

INTRODUCTION

# Prophetic Republicanism as Vital Center

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world . . .  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity. . . .

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,  
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

— W. B. YEATS, “THE SECOND COMING”

WRITING SHORTLY AFTER the close of World War II, Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. spoke of the urgent need to fortify the “vital center” of the American polity against “centrifugal forces” that were threatening to tear it apart. By the “vital center,” he meant an alliance between “the non-Fascist Right” and “the non-Communist Left” that was based on a shared belief in liberal democracy.<sup>1</sup> The “centrifugal forces” he spoke of emanated from rapid social change and radical ideologies.

The only way that the vital center could be held together, he argued, was if the Left and the Right both faced up to their own moral and political failures. The chief failure of the Left was a sentimental belief in human goodness and historical progress that led it to underestimate the human capacity for evil. The chief failure of the Right was a callous indifference to the dislocations and injustices produced by industrial capitalism and a self-serving faith that the market would sort them out.

Today, America’s vital center is threatened by a new set of centrifugal forces: by economic changes that are steadily widening the gap between the haves and the have-nots; by partisan politics that are drawing a new Mason Dixon line between “red states” and “blue states”; by the Great Recession, which lasted longer than the Great Depression; by a series of small wars that have left the nation anxious and depleted; and by a

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never-ending culture war now well into its fourth decade. These changes are pulling at the seams of the social fabric.

The vital center is also threatened by radical ideologies. Some are old, such as the revival of “states’ rights” arguments hailing from the antebellum South. Others are newer, such as the antistatist “techno-libertarianism” that has taken hold among some on the Left. These ideologies are tearing the American tapestry apart.

The result of these changes is political dysfunction. Congress engages in unprecedented obstructionism. The executive branch responds with unprecedented unilateralism. Roads and bridges crumble. Cabinet posts go unfilled. Budgets get stuck in committee. Each side doubles down in the hope of scoring a knockout blow against the other. This endless gridlock and bare-knuckled partisanship is eroding the nation’s power and standing in the world.

What is needed now is not another political speech about “American greatness.” What is needed is a new vital center, a coalition of nonchauvinists and nonlibertarians on the Left and the Right, a coalition of ordinary citizens premised on a common vision of the American project that is grounded in America’s civil religious tradition.

The vital center is not a mushy middle that splits the difference between Left and Right. It is a living tradition that cuts across these divisions. Some will argue that it is “neoconservative.” Others will denounce it as “crypto-socialist.” But they will be wrong: it is neither. It is something much older and also more radical.

The vital center does not purport to be a “third way” that “transcends” Left and Right. It is a political vocabulary that enables dialogue and debate between Left and Right. The point of reclaiming the vital center is not to end debate but to restart it. There is plenty of posturing in our public life right now but very little genuine engagement. There is lots of shouting but not much actual discussion.

Much of the shouting is coming from two directions. The first is American religious nationalism, a toxic blend of apocalyptic religion and imperial zeal that envisions the United States as a righteous nation charged with a divine commission to rid the world of evil and usher in the Second Coming. The other is American radical secularism, an equally noxious blend of cultural elitism and militant atheism that envisions the United States as part of an Enlightenment project threatened by the ignorant rubes who still cling to traditional religion.

Religious nationalism is not worthy of our allegiance. There are reasonable forms of nationalism, but religious nationalism is not one of

them. At its core, religious nationalism is just national self-worship. It is political idolatry dressed up as religious orthodoxy. Any sincere believer should reject it, remembering that the line between good and evil does not run between people or nations; it runs through them.

Radical secularism is not worthy of our allegiance either. There are reasonable forms of secularism, too, but radical secularism is not one of them. At its core, radical secularism is little more than a misguided effort at cultural censorship, political illiberalism dressed up as liberal politics. Any serious liberal should reject it on the ground that liberal citizenship should not require that religious citizens shed their deepest beliefs before entering the public square. What liberal citizenship really requires is liberality—a spirit of ecumenism, generosity, and civic friendship.

How have religious nationalism and radical secularism come to exert so much influence over our public life? This situation has arisen in part because both sides have been supported by vocal and well-organized minorities, and in part because each tradition strongly confirms the other's prejudices. Christian nationalists conform to the stereotypes of the radical secularists, who equate religion with violence and intolerance. Radical secularists conform to the stereotypes of the Christian nationalists, who equate secularism with moral relativism and cultural condescension. Meanwhile, the chorus of shouting drowns out the quieter voices of the vital center.

