

Introduction

Civil Religion and the Anglo- and African American Jeremiads

ON AUGUST 28, 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., addressed a huge crowd of civil rights supporters gathered before the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Thanks to the electronic media, he also spoke to a far vaster audience as he attempted to fix America's attention on the urgent need for national political action to end racial segregation. The site for the event had been thoughtfully chosen. Conscious of the occasion's historic symbolism, King opened his remarks with a reverent glance backward at the national past. "Five score years ago," he intoned, "a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand, signed the Emancipation Proclamation." This "momentous decree" came as "a great beacon of hope" to millions of slaves, he declared, and inaugurated the enduring quest of African Americans for the full freedom and blessings of American life.

Dr. King pointedly contrasted the nobility of this past act with the present ignominious neglect of the black demand for equality. Americans in 1963 were not finishing the task heroically begun by Lincoln's generation, he reported disapprovingly. One hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation, King charged, "the colored American is still not free" but rather is "sadly crippled by the manacle of segregation and the chains of discrimination. . . . In a sense we have come to our Nation's Capital to cash a check."

When the architects of our great republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir . . . a

promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Yet, King lamented, it was obvious today that “instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given its colored people a bad check.”

King invoked the nation’s noble ideals and past as his prelude to demanding current reform on the issue of civil rights. He and a quarter-million marchers had come “to this hallowed spot to remind Americans of the fierce urgency of *Now*.” “*Now* is the time to make real the promise of democracy,” he announced. Today, African Americans “have come to cash this check,” he declared, and receive their birthright of the “riches of freedom” from “the great vaults of opportunity of this nation.” It was time, at last, to make real America’s promise of liberty and justice.

This was his expectant faith. Yet, he warned, it “would be fatal for the nation” if it chose “to overlook the urgency of the moment.” For “there will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the colored citizen is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.” The current deplorable situation, King declared, “somehow . . . can and will be changed.”

Beginning the speech by recalling the hallowed national past, then dwelling on the urgent challenge of the present, King turned visionary at the end, describing in unforgettable language and apocalyptic imagery his dream of America’s future. “In spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment,” King proclaimed, “I still have a dream, . . . a dream deeply rooted in the American dream,” that “one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed . . .” “I have a *dream* today,” he cried in mesmerizing cadence to a transfixed audience. In his extended inspirational peroration, King painted scene after scene of a future America transformed into a land of interracial freedom and community. In that rapidly approaching time, he declared, America would fulfill its promise “and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.” Dismissing the crowd, he charged them to

go home and work to “speed up that day” when this would happen, when all Americans could sing heartily together: “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”¹

The image of Martin Luther King standing before the Lincoln Memorial orating magnificently about his American dream is etched into the national consciousness. This speech, more than any other single event, legitimized the ongoing black revolution in the eyes of most Americans and came to symbolize a historic national turning point, lifting King into the pantheon of great American heroes.

What was it in King’s rhetoric that made it so deeply stirring for millions of Americans? This study will show how King and other national black leaders have artfully employed a rhetoric of social criticism and prophecy known as the American jeremiad, creating a variant that is specifically African American. The American jeremiad and the major contributions of African Americans to its development will be explicated by examining the thought and rhetoric of these prominent figures. Because rhetoric operates within a culture, it is best to begin by describing basic American myths that Dr. King and other black spokespersons have so skillfully invoked throughout American history.

American Messianism and Civil Religion

People in the United States have always believed America to be somehow special and uniquely set apart from the rest of the world. “America” is more than an objective geographic or political designation: it is a powerful symbol charged with great cultural meaning. On one level, “America” refers to a particular society and polity; on another, it represents a mythical space of unlimited human potential. It is the setting in which humanity’s dreams can and will be finally realized. This was the dream of America originally conceived by Europeans who hoped to escape the history-ridden Old World for a new land of unbounded opportunity and promise.²

Americans’ belief that their country is exceptional and an exemplar for other nations is as hoary as the Pilgrims and as contemporary as each presidential campaign. Puritan John Winthrop called

New England a “City on a Hill,” a shining example of socioreligious perfection lighting the way for the coming of God’s earthly kingdom. Over a century later, our rationalist Founding Fathers stated their own fervent belief that it was in Americans’ power “to begin the world over again,” and customarily referred to their republican experiment as “the world’s best hope.”³

In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan drew on these popular cultural myths as frequently and effectively as any American public figure. The following passage is typical of many in Reagan’s speeches, especially on ceremonial occasions: “I have always believed that this land was placed here . . . by some divine plan . . . to be found by a special kind of people—people who had a special love for freedom.” References to America as “a shining city on a hill” and “this last, best hope of man on earth” and to Americans’ purported ability to “begin the world over again” were all stock phrases in Reagan’s speeches.⁴ These are not just dead phrases of the far past, then, but still words able to make Americans’ hearts beat faster and swell with pride.

