of religious symbols in any modern nation-state, and these symbols will very likely be equivalent, that is to say, open to many different interpretations, though some interpretations will be more consistent with the basic insights of the symbols than others.

My contention, then, will be that what is required in dealing with the civil religion is not attack or defense but hermeneutics. One must search for an interpretation that calls forth the most positive and constructive social response from those who have committed themselves to the religious symbol. If we are concerned, and I believe we ought to be, with practicing hermeneutics on the symbols of the civil religion, then we should consider perhaps the possibilities for political and social rhetoric inherent in some recent comments by Paul Ricoeur on what he calls the "non-ostensive" interpretation of symbols. I think his remarks directed toward theology can be applied equally well to interpreting the symbols of the ethnic civil religion:

We can now give a name to non-ostensive reference. It is the kind of world opened up by the depth-semantics of the text. This discovery has immense consequences concerning what is usually called the *sense* of a text.

The sense of a text is not *behind* the text, but in front of it. It is not something hidden, but something disclosed. What has to be understood is not the initial situation of discourse but what points toward a possible world, thanks to the author and his situation. It wants to grasp the world-propositions opened by the reference of the text. To understand a text is to follow its move-

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ment from sense to reference; from what it says to what it talks about.

Disclosure is the equivalent for written language of ostensive reference for spoken language. It goes beyond the mere function of pointing out and of showing what already exists and, in this sense, transcends the function of ostensive reference linked to oral language. Here showing is at the same time creating new modes of being.

Therefore it is not the initial discourse situation which has to be understood, but that which, in the non-ostensive reference of the text, points toward a world toward which bursts the reader's situation as well as that of the author. Less than ever, understanding is not directed toward an author who is to be resuscitated. It does not even address his situation. It turns toward the propositions about the world opened up by the text's references. Understanding the text is to follow its movement from the sense to its reference, from what it says to that about which it talks. Beyond my situation as reader, beyond the author's situation, I offer myself to the possible modes of being-in-the-world which the text opens up and discovers for me (quoted by Joseph Sittler, "The Scope of Christological Reflection," *Interpretation*, 26, 3 July, 1972, from an unpublished paper of Ricoeur's).

If we are trying to deal with those American symbols that exist in the middle ground between ideology and "pure" religion, we must ask what possible modes of socially "being-in-the-world" those symbols can open up and discover for us and, of course, for those people who are committed to the symbols.

It is clear, I think, that at the present time we are about to embark on a stage when the social and intellectual élite of the United States reevaluates its relationship with the rest of society. Confident that its own intellectual brilliance, organizational skill and moral excellence entitle it to govern, this élite recently managed to seize control of the Democratic Party. It arranged a national political convention that it thought was an admirable reflection of its own values—the most honest, the most open, the most democratic, the most representative convention in American political history. (So what if more than a third of its members had gone to graduate school?) The candidate chosen, if we were to believe liberal Christian journals, was someone only slightly less than the reincarnation of Jesus Christ; his opponent, we were told, anything from a psychotic to a mass murderer. Yet it would appear that middle America rose up and gave the élite—and our sainted candidate—one of the worst political drubbings of modern times.

We are angry, some of us more than others. (I will confess in all honesty that to be given a choice between Orange County and Harvard Yard is to be

given no choice at all.) This anger is beginning to show in the columnists of the élite press. Anthony Lewis, Tom Wicker, Scotty Reston grow more and more furious in their stern denunciations of the immorality of the American people. Tom Braden writes off that people as a "beast." Various clerical leaders and editorial writers express outrage at the indifference of the American people to the *real* issues of the election. We of the élite gave middle Americans their last chance and they have blown it. After the loss of the election, we can now go back to our secure berths and discuss the technology of liberation and other pleasantries. We can be content with our anger. We can analyze the civil religion of middle America in such a way that it can be equated with Billy Graham. We can lament the fundamentalism and the conservatism of that civil religion. We can shake our heads in dismay and despair over the "stupidity" of the public.