That center consists of the many Americans—believers and nonbelievers, Republicans and Democrats—who support a moderate form of secularism and a liberal form of nationalism. They are concerned that church and state not become too entangled in one another's affairs, but they do not believe you can take religion entirely out of politics, or vice versa. They know that the American project has a moral and spiritual core. They also value American culture and institutions enough to cherish and defend them but without succumbing to the conceit that America is always and everywhere a "force for good in the world." They are the natural constituency of the vital center. This book is addressed to them. It is an effort to give voice to the historical tradition that undergirds their deepest convictions, in a time when the best are denounced for lacking all conviction.

This is mostly a book about important thinkers and their ideas, rather than about power and institutions. I am well aware that thinkers and their ideas are always influenced by power and institutions—I am a sociologist, after all!—but I also know that thinkers and their ideas are rarely sufficient to change power and institutions. For that, organizations and movements are generally required. But as a historical and cultural

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sociologist, I am equally convinced that thinkers and their ideas are always necessary to change power and institutions. They help us to express our highest ideals and to see how we fall short of them.

The thinkers and ideas I deal with in this book are not free-floating. They are all embedded in various traditions, and it is these traditions that I am most concerned with here. By a “tradition,” I mean a culture that is self-conscious of its past. To be part of a tradition is to know certain stories, read certain books, admire certain people, and care about certain things. It is to knowingly enter into an ongoing conversation, a conversation that precedes one’s birth and continues on after one’s death.

Commitment to a tradition is not just a matter of opinion. It is not “subjective,” like a preference about soda is. Traditions have been forged and tested through historical experience and collective debate. Some traditions stand the test of time; others don’t.

Traditions have to be evaluated not only in relationship to historical experience but also vis-à-vis rival traditions: other accounts of how the world is and should be. Evaluating traditions fairly is difficult. In this book, I have used three criteria: internal consistency, historical accuracy, and sociological plausibility. I have asked whether each tradition remains true to its own highest values, gives a defensible interpretation of the nation’s history, and yields a practicable vision of the American project.

I believe that the civil religious tradition passes these three tests, and that its two rivals fail them. Religious nationalism fails because it is idolatrous and thus irreligious, because America was not founded as a “Christian nation,” and because many modern-day Americans are not believing Christians but are good citizens nonetheless. Radical secularism fails because restricting religious expression violates liberal principles, because the United States was not founded on a “total separation” of religion and politics, and because most Americans are still religious. Consequently, neither religious nationalism nor radical secularism provides a morally defensible, historically plausible, or sociologically practicable basis for the American project.

The civil religious tradition passes these tests because it is neither idolatrous nor illiberal, because it recognizes both the sacred and the secular sources of the American creed, because it provides a political vision that can be embraced by believers and nonbelievers alike, and because it is capacious enough to incorporate new generations of Americans.

I expect that some readers may be puzzled by my emphasis on the dynamism of tradition. “Isn’t a tradition fixed?” they might ask. I agree that

any tradition must have some foundations, and that the shape of those foundations influences the shape of what can be built on them. But any building must be renovated and expanded now and again if it is to withstand the tests of time and accommodate new occupants.

Let me put this less metaphorically. The foundations of a tradition are laid by certain people and composed of certain texts. To that degree, they are indeed fixed. But the meaning of those lives and texts is always and ever subject to debate. Even the names of the founders and the texts in a canon may be called into question. New founders and texts may be discovered and incorporated. That is the source of the tradition's dynamism.

For some, "dynamism" is just another word for corruption. I am not of this view. I believe that the full meaning of a tradition is only gradually disclosed over time as its implications are worked out in various contexts. For example, I think it is fair to say that the American founders did not fully understand the meaning of equality, even if they wrote that concept into the founding documents.

Nor is this to say that change is always for the good. Traditions really can be corrupted. Corruption occurs when the core values of a tradition are distorted to justify a particular status quo, as when equality is claimed to apply only to white, property-holding men. But sometimes change deepens or widens a tradition, making it more profound or inclusive. In this way, freedom of conscience was eventually understood to imply the free exercise of religious faith, and not only for Protestants. This sort of change is not corrupting. Indeed, a tradition that is no longer able to grow in this way may in fact be dying.

While some readers may find my definition of tradition peculiar, others may find it alarming. "Isn't tradition opposed to modernity, rationality, and progress?" they might ask. Not at all! Modernity and tradition are closely connected. It is precisely the rapid pace of social change in modern societies that has generated a stronger awareness of tradition in the first place and, for many, a deepened yearning for the bonds of tradition, as evidenced by the many traditions great and small that we moderns are continually inventing for ourselves.

