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**Bringing Religion Back In:
Elements of a Cultural Explanation of
American Democracy**

Michael Zöllner

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Preface

Many readers of our Occasional Papers series know that the annual Alois Mertes Memorial Lecture commemorates the German statesman, diplomat, and politician Alois Mertes, who died in 1985. Mertes was an expert in German foreign policy and international relations, and it was for this reason, among others, that he was appointed undersecretary of state by Chancellor Helmut Kohl in 1982.

The purpose of this memorial lecture series is to reward scholars working in one of the areas to which Alois Mertes devoted his life in public service, namely, the German question in the context of German-American relations, European integration and the Atlantic alliance, the prevention of war and its link to ethics, the dialog between American Jews and Germans, and the relationship between religion and politics.

The previous six memorial lectures covered the following topics: *The World Jewish Congress and the End of the German Democratic Republic* (Michael Wolffsohn), *CDU Deutschlandpolitik and Reunification* (Clay Clemens), *Ideals and Interests in Recent German Foreign Policy* (Ludger Kühnhardt), *East German Communists and the Jewish Question: The Case of Paul Merker* (Jeffrey Herf), *The Germans and the Nuclear Question* (Wolfgang Krieger), and *The Struggle for Germany and the Origins of the Cold War* (Melvyn P. Leffler).

To date the relationship between religion and politics in the modern world has not been treated in this series. As a convinced democrat, committed Catholic, and active member of the Central Committee of Roman Catholics in Germany, Alois Mertes made this subject a lifelong concern. It thus was a natural choice for the German Historical Institute to invite Professor Michael Zöller to give the 1997 Alois Mertes Memorial Lecture. Professor Zöller has distinguished himself in the fields of political sociology, American studies, and the role of religion in modern life. He currently is professor of political sociology and director

of the Center for American Studies at the University of Bayreuth. He also was recently appointed Max-Weber-Professor at the newly founded University of Erfurt in Thuringia.

Professor Zöller was born in Würzburg in 1946 and studied at the universities of Frankfurt, Würzburg, and Munich; he received his Dr. phil. degree at Munich in 1973. Zöller was active as a junior editor for a broadcasting corporation in 1965 and held the same position at the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in 1966. His academic positions include that of assistant professor at the University of Munich from 1974 to 1975, professor at the Hochschule für Politik in Munich from 1975 to 1979, and a visiting professorship at the University of Mainz in 1982.

Zöller has received many fellowships, grants, and visiting scholarships that have allowed him to gain an expert knowledge of academic life in the United States. In 1979 he was a visiting fellow at the University of Notre Dame, where he later returned as a visiting professor in 1986. In addition, he was awarded fellowships at the University of Chicago in 1984 and 1992, at Stanford University in 1985, 1989, and 1993, and at the Catholic University of America in 1993 and 1994.

Zöller has authored eight books, including works on German politics such as *Die Utopie der neuen Intelligenz (The Illusions of the New Intellectuals; 1974)* and *Die Unfähigkeit zur Politik: Politikbegriff und Wissenschaftsverständnis von Humboldt bis Habermas (Politically Incapable: Views of Politics and Scholarship from Humboldt to Habermas; 1975)*. His later work focused on problems in American society, including *Welfare—Das amerikanische Wohlfahrtssystem (The American Welfare System; 1982)* and *Massengesellschaft und Massenkommunikation: Das Beispiel Amerikas (Mass Society and Mass Communication: The Example of America; 1984)*. Zöller's most recent book, *Washington und Rom: Der Katholizismus in der amerikanischen Kultur (Washington and Rome: Catholicism in American Culture)*, was published in 1995.

He also has contributed numerous articles to scholarly periodicals, popular journals, and newspapers, affirming his dedication to public policy issues. These include preserving academic freedom, advancing democratic thought and political respon-

sibility in contemporary Germany, and examining the German social welfare state. His most recent articles focus on the examination of American society and the question of American influence on European thought and social behavior.