All this is relatively harmless behavior. It consoles us for our loss. It will cost none of us his secure faculty or bureaucratic position. It will require no intellectual effort or soul-searching, and it is not likely to offend many middle Americans, since they don't read what we write anyhow—which is one more evidence of their inferiority. Some of them do read us though, and they tend to be a little upset about it. Professor Thaddeus Radzialowski remarks ironically:

During the first hundred years that the Polish community in Detroit has existed, the American view of the immigrant and his progeny has changed considerably. The brutish, antidemocratic ignoramus; the strikebreaking supplanter of honest American labor; the advance guard of anarchism and bolshevism; the mindless tool of papal conspiracy was transformed by the 1940s into the kindly, gentle, slightly comic fellow who, waving his citizenship papers proudly, burred heartwarming patriotic clichés in his broken night school English. Now he is again transformed into the racist hard-hat. These racial stereotypes, many of them conflicting, reveal much more about the projected hopes and fears of American society than they do about the immigrant ("The View from the Polish Ghetto; Some Observations on the First Hundred Years in Detroit," unpublished paper).

Men like Radzialowski can be dangerous. The very idea that the myth of middle America or the myth of the hard-hat is a creation of our own fantasy. How dare he!

There is another alternative, of course, and that is to take Radzialowski and others like him seriously. We might concede to ourselves that political defeat—indeed, political disaster—which comes at a time when three-fifths of the country is in sympathy with liberal political positions represents an achievement of political incompetence

that boggles the mind. We might admit that we know precious little about middle America and that some of the ethnic communities in the United States are less well known to American intellectuals than are some African tribes. We might try to understand the civil religion of ethnics and other middle Americans from the inside. (And with all due respect to Mr. L. Streiker and Mr. G. Strober's admirable book,<sup>9</sup> I suspect that at least so far as the people who occupy my part of the beach are concerned, Billy Graham isn't much help—and neither, to tell you the truth, is Bishop Sheen. We might want to try Father Hesburgh, though.)

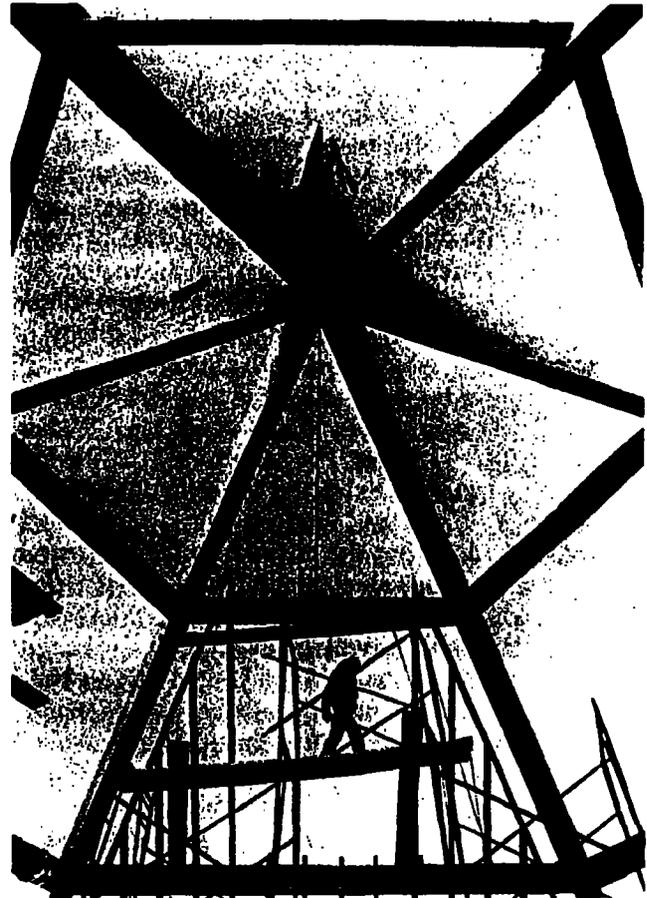
To put the matter more bluntly, most of those who have pontificated ethnicity and middle America have not been in the neighborhood for a hell of a long time, if ever. Those few neighborhood dwellers who read what the pontificators have written are more likely to be amused than angry. Robert Coles is an outstanding exception to this, but Coles's insistence that both individuals and groups are complicated is decidedly unfashionable and recently won him a stern warning from a reviewer in *Commentary*. For if we admit complexity, the *Commentary* reviewer tells us, how then will we be able to act? I suspect that at this point in time George McGovern and his former staff must be wondering whether it would have been better for them to admit to perhaps just a bit more complexity.