Furthermore, the civil religion still is a mode of language with great potential effect. In the early twenty-first century, President George W. Bush energetically marshaled American messianic notions in his rhetoric for the “war on terror” following the Al-Qaeda terrorist network’s attacks on the Pentagon and New York City’s World Trade Towers on September 11, 2001. He used similar rhetoric in justifying the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. In his starkly moralistic calls for U.S. global war against “evildoers,” he declared that the “call of history” to lead freedom’s forces against international terror “has come to the right country.” Citing democracy as God’s special blessing on America was a major part of the President’s lofty rationale for the war to topple Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. Bush stated in his 2003 State of the Union address that “the liberty we prize,” and of which U.S. foreign policy was an instrument, was both “America’s” and “God’s gift to the world.”⁵

Many scholars have held that a national “civil religion” composed of a shared set of myths, symbols, and rituals underpins American society and seeks to unify its diverse polity into one moral–spiritual community.⁶ Well developed and institutionalized, this civil religion

is replete with founding myths such as those of the Pilgrims' arrival in America and the American Revolution, with patriarchs and saviors such as Washington and Lincoln, and with scriptures such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. It is commemorated on public holidays such as Independence Day and in such public rituals as State of the Union addresses and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. From the earliest grades, the public school system inculcates civil faith and reverence in every pupil. No belief has been more central to American civil religion than the idea that Americans are, in some important sense, a chosen people with a historic mission to save and remake the world.⁷

Such a flattering self-image can promote excessive social pride and complacency or, alternatively, an acute sense of failure in completing the transcendent national mission. The American jeremiad is a rhetoric of indignation, expressing deep dissatisfaction and urgently challenging the nation to reform. The term *jeremiad*, meaning a lamentation or doleful complaint, derives from the biblical prophet, Jeremiah, who warned of Israel's fall and the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by Babylonia as punishment for the people's failure to keep the Mosaic covenant. Although Jeremiah denounced Israel's wickedness and foresaw tribulation in the near-term, he also looked forward to the nation's repentance and restoration in a future golden age. A uniquely American version of this rhetorical tradition has been identified by cultural historians as a major convention of American culture.⁸

The Puritan Origins of the American Jeremiad

The American jeremiad originated among seventeenth-century New England Puritans as a vital expression of their self-identity as a chosen people. These early Anglo-Americans believed that they had been called by divine plan to flee a hopelessly corrupt European religious and social establishment and found a holy society in the American wilderness. They felt assured of success in this grand venture because they believed God had chosen them as the historic instrument of

his will. America was destined to be a beacon to the world, lighting and leading the way to the millennium. The American Puritans thought that they, as God's new Israel, had undergone an Exodus from "Egyptian bondage" in Europe to a wholly new world. In their westward trek they had escaped the limiting, corrupting forces of tradition and, in accord with divine plan, would march inexorably toward the millennium.

John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony and the one who dubbed New England "the city on a hill," also helped found the jeremiad tradition. In the same address that informed the arriving colonists of their exalted status and destiny, the governor stressed an ominous corollary. He warned: "if we shall deal falsely with our god in this work we have undertaken," then "we shall be made a story and a byword through the world," and God would destroy them and wreck their enterprise.⁹

The jeremiad came to be the special province of the male clergy and rang down from New England's pulpits with increasing ferocity after 1650. As Puritan society fell short of its goal of civic perfection, the jeremiad became a ubiquitous ritual of self-reproach and exhortation. Puritan ministers deplored a long list of perceived social failings, denounced the people for their sins and social misconduct, and warned of worse tribulations and divine punishments to come if they did not strictly observe once more the terms of their covenant with God. Believing that their "errand into the wilderness" was to accomplish God's will and establish his kingdom, they declared that the people's everyday misbehaviors imperiled the salvation of the world.