We are pleased to present Professor Zöller's lecture on the role of religion in the development of American democracy as the seventh Alois Mertes Memorial Lecture and as the twenty-first issue in our Occasional Papers series.

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Detlef Junker

Bringing Religion Back In: Elements of a Cultural Explanation of American Democracy

Michael Zöller

Until the 1980s German scholars in the humanities and social sciences who focused on cultural explanations were the exception rather than the rule. At the Amerika-Forschungsstelle in Bayreuth we have always begun with the assumption that culture matters. We especially believe that the religious element of culture is particularly important in understanding the history of the United States. In this essay I present several examples of our research to demonstrate how a cultural lens focused on religion clarifies various elements of the American experience.

Alois Mertes, for whom this lecture is named, came from a region in western Germany that even in 1932 cast less than 20 percent of its votes for the National Socialists. The strong cultural milieu of his native region seemed to provide a partial inoculation against the Nazi virus. His upbringing instilled in Mertes an abiding concern with the relationships among culture, religion, and politics.¹

By *culture* we mean more or less what Alexis de Tocqueville called *mores*, namely, "the different notion possessed by men, the various opinions among them, and the sum of ideas that shape mental habits."² We have taken up that part of Max Weber's

I would like to thank Jerry Z. Muller for his editorial work on this manuscript, which improved it considerably.

¹ Alois Mertes, *Der Primat des Politischen: Reden und Aufsätze*, ed. Günter Buchstab (Düsseldorf, 1994).

² Alexis de Tocqueville, *Über die Demokratie in Amerika* (Munich, 1976), 332.

work that attempts to explain how culture influences individual behavior and how culturally motivated individual action leads to social institutions. Our working hypothesis can be summarized as follows: Every motive of action—whether it is framed in the language of politics, morality, or economics—is at its core a cultural concept, which frequently turns out to be a religious concept.

This hypothesis is particularly applicable to the study of the American experience, which has long been recognized as a culture biased in favor of religion. We all know of distinguished and not-so-distinguished European observers who came to the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth century and encountered what they either feared or hoped for in their own countries. Often enough they were convinced that they would find the European future in the American present, on the assumption that there was a single, common direction for Western societies. Some American intellectuals objected to this assumption, emphasizing the differences between Europe and the United States, and hence the exceptional nature of the American experience. Such "exceptionalists," as they were appropriately dubbed, pointed out, for example, that the American and French Revolutions were quite disparate in nature and had very different outcomes. For them, America was to be perceived not as the precursor of a common modern Western age but rather as an exception or a model of a different kind of modernity, or as a reason for hoping that there were alternative paths for European development.

The religious culture of America provides an example of this separate American development, which counters expectations that advancing modernization, with its loosening of social ties, would lead to the disappearance of religion. Initially, the development of religion in America appeared to be merely a variation on English patterns. But as early as the late eighteenth century there arose specifically American forms of religion that, despite their diversity, shared the conviction that individuals not only had the *right* to choose their religious affiliation but were also *competent* to evaluate their religious choices. As we will see, even those movements that opposed the weakening of the power

of congregations and their governing institutions ultimately contributed to this highly individualistic conception of religion. And this, in turn, might help to explain why the United States—in this respect quite unlike Europe—still has a religious culture and is, in many respects, a religious culture itself.

There are many ways to demonstrate the religious nature of contemporary American society compared with its European counterparts. In any European city you will find a cathedral in the historic center and, after climbing a lot of stairs, if you look out from the steeple you will see the modern residential sections surrounding the inner city like a belt. In an American city you are more likely to find an impressive skyscraper owned by an insurance company right in the center. If you were to take the elevator to the roof of the building, you would see the city stretching to the horizon, and sticking out would be dozens of churches. In the inner districts these churches generally display highly disparate features, reflecting the periods in which they were built and the tastes of the immigrants who built them. But beyond the inner city they tend to be as uniform as the suburbs and the middle class to whom they belong.