What I wish to offer here is, if not exactly an alternative model to the religion of my kind of middle Americans (Catholic ethnics), at least an interpretation of those symbols that points out the more positive and constructive dimensions of that religion. By implication, at least, I will suggest how the civil religion of ethnic Americans might provide raw material for some political leader of the future who is trying to put together a new coalition.

Am I making the claim that I know more about the civil religion of the ethnics than others who have written on the subject? If so, by what right do I make it?

I guess I have to admit that I do make such a claim, and I justify it in part on the grounds that I have more data than they have, though this is no great accomplishment, because most of those who pontificate about the ethnics are singularly unencumbered by data.

But to be perfectly honest, I am only disguised as an academic, for I am an agent from the enemy camp. No matter how I try to get around it, and more recently I have stopped trying, I am far more an ethnic than I am an intellectual. I came to the academy rather late in life (and I am sure to leave it shortly—either by my own choice or by request) and never left the neighborhood of the parish behind. In the world of cosmopolitans I am a local; in the world of alienated people I am incorrigibly rooted; and if I am forced to choose between ethnics and in-



tellectuals, I have no doubt any more which side I'll come down on. (Under such circumstances, if I had my druthers I would withdraw to my ancestral County Mayo, where in the midst of the rain and the fog I would mutter imprecations on both their houses like the unfortunate Mercutio caught in the crossfire of the Montagues and the Capulets.)

To put the matter somewhat differently: One of the advantages of being a loudmouthed Irish priest is that you still have some sense of how the other Irish think and feel. I do not wish to romanticize the ethnics. They are not, heaven save us, a new version of the "noble savage." Some of my best friends are South Side Irish, and I would not want my niece to marry one, particularly since his parents would probably have signed periodic petitions to His Eminence Cardinal Cody demanding my liquidation. The Kosciusko Foundation recently devoted an entire issue of its newsletter to the argument that I had to be anti-Polish, since any Irish priest who presumed to talk about the problems of Poles was bound to be against them. (One is reminded that G. K. Chesterton's book, *Orthodoxy*, was condemned in czarist Russia on the assumption that it was about the Orthodox Church and therefore necessarily against it.) The ethnics are not angels or saints, folk heroes or a new messianic people. They are human beings like the rest of us, and they deserve to be understood in

<sup>9</sup> *Religion and the New Majority* (Association Press, 1972)

their full complexity of good and bad, positive and negative, open and closed just as much as anyone else.

Most of what passes for sociology of religion today is scarcely pertinent to our concerns. Sociology of religion has been thus far mostly concerned with denominational affiliation, church attendance and agreement with doctrinal propositions (usually of the catechetical variety). As far as I know, a project being directed by my young colleague William McCready is the only attempt to push sociology of religion beyond interdenominationalism to concern itself with meaning systems of the sort described by Goertz, Luckmann, Peter Berger—and Max Weber, for that matter. I know that Doctors Streiker and Strober relied to some extent on the religious research of Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark without adverting to the fact that the criticisms of this research within the sociological community have been devastating and, I think, decisive. When the McCready project is finished we will know a good deal more about basic belief systems in the United States. Until then our speculations will have to be very tentative. Since the civil religion is in some fashion a deduction, or perhaps one should say more precisely a consequence, of basic belief systems, we are in the position necessarily of having to speculate on a speculation.

