



The Theology of Democracy

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“DEMOCRACY” functions as a “god-term” in American culture, wrote Ralph Ellison, borrowing from the rhetorical theory of his friend Kenneth Burke.¹ Today, more than ever, it does so in our larger global culture as well. Over the course of the twentieth century, Amartya Sen argues, democracy has been established as “the ‘normal’ form of government to which any nation is entitled—whether in Europe, America, Asia, or Africa.”² Increasingly, “democracy” is presumed to be both a “universal value” and a portable practice devoid of specific content. However, as the discourse surrounding the Iraq War and, more broadly, the “War on Terror” has made clear, “democracy” not only operates as a god-term rhetorically but also often harbors theological presumptions about God, specifically God’s relation to human freedom and history. With lines being drawn, as they now are, between American redemptionism and an equally imperious radical Islamism, it is more important than ever to assess the theological origins and implications of modern democracy. We must frankly ask to what extent any democracy worth the name has been and can continue to be compatible with a theological framework dominated by an Absolute God of the sort we encounter in classic Christian—or Islamic—theism.

¹Ralph Ellison, “The Little Man at Chehaw Station,” *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Modern Library, 1995), p. 502; Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 22, 33, 175.

²Amartya Sen, “Democracy as a Universal Value,” *Journal of Democracy* 10, no. 3 (1999): 3–4.

The American fusion of Christianity and democracy, scholars now recognize, is historically particular rather than logically self-evident and, as such, arbitrary and unstable.³ There is ample evidence—historical and theological—that Christianity, *contra* the prevailing view, “is not inherently a liberal or democratic religion” but, as Robert Kraynak has confessed, in crucial respects quite the opposite. But to question the view that Christian theology “contains the theory of modern liberal democracy” is not to deny the theological sources of democratic theory but, rather, to demand that we consider those sources more carefully.⁴ If we grant David Nicholls’s contention that modern conceptions of the state have insistently invoked images of God as analogues, then the question is not *if* theology matters for democratic theory but *which* theology matters and *how*.⁵ For Puritan political theorists like Roger Williams and John Milton, democracy was a necessary, temporary evil in a world utterly fallen from God. With the increasing collapse of Calvinist cosmology that accompanied the Age of Revolution, a notion of “divine right democracy,” as Kraynak has cleverly put it, arose in the United States.⁶ Democracy—American democracy, in particular—became God’s thing, so to speak, rather than something human beings did in the absence of God. It is a providence of the Absolute God, as American politicians are ever eager to remind us. Stalled in this nineteenth-century political theology, contemporary U.S. political discourse has failed to absorb some of the more provocative insights of twentieth-century pragmatists like John Dewey and William James, both of whom recognized that if “God” was not in the first place democratized, then—ironically—the more fervently one sacralized a democratic order, the more antidemocratic it could become.

³Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 53–92.

⁴Robert P. Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy: God and Politics in the Fallen World* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), pp. 7, 120.

⁵See David Nicholls, *Deity and Domination: Images of God and the State in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Routledge, 1989), and *God and Government in an “Age of Reason”* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁶Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy*, pp. 131–64.

Given these historical particulars, both past and present, it is an especially fitting moment to examine afresh the familiar metanarrative about Democracy in America, a story that wends its way from Puritans to Pragmatists via Revolutionaries and Romantics.⁷

Part 1: Puritans

Arguments that locate the origins of Anglo-American democratic theory in Puritan theology are hardly novel. Over the course of much of the last century, historians like Perry Miller, Edmund Morgan, and others have sought to define the massive “debt that modern democracy owes” the Puritan religious tradition, and they have done so, as Miller complained, in the face of a prevailing, “settled hostility against any account implying that the founders of New England were primarily occupied with religious ideas.”⁸ In many ways, such scholarship has championed precisely the thesis I want to trumpet here, namely, that theological ideas were central to the development of democracy. But in other ways it has not, insofar as that scholarship has tended to gravitate toward a strikingly common conclusion: that the emergence of democracy vis-à-vis Puritan theology was in large part *ironic*. In other words, while it is maintained that

⁷It is indeed a metanarrative we are dealing with, that is, a narrative that envelops original historical actors’ claims about democracy, the claims of historians about those original historical actors’ claims about democracy, and the claims of contemporary historical actors about the ultimate significance of democracy in the wake of all this history and historicizing. As such, this inquiry requires that we move back and forth between historical analysis, historiographical survey, theological critique, and political commentary on our contemporary moment. In so doing, I acknowledge that the essay itself perhaps suffers from some of the shortcomings of the metanarrative mode, among them a rather loose definition of terms. I am well aware of John Dunn’s useful historicization of the term *democracy* in his recent “Capitalist democracy: elective affinity or beguiling allusion?” *Daedalus* 136 (Summer 2007): 5–13. In general, I use *democracy* teleologically to refer to any potential movement toward radical egalitarianism. Hence, “democracy” becomes a blanket term for the various forms of republicanism, liberalism, and communitarianism described throughout. I can only beg readers’ patience with such strategic indulgence in counter-metanarrative.

⁸Edmund S. Morgan, introduction to *Puritan Political Ideas, 1558–1794*, ed. Morgan (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1965), p. xlvii; Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* [1956] (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 49.

democracy arose in intimate dialogue with Puritan theology, Miller and others imagine that dialogue as antagonistic. Thus, in their characterization, democracy became thinkable *in spite of* rather than *because of* Puritan theology, materializing only at those outer limits where the delicate subtleties of theory gave way to the hard exigencies of practice. In this ironic scheme, Puritan theology mattered only to the degree that it ceased to matter (or mattered less) as colonists set about grappling with the gritty demands of “real”—or, rather, New—world experience. On the one hand, this familiar narrative of “declension as a story of religion giving way to the social,” as David Hall puts it,⁹ can be credited with undercutting Protestantism’s self-fulfilling prophecy for democracy, that is, that the best of modernity can be traced to Reformation theology. However, on the other, the declension narrative’s backhanded dismissal of the theological sources of democracy may fail sufficiently to challenge the precarious American Christian-republican synthesis, indeed, may unwittingly reinforce it by admitting the “exceptionalism” of American circumstances.¹⁰

Perry Miller established the basic contours of the declension narrative. According to his model, second- and third-generation Puritans, “left alone with [an] America” upon which their forebears’ hopes had foundered, were forced by circumstance to turn from theological niceties regarding millennial redemption to more practical concerns related to sociopolitical reality, a much chastened version of the settlers’ initial “errand.” Thus did Miller originate the sturdy—but perhaps facile—dichotomy between theory and practice that sustains

⁹David D. Hall, “Narrating Puritanism,” in *New Directions in American Religious History*, ed. Harry Stout and Daryl Hart (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 72.