This is a spatial and an architectural reminder that American history does not support the belief in the end of belief. America has become *more* religious in the course of its history, not less so, and religion is increasingly identified with the middle class.³ The contrast to European developments is striking. Some 80 percent of Americans belong to a church or synagogue, and, however one defines middle class, the significant difference from Europe is that congregants are close to average in every respect. They are not the older, less-educated female inhabitants of economically backward rural regions—the typical European pattern—but rather resemble the general profile of the white, suburban population (even more in the case of Catholics than of Protestants).

In the history of the United States, religious developments seem to anticipate cultural and political change like barometers,

³ On the history of religious participation, see Theodore Caplow, *All Faithful People: Change and Continuity in Middletown's Religion* (Minneapolis, 1983.)

as Samuel Huntington suggested in *The Promise of Disharmony* and as Nathan Hatch documented in *The Democratization of American Christianity*.⁴ My interest in this separate American path arose as I came to appreciate how often radical cultural and political change in America is adumbrated by a religious prelude. Moreover, I have come to the conclusion that, in contrast to the frequent assumption of modern European social scientists that society follows an evolutionary path in which one form of religion (Catholicism) is replaced by another (Protestantism), only to be replaced in turn by secularism, in America each religion continues, adapting by developing institutional mechanisms that reflect its distinct traditions, theology, and mind-set.

What follows are three examples of the ways in which our quest to explain American developments led to theses about the interaction of religion with politics and society in American history.

1. The Puritan dilemma, or religious pluralism as the unintended consequence of enforced orthodoxy.

A few years ago, we were asked to contribute to a new German handbook of American studies and thus began to prepare a documentary history of American political culture.⁵ We began with established interpretations of the sort one finds in Gunnar Myrdal's "American Creed,"⁶ according to which American culture is a secularized form of Puritanism. But when we examined the matter more closely, we found that it was important to understand the Puritans not because their ideas already contained the essence of American culture, but because they failed to implement these ideas. In an unintended way they initiated a new conception of the public role of religion and a

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn., 1989).

⁵ Michael Zöllner, "Gibt es den amerikanischen Charakter? Politische Kultur und politische Soziologie der Vereinigten Staaten," in Willi Paul Adams et al., eds., *Die Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1992), 1:22.

⁶ Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York, 1975).

new, pluralistic conception of religious organization, both of which were equally far removed from their roots.

Apart from the Puritan experiment in New England, religious motivations were quite insignificant at the beginning of the colonial period. There was no specific British colonial policy on religion. Although there was no religious monopoly, neither was there a policy of allowing competition among religions on the basis of legal parity; rather, individual colonies were characterized by regional monopolies of one sort or another. Only Maryland provided a kind of religious freedom that was unknown in the other colonies; in that nominally Catholic colony, Catholics were in the minority from the very beginning, finding themselves in circumstances that fostered religious tolerance. Yet this exceptional situation of religious tolerance did not last long because the Maryland Toleration Act of 1649 was abrogated under pressures arising from the English Civil War.

At the other end of the spectrum were the Puritans of New England, who pursued their regional religious monopoly with great persistence. They interpreted their royal charter as a license to conduct an experiment in political theology. But in the process, they set into motion a development of an entirely different nature, namely, the establishment of an individually conceived and pluralistically organized type of American religion that was to change American Protestantism during the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This is an illustration of the fact that institutions frequently are not the result of conscious planning; they come about as a result of the unanticipated effects of actions guided by entirely different intentions. American culture cannot be understood simply as a secularized form of Puritanism or as the manifestation of populist liberalism based on natural law. Rather, the essential contribution of the Puritans to American culture resulted from their failure to establish a regime of saints and the reactions and counterreactions that resulted. Ultimately, history was to follow a course quite at odds with the one intended by those pious emigrants.