With this final qualification I proceed to the work at hand. I suggest that in line with three thousand years of Yahwistic tradition, American takes a fundamentally hopeful view of the human condition. While there is evidence that the Irish and the Italians, for example, are likely to be more fatalistic than their Anglo-Saxon hosts, it is obvious, I think, that such fatalism, which was fundamentally pagan in Sicily and in the west of Ireland, has been largely overcome in the United States. (Paradoxically, the Irish, who are the most fatalistic of American ethnic groups, are also the most trustful.) I submit that religious hopefulness has been transferred in a fundamental way to the American political system. The ethnics, like most other middle Americans, have not despaired of American society and polity. The assumption prevalent among the élites that the ethnics are "alienated" is not confirmed by the available data. There may be some unease about what is happening to American society, particularly about crime and drugs (unease, I might note, which is shared in almost the same proportions by American blacks). This unease is not despair over the fundamental viability of American polity and society. Nor, for that matter, have the majority of blacks despaired either.

Secondly, I would submit that the Yahwistic religious symbol of the "new age," which has appeared in many secular and religious messianic guises down through the ages and currently is most obvious in the

American secular conviction of progress, is very much part of the civil religion of the ethnics. The ethnic believes that progress is possible and that change is desirable. If he is less likely than he was twenty years ago to describe himself as a liberal, the reason is not that he is any less committed to change or any less sympathetic with the oppressed but simply that he has much less confidence in American liberalism now. I contend that there are strong residual forces in the civil religion of ethnics which would make them sympathetic to notable social change. One need only look at their attitudes on major issues such as pollution, gun control, welfare reform, higher taxes to solve urban problems, rapprochement with China and Russia and opposition to the war<sup>o</sup> to perceive that this sympathy for social change has obvious practical consequences.

There is also in the ethnic civil religion a profound conviction about the freedom and dignity of the individual person, a conviction which I take to be rooted in the upper-level symbols of the Yahwistic symbol system. Rights of dissent, of due process, of equality of opportunity are professed in theory and supported in practice. Recently the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) undertook a replication of their civil liberties study of several decades ago. There were two striking findings of the research. First, tolerance for civil liberties, rights of dissent and due democratic processes have increased enormously in the last two decades. The second finding was that on most items the ethnics were more "liberal" than the American average. They were also overwhelmingly sympathetic to college students, college professors (probably because they didn't know very many) and to blacks. They were less enamored of "hippies" and radical militants. A whole bevy of eager young New Left graduate students from the political science department of the University of Chicago armed themselves with these data and went out into the ethnic neighborhoods of Chicago to try to uncover evidence of ethnic antagonism toward the counter-culture. They were honest enough to admit that their search was mostly in vain. Like Robert Coles they discovered that although there was some verbal opposition to the psychedelic revolution, it was simply not a subject about which Chicago ethnics felt all that strong. They were, it turned out, much more

<sup>o</sup> Professor James D. Wright of the University of Wisconsin has recently demonstrated that the opposition of Catholic ethnics to the war, shown by Norman Nie and Sidney Verba as evident in 1967, actually goes back to the beginning of the war. It was the college-educated upper middle class that was more sympathetic to the war, not the so-called hard-hat ethnics of the early 1960's. Incidentally, Wright also finds that older people were more likely to have opposed the war from the beginning than younger people. Naive young scholar that he is, Wright seems to expect that his findings will be believed.

concerned about crime than about young people smoking grass or popping acid.

Norman Zinberg and John A. Robertson, in their very useful book, *Drugs and the Public*, contend that there is an incredibly vicious and rigid public reaction to drug experimentation among college-age youth. But I am not convinced and particularly not convinced by the data these authors cite. When asked if they favor legalization of marijuana, the ethnics may say no, but I do not think the issue is all that salient for most of them. What they are concerned about—and with ample reason, I would submit—is the heroin-induced crime that is turning many American cities into jungles. Incidentally, 30 per cent of the Irish in the country are in favor of legalization of marijuana, second only to the Jewish 45 per cent. The Irish apparently know a thing or two for weal and woe about ingesting drugs into their bloodstreams.