Nor do I think that rationality is inherently opposed to tradition. I doubt that rationality in any deep sense is possible outside of a tradition, if by "tradition" we mean a certain language for talking about the world, and if by "rationality" we mean reasoning about ends as well as means. The various discourses of modernity—natural science, secular philosophy, abstract art, and so on—are all "traditions" in this sense. They tell us

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what we should strive for—be it truth or reason or beauty—and not just how to get there. It is therefore important to distinguish tradition in the sense I describe here from traditionalism in the sense of an instinctive resistance to change.

Finally, I do not believe that tradition is inherently opposed to progress. Tradition often serves as an inspiration for change, and sometimes even as a source of radicalism. Civic republicanism is a very old tradition, for example; its roots go back at least to ancient Athens. Nevertheless, it provided one inspiration for the American Revolution, which was a very radical experiment indeed. Prophetic religion is an even older tradition; its roots go back to ancient Israel. But it provided one inspiration for the civil rights movement, another very radical movement. Again, we must be careful not to confuse tradition and traditionalism.

“Fine,” readers may respond. “But I am still an antitraditionalist. I prefer to think everything through on my own.” I doubt this is really possible. By the time we are able to think on our own, we have already been socialized into any number of traditions: cultural, political, local, religious, and so on. We can be reflective about and even critical of these traditions. And we should be. That is what people really mean when they talk about thinking things through “on their own.” My point is that there is a historical and social element to all of our thinking. We think in languages that have been handed down and taught to us.

What does it mean to be immersed in a tradition? A tradition is like a powerful river that cuts through a deep canyon. We can approach it in various ways. We can swim against the current, or we can just let it carry us along. We can also lie on our backs and gaze upward, wondering what lies above. All these are things we can do.

What we assuredly cannot do is climb up out of the canyon and gaze down at the river from some God’s-eye perspective. For finite, cultural animals such as us, there is no “view from nowhere.” It is because of this that independent, critical thinking is not necessarily opposed to tradition. In fact, I would argue that it is really possible only for those who have mastered a tradition.

To think critically within a tradition is to paddle to shore and walk upstream or downstream, reflecting on how the river and the canyon have shaped one another. To act critically within a tradition is to try to bend the river by altering the banks, or vice versa. This book does the former in order to enable the latter. It presses conservatives to embrace a more dynamic understanding of tradition, and it pushes progressives to take tradition more seriously. And it does both with an eye to action.

One of the scholarly traditions that I am working out of here is “critical hermeneutics.” My method is “hermeneutic” in that it involves textual interpretation, but mine is not a sophisticated hermeneutics based on literary theory. Rather, it is a poor man’s hermeneutics that simply tries to put texts into contexts—biographical, historical, and social.

I am interested in the standpoint of the author, the sources of his or her thinking, and how that thinking was related to the problems of the day. I am especially interested in thinkers who deepened or widened their traditions: deepened by going back to earlier texts within the tradition or widened by drawing in new sources.

My approach is critical insofar as it involves the *evaluation* of texts. I regard some interpretations as better than others, based on the three criteria enumerated previously. For example, I think Frederick Douglass’s and Abraham Lincoln’s interpretations of the nation’s founding documents are much better than John C. Calhoun’s (see chapter 4). And I think Reinhold Niebuhr’s interpretation of Nazism is infinitely superior to H. L. Mencken’s (see chapter 5).

My approach is also critical in several other senses, though. I criticize some thinkers for a one-sided reading of the civil religious tradition. In this way, I criticize Hannah Arendt for ignoring the prophetic side of the tradition (see chapter 6), and I criticize Barack Obama for underplaying its republican side. I criticize other thinkers for corrupting the civil religious tradition (see chapter 7). In this vein, I criticize Jerry Falwell for exempting the Christian churches from his prophetic critiques, and I criticize Ronald Reagan for absolving the American people of their collective sins (again, see chapter 7).

Another brief note on method is also necessary here: the central concepts of this book—“civil religion,” “religious nationalism,” and “radical secularism”—are all “ideal types” in the two senses delineated by the great German sociologist Max Weber. First, they are “ideal types” in the sense of a series of “unified analytical constructs” that are “formed by the one-sided accentuation of certain points of view” so as to sharpen their contrasts with each other.<sup>2</sup> An ideal type construct in this sense is a set of interrelated concepts that are more logically consistent within themselves and more sharply bounded off from one another than are the real phenomena to which they refer. In short, ideal types are useful exaggerations. By turning shades of gray into black and white, they make it easier for us to see real contrasts.

