



# The Dream and the Wrath

Robert Benne and Philip Hefner

**I**n the midst of pervasive malaise America tries to look forward to celebrating its bicentennial. It is not an easy thing to celebrate a birthday when the body and spirit are sick. Little wonder that social analysts and critics are calling for a renewal of the American spirit, the recovery of an American tradition from the distortions of our recent past. It is this tradition that must provide guidance for the future that is already upon us. Daniel Bell, in his *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, is but the latest of the company of exhorters, which includes such critics as Sydney Ahlstrom, Robert Bellah and Gibson Winter.

These preachers presuppose an American tradition, a mythos or dream that bestows identity and provides a frame of meaning for our past experience, our present challenge and our future projects. It is always hazardous to point to one American tradition, but there is in fact a mytho-poetic motif that does run deeply in our American life, the cultural substratum for our identity and aspirations. This motif was originally religious and centered on the New Israel as the symbol that described the experience of moving from the settled bondage of Europe to the exhilarating and terrifying task of settling a new land. For many Americans, of all types and occupations, it was God who called people from bondage through a struggle in the wilderness to the establishment of a new nation of high promise. The call, the struggle and the promise were all dependent upon obedience to God's covenant, the law that ordered life and sustained community.

The mytho-poetic motif was secularized. Leaving the bondage of Egypt was translated into secular

terms as shaking free of the limits of the past. The wandering in the wilderness by which a new identity before God is forged takes secular shape as a struggling ascent from the limits of the past. The promise God made with Abraham and his descendants takes secular form in the promise of an open, gracious future. The heart of the American Dream, then, is to shake free from the limits of the past and in struggling ascent reach toward a gracious, open future. One of the key elements that was eroded over time was the idea of covenant. The covenant motif made the promise of the future dependent upon obedience to God's law, which ordered life, giving it moral form and a transcendent source of judgment.

The structure of the American myth lifts up three elements in our political constitution. First, *liberty*—freedom to move from the limits of the past, to move geographically and socially from the place and station of one's forebears. Second, *initiative*—the virtues of self-reliance and independence which enable the struggling ascent. Third, *opportunity*—premised upon an open and gracious future. Every person ought to have equal opportunity to run the race and, assuming self-discipline, to share the chance for success. So liberty, initiative and opportunity are the hallmarks of American libertarian society and flow consistently from the underlying mythic motif.

**I**f the foregoing analysis provides some insight into the motivating dream and reality, then the civil religion is the culturally carried set of symbols that legitimates and sacralizes the dream inherent in American life. It is the sacred canopy that is cast over this dream and projects it not only as true for American experience and American people but as universal and cosmic truth.

Robert Bellah has etched the notion of civil religion into the current discussions, pointing out the ways in which it has served major political figures

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at key moments in our history. The civil religion has not only reminded us who we are as Americans but also exhorts us to live up to the promise and the possibilities of our dream. Thus, the civil religion is the guardian of the American Dream. It provides a transcendent point from which our performance can be assessed.

There is little doubt that this myth is a powerful reality in the majority of the American people. They have experienced a movement from the limits of their past, whether geographical or in terms of the status or class of their parents. They have experienced a struggling ascent based on their own self-initiative and hard work. By and large this movement from the past and the struggling ascent have been greeted by success in an open future. That is, the project that each individual has cast onto the future has been graciously received.

It is the worst kind of error in judgment to deprecate unqualifiedly the American Dream and the civil religion that guides and sustains it. Indeed, if it is true that humankind is intrinsically possessed of a finite freedom that aspires to indeterminate creativity and significance for the individual, then American experience has been the most important fulfillment—although only partial, to be sure—of one transcendent element in human nature. The testimony of millions of people who have been able to recapitulate the American myth in their own lives grounds the claim of the Dream, even today, as *truth*.

However strongly rooted in the American experience the Dream is, and despite the corroboration it has received in individual lives, the shock waves of the last ten years have left the civil religion reeling. Waves of wrath have rolled over American society, reaching intensity pitch in the last decade. This outpouring of wrath has both bruised and puzzled the body politic. Bewilderment and disorientation stem from the unveiling of the presence of error, failure and self-deception in the American experience. The horrors were not discovered at the periphery, among the scoundrel element in society, but at the very center, among, as David Halberstam has put it, "the best and the brightest." The symbols of the civil religion cannot account for this intrinsic ambiguity and evil, and therefore cannot order the dark side of American experience within the metaphors of the Dream.

Each of the three moments of the Dream, for example, has carried within it the actuality of evil and failure. The first moment, shaking free of the limits of the past, has included the tendency to leave tremendous amounts of unnoticed and uncared-for wreckage in our past. Americans have moved onward and upward, but there have been terrible casualties—Amerindians, blacks, urban centers. The American myth has been insensitive to the fate of the human and physical launching pads that have served the ascent of the successful ones. We have few resources

in our cultural heritage exhorting us to care for this wreckage.

Similarly, the struggling ascent of the second moment of the myth has encouraged initiative and self-reliance, but it has scarcely paused to understand or care for those who cannot or will not enter the struggle. Internal cultural blocks, as well as external economic-political-social blocks, have been pushed in the way of those who cannot or will not run the race with the WASPs. Our merging of virtue and prosperity has blinded us to the nonstrugglers.

As for the open and gracious future, the very success of the Dream has so cluttered and desecrated the physical and social space of America that the future has become a complex, interdependent realm. Only with considerable ability, training and experience can one project himself into a relatively open and simple future.