In addition, I would argue that abhorrence of social injustice, again drawn directly from the Yahwistic tradition, is very much part of the civil religion of ethnics. I am not suggesting that they are radicals or liberals or enthusiastic integrationists; I do suggest that the dramatic changes in racial attitudes that NORC has monitored over the last three decades represent not merely verbal assent but a recognition, profound and pervasive, of the evils of racial bigotry. I shall also point out that our research indicates that the ethnics have higher scores on integration scales than the American average, even the American average in the North. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that probably we have reached a social consensus about the desirability of integration in most areas of American life—an incredible change in a rather brief period of time, as human history goes. As a matter of fact, there is probably more consensus about the desirability of integration in the United States than in any multiracial society in the world. The issues in American society today are much more likely to have to do with the means of translating this national consensus into effective programs. I think that those of us who accept the label of the liberal élite would be well advised to keep that in mind. Opposition to busing need not necessarily be racist in origin. (Indeed half the blacks in the country seem to be opposed to it.) Nor need opposition to a “quota system” be racist in origin. Certainly I am not suggesting that there are not powerful residues of racism in American society. I think there are; but I would submit that the civil religion of the country, and surely the civil religion of the ethnics, has had much to do with the very considerable change in attitudes and behavior that has occurred over the last two decades and provides even more positive and constructive forces for reducing further that remaining residue. Those who fail to recognize that the problems of urban housing and school integration cannot be solved without substantial progress

toward the reduction of urban crime do little service in the cause of racial justice. Racists are afraid of crime. Racists object to busing. But it does not follow that all opposition to crime and all opposition to busing is racist. Crime is the most serious problem in the country from the point of view of blacks as well as whites, and, as I pointed out before, the black population is evenly divided on the subject of busing.

This concern for social justice, like all religious concerns admittedly weaker than it should be and less effective than it might be, can also be seen as underpinning commitment to government involvement in the solution of social problems. Here the ethnics are if anything substantially more “liberal” than the American average. They are more likely to endorse government involvement in social problems, a guaranteed annual wage and welfare reform, in part, perhaps, because of the tradition of Catholic social teaching. I do not suggest that there is not a strong component of the work ethic in the ethnic civil religion. On the contrary, Irish Catholics are second only to Jews on most items designed to measure their endorsement of “the Protestant ethic.” Many, perhaps most, American ethnics would argue that they made it without help from the government and others should too. They will also rage, I suspect, against “welfare chislers.” Nevertheless, they supported the New Deal social reforms and have continued to vote for liberal congressional candidates who have extended and enlarged the New Deal. They may not always be as compassionate as we would like, and yet I would suggest that there is broad sympathy for the goals of eliminating hunger, misery, poverty, bad housing, bad education and every other sort of social ill wherever it can be found in America. It does not follow that this commitment to the elimination of injustice will necessarily lead them to vote for a candidate who is so inept as to suggest publicly a madcap scheme to give everyone a thousand dollars a year. But they will support a guaranteed annual wage, as the survey research clearly shows. One is faced here, I suspect, with an underlying question: What kind of rhetoric works and what kind doesn’t work to activate the most positive and constructive aspects of the civil religion of the ethnics and, indeed, of other middle Americans? As an example of effective rhetoric, I cite Lyndon Johnson’s famous “Banks of the Perdenales” television talk after the Selma riots.