¹⁰The question is whether, in its many forms, the declension narrative, by suggesting New World reality’s triumph over Old World ideas, ultimately serves what Scott Pratt has identified as an intellectual variant of the “frontier story,” which imagines America as the place that philosophers and boosters made it out to be: a state of nature in which universal truths become self-evident. See *Native Pragmatism: Rethinking the Roots of American Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), pp. 1–16. The flip side of the reduction of Puritan theology to a straw man of American social reality can thus be the affirmation of an American civil religion that exceptionalizes America.

subsequent ironic readings of Puritanism and democracy. “Congregationalists *inadvertently* opened a bit wider—*wider than they ever intended*—a door for the democratic propulsion,” Miller writes. Again and again, he describes “*dogmatic* rigors,” like those of “absolute predestination,” becoming “materially softened” “in *practical* life.” While Puritan political “*theory* stands on paper . . . almost perfect,” when “realized in *practice*,” it is inevitably compromised, and—in a supreme irony of history—democracy emerges from the glorious wreckage of Puritan theology in America.¹¹

While scholars in the intervening decades have directly challenged and adroitly complicated this declension narrative, its ironic force has persisted.¹² Commenting on the (apparently unexpected) economic and political modernity of the Puritans, Stephen Innes writes, “By portraying sin as an internal matter—emphasizing conscience over positive law—the saints *unwittingly* endorsed a world of greater economic freedom. . . . By demanding a new form of piety based on the doctrine of the calling, they (*again, unwittingly*) sanctioned a new type of profit making.” In sum, “Intent on replacing a corrupt modern order with the true primitive order, the saints ended up accomplishing something quite like the reverse.” Depicting the “quasi-republican society” of the New England Puritans not so much as a nonlinear happenstance of human history but as an almost perfect inversion of human intention, Innes boldly declares that Puritanism possessed an “apparently *inexhaustible supply of ironies*.” He goes on to state his case with admirable clarity: “the division of humankind between a spiritual aristocracy of those who were saved and the remainder who were not produced *unintended democratic consequences*. By shifting the basis of one’s status from birth to the possession of grace, the Puritan leadership *unwittingly* fostered a political inclusiveness

¹¹ Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, pp. 14–15, 47, 73, 150; italics mine.

¹² As David Hall writes, “declension as a story of religion giving way to the social” has hardly declined among more recent social historians. Even as they have imagined themselves as revisers of Miller’s intellectual-historical approach, they have “adopted his scheme of declension, which for them signified that religion became ineffectual or collapsed as society grew more diverse” (“Narrating Puritanism,” p. 69).

that was *the very opposite of its initial intentions.*"¹³ In Innes's description, Puritanism is in danger of becoming a mere trope, a vehicle for the expression of historical irony; and, to state the obverse of the same formulation, irony too becomes the defining trope of that historical construct we call Puritanism.

This particular conflation of the Puritanical and the ironical surfaces again in David Hall's historiographical essay "Narrating Puritanism." Even as Hall attempts to rise above the fray and coolly occupy a metaposition, he cannot seem to escape the ironic rhetoric of declension, especially as regards the "too 'democratical'" politics of the New England Way. On the one hand, Hall outthinks his predecessors by acknowledging ambiguities inherent in Puritan theology and thus rejects the ahistorical "conception of Calvinism as a once and perfect orthodoxy" against which the simplistic narrative of declension plays out. Hence, for Hall, the religious—indeed, the theological—remains more than a straw man of the social. However, on the other hand, Hall arguably internalizes the declension narrative within Puritanism itself. Not only does the major ambiguity within Puritan theology lie precisely in the tension between "doctrinal" and "'practical and experimental'" truth, between theory and practice, but this ambiguity becomes most salient at the intersection of the clergy's theological "first principles" and the laity's "lived religion." Hall merely transposes social reality's betrayal of theological nicety to the tension between elite and popular religion. His conception of Puritanism as a "'middle way'" becomes the way to a "middle-way" methodology for doing religious history that democratizes "religion" itself by locating it in the ironic space between an elite theological "center" and the "disordering rhythms of everyday life."¹⁴ Hall thus turns Puritan typology back on itself, enlisting Puritanism as a type of the true complexity of religious experience.

¹³Stephen Innes, *Creating the Commonwealth: The Economic Culture of Puritan New England* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1995), pp. 29, 28, 205–6; italics mine.

¹⁴Hall, "Narrating Puritanism," pp. 60, 66, 54, 57, 62, 53–54, 73–75.

In so doing, Hall at least tacitly reinforces the thesis of democracy as something that necessarily emerges along the leading edge of a harsh theology precisely at that point where it is irrevocably blunted by an even harsher reality. Like Miller and Innes, Hall ultimately traces democratization to the many theological “contradictions [that] became visible *in practice*,” above all, the practical problem of determining who was saved and who was not. Although at the theoretical level the criteria distinguishing “true Christian” from “hypocrite or reprobate” were more or less clear, “*in practice* this difference became blurred”; consequently, lest it exclude the worthy, “the gathered church incorporated an ever widening constituency of visible saints.” He allies the democratization of the church and, by extension, the community with the practical need to circumnavigate an unyielding theology. “The strong rules . . . were *in practice* not so strong after all.” Such concessionary democratization “played into the hands of ad hoc liberty,” Hall writes. But the related point is that liberty is by definition ad hoc. It is something that living, popular religionists seem instinctively to assert against the authoritarianism of ideas. Once again, democratization is portrayed as an outgrowth of experience rather than an intervention of ideas, yet another ironic instance of “how ideas can bear *unexpected* fruit.”¹⁵

Miller, Innes, and Hall compel us to accept the inverse of James Kloppenberg’s provocative contention that the theoretical “idea of democracy is uniquely well suited to [the] culture of irony”: namely, that the practical reality of irony is uniquely well suited to the emergence of a democratic culture.¹⁶ In their accounts, the sign of democracy is history’s ironizing mockery of the pretensions of intellectual abstraction. To a real extent, Puritan theology is indispensable to the emergence of democratic culture only in its emblematic dispensability. Or, in other words, the road to democracy is paved

¹⁵Hall, “Narrating Puritanism,” pp. 52, 61, 60, 75, 74, 59; italics mine.