This intrinsic evil and failure are precisely what the symbols of the American myth cannot explain and order. We cannot comprehend within our primal myths why and how inalienable rights may be systematically denied large segments of our population. Nor can we comprehend how the successful free-enterprise system has failed to distribute the wealth fairly, nor how we could wage a mistaken war and in the process be defeated by a small, incredibly weak foe. We stand in a symbolic impasse that has its roots in the experience of wrath and the inability to account for that wrath and to integrate it with the symbols that give us our identity and meaning as Americans. The result is an identity crisis that accounts for much of the sickness of spirit as the nation approaches its bicentennial.

We do not subscribe to the thesis that the civil religion is dead, however. The American Dream is still the major opening to transcendence for most Americans and for the society as a whole. Furthermore, no social order can exist without a symbol system to guide it, and it seems unlikely that the American symbol system of the next hundred years will be other than a reformed version of the civil religion that has functioned for the past two hundred years. The reforms may be great, but they will be in continuity with what has been. Symbols do not come and go with ease, particularly primal symbols of identity.

It is that reformation of the civil religion that concerns the Christian faith in our time. Specifically, and in the context of this discussion, the Christian faith has a role in laying bare the inadequacy of the civil religion to perceive and account for the wrath that befalls the best and the brightest. Christian faith can point to a better way of understanding the sixties and seventies, expanding our vision of alternative futures that may emerge from this wrathful age.

Christian faith knows that wrath is the consequence of the frustration of God's will. The thwart-

ing of God's will, for Christians, is also a violation of human nature and destiny. For American experience the power and will of God have been revealed in a secular way as the power and possibilities of the future. Therefore the experience of wrath in the last decade is a consequence of the thwarting of the future of American life. Christian theology has traditionally spoken of *deus revelatus* (God revealed) and *deus absconditus* (God hidden). The revealed God performs his "proper work" (*opus proprium*), and the hidden God performs work that is "alien" to his essential nature (*opus alienum*). The hidden God is the thwarted God, and his alien work is wrath. He performs this work not because he is spiteful and jealous, but rather because he will not violate the freedom which is essential to the creation he has unleashed and will not shield men from the consequences of their actions.

We may transform these theological categories into talk about the future and speak of a *futurus revelatus* and a *futurus absconditus*, as well as of the proper and the alien activity of "the power of the future." Thus we can understand the denial of rights to blacks and other colored minorities as an evil from the first. The primal symbols of America, as embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, revealed this evil to us. They spoke of a future that meant actualizing the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (property) that belonged to all human beings by virtue of their createdness.

The failure to enact this revealed truth in the colonial period was itself a thwarting of the *futurus revelatus*. Lincoln saw the grounds for this violation of the vision of man's future in America in pragmatic political terms—the colonialists could not have had both union and an end to slavery. The colonialists were permitted to exercise their freedom as they thought necessary at the time. We might even conclude that for their time they were correct in their assessment of practical realities. But the future was thwarted and repressed nonetheless. Neither the natural possibilities that flowed from their successful union nor the consequence of their thwarting the future could be dammed up or stopped. This is what Lincoln saw more clearly than most Americans of his day. With no thought of avoiding the wrath—indeed he struggled valiantly to help his contemporaries understand their plight as a manifestation of wrath—he nevertheless believed that by rectifying the colonialists' deviation from the *futurus revelatus* further wrath might be avoided and the future might yet enhance freedom through the entire world.

Lincoln's vision was more than his age could handle, and the failure of Reconstruction represents a second climactic thwarting of the future in America. In the area of race relations we face now the third opportunity to reverse the wrath of the future thwarted.

The Christian faith recognizes one more essential aspect of the work of God, namely, that wrath falls upon guilty and innocent alike. The wrath we have known in these last ten years may be related to our human solidarity, but not to "corporate guilt." The wrath need not be ascribed to the fact that every last American is guilty of racism or militarism or imperialism or sexism or capitalist exploitationism. Wrath of the future thwarted knows no distinctions.

The poor have always known this. The black man or the white man who died in Vietnam simply because he was poor and unable to get an academic deferment may have been neither imperialist nor militarist, but he felt the wrath of the future of the American Dream thwarted. The power of God as future in our midst cannot be thwarted with impunity, and the *futurus absconditus* will do its alien work. The future cannot be manipulated or restricted to any single group or class, and our efforts to restrict it will meet further wrath poured upon innocent and guilty alike.

This insight of the Christian faith may seem to be a gospel of bad news, but in the long run it is very good news indeed. Lincoln was not immobilized by his understanding of the wrath that attended white America's treatment of blacks. He was caught in no cul-de-sac because of his sharp vision of wrath. His insight enabled him to set a course of action which, although it went against his own personal opinion that blacks were inferior, was so positive and so vast that it overwhelmed his fellow countrymen, outstripping their energies and their imaginations. Similarly, the message of the future's wrath opens up avenues for dealing with the basic problems that confront us. The power of this symbol of wrath illumines the *religious* meaning of the concrete problems and injustices we face today.

A lucid sense of the wrath which attends the future thwarted calls into question the more soothing strategies that do in fact close off avenues for dealing with our woes in contemporary American society. Scapegoating and conspiratorial paranoia are the alternatives to a sense of wrath, and these alternatives have marked and now mark our responses to evils in the American experience. They are illusionary and, in the end, paralyzingly destructive.

The inability to deal with wrath at the symbolic level is a grave weakness in the civil religion. A doctrinal dialogue is in order between the civil religionists and Christians and Jews, its goal to reform the civil religion so that it may yet be workable and wholesome as a mold of our experience. The second goal is to reestablish the credibility of the Dream to the cynics who cannot honestly live within it but are increasingly unable to live without a dream of some sort. The civil religion must be saved *from* its manipulators and *for* the people, including those who have lost the faith.