Another component of the civil religion is pluralism, by which I mean the insistence of the right of various groups to maintain their own diversity of heritage and custom within the broader national consensus. Paradoxically enough, it is the blacks who have finally legitimated pluralism for the whole of society—though as Professor Arthur Mann has pointed out in his work, the country was necessarily pluralistic from the very beginning. I suspect that insofar

as the pluralism of the civil religion is linked with a purely religious symbol of the Yahwistic tradition, it is part of the New Age symbol when Jew and Gentile, Greek and Roman, lion and lamb live in peace and harmony with each other. I am inclined to think that American ethnics, who have by and large profited greatly from American pluralism, have a good deal more confidence in the capacity of the country to cope with ethnic diversity than do many of us in the intellectual élite who worry about such things as common culture. I do not deny common culture; there surely is one. I am asserting that one of the premises of the common culture is that there is room for diversity of cultures. One need only mention Biafra, Sudan, Burundi, Bangladesh, the Congo, Iraq, Ceylon, Cyprus, Ulster, Indonesia to be reminded of the incredible amount of religious, ethnic and racial conflict that has swept the world since World War II. The astonishing thing is that the violence and unrest have been so limited in this large and fantastically heterogeneous American society.

I would contend that the civil religion of American ethnics not only permits them to support the idea of black culture but also to tolerate a wide variety of countercultures within the country. This is not to say that the ethnic will necessarily be enthusiastic about hippie communes, but they see them as far less a threat to the pluralistic structure of our society than we in the intellectual élite argue that they do. Once again one is reminded of Professor Radzialowski's words about projection.

There is also in the civil religion of ethnics a strong emphasis on the freedom and dignity of the individual person, an obvious deduction from the Yahwistic tradition. A person should not be messed with or hassled by large bureaucratic agencies, be they governmental, labor, business or ecclesiastical. One need only read Robert Coles to understand the strong populist strain that persists among middle Americans. Unfortunately, the New Populism (so-called) seems to think that it can appeal to the ethnics and their Protestant counterparts in middle America by promising not less government intervention but more.

Unquestionably, the insistence that a man should be judged independently of race, creed and color, which was once used to object to quotas against Jews (successfully) and quotas against Catholics (less successfully), is now being used to object to quotas in favor of blacks. My own personal hunch is that the quota system is a disastrous political mistake mostly because it doesn't have much of a chance of being accepted in American society (save in frightened institutions of higher education) and also because if it did work it would be counterproductive. A more sophisticated strategy that insisted with greater vigor than in the past on equality of opportunity, on judging a man by his merits and on making the riches of

American society available to everyone would be more effective politically, I think, and would also have a much better long-run payoff than any quota system. There is little in the civil religion of American ethnics that will underwrite quotas and a great deal that will underwrite a campaign for a dramatic increase in job opportunities for those who have not had access to them.

Less attractive to many radical critics will be that component of the civil religion of ethnics that insists on orderly process. The elaborate legal traditions of the Jewish and Christian religion are part of the explanation for this concern for order, I suppose. It would be a mistake to overemphasize how important it is, however. The Irish were an unruly, uncivilized people before the English forces of law and order either killed them off or forced them to migrate from their native land, and they were not magically transformed upon setting down on these shores. Not all Italians, obviously, are Mafiosi, and they were not the first to practice organized crime in this country; but it would be idle to contend that there is not some sympathy for "the outfit" (as we call it in Chicago) inside the Italian community. The Slavs have a long history of labor conflict and of settling arguments with the fist instead of the lawsuit. Today, one of the more fascinating recent American phenomena is the growth of neighborhood political organizations in ethnic communities, which are as capable as any black organization of using the protest style.

So the ethnics were scarcely the "civil" people that their British cousins were. It may well be argued that all too many of them seem to have forgotten those experiences. On the other hand, the idea of random violence or revolution as a means of political activity receives little support in the symbol systems of the ethnic civil religion. Negotiation, compromise, deals, collective bargaining in other arenas besides labor-management relations: this is what the ethnics have come to believe is the American Way. Again, I would point out that most blacks would agree with them. The ethnic enthusiastically endorses Abraham Lincoln's comment that there is no successful appeal from the ballot to the bullet. All of us came from countries that had been wracked by violence for hundreds of years. We have ancestral memories that remind us that we are the "little people" who always suffer in the revolutionary upheavals. When various "spokesmen" (usually self-anointed) appear on television and announce that they are going to tear American society apart unless their demands are met, the ethnics are promptly turned off, even if their sympathies are engaged by the demands. It may be argued that the oppressed and the victimized have a right to threaten revolution, to engage in violence and even to engage in random terrorism to end their victimization. To this I believe the ethnic would reply out of the context of his civil religion that they

may have the right to do that if (a) their situation is completely intolerable, (b) there is no other recourse available to them and (c) they are going to accomplish something by such tactics. The ethnic would assert (and most blacks would agree with them if I read the data correctly) that none of these three qualifications holds in contemporary America.