These concepts are also “ideal types” in a second sense: they articulate contrasting sets of ethical and political ideals and clarify what is at stake



when we choose between them. So one function of ideal types is to draw out the underlying assumptions of civil religion, religious nationalism, and radical secularism so that we can subject them to logical, historical, and ethical evaluation. Another is to more precisely locate the boundaries between them so that we know when we are crossing over from one side to the other—when, for instance, a laudable sort of civic patriotism is devolving into a dangerous form of political idolatry, or when a reasonable concern with individual freedom is shading off into a malignant type of radical individualism.

I set out to write a book that is scholarly but accessible. That is easier said than done, and whether I have succeeded, only the reader can judge. Still, it may be helpful if I briefly explain how I have approached the task.

On the one hand, I have tried to read as broadly and deeply as possible—broadly in the general literature about each historical period I consider, and deeply in the writings of each individual thinker I examine. I have not delved into personal papers or archival sources but have relied exclusively on published materials and secondary literature. Consequently, whatever claim to originality this book may have resides exclusively in the overarching framework it develops—particularly its central thesis concerning America's three competing political theologies.

At the same time, I have tried to write as plainly and directly as possible. This is not how professors are taught to write, and I have learned that it is not easy. As far as possible, I have tried to keep the academic jargon to a minimum and to confine scholarly debates to the endnotes or, where this is not possible, to define my terms in ordinary language and paint the academic debates in very broad strokes.

Specialist readers who care about the scholarly debates can always turn to the notes, where they will easily discover my intellectual influences. Among other things, they will find that my interpretation of civic republicanism is shaped by the Cambridge School, that my understanding of the prophetic is similar to Walter Brueggemann's, that my understanding of hermeneutics takes its cues from Paul Ricoeur, and that my theory of tradition is inspired by Alasdair MacIntyre and Jeff Stout. Non-specialist readers who do not care about such things can simply read on.

I have also structured the introductory and concluding sections of the book in a somewhat unusual way. The present introduction is addressed to a wide audience, and it may be all the introduction that many readers will want. In contrast, the next chapter is a bit more scholarly. It, too, is written for a general audience, but readers with a low tolerance for conceptual discussion may wish to skip it. The conclusion is likewise in two



parts. Its first part, chapter 8, is, like chapter 1, a little more scholarly in tone. It contrasts civil religion with other political philosophies and political theologies, and argues that some of them are reasonable and others not. Readers who are not especially interested in political philosophy or political theology may want to skip directly to the conclusion proper, which sketches a vision of the righteous republic and considers how such an end might be achieved. I suspect that many academic readers will find chapters 1 and 8 much more interesting than the introduction and conclusion, while some political philosophers and theologians may find them to be the only interesting parts of the book.

Now, for a more detailed road map of what follows. In chapter 1, I define my key concepts in greater detail and situate my argument within current debates. I explain at more length what I mean by terms like “civic republicanism,” “prophetic religion,” “civil religion,” “religious nationalism,” “radical secularism,” and “tradition,” and I spell out how my definitions are similar to, or different from, those advanced by other scholars. Again, readers who are satisfied with the briefer explication of these terms I have already given may simply skip directly to chapter 2, though they may wish to circle back after reading a few of the historical chapters.

Chapter 2 is devoted to what I regard as America’s first founding: the establishment of Puritan New England. There, I argue that covenantal religion provided the basic blueprint for Puritan society; that the Puritan polity was proto-republican; that American religious nationalism first arose out of the Puritans’ wars with the Native Americans; and, finally, that Puritan society gave rise to proto-secularist views, but not radical secularist ones.

Chapter 3 focuses on what I regard as America’s second founding: the American Revolution. There, I side with scholars who argue that the American revolutionaries were more influenced by civic republicanism than by “Lockean liberalism”; that the American founders generally saw Christianity and republicanism as complementary, rather than opposed; that the most influential model of republican government for most Americans was neither Rome nor Athens but Jerusalem; that apocalyptic religious nationalism was conspicuous mainly by its absence in this period; and that scholars who believe that radical secularism was the main inspiration for the American Constitution are seriously mistaken.

Chapter 4 turns to what may be seen as America’s first refounding: the Civil War. It argues that Abraham Lincoln’s understanding of the American Constitution was initially quite similar to that of John C. Calhoun,

the most articulate defender of Southern slavery and “states’ rights,” but that Lincoln’s thinking gradually converged around a new interpretation of the Constitution whose leading advocate was the abolitionist orator Frederick Douglass, himself an emancipated slave. For Calhoun, the articles of the Constitution overrode the preamble, and the Constitution overrode the Declaration, while Douglass’s reading proceeded in the opposite direction: the preamble of the Declaration, with its promise of equality, overrode the articles of the Constitution, with their tacit recognition of chattel slavery.