¹⁶James T. Kloppenberg, “Intellectual History, Democracy, and the Culture of Irony,” in *The State of U.S. History*, ed. Melvyn Stokes (New York: Berg, 2002), p. 210.

with the skulls of unreconstructed “pure Calvinists.”¹⁷ The account of democracy offered by these ironist historians feeds into an intellectual tradition that construes democracy as inherently *pragmatic* (not to be confused with *pragmatist*), that is, as an experiential truth rather than an ideological program.¹⁸ This tradition renders democracy commonsensical, the choice to which sensitive historical actors have been compelled by life’s vicissitudes. But this naturalizing formulation is of course itself ideological: it is clearly rooted in a longstanding discourse that contrasts hardheaded Anglo-American libertarianism and wild-eyed Continental socialism, a discourse that bloomed into full ideological flower during the Cold War.¹⁹ Given the outcome of that war, this intellectual tradition has been increasingly successful, as Sen suggests, in universalizing democracy as a self-evident truth, which, in many respects, has landed us in the war in which we now find ourselves. It is precisely the acceptance of democracy as a self-evident truth that calls for a strategic (over)emphasis on the role of ungainly theological ideas in the making of democratic theory, not merely to damn democracy to the status of historical particular but potentially to salvage it as genuine ideal.

Two of the most ardent early exponents of those values we now recognize as quintessentially democratic—separation of

¹⁷The term is Miller’s: the “essence” of “pure Calvinism” is the belief in the absolute freedom of God and the more or less utter abjection of postlapsarian humanity (*Errand into the Wilderness*, pp. 51, 54).

¹⁸See, e.g., Benjamin R. Barber’s case for the inherent antifoundationalism of democracy, “Foundationalism and Democracy,” in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 348–60. See also Timothy V. Kaufman-Osborn, *Politics/Sense/Experience: A Pragmatic Inquiry into the Promise of Democracy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), which argues that all of Western political philosophy has been arrayed against democracy by virtue of its insistence upon grounding politics in an ideal order. While sympathetic to these positions, I would suggest that in today’s climate of celebrating democracy, they can be adopted to represent democracy as something people “just do,” something that falls outside ideological production.

¹⁹See Brian Lloyd, *Left Out: Pragmatism, Exceptionalism, and the Poverty of American Marxism, 1890–1922* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997). Although I disagree with Lloyd’s caricature of pragmatism, he rightly notes that many of James and Dewey’s successors invoked their ideas in order to discredit systematic and theoretical accounts of political economy as unrealistic and impractical.

church and state, freedom of the press, religious toleration—remind us of the role of such ungainly theological ideas in democratic thought. Friends living on opposite sides of the Atlantic but drawn together by common woes and foes, John Milton, the English poet and polemicist, and Roger Williams, the Rhode Island radical, grounded their political theories in essentially uncompromising Calvinist tenets.²⁰ Such a claim is bound to be controversial in Milton's case. On the one hand, as N. H. Keeble puts it, Milton arguably was “no Calvinist”—he affirmed human free will and reason, conceded Arianism, and even leaned toward a metaphysical monism that rejected Calvinist dualism.²¹ Milton's democratic tendencies did not, however, emerge from such heresies; they flowed, instead, from a rather orthodox conception of the Fall. As he laid out his position in his 1649 tract *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*:

No man who knows ought, can be so stupid [as] to deny that all men naturally were born free, being the image and resemblance of God himself, and were by privilege above all creatures born to command and not to obey: and that they liv'd so. Till from the root of *Adams* transgression, falling among themselves to doe wrong and violence, and foreseeing that such courses must tend to the destruction of them all, they agreed by common league to bind each other from mutual injury, and joyntly to defend themselves against any that gave

²⁰On the relationship between Milton and Williams, see Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *The Life of John Milton: A Critical Biography*, rev. ed. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 178–91, 285–86, 317.

²¹N. H. Keeble, “Milton and Puritanism,” in *A Companion to Milton*, ed. Thomas N. Corns (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2003), p. 135. On Milton's departures from Calvinist orthodoxy in his *De Doctrina Christiana*, see Lewalski, *Life of Milton*, pp. 420–24, for a succinct summary. On his monism, see Stephen M. Fallon, *Milton among the Philosophers: Poetry and Materialism in Seventeenth-Century England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). While the eminent scholars who contribute to *Milton and Heresy* (ed. Stephen Dobranski and John Rumrich [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998]), are right to challenge the totalizing nature of Stanley Fish's critically orthodox conception of Milton as the poet *par excellence* of Christian orthodoxy, Fish's identification of Milton's fundamental capitulation to the Absolute God of traditional Christianity seems, at some level, inescapably right to me, certainly when it comes to political theology.

disturbance or opposition to such agreement. Hence came Citties, Townes and Common-wealths.²²

In Milton's account, the enabling condition of democracy is not the rapprochement but, rather, the rupture of the human and the divine. By contrast, Miller and others have assumed that democracy became an unexpected possibility only insofar as figures like the New England federal theologians, in response to the demands of "practical life," "materially softened" Puritanism's "dogmatic rigors," thus bringing the human and the divine into greater harmony and "bring[ing] Calvinism into harmony with the temper of the seventeenth century."²³ Whatever harmonizations Milton may have been performing on a metaphysical level, his political theology, by contrast, remained rooted in an assertion, rather than a practical relaxation, of cosmic hierarchy. For him, the democratic social contract was necessary precisely because the gap between an absolute divine order and a fallible human one, a gap caused by the Fall, was ultimately unbridgeable. He made his case for modern democratic policies like freedom of religion and the press specifically on that basis: it was precisely because the Fall engendered "originall blindness" in human beings that no one could know for sure whether a given scriptural interpretation or revelation "might not be the dictat of a divine Spirit"; and so most, if not all, expressions had to be protected.²⁴

Milton's "innovative if not original version of the social contract" as a response to the Fall reflects the fact that "the hypothesis of original sin" had been the starting point for Christian political theory for centuries, grounding both Puritan and republican visions.²⁵ Government, as Thomas Paine put it in

²²John Milton, *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, in *The Riverside Milton*, ed. Roy Flannagan (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), p. 1060. All subsequent citations to Milton are from this volume.