Despite its dark surface tones, the American jeremiad was filled with underlying optimism about America's fate and mission. Sacvan Bercovitch has argued that the essence of the jeremiad was found in "its unshakable optimism," as it invariably ended by affirming American society's uniqueness and heralding its imminent perfection. The jeremiad's dark portrayal of current society never questioned America's promise and destiny. According to Bercovitch, the jeremiad accomplished this by ritualistically inverting "the doctrine of vengeance into a promise of ultimate success." American Puritans saw themselves as a "peculiar" people to whom God had promised

success so long as they observed their divine covenant. Unlike other people, therefore, their calamities were proof of their specialness; God chastened them to hasten the completion of their mission. God's vengeance against them, writes Bercovitch, was considered loving, "a father's rod used to improve the errant child. In short, their punishments confirmed their promise."¹⁰

The complete rhetorical structure of the American jeremiad has three elements: citing the *promise*; criticism of present *declension*, or retrogression from the promise; and a resolving *prophecy* that society will shortly complete its mission and redeem the promise. The jeremiad's unflinching view is that God will mysteriously use the unhappy present to spur the people to reformation and speedily onward to fulfill their divine destiny. Bercovitch argues persuasively that this basic structure of the American jeremiad survived Puritanism and evolved into a central American rhetorical and literary tradition.¹¹

Evolution of the Civil Religion

The American Revolution was the great formative event of the civil religion. Every subsequent generation inherited an existent set of primary sacred myths and symbols created by the Founding Fathers. Future Americans, in the words of one scholar, would henceforth "have to add to or lighten the burden of that original package" in order "to transform its contents" and make the myth fit contemporary needs and sensibilities.¹²

In *Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution*, Catherine Albanese analyzes key changes in American civic consciousness accomplished by the Revolution and offers a general model for comprehending the dynamics of change versus continuity in American civil religion.¹³ She underscores the Revolution's essentially conservative inspiration; the leaders' initial rationale for their actions was that they sought to preserve America's virtuous *status quo* against illegitimate imperial encroachments upon their rights as Englishmen. Indeed, until very late in the struggle with the British government over new taxes and Royal regulations that began in 1763, Americans claimed to be defending the traditional English Constitution against tyrannical

British departures from it. Not until 1776, a year after the outbreak of military hostilities, did America's leaders formally dedicate their cause to the creation of a *new* political system, republicanism, thereby finally aligning themselves with political innovation over tradition.¹⁴

The American colonists gradually transformed their inherited civic faith. The founding settlers of New England, for example, were already regional mythic heroes well before independence. New England colonists felt a keen duty to honor the traditions of those who had first settled in the wilderness to spread religious and political liberty. This was a powerful social tradition, ritualistically recalled in jeremiads. By the eve of Revolution, this colonial myth of origins had merged with the broader secular myth of Anglo-Saxon political liberty. It was widely believed that England had a mission to develop the principles of free government, and this tradition was thought to have originated in a golden age of free political and legal institutions among the eighth-century Anglo-Saxons.¹⁵

The inner drama of the Revolution, according to Albanese, was the process by which sons, originally seeking only to conserve the past, became conscious creators of something unprecedented.¹⁶ As the Revolutionary events unfolded, they gained an exhilarating self-identity as progenitors of something wholly *new*. The patriots discovered that they had saved the liberty founded by their fathers by changing and expanding it for themselves and were now creating and actualizing themselves in a time and arena of their own making. Albanese finds that, because of the patriots' intoxicating self-discovery, the Revolution was, for them, "a religious experience." Although the patriots began as dutiful sons, she writes, "somewhere in the process of rallying around their past, they discovered the sacrality of the present" and of themselves in it, and "the result was so powerful an hierophany that it became a new mythic center for themselves and for those who would come after."¹⁷

With the Revolution, the basic paradigm of the civil religion was set. But it would be ahistorical to suppose that all significant innovation ended there. From time to time, responding to great public events and crises, later generations of Americans would similarly transform their inherited understanding of the nation's mission and freshly redefine its

promise. The Revolutionary myth was an origins story for a history-making people. True sons of the Revolution were themselves called to take heroic action to advance the national mission beyond all past approximations of liberty. The sons best honored the fathers by initiating acts that simultaneously reaffirmed the nation's beginnings and thrust it forward to start a new chapter in the national saga of expanding freedom. In becoming creators of new norms, latter generations could connect themselves to the timeless experience of the founders.

Opportunities for achieving greatness like that offered by the War for Independence would, of course, not be available to most Americans in most times. Possibilities of heroic action and self-creation amid great, stirring events have occurred only as occasional peaks in American cultural history amid long valleys of seeming national declension. A more frequent feature of the cultural landscape has been incessant jeremiads castigating the present sons for infidelity to the fathers' missionary purpose and lamenting America's decline from its sacred beginnings. The Founding Fathers cast a gigantic shadow over future generations, laying on them the burden of measuring up to the fathers' awesome achievements.¹⁸ For post-Revolutionary Americans, as for the postsettlement colonists, everyday experience seemed mundane and profane in contrast. The world seemed to be continually running downhill as it drew further away from the sacred event. This is the sense of present declension that the jeremiad customarily expresses.