There is one last component that must be mentioned, and that may be offensive to some. The ethnics *like* the United States of America. The flag, the Star Spangled Banner, the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, the Capitol, the office of the Presidency—all these are admired symbols which together sum up the gratitude the ethnic feels for what the United States has made possible for him: freedom, dignity, comfort, security—things which his ancestors in the countries from which they fled or were driven would not have dreamt possible. The ethnic is a patriot because he is grateful for what the United States has done for him. He is not, at least not anymore, a superpatriot. He was less likely than his fellow Americans to favor the Vietnam war, and his opposition to communism did not lead him to object to rapprochement with China or the Soviet Union. It was not an ethnic who said, “My country, right or wrong.” But he has not been in America long enough or achieved that level of security where it becomes easy to hate and despise the United States. An appeal to the conscience of the ethnic against war and against injustice that is based on American patriotism has a much better chance of being effective than one based on a denunciation of America as a sick society, burning American flags and ridiculing American institutions. I have the impression that some members of the liberal élite will only accept the ethnics as bona fide allies when they are willing and eager to repudiate everything in the American polity, society and culture. That may be a great way to protect your own moral purity or to meet your own emotional needs. It’s a lousy way to win an election.

As Professor Robert Bellah pointed out in his original essay on the civil religion, the real problem with the American political symbol system is not that it lacks nobility of conception or expression but rather that its practical application has frequently been substantially less than the ideal. But of course the practical application of any belief system is always substantially less than the ideal. There are then two

things one can do: redouble one’s efforts to draw closer to the ideal or call for the abandonment of the system altogether. The latter strategy is currently quite popular among American liberals, it seems to me. In other contexts such strategies have been called “throwing the baby out with the bath.”

I suspect that many people will argue that, however correct I may be about the potential for positive and constructive hermeneutics of the symbols of the ethnic civil religion, in fact ethnics are narrow, bigoted, racist hawks, and that they are the principal opponents to racial justice in the United States. If I am forced to it, I think I can adduce empirical data to refute both those assertions. Let me concede them for the sake of argument. I am not trying to canonize the ethnics; I am not trying to make them a messianic class that will accomplish Consciousness III. I am well aware—perhaps since I live with them, more aware—of the immense cultural and intellectual limitations of the children and grandchildren of the immigrants. (The South Side Irish have not changed all that much since the death of Studs Lonigan.) What I am attempting to achieve is not a balanced, nuanced presentation of the strengths and weaknesses of Catholic ethnics, for I do not believe that we have now, nor will we have for a long time, the empirical evidence or the theoretical and methodological perspectives which will enable us to do that. Good Marxist that I am, I am just taking a dialectical position and suggesting that in addition to the narrowness, ignorance, insecurity and fear which can indeed be found in the ethnic population of this country, there is also a potential for openness, movement and growth—a potential that can be illumined and actualized by an intelligent and sensitive hermeneutics of the symbol system which constitutes the ethnic’s civil religion. I make the modest assertion that ethnics are neither angels nor devils but human beings with fears and limitations on the one hand and nobility and the capacity to grow on the other. There may be some who are not ready yet to agree with this or are not ready even to try it as a first premise of a political and social strategy. There are those who believe that the only way you appeal to that which is most noble and most generous and most constructive in people is by denunciation and threat. Well and good. If that is the rhetoric of American liberalism, then so be it. But under such circumstances those who are committed to that rhetoric must not expect to gain adherents from the denounced and threatened.