²³Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, pp. 73, 66, 92. See also Noll, *America's God*, pp. 31–50.

²⁴Milton, *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, p. 930; *Areopagitica*, p. 1013; and *A Treatise of Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes*, p. 1122.

²⁵On Milton's social contract theory, see John Rumrich, "Radical Heterodoxy and Heresy," in *A Companion to Milton*, p. 143. On the Fall as the basis for Christian,

Common Sense, is the “badge of lost innocence.”²⁶ However, Paine’s strategically Christian rhetoric belies the fact that the social contract he and many other republicans embraced was less cut off from sacred origins than Milton’s. Increasingly, Paine and others situated the social contract in a more organic narrative: as a rational attempt to secure, in the face of the inevitable abandonment of the state of nature, some of the natural rights that Milton associated with the prelapsarian state. Milton’s social contract, on the other hand, remains a decidedly postlapsarian measure on the opposite side of an irrevocable punishment by God, a measure called for because, to some extent, the human mind had been darkened and the human will poisoned by the Fall. For Paine and others, the democratic social contract was, in some sense, something fallen *from*; for Milton it was something fallen *to*. Democracy was not a sacred beginning or end; it was a profane means.

The work of Milton’s compatriot Roger Williams highlights the point: in a fallen world, democracy’s only purpose was to serve as a practical shield against man’s tendency to profane the spiritual kingdom of God. Williams, who considered it “blasphemous” to “read the presence of God into human transactions,” argued for what we now recognize to be the liberal-democratic separation of church and state—but he did so on behalf of the church, not the state.²⁷ Miller aptly sums up Williams’s worldview:

Williams evolved from an orthodox Puritan into the champion of religious liberty because he came to see spiritual truth as so rare, so elevated, so supernal a loveliness that it could not be chained to a worldly establishment and a vested interest. He was a libertarian

specifically Puritan, political theory, see Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, pp. 142, 144; on the Fall as the basis of republican political theory, see Lydia Dittler Schulman, *“Paradise Lost” and the Rise of the American Republic* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), pp. 17–31.

²⁶Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776) (New York: Penguin, 1986), p. 65.

²⁷Edmund S. Morgan, *Roger Williams: The Church and the State* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1967), p. 89. See also Timothy L. Hall, *Separating Church and State: Roger Williams and Religious Liberty* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), esp. pp. 77–79.

because he contemned the world, and he wanted to separate church and state so that the church would not be contaminated by the state.²⁸

For both Milton and Williams, then, democracy is fundamentally *negative* in character—not only is it nothing to be proud of inasmuch as it is merely a default of the postlapsarian condition, but it exists only to further ends other than its own. Ultimately, one turns toward democracy and away from monarchy only in order to affirm Christ’s “universal and milde *Monarchy* through Heaven and Earth,” to use Milton’s phrase.²⁹ Democracy in and of itself not only fails to reflect but in fact opposes the ideal cosmic order, which is emphatically a *kingdom* in which the Absolute God rightly reigns supreme. The democratic Milton thus issues from the “profoundly theocratic” Milton; the same can be said for Williams.³⁰

Unlike many of their radical contemporaries—or descendants, as we shall see—neither Milton nor Williams succumbed to the religious enthusiasm that prompted some thinkers to equate their democratic social experiments as supposedly redeemed human beings with the advent of Christ’s millennial kingdom.³¹ For them democracy was inseparable from a theological framework in which it was no more than a provisional, “secular” solution in the mortal interim between Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained, the hiatus in which the divine dynasty absented itself from earth. As Richard Hughes has put it in a different yet applicable context, secular democratic ideals like “freedom of conscience for all human beings” were understood to be in effect only “so long as this fallen and profane world should last,” and “religious pluralism, as with other childish things, would be put away in the age of millennial

²⁸Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, p. 146.

²⁹Milton, *Of Reformation*, p. 901.

³⁰Rumrich, “Radical Heterodoxy and Heresy,” p. 143.

³¹Lewalski, *Life of Milton*, pp. 437, 486–87, 518–20. Lewalski best captures the nuances of Milton’s position: while his political theology cannot be construed as “a recipe for quietism,” arguing instead for human “responsibility to oppose, if God calls them to do so, the Nimrods, or the Pharaohs, or the royalist persecutors of Puritans”; it also holds that those who have been called to resist “can win no decisive victories and can effect no lasting reforms until the Son appears” (p. 487). On either hand, as the provision of divine calling makes clear, God is calling the shots.

perfection.”³² Hence, whereas Milton and Williams were compelled to make do with democracy during the short run of a fallible human order, they longed for the returned Christ’s gloriously antidemocratic dominion, when knees would bend and tongues confess to a single, sovereign Truth.

Ironically, then, Milton’s and Williams’s “secular” conception of democracy proceeded not from an ironic concession to experience but rather from a sincere theological conviction. Calvinist theology itself provided Milton and Williams with the disenchanted world to which democracy became the necessary response. But, consequently, the best Milton and Williams could say for democracy—and the best any Christian can say, according to Kraynak—is that democracy might be the most prudential choice here in the fallen Earthly City.³³ That said, the negative conception of democracy may have much to recommend it. Given the triumphal rhetoric that colors democracy in our time, its modest tone is refreshing. In light of contemporary political orthodoxy around democracy, its theological orthodoxy may even have a heretical savor. Furthermore, Milton and Williams’s argument for democracy is premised on the conditions of a fallen world, conditions that resemble those often presumed by our day’s world-weary secularists. If the fallen world could be extracted from its theological framework, a philosophical foundation for democracy might thereby be constructed, one that could be broadly appealing. Perhaps this is the unconscious hope of ironist historians who represent democracy as the child of contingency, born out of the welter of fallible human choices. However, we simply cannot ignore that Milton and Williams passionately advocated many of the democratic values that have come to constitute our secular common sense only within the larger context of their passionate advocacy of the millennial monarchy of the Son of God, and this may

³²Richard T. Hughes makes this argument in the context of his discussion of early Mormon millenarianism, one of the many religious descendants of Puritanism. See “Soaring with the Gods: Mormons and the Eclipse of Religious Pluralism,” in *Mormons and Mormonism: An Introduction to an American World Religion*, ed. Eric A. Eliason (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), p. 41.