As is well known, New England was first settled by people who left their homeland for noneconomic reasons. The founders

of the colonies of Massachusetts Bay, Plymouth, and New Haven were interested mainly in pursuing their ideals of a God-given way of life without outside interference. Like the Scottish Presbyterians, Puritans were adherents of the teachings of John Knox (1513–1572), who had fled to Geneva during the reign of England's Queen Mary. Knox rejected the Pope's claim to be the leader of Christianity, as the Church of England had done, but he went one step further by also rejecting the institution of bishops. Necessary decisions were to be reached by the congregation under the guidance of the Bible or through elected elders, the presbyters. It was in professing this form of church government that the Dissenters veered most dramatically from the established Church. They were referred to as "Puritans" because they were interested not only in matters of congregational reform but also in ridding the Church of everything they regarded as superfluous to true faith. The performance of the sacraments in the Church of England still seemed too Roman in character: Knox reduced the sacraments to baptism and the Eucharist, treating everything else as idolatry and human invention. Like all other reformers, the English Dissenters sought not to divide the Church but to renew it. They placed great emphasis on unity; the idea of denominational pluralism was as far from their conception as was the separation of church and state, institutions that they viewed as "two twinnes."⁷ For the Puritans, part of the attraction of the New World was the hope of being able to avoid the choice between ecclesiastical unity and dogmatic purity. Freed from previous historical institutions, they sought to construct a community in which religion and politics were one.

These ideas were far removed from the optimism, individualism, and tolerance so often associated with Myrdal's "American Creed." Puritan thought began with the emphasis on original sin, and its skepticism about the ability of individuals to redeem and perfect themselves made it highly anti-individualistic. It called not only for strict theological orthodoxy but also for the practice of direct social control by the congregation, which

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25–32.

replaced the more distant, institutionally organized Church. One task of the congregation was to distinguish accepted members of proven religious and moral standing from persons of dubious repute. To the founders of the Massachusetts Bay colony, religion and law were closely intertwined: It was the God-fearing colonists who were considered law-abiding. The right to vote was tied to membership in the congregation of saints, and all civic rights, beginning with the right to immigrate to the colony, were made dependent on correct belief. This unity of church and state was soon called into question by the most radical among the orthodox, such as Roger Williams (who taught that proximity to the state perverted the church into a "filthy dunghill and whorehouse"), and it was at odds with the wishes of the growing number of new immigrants who arrived without particular religious inclinations.⁸

The consequence of this connection between religious qualification and legal status was that religion was used as an excuse for increasingly nonreligious purposes. The foundation had been laid for a political culture in which it was advantageous to couch all interests in religious terms. Thus, the desire to sanctify the profane had the opposite effect as religion itself became profaned, and the elitist self-understanding of the congregation came into conflict with the political demands of those who were excluded because of their lack of orthodoxy.

A compromise emerged in the Halfway Covenant of 1662: Those on the outside were met "halfway" by admitting them to one of the two sacraments, namely, baptism. But they remained second-class church members not admitted to the Lord's Supper and second-class citizens without the right to vote. This interim solution satisfied neither those old members who were determined to preserve the exclusive character of the congregation nor those excluded members who sought complete recognition. The next unavoidable step was taken by the famous preacher Solomon Stoddard, who suggested that all baptized persons were entitled to full congregational membership; his doctrine (dubbed "Stoddardism" by its opponents) was to prevail by 1700.

⁸ Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America* (New York, 1984), 18.

This relaxation, which allowed for the admission of more members whose qualifications no longer were subject to rigorous demands, in turn prompted more orthodox members to join together in more exclusive congregations. The interplay between the liberalization of the established religion and protests against it set the fundamental pattern that came to characterize the organization of American Protestantism and that was to influence its subsequent history. Once religions lose their legally privileged status, the dissatisfied have an incentive to create new religions, limited only by financial considerations. As a result, rather than battling out deep-seated religious conflicts, those conflicts were resolved as each of the parties gained independence, that is, as the disgruntled minority broke away. Thus, the number of Protestant denominations continued to increase, reaching over three hundred by the end of the nineteenth century.