Chapter 4 also details important developments within the rival traditions. It discusses the emergence of a new rhetoric of “blood sacrifice” and “blood atonement,” first as a justification for the Civil War and later to legitimate American imperialism, and how this durably transformed American religious nationalism. It also discusses the new radical secularist movement that appeared during Reconstruction and the central role that nativist anti-Catholicism played in its emergence.

In chapter 5, I fast-forward to a second period of social upheaval, the first half of the twentieth century. This chapter focuses on four Progressive Era intellectuals—John Dewey, Jane Addams, Reinhold Niebuhr, and W.E.B. Du Bois—and their respective responses to America’s increasing secularity, diversity, and power, as well as its continuing struggles over race. It also details the emergence of popular apocalypticism within American Christianity and discusses its influence on American religious nationalism via the example of Pentecostal evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson. Finally, it shows why modern-day radical secularists might want to think twice before lionizing H. L. Mencken.

In chapter 6, I turn my attention to the decades after World War II, the period of the “liberal consensus,” the civil rights movement, and the final collapse of the WASP ascendancy in American society. I show how Hannah Arendt challenged an increasingly technocratic style of liberal governance by returning to the Athenian roots of Western democracy, how Martin Luther King’s civic poetry wove several new strands into prophetic republicanism, and how John Courtney Murray incorporated Catholicism into the American story and resynthesized the prophetic and republican strands of the civil religious tradition via the theory of natural law.

In chapter 7, I trace the interaction between the civil religious tradition and partisan politics from the Reagan era up through the present day. In brief, I argue that liberal Democrats like Michael Dukakis and Walter Mondale jettisoned the civil religious tradition, while conserva-

tive Republicans like Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush corrupted it. I also argue that Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign can be seen as an attempt to revive that tradition, albeit a one-sided and anemic one that ignored its republican strand and then succumbed to the fundamental contradiction between power and prophecy.

In chapter 8, I explain in greater detail why I regard the civil religious tradition as superior to its two main rivals and compare this tradition to several other closely related standpoints, including "liberal nationalism" and "constitutional patriotism." Again, the general reader may find this discussion a bit too specialized.

Finally, in the conclusion, I offer some thoughts on how a revival of the prophetic republican tradition might be brought about and how it would reframe political debate and public policy in the contemporary United States.

In closing, let me offer a few caveats for both the scholarly and non-scholarly reader. The scholarly reader may wonder about my method. For example, cultural and historical sociologists may wonder why I have not spent more time trying to explain the series of social crises that frame each chapter of the book or placing the resulting conflicts in their social context. Intellectual historians may be unhappy that I have focused most of my attention on a few relatively well-known figures instead of trying to paint a more complete and bottom-up picture of the political debates within each period. Political philosophers might wish that I had parsed certain texts more finely or worked out some of my arguments in greater detail. Political scientists, finally, may wonder how the intellectual developments I discuss here may have interacted with electoral politics or public policy.

I have two answers to these concerns. The first is that I am addressing my readers as citizens first and scholars second. The second is that even a scholarly book's method must be appropriate to its purposes. The purposes of this book are to recuperate a certain tradition within American political culture, to demonstrate that it has been a living and evolving tradition, and to identify certain exemplary figures within that tradition from whom we might still draw some measure of inspiration today. While the book's methods may not be adequate to the current standards within any of the various disciplines on which they draw, I believe that they are adequate to their own purposes.

I'd also like to issue a further caveat for nonacademic readers who may wonder why a book about the present crisis gives so much attention to past events. Let me briefly reiterate the reasons:

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1. To deepen our perspective on the present. Our current debates are often extensions of earlier debates that reach back to the founding generations and beyond. Consequently, revisiting past debates may help us to resolve present ones, or at least to understand them better.
2. To provide hope for the future. Viewed through the lens of a single lifetime, our politics may seem hopelessly static. When viewed in cross-generational perspective, however, the slow and halting progress becomes more visible. History can be an antidote for cynicism.
3. To challenge misleading narratives. Our positions on politics are often wrapped up with our understanding of the past. If this understanding is distorted or one-sided—and it often is—then our politics will be too. Better history may lead to better politics.
4. To provide a sturdier and more capacious frame for thinking about the American project. Nonacademics—which is to say, most people—do not usually reason in terms of abstract principles or values; they work through moral problems in terms of stories. Historical narratives help us to think about what should come next.