³³Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy*, pp. 246–50.

rightly trouble the thoroughgoing partisan of democracy. In the case of Milton and Williams, ideas—the uncompromising ideas of Puritan theology—not only mattered in the development of their democratic theories; they constituted its *prima materia*.

Part 2: Revolutionaries and Romantics

Over the last forty years, an appreciation of the continuity between Puritan theology and the Whig science of politics in the United States, a continuity explicitly recognized by many of the founders themselves, has taken hold in the historiography of republicanism.³⁴ Gordon Wood neatly encapsulates that understanding when he writes, “Enlightened rationalism and evangelical Calvinism were not at odds in 1776.”³⁵ As the drift of the federal theology suggests, American Puritanism moved toward increasing confidence in the human capability to categorize and realize the Ultimate.³⁶ Evangelical Calvinism and Enlightenment rationalism found common ground, as Kloppenberg, Mark Noll, and others have noted, in the Scottish Enlightenment’s notion of the moral sense, which vaunted “the human ability to identify and comply with the demands of morality.”³⁷ Qualities that had previously been vested in God alone were increasingly accorded to humanity as well. As the case of Milton and Williams suggests, we need not think of this more capacious estimation of human nature as a necessary

³⁴In his 1765 *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*, John Adams directly referred to that continuity when he wrested his Puritan forebears from the grasp of dismissive *philosophes* and represented them as “a sensible people” whose “policy was founded in wise, humane and benevolent principles” like “freedom of enquiry and examination,” a people dedicated to the demystification of obscurantist religion and tyrannical government, in sum, a people almost identical to Adams’s people (*The Papers of John Adams*, vol. 1, ed. Robert J. Taylor, Mary-Jo Kline, and Gregg L. Lint [Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1977], pp. 114–17). Paul Conkin highlights this self-identification in his chapter on Adams, whom he argues presents “the portrait of an enlightened Puritan,” in his *Puritans and Pragmatists: Eight Eminent American Thinkers* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1968), pp. 109–48.

³⁵Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. 60.

³⁶On the “Enlightenment” context of the federal theology, see Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, pp. 92–93.

³⁷James T. Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 41. See also Noll, *America’s God*, pp. 93–113.

condition for democracy, as some have suggested.³⁸ Rather, we should think of this seeming “secularization” of Calvinist orthodoxy as enabling—ironically—a more “religious” conception of democracy than that held by Milton and Williams, one that could tend toward antidemocratic ends. Theological liberalism, in other words, could actually spawn political illiberalism.

In the face of the millennial promise of the Revolution, the perfection that Milton and Williams resolutely deferred to a divinely administered end time increasingly seemed a possibility that human beings could actualize in present time, perhaps even in the “self-evident” truths of the new nation’s political program.³⁹ To put it crudely, seventeenth-century Calvinist eschatology had been absorbed into eighteenth-century Enlightenment epistemology. This development allowed a *positive* conception of democracy to emerge, positive not only in the sense of its comparatively laudatory attitude toward democracy as a political system but also in its postulation of a positive connection between the United States and the ideal state of affairs. In the positive conception, democracy becomes a logical deduction and a divine providence flowing from the innate freedom of human beings made in the image of God. This is a stark contrast to Milton and Williams’s negative conception, in which democracy is an unfortunate requirement of the inevitable unfreedom into which human beings fell when they turned their faces from God. Milton and Williams’s stark dualism between the fallible human order and the transcendent divine order—the very basis for the necessity of “secular” democracy—had begun to break down.

This collapse of Calvinist dualism was, however, problematically one sided. Under the aegis of America’s Christian republicanism, the human began to approximate the absolute freedom and perfect reason of the divine, but the divine, by no means meeting the human halfway, remained steadfastly

³⁸Noll, *America’s God*, p. 60.

³⁹Two of the classic treatments of such American millenarianism are Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1765–1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), and Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

synonymous with the ideal, the transcendent, the Absolute. Whereas democracy had been theologized, theology had not been democratized. This insistence on maintaining an orthodox view regarding God's magnificence served as "a republican disinfectant," as Noll calls it, a means of defending against the charges of heresy constantly being leveled at republicans.⁴⁰ Notably, even at his most heretical, Paine couched his rejection of Christian orthodoxy in a claim of hyper-orthodoxy: unlike traditional Christianity, which had lapsed into a degraded and degrading form of "man-ism," Deism properly observed the glory of God.⁴¹ God was super-duper-natural. If, on the one hand, then, human beings were more than ever like God, on the other, God was more than ever God. Consequently, to the extent that America's Christian-republican synthesis held firm, a paradoxical possibility emerged: an American democracy founded upon an antidemocratic claim that it embodied a transcendent divine order, a "divine right democracy," a "redeemer nation."

Such a seemingly wild oscillation from a thoroughly chastened to an audaciously inflated conception of democracy's place in the grand scheme of things deserves further explanation. According to John Dewey's *A Common Faith*, that vacillation is perfectly understandable within the logic of the supernatural idealism that undergirded both "enlightened rationalism" and "evangelical Calvinism" in the early republic:

Belief in the supernatural as a necessary power for apprehension of the ideal and for a practical attachment to it has for its counterpart a pessimistic belief in the corruption and impotency of natural means. That is axiomatic in Christian dogma. But this apparent pessimism has a way of suddenly changing into an exaggerated optimism. For according to the terms of this doctrine, if the faith in the supernatural

⁴⁰Noll, *America's God*, pp. 60–63.