In sum, the Puritans provoked the very pluralism that they had sought to avoid. This development continued as subsequent Protestant religious movements similarly made their contributions to pluralism despite their original intentions. Liberalization and the reactions to it combined to make religion a matter of choice and to introduce the American Protestant method of conflict resolution—the multiplication of denominations. There was no need for anyone to find consensus within the existing congregation when founding a new one seemed easier than fighting out the points of contention. A Protestant religious marketplace was the result. I emphasize that this was a purely Protestant phenomenon: It was not an option for Catholics, to whom we now turn.

2. Religion as the tolerated form of difference: becoming American while remaining Catholic.

American Catholicism has long been an object of fascination for me because it offers an excellent test case.⁹ To many, Catholicism seemed unmarketable in the United States; with its combination of skepticism about human nature and certainty of grace, its

⁹ See Michael Zöllner, *Washington und Rom: Der Katholizismus in der amerikanischen Kultur* (Berlin, 1995).

historical consciousness and its stress on institutions, it seemed to many to be antithetical to American culture.

Therefore, in the course of the nineteenth century as immigration reached proportions that many found alarming, many Americans felt that everything depended on "Americanizing" the Irish and on "christianizing" the Catholics. As is well known, immigration caused a strong nativist and anti-Catholic reaction, which is why immigration and integration are usually presented as an intergroup conflict: the aggressive nativist against the "fighting Irish." But there is another story, which is told much less often but is rather more interesting, about immigrations past and present: the intragroup conflict among the immigrants over how to become American while still remaining Catholic, Lutheran, or Jewish, that is, how to establish a suitable mixture of distance and proximity to American culture.¹⁰ Take the Lutheran elder in Wisconsin who went on record as saying that "God spoke German already in Paradise," or the Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe who saw no difference between being Jewish and speaking Yiddish.¹¹ In each case, language, ethnicity, and religion were intertwined; preserving the German hymnal or maintaining "Yiddishkeit" was everything.

Seen from this perspective, the so-called Great Crisis of American Catholicism of the late nineteenth century is the most intensive example of this characteristic immigrant dilemma, a fact obscured in the historiography, which reduces it to a clerical power-play between the Vatican and the American Church. The question of whether and to what degree Catholicism could be Americanized became the subject of intense debate among Catholics. The so-called Americanists accused their opponents of being un-American, while their opponents in turn questioned the orthodoxy of the Americanist faction. The debate developed around such questions as whether to maintain ethnic parishes

¹⁰ Ibid., 136–8.

¹¹ Johannes F. S. Hanselmann, *Meilensteine auf dem Wege der lutherischen Kirche in Amerika* (Neuendettelsau, 1952), 16; and Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, N.Y., 1955), 172.

(where the native languages of the immigrants were spoken) and whether to maintain Catholic schools.¹²

Whereas the Americanists insisted that the Church as a whole would advance only by being Americanized as rapidly as possible, their opponents feared that the immigrants would lose their faith if they were deprived of their native language and customs, based on the assumption that language, ethnic culture, and religion were indissolubly linked. But in reality—despite the polemics—this was not an either/or alternative. The German and Polish priests in Milwaukee and Detroit might oppose "Americanism," but they saw to it that the parish offered English-language courses for the immigrants and provided an education for their children. However, no Irish Americanist was prepared to sacrifice any substantive Catholic teaching in order to accelerate integration. So the debate was not really about whether or not to Americanize the Church—for everyone recognized that this was happening already—but about the right mixture of adaptation and distance or the right balance between integration and self-segregation.

The Americanist controversy divided the American Church, creating two camps among the bishops and resulting in a great deal of animosity, which led some bishops, such as John Ireland, to resort to the language of war.¹³ A fierce fight over how to become American while remaining Catholic was unavoidable because the American Protestant mode of conflict resolution—the multiplication of denominations, the admission of everyone who best suited the congregation—was not available within the Catholic framework.