When Americans, however, *have* faced momentous public events to which they could respond with bold, self-realizing actions, it has proven an exhilarating, overpowering cultural experience. Then could one generation of sons claim the identity of fathers of future American traditions.

Periodically, Americans have believed themselves in the midst of an Exodus in which they cross a threshold from bondage to freedom as did the Puritan and Revolutionary fathers. For Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and others of their generation, the Civil War was such an Exodus. It represented a moment of divine intervention in history in which Americans might save the achievement of their fathers—the Union. And, as the national mission was reborn in the war, it was redefined by it.

The American civil religion, then, has evolved historically as has its jeremiadic rhetoric. An early national jeremiad glorified the American Revolution as a political Exodus in which Americans had escaped Old-World tyranny and entered the New World of Republican liberty. This nationalistic jeremiad quickly became pervasive in national discourse and was ornately embellished in countless Fourth of July orations. As it evolved with American society, moreover, the jeremiad's contents grew increasingly secular. By the mid-nineteenth century, America's "Manifest Destiny" was popularly conceived as spreading the blessings of democracy, free enterprise, and Protestantism across the continent. For a frontier people in ceaseless motion, the jeremiad served as an invaluable agent of cultural continuity and cohesion. It was able to relate the frequently unsettling signs of the times with familiar myths that, amid rapid change, preserved Americans' traditional self-image.¹⁹

Abolitionist Origins of the African American Jeremiad

As a pervasive idiom for expressing sharp social criticism within normative cultural bounds, the American jeremiad has been frequently adapted for the purposes of black protest and propaganda, starting with the abolitionist crusade against slavery in the antebellum North. Although there were many instances of violent rebellion among Southern slaves, slave resistance necessarily mainly took subtler, nonpublic forms such as plantation theft and sabotage, grudging compliance with authority, or individual escape.²⁰ Only in the Northern-based free black community was it relatively safe to protest openly against American slavery and racial proscription.

According to Wilson Moses, the jeremiad was the earliest expression of black nationalism and key mode of antebellum African American rhetoric. *Black jeremiad* is Moses' term for "the constant warnings issued by blacks to whites, concerning the judgement that was to come from the sin of slavery." In this ubiquitous rhetorical convention, blacks "revealed a conception of themselves as a chosen people" as well as "a clever ability to play on the belief that America as a whole was a chosen nation with a covenantal duty to deal justly with the blacks."²¹

Messianic themes of coming liberation and social redemption have deep roots in African American culture. The biblical motif of the Exodus of the chosen people from Egyptian slavery to a Promised Land of freedom was central to the black socioreligious imagination. African Americans, by virtue of their unjust bondage, felt that they had a messianic role in achieving their own and others' redemption. Similar themes of messianic purpose and identity and of a historical Exodus figured prominently in both black and white antebellum culture. The interconnected development of a strong commitment by African Americans and Anglo-Americans to evangelical Protestantism in the two generations before the Civil War encouraged black leaders to believe that Northern whites would respond to their denunciation of the sin of slavery as declension from the promise of a Christian America.²²

The abolitionist jeremiad sometimes crossed the color line to appear in the reflections of prominent whites. Proud nationalists of the early Republic hailed their revolution as the greatest advance for humanity in all history. Having so recently resisted a tyrannical plot to enslave free men, Americans were not entirely oblivious to the stark contradiction of the nation's professed ideals involved in the enslavement of Africans in America. Thomas Jefferson worried about the fate of liberty in a land that tolerated the systematic denial of the most basic rights to millions of people. Believing that "liberties are the gift of God . . . not violated but with His wrath," Jefferson lamented, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just."²³

Far stronger were the fierce condemnations of slavery hurled at white Americans by black abolitionist jeremiahs such as David Walker. Walker was born legally free to a slave father and free mother in North Carolina in 1785. At the age of thirty, he left the South vowing to avenge the wrongs against his people and moved to Boston where he became a militant abolitionist journalist. He was among the most socially advantaged African Americans and, while his fiery rhetoric expressed alienation from the land of his birth, his skillful use of jeremiadic rhetoric reflected his active participation in the highest ideals of American society. In his famous 1829 pamphlet, *The Appeal*, Walker bitterly charged "this Republican land" with gross hypocrisy and called down God's wrath on America: "Oh Americans! Americans! I warn

you in the name of the Lord . . . to repent and reform, or you are ruined!" Despite the *Appeal's* rhetorical threats of violent black revenge, it ended with the optimistic prediction that God meant yet to melt the hearts of white Americans and save them from their folly.²⁴

It is ironic that this earliest expression of messianic black nationalism in America should have sprung up in such close proximity to Anglo-American nationalism. For leading black spokespersons' use of American jeremiadic rhetoric signals their virtually complete acceptance of and incorporation into the national cultural norm of millennial faith in America's promise. Yet the African American jeremiad also expressed black nationalist faith in the missionary destiny of the African race and was a leading instrument of black social assertion in America.