⁴¹Paine goes so far as to call "the Christian system of faith . . . a species of atheism; a sort of religious denial of God. It professes to believe in a man rather than in God" (*The Age of Reason: Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology* [1794–96] [New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1896], p. 50).

is of the required order, regeneration at once takes place. Goodness, in all essentials, is thereby established.⁴²

The difference between the diametrically opposed moods of optimism and pessimism is the perceived degree of distance between the fallible human order and a transcendent divine one. What remains constant is the definition of the divine as absolutist and idealist. Hence, insofar as American Revolutionaries were willing to assert that the human partook of the divine, they raised the possibility that fallible human orders could undergo a magical “regeneration” that would in effect render them unassailable instantiations of the ideal. In this regard, “historic Christianity” poses a danger. By simultaneously offering divine redemption and defining the divine as ideal and absolute, it fosters the perennial emergence of a self-appointed “spiritual aristocracy” that will upstage genuine democracy by claiming to articulate and embody transcendent, objective knowledge.⁴³ As long as such knowledge remains the ultimate measure of the True and the Good, Richard Rorty has argued, democratic discourse will inevitably be truncated and trumped by theocratic pronouncements, whether those of God or Reason.⁴⁴

Such a narrative may account for an unsettling antidemocratic assumption held by many of the nation’s founders: that democracy, in the final analysis, is nothing more than a vehicle for the emergence of a “natural aristocracy” of supremely reasonable men capable of “introduc[ing] the perfection of Man,” the Enlightenment’s answer to Christianity’s spiritual

⁴²John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1934), pp. 46–47.

⁴³See Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 84.

⁴⁴As Rorty puts it, “Although I do not think that there is an inferential path that leads from the antirepresentationalist view of truth and knowledge common to Nietzsche, James, and Dewey [to democratic convictions], I do think there is a plausible inference from democratic convictions to such a view. Your devotion to democracy is unlikely to be wholehearted if you believe, as monotheists typically do, that we can have knowledge of an ‘objective’ ranking of human needs that can overrule the result of democratic consensus” (“Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism,” in *The Revival of Pragmatism: New Essays on Social Thought, Law, and Culture*, ed. Morris Dickstein [Durham: Duke University Press, 1998], p. 27).

aristocracy of redeemed saints.⁴⁵ According to this model, democracy is no longer a measure of the space to be crossed before one might experience the antidemocratic triumph of the millennial kingdom but, rather, the means to achieving it in some form. Even in this scheme, though, democratic means remain subservient to antidemocratic ends. The ultimately antidemocratic implications of theologizing American democracy are nowhere more evident than in its continuing conception of power—even the power of the people in a democratic society—as the function of a transcendent divine order whose rule is by definition righteously absolute and rightfully unchallenged. Milton's epic *Paradise Lost*, a favorite of John Adams's and a formative influence on the rise of the American republic, helps us negotiate this tricky terrain.⁴⁶

At the heart of Milton's masterpiece is a theological dictum that goes something like this: power is the prerogative of God, and humans can exert their power only by willing themselves powerless before God's absolute power. To understand this paradoxical conceit, we must first appreciate that

⁴⁵On "natural aristocracy," see John Adams to Samuel Adams, 18 October 1790, in *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, vol. 6, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1851), p. 417. On the "perfection of Man," see John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 15 November 1813 and 19 April 1817, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams*, vol. 2, ed. Lester J. Cappon (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), pp. 397–402, 508–10. The different tone between the first and last of these letters well registers the shift from a negative toward a positive conception of democracy. In the 1790 letter to Samuel Adams, Adams maintains that "human appetites, passions, prejudices, and self-love will never be conquered by benevolence and knowledge alone, introduced by human means. The millennium itself neither supposes nor implies it. All civil government is then to cease and the Messiah is to reign. That happy and holy state is therefore wholly out of the question" (p. 416). This squares with Kloppenberg's description of the Founders: "their faith in reason . . . [was] bounded by their awareness of their finitude" (*Virtues*, p. 45). However, by 19 April 1817, Adams is reading Chateaubriand and Dupuis, countenancing the human creation of "the best of all possible Worlds" and asserting that "there is no Individual totally depraved" (pp. 508–9).

⁴⁶For discussions of Milton's influence on U.S. political theory and culture, see Schulman, *"Paradise Lost" and the Rise of the American Republic*, and K. P. Van Anglen, *The New England Milton: Literary Reception and Cultural Authority in the Early Republic* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993); Conkin, *Puritans and Pragmatists*, p. 117, on Adams's predilection for Milton; and George Sensabaugh, *Milton in Early America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964).

Milton considered the rights of authorship—not only his own but, above all, God’s—to be absolute.⁴⁷ Giving full rein in the poem to his conviction in the absolute freedom of an unpredictable Creator-God, Milton portrays the world as created entirely by divine fiat. In such an autocratically authored universe, the creaturely are forced to confront the extent of their utter abjection, the ludicrousness of their ever “disput[ing] / With [God] the points of libertie, *who made / Thee what thou art*” (5:822–24; italics mine). Because God is their ineluctable source, the dictates and directions of human free will are but a reflection of his will: it was he who “ordaind thy will / By nature free, not over-rul’d by Fate / Inextricable, or strict necessity” (5:526–28); God “formd [men] free, and free they must remain, / Till they enthrall themselves” (3:124–26). In other words, “Freedom is a gift from God,” as American politicians are wont to say.

The ominous conditional clause at the end of Milton’s line essentially encapsulates his Christian political theology. In Milton’s paradoxical scheme, insofar as God is God precisely because he alone as Creator enjoys absolute freedom, man’s “Libertie” becomes equated with humble obedience to, and his “Servitude” with willful disobedience of, their Lord’s indomitable will. In his great debate with Satan, the righteous Abdiel responds to Satan’s characterization of God as a tyrant in this way: “Unjustly thou deprav’st it with the name / Of *Servitude* to serve whom God ordains. . . . This is servitude, / To serve th’ unwise, or him who hath rebelld / Against his worthier, as thine now serve thee, / Thy self not free, but to thy self enthrall’d” (6:174–75, 78–81). In other words, to exercise one’s will by refusing to submit to one’s “worthier”—indeed the Worthiest, God—cannot result in freedom but only in slavery. Hence, “tyranny,” both “within”—where “upstart Passions” “reign over free Reason”—and “without”—where “Custome” is “silently receiv’d for the best instructor”—necessarily exists in the postlapsarian world because Adam and Eve—and their descendants—insisted upon exercising a power that simply was

⁴⁷See Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 2:864–66, 3:122; 4:301, 4:635–38; and 5:71–73.

not theirs to exercise. Power, for Milton, is of only one grade or quality—the absolute.⁴⁸ Within this framework, “secular” democracy became the appropriate response to the Fall because it *conserved* rather than *collapsed* the hard distinction between a fallible human order and a transcendent divine one. In so doing, it facilitated the work of redemption, liberating the individual conscience *immediately* from all but a most basic, “outward” commitment to a human civil power and, consequently, liberating it *ultimately* to resurrender itself “inward[ly]” to the only proper power, “the divine excellence of [Christ’s] spiritual kingdom.”⁴⁹