For a while the ethnic parish came quite close to this Protestant model, but only for the first generations of immigrants in heavily ethnic neighborhoods and only as long as it was in no one's interest to ask whether the Catholic Church should continue to be organized along ethnic lines. This changed during the Americanist controversy as the bishops split into two

¹² Gerald P. Fogarty, *The Vatican and the Americanist Crisis: Denis J. O'Connell, American Agent in Rome, 1886–1903* (Rome, 1974.)

¹³ Zöllner, *Washington und Rom*, 121.

camps, with most of the bishops of Irish origin in the Americanist one and the German-speaking bishops in the opposing one.

But the days of the ethnic parish were numbered. Between the turn of the century and the end of World War II, American Catholics worked their way out of their ethnic ghettos and gradually transformed their own institutions, adopting conceptions of what it meant to be Catholic that were more abstract and less tied to ethnicity. This changing conception of what it meant to be Catholic was reflected in marriage patterns: Although the second generation of Polish Americans still tended to marry other Polish Americans, for example, by the third generation the tendency was to marry another Catholic but not another Polish Catholic specifically.

Both the ethnic parish and the Catholic milieu that replaced it were at the same time agents of Americanization and of preserving one's heritage while gradually transforming it. The move from ethnic to Catholic identity was promoted by the fact that in American culture, religion was the one acceptable way of being different.

The church hierarchy often quite unintentionally prepared the ground for a more abstract Catholic identity by building up a *national* structure. World War I provided the context for the establishment of a more national network for information exchange and led to the creation of Catholic organizational structures on a national level. A National Catholic War Council was organized to coordinate services for Catholic soldiers, and after the war the letter "W" was maintained as its symbol, but its significance changed as the organization was rechristened the Catholic Welfare Conference, the predecessor of today's national Catholic organizations in Washington. As is so often the case, war efforts led to an increase in bureaucracy that was not dismantled when the war was over.

The world wars of the twentieth century also had another impact on American Catholics: Many American soldiers came into close contact with other soldiers who happened to be Catholic but turned out to be as American as anybody else.

For many Catholics, the GI Bill provided the final push into the middle class, and from the 1950s on, American Catholicism

was established as a religion of the middle-class suburbs. American Catholics had finally "made it," and critics claimed they had become as prosperous and dull as the 1950s in general. In the 1960s and 1970s American Catholics were divided once again about their relationship to American culture. But this time, those who emphasized the virtues of America were pursuing a conservative agenda, and the division no longer followed ethnic lines. In this new kind of cultural warfare there was a right-wing and a left-wing position on every issue, and both camps developed their own national organizations, publications, and spokespersons.

Thus American Catholicism had made another transition: The ethnic church of the immigrants was transformed into a trans-ethnic Catholic milieu that in turn gave way to a Catholic identity that was more abstract and less connected to locale. Whereas at earlier stages the political identity of Catholics seemed to follow from their being Catholic, by the 1970s and 1980s the type of Catholic they thought themselves to be was often influenced by their broader political orientation.

The categories we use to conceptualize the development of American Catholics—adaptation and distance, integration and separation, from ethnic ghetto to more abstract and national identity—also can be adapted to analyze the experience of American Lutherans and American Jews while keeping in mind the different organizational imperatives inherited from their earlier experiences.

3. The link between fundamentalism and populism: the separation of tradition and history.

The terms *populism* and *fundamentalism* occur frequently in American political journalism, and trying to discover what each term means led us to explore how the two phenomena are connected.