Black Nationalism and the Two Chosen Peoples

"One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro,"²⁵ wrote W. E. B. Du Bois, classically stating one of the key paradoxes of black history: blacks' simultaneous integration into an American culture largely created by whites and their social exclusion from white society. This contradictory experience has bred both an American and strong separate group identity among African Americans, a dual identity that has often been reflected in black messianic traditions.

While African Americans most often have chosen a composite nationality that incorporates both their specific experience of race and their general American messianic tendencies, many blacks have embraced exclusive black nationalist myths such as those in Garveyism and the Nation of Islam, which posit a messianic destiny for blacks apart from, or even in opposition to, the national mission imagined by Anglo-Americans. Marcus Garvey in the 1920s led a popular mass movement among American blacks that championed separate black developments in America and ultimate reunion of all people of African descent in an independent African fatherland. Garveyism represented a potent black civil religion promulgating the idea that there was no promising future for blacks in America solely as Americans.²⁶

Similar separatist ideas appeared in a black nationalist millenarian sect founded in the 1930s, the Nation of Islam.²⁷ The so-called Black Muslims' views gained national notoriety in the 1950s and 1960s, especially as voiced to the media by the fiery Muslim spokesman, Malcolm X. For him (until his last year or so), America was not and never would be blacks' promised land but rather was a white-run jail from which blacks had, psychologically and physically, to escape.²⁸

Unlike separatist forms of black nationalism such as those voiced by Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X, the dominant black jeremiad tradition conceives of blacks as a chosen people *within* a chosen people. The African American jeremiad tradition, then, characteristically addresses *two* American chosen peoples—black and white—whose millennial destinies, while distinct, are also inextricably entwined.

After its inception in the abolitionist movement, the black jeremiad remained a prime black rhetorical and ideological force into the twenty-first century. While greatly respecting his work on black messianism, I sharply disagree with Wilson Moses' characterization of the period in which the black jeremiad flourished. Moses considers the black jeremiad "mainly a pre-Civil War phenomenon" exclusively associated with abolitionism. This view slights the continued vitality of the African American jeremiad as a primary tool of black protest against all forms of American racial injustice before and after slavery.²⁹ It is the story of this influential rhetorical tradition's place and development in the thought of national black leaders from the age of the Civil War to the present that this book tells.

The study examines uses and reformulations of the jeremiad in the speeches and writings of Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, Ida B. Wells, W. E. B. Du Bois, Mary McLeod Bethune, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Jesse L. Jackson. Although it is argued that all these figures drew on and participated in this rhetorical tradition, they did not all do so in identical manner or to the same extent. Of these eight outstanding national leaders of the mainly nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Douglass, Du Bois, Wells, King, and Jackson most consistently used the jeremiad in its purest form, that is, boldly and unrelentingly, to censure white Americans. Although Bethune and Malcolm X employed elements of the jeremiad in their rhetoric,

they also sometimes deviated considerably from parts of the pattern. Washington alone among these figures entirely omitted the jeremiad's censorious tone in his public words to white Americans, but at the same time he confirmed their status as a chosen people. His openly critical reform rhetoric to blacks, on the other hand, closely followed the jeremiad format. Unlike Washington, Wells and Bethune clearly operated within the mainstream black protest tradition, vigorously defending black civil rights and criticizing whites. Yet their relation to the jeremiad is somewhat ambiguous, because they also relied considerably on less aggressive modes of persuasion. Malcolm X (in his separatist nationalist phase), alone among the leaders analyzed, vehemently denied any messianic identity and redemptive hope for European Americans, even while he lambasted whites for their evil misdeeds toward African Americans. On the other hand, Malcolm always aimed truly jeremiadic criticisms and prophetic words toward blacks and seemed to be, at his end, nearing a jeremiad with hope for all Americans.

The ebb and flow of optimism about American promise and progress is a pervasive motif in this analysis, affording much inner drama behind these figures' public words. Douglass, Du Bois, and King in particular vacillated with regard to America's perfectibility. Their rhetoric reveals that the intractability of white racism could plunge them into profound crises of faith and that they struggled, often at the cost of great personal turmoil, to sustain a vision of America's democratic promise.