Only within the confines of this Christian theological context can we truly appreciate “the general fear of power” that animated republican discourse. As Bernard Bailyn has shown, eighteenth-century republicans tended, like their seventeenth-century forebears, to accept the propositions that human nature was innately evil and that power was solely a divine right, propositions that informed their political views.⁵⁰ The relationship between rulers and ruled as delineated within the doctrine of the divine right of kings is a case in point. As Wood carefully chronicles, insofar as the king was taken to represent the divine order on earth, he alone could possess *power*, “the Crown’s *prerogatives*” being set against “the *rights* and *liberties* of the people.” Further elucidating this difficult notion, Wood states: “In the Whig conception of politics a tyranny by the people was theoretically inconceivable, because the power held by the people was liberty, whose abuse could only be licentiousness or anarchy, not tyranny.” Hence, the people’s “power”—if it could even be called that—was entirely negative, consisting only in the liberty or right to resist the Crown’s divinely ordained positive power, which alone “exist[ed] autonomously.”⁵¹

⁴⁸See Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 12:83–96, and *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce*, pp. 930–32.

⁴⁹Milton, *A Treatise of the Civil Power in Ecclesiastical Causes*, p. 1127.

⁵⁰Bernard Bailyn, *Faces of Revolution: Personalities and Themes in the Struggle for American Independence* (New York: Knopf, 1990), pp. 231, 242.

⁵¹Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic*, pp. 19, 62, 135; italics mine.

In the process of carving out an “American science of politics,” the founders, as I have suggested, were forced to revise the theological truism of a fallen humanity’s constitutional incapacity to wield power. Indeed, “the central task” of the federal Constitution—“the creation, not the destruction, of national power”—was to “reverse” the entire thrust of republican political theology.⁵² The framing of the federal Constitution was thus itself framed by a relaxation of the orthodox attitude toward the propriety of human power. To take one example, a favorite among historians of the period: at the Virginia ratifying convention James Madison mocked the paranoia of those who “suppose[d], that the general legislature will do every mischief they possibly can” and “consider[ed] it reasonable to conclude, that they will as readily do their duty, as deviate from it.”⁵³ The sentiment circulated widely in the Federalist camp, becoming a linchpin in their justification of centralized power. Bailyn references Timothy Pickering’s caution that “catastrophe will be found everywhere . . . ‘if we give a loose to our imaginations’” and Hamilton’s rhetorical question in rebuttal—“are our fears to end if we may not trust our sons, our brothers, our neighbors?”—as well as his more impatient injunction to stop arguing “‘against a measure from a remote possibility of its being abused.’”⁵⁴ The Federalist solution was thus predicated on a “confront[ation with] the ancient, traditional fears that had lain at the heart of the ideological origins of the Revolution” and a judgment that these fears were, in the final analysis, “simplistic.”⁵⁵

Still, although the founders at least partially succeeded in their efforts to depict human beings as sufficiently or potentially virtuous and the love of power as a necessary—even noble—function of human government, they did not address republican concerns about humanity’s inevitable abuse of power *by*

⁵²Bailyn, *Faces of Revolution*, p. 228.

⁵³*The Papers of James Madison*, vol. 11, ed. Robert A. Rutland and Charles E. Hobson (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977), p. 163.

⁵⁴All quoted in Bailyn, *Faces of Revolution*, p. 247.

⁵⁵Bailyn, *Faces of Revolution*, pp. 246, 261.

attempting to detranscendentalize power but instead deflected those concerns *by exceptionalizing America*. As Bailyn demonstrates, in responding to the Antifederalists' deployment of the "old formula" that, because humans were incapable of handling power, the size of a republic should be restricted, the Federalists argued not that the position was false but, rather, that it was irrelevant "in the American situation." Such exceptionalist arguments blossomed within the Federalist epistemology, which "ridiculed the idea of hunting for precedents in Europe" and privileged a view of the American experience as globally and historically unique.⁵⁶

The exceptionalist view of America had the effect of reinforcing the absolutist conception of power, constructing for it a sacred precinct seemingly set apart by History—a democratic America chosen by Providence to serve as the site of a reconstituted Eden in which human and divine orders could rightfully be realigned. For many Revolutionaries, English and American alike, transferring power from king to people merely detranscendentalized monarchy and transcendentalized democracy, in other words, merely relocated the absolutist conception of power in the sovereignty of the people rather than the divine right of kings.⁵⁷

Early proponents of popular sovereignty like the "'monarchomachs'" initially conceived the role of "the people" as a "duty to monitor their government's compliance with the will of God."⁵⁸ Power, whether in the hands of king or people, was divine by definition. Take Englishman Henry Parker's otherwise absurd declaration that, insofar as the Parliament represented the vested power of the sovereign "people," "There can be nothing under Heaven . . . next to renouncing God, which can

⁵⁶Bailyn, *Faces of Revolution*, pp. 251, 253, 255, 262.

⁵⁷In his *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1988), Edmund S. Morgan traces this "substitut[ion of] popular sovereignty for divine right," noting its reliance on the theological assumption of "the existence of a state of nature in which there were no kings but all men were equal in whatever power nature or nature's God conferred on men" (p. 288).

⁵⁸Morgan, *Inventing the People*, p. 56.

be more perfidious and more pernicious in the people” than desertion of Parliament. Or consider the American Federalists’ contention that “whatever dignity or authority” the popularly elected president could possess would be “*a delegated part of [the people’s] Majesty and their political omnipotence.*”⁵⁹ Such theological terminology even seeps into the secondary sources, as when Edmund Morgan describes the “supposed acts of the people” as being “as difficult to examine as acts of God,” or when Gordon Wood, in a language of mystery not unlike that of the early Christian creeds, depicts the Federalists’ desubstantiated notion of popular power as a power seemingly everywhere and nowhere, “outside of the government . . . always absolute and untrammelled,” “disembodied,” “abstracted.”⁶⁰

Wood links this desubstantiated notion of popular power and its attendant theological tropes with the emergence of a new “romantic view of politics.”⁶¹ With American romantics as diverse as George Bancroft, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Walt Whitman, one encounters a political pantheism that variously affirms *vox populi vox dei*: on the one hand, “the common mind” embodied in democratic consensus becomes synonymous with “the decrees of the universal conscience,” the very “presence of God in the soul of man,” to quote Bancroft; on the other, the “private man” is part and parcel of the “infinitude” of the ideal order, according to Emerson; and for Whitman, both the individual American and the American polity are extensions of the divine.⁶² In a real sense, liberal democracy thus

⁵⁹Quoted in Morgan, *Inventing the People*, p. 64; quoted in Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic*, p. 547.