From reading editorials in the prestige press, one would have to conclude that anything that stands a chance of being accepted by the majority is "populist," whereas anything not in tune with the opinions of editorialists—but somehow still religious—is "fundamentalist." Populism, in this sense, denotes a degenerative form of democracy in which politicians follow public opinion

instead of providing leadership and a disposition in favor of the common man without specific cultural content. Scholarly treatments of this topic are unsatisfactory. Many treat populism only in the most nominal sense as limited to a specific social group, region, or period, especially to the Midwestern agrarian protest movement of the 1890s. Others, such as Michael Kazin, treat populism as an integral part of the progressive coalition in American politics, attributing the current decline of the Left to the fact that populism has been co-opted by the Right.¹⁴ But if one looks at a figure such as William Jennings Bryan, it is difficult to rest with merely regional definitions of populism or with the notion that the categories of *left* and *right* are the most appropriate for understanding it. Thus, we turn to an examination of the cultural agenda of populism, and what we conclude is that populism is best understood as a transformation of the cult of the common man brought about by the influence of religious fundamentalism.¹⁵

The idea that moral superiority and common sense reside with the majority of common folk rather than with elites is a notion that precedes populism and was proclaimed in non-American contexts. The first example that comes to mind is the Sermon on the Mount; and from Jefferson, Emerson, or defenders of the "plain people" to the German Romantics, there is an abundant literature praising the common man, contrasting his virtue to the lifestyle of the privileged. A tacit consensus on the topography of virtue also exists: The good life is associated with the countryside (although social historians present us with a very different picture of the realities of rural life), while Nineveh, Babylon, and Imperial Rome—which had lost the roots of rude simplicity—signify decadence and decline. In keeping with this tradition, as Gary Wills has noted, the city in the American imagination has occupied "the role of hell in Christian theology."¹⁶

Although there is no doubt that the location of virtue is among the plain people, the tradition of praising the common

¹⁴ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York, 1995).

¹⁵ Michael Zöller, "Der Kult des gemeinen Mannes," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, Jan. 11, 1996.

¹⁶ Gary Wills, "American Adam," *New York Review of Books*, Mar. 13, 1997.

man and the simple life allow for some variation in the sociology of virtue. At first only one demarcation seems sufficient: the simple versus the sophisticated, a matter of different lifestyles. But then the emphasis shifts from how one leads one's life to how one earns one's living. Instead of representing the lower half of society, the common man now sees himself between the "tramps" on the one hand and the "millionaires" on the other, and later between those on welfare and those belonging to the elites of big government and big business, all the while defining himself and the majority to which he belongs as those who earn their own living and play by the rules as hard-working, law-abiding citizens.

To this traditional folklore of the common man populism adds one important element, which rests on a common culture of literacy and the accessibility of basic books and documents. And here is where the link between populism and fundamentalism comes into play: Populism amounts to establishing and defending an immediate and direct relationship between the common man and sources of authority. The *hoi polloi* are entitled to come to their own conclusions about everything because their moral autonomy originates from the authority of sacred texts. *Literalism* is the link between the old valuation of the simple man and modern populism, and its roots lie in religious fundamentalism, with its insistence that anyone who can read can also draw all the guidance he needs from the Bible. Emphasizing the religious autonomy of the literate individual means relocating moral authority and redistributing religious market shares. As David Leege of the University of Notre Dame has pointed out, the language of salvation becomes "me" centered, which favors conversionist styles of religion wherein traditions and institutions lose their importance and where the emphasis is on the "I" who must come to a decision in order to change "my" life.¹⁷

Once the common man has been declared independent, he does not limit his claims to the religious sphere but wants the same principles to be applied to politics, such as favoring

¹⁷ David C. Leege, "Reflections on the Religious Right and the Republican Party," unpublished paper presented at the University of Notre Dame, 1996.

"originalism" in interpreting the Constitution, for example. (Whatever the intrinsic difficulties of originalism, it reflects the very American proposition that one can always start all over again.)

The anti-elitism so central to populism is linked to a cultural agenda by fundamentalist assumptions. Populism, strange as it may sound, is bookish: The authority of the common man derives from the authority of holy books and from his presumed ability to apply the books' lessons directly. It involves the rejection of a hierarchy of interpreters of the sacred and the true, and in order to keep the common man independent of professional interpreters and authorized mediators, one has to insist that the texts be simple, clear, and independent of time and circumstance, so that anyone can relate to them directly—the essential tenets of fundamentalism in a nutshell. Populism shares with fundamentalism the drive to separate tradition from history. Populists and fundamentalists are not prepared to tolerate a difference between a subject and its interpretation, or really any kind of relativism, because where there is no room for ambiguity, there is no place for elitist interpreters. Populism thus is an excellent example of how cultural agenda and social forms are interwoven.

So let me conclude with some reflections on how our analyses of religion in American history have led us to call into question some of Weber's assumptions, with which I began. Weber appears to have tacitly and perhaps unconsciously adhered to the evolutionary-historicist assumptions of nineteenth-century liberal *Kulturprotestantismus* (cultural Protestantism) of his milieu. He wrote as if religions were stages of the human mind succeeding and replacing one another because the later ones are more advanced (which means better adjusted), a notion often combined with the expectation that in the end religion would perform a last service to society by transcending itself and becoming a kind of cultured civic-mindedness.¹⁸ Weber focused his attention on explaining Protestantism, which he saw as central to modernity, while (as

¹⁸ See Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, "Dechristianisierung: Zur Problemgeschichte eines kulturpolitischen Topos," in Hartmut Lehmann, ed., *Säkularisierung, Dechristianisierung, Rechristianisierung im neuzeitlichen Europa* (Göttingen, 1997), 46.

his critics and even admirers have noted from time to time) treating Catholicism (and for that matter, Judaism) as a residual category. In *The Protestant Ethic* and other works, Weber treats Catholicism, like Judaism and even Lutheranism, somewhat cavalierly because his history of religion is implicitly geared toward the inevitable outcome of inner-worldly asceticism and all that follows from it. Everything Weber says about the Protestant contribution to modernity implicitly and sometimes explicitly includes an argument *ex negativo* and implies the judgment that Catholicism was incapable of developing the institutional prerequisites of modernity. Yet he never came up with an ideal-typical description of Catholicism by which it could be compared to his ideal type of Protestantism. Conceived by Weber primarily as an obstacle to modernization, Catholicism was treated simply as a thing of the past.¹⁹ This evolutionary historicism also colored his predictions for the United States. Despite its differences, he expected that it too would go the way of Europe because it was destined to suffer the same problems. Weber anticipated that in the American future, economic growth would come to an end, an influential aristocracy would arise as would a class-conscious socialist labor movement, and progressive secularization would diminish the influence of religious sects.²⁰

The errors of Weber's predictions seem to call into question the adequacy of the evolutionary-historicist assumptions that he brought to his treatment of religion. We might conclude that religions such as Protestantism and Catholicism are not evolutionary stages in which earlier forms perish so that later forms can unfold. Rather, they represent different cultural-institutional principles, each with its distinctive ways of placing the burden of learning either on the individual or alternatively on social institutions, and each with distinctive modes of dealing

¹⁹ Michael Zöllner, "Kulturprotestantismus als Religionssoziologie: Weber, Troeltsch und der Katholizismus," in Paul Mikat, Heinrich Oberreuter, and Theo Stammen, eds., *Politik-Bildung-Religion: Festschrift für Hans Maier* (Paderborn, 1996).

²⁰ See Wolfgang J. Mommsen, *Max Weber: Gesellschaft, Politik und Geschichte* (Frankfurt am Main, 1982).

with dissent (by exclusion in the Protestant case, by institutional inclusion in the Catholic case). These different cultural-institutional principles persist while competing with and influencing one another.

If we are right, then, as Weber insisted, cultural motives are central to the explanation of historical development, and in America those cultural motives were—and remain—shaped by religious motives in ways that even Weber did not fully appreciate.