⁶⁰Morgan, *Inventing the People*, p. 58; Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic*, pp. 389, 604, 606.

⁶¹Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic*, p. 606.

⁶²See George Bancroft, “The Office of the People in Art, Government, and Religion” [1835], in *Literary and Historical Miscellanies* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1855), pp. 408–35. In the case of Emerson, Christopher Newfield has recently documented in *The Emerson Effect: Individualism and Submission in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) the extent to which Emerson’s positive conception of democratic individualism only makes sense within an absolutist-idealist framework in which “defiance turns into obedience with such thoroughness that they become the same thing” (p. 32). Finally, in his recent *The Pragmatic Whitman: Reimagining American Democracy* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), Stephen John Mack goes

represents the truest theocracy, for it diffuses the Absolute into its constituent parts. It was just such a theologization of democracy that Herman Melville was no doubt sending up in *Moby-Dick* when he had Ishmael gush: "This august dignity I treat of, is not the dignity of kings and robes, but that abounding dignity which has no robed investiture. . . . That democratic dignity which, on all hands, radiates without end from God; Himself! The great God absolute! The centre and circumference of all democracy! His omnipresence, our divine equality!"⁶³ Melville's hyperbolic conceit thrusts the irony of the positive conception of democracy to the fore: Could a democracy conceived in such antidemocratic terms help but become antidemocratic itself? As long as the Calvinist God of absolute freedom haunted American consciousness, Melville suggests, he would not fail to furnish an absolutist ideal of power that could only derail genuine democracy and provide further warrant for various forms of imperialistic domination.⁶⁴ No matter how reverentially democracy was theologized, if theology failed to be democratized, there could be no democratic solution.

Interlude: The Tocquevillian Counterpoint

The positive conception of democracy was dramatically thrown into relief when Alexis de Tocqueville issued his programmatic—indeed, paradigmatic—critique, *Democracy in America* (first volume, 1835; second, 1840). As remarkable as the content of the book is, we would do well to note its equally remarkable form: Tocqueville frames his comments on

to great lengths to demonstrate Whitman's early conception of democracy as much more than a distinctive U.S. political or even cultural practice but, in fact, as nothing less than a representation of the ideal metaphysical order (pp. 3–74).

⁶³Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or, The Whale* (1851) (New York: Penguin, 1992), pp. 126–27.

⁶⁴On Melville and democracy, see Wai-Chee Dimock, *Empire for Liberty: Melville and the Poetics of Individualism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989); Timothy B. Powell, *Ruthless Democracy: A Multicultural Interpretation of the American Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 153–76; and Michael Paul Rogin, *Subversive Genealogy: The Politics and Art of Herman Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1983).

democracy in entirely theological terms.⁶⁵ In his introduction, he offers a full-fledged eschatology of democratization, describing how “all have been driven pell-mell along the same road . . . blind instruments in the hands of God” to promote—willingly or not—“the gradual progress of equality,” which is “something fated.” Tocqueville’s response to this “irresistible revolution” is “religious dread,” a shocking admission given that it effectively places him on the wrong side of History. Interestingly, Tocqueville presents his capitulation to the reality of democratization as something like a Calvinist humiliation before the will of God: “It is natural to suppose that not the particular prosperity of the few, but the greater well-being of all, is most pleasing in the sight of the Creator and Preserver of men. What seems to me decay is thus in His eyes progress; what pains me is acceptable to him.”⁶⁶

In his reluctant concession to democracy as God’s will, Tocqueville reflects the negative conception of democracy that moved Milton and Williams. Indeed, Tocqueville’s valorization of the Puritan legacy as the pure fountainhead of American democracy is evident in his corrective prescriptions for America’s antebellum political culture. Any virtue American democracy possesses he ascribes to that “marvelous combination” of “the *spirit of religion* and the *spirit of freedom*.” However, by “combination,” it quickly becomes clear, he means something more like “coexistence.” For, along with Milton and Williams, he insists on an absolute distinction between “the world of politics,” wherein all things are “malleable,” and “the moral world,” wherein “everything is classified, coordinated, foreseen, and decided in advance.” This crucial distinction he initially draws within the context of a glowing review of “the founders of New England.”⁶⁷ Hence, although Tocqueville at times seems to subscribe to a presciently “pragmatist”

⁶⁵Kloppenbergh also notes the centrality of religious concerns to *Democracy in America*; see his *The Virtues of Liberalism*, pp. 78–81.

⁶⁶Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer and trans. George Lawrence (New York: Perennial Classics, 2000), pp. 12, 704.

⁶⁷Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, p. 47; his discussion of the Puritans is on pp. 31–49.

philosophy of religion, he is wary of those forms of American religious “pragmatism”—civil religion (“the irritable patriotism of the Americans”) and religious materialism (the “preachers in America,” who leave him in doubt as to “whether the main object of religion is to procure eternal felicity in the next world or prosperity in this”)—that threaten to demean the timeless values of “the moral world” by too nearly associating it with the improvisational immediacy of the political world.⁶⁸

Although Tocqueville accepts democracy as divinely decreed, he refuses to idolize it as “the new deity emerging from the chaos” (as, by implication, many Americans did); rather, he insists that its otherwise “unlimited field” be bounded by the “insurmountable barriers” of morals derived from God, the only object worthy of worship. Much as Milton and Williams had done, Tocqueville justifies “secular” democracy only if it serves a redemptive function, only if the “relax[ation]” of “political ties” serves as the means to “tighten” “moral ties,” only if political liberation enables more genuine spiritual surrender. What Tocqueville simply could not abide was what these radical Puritans also could not abide, namely, the thought that “there is nothing outside the majority capable of resisting” “the absolute sovereignty of the will of the majority.” Tocqueville was thus engaged in something much less grandiose than theological analogizing when he commented, “the people reign over the American political world as God rules over the universe. It is the cause and end of all things; everything rises out of it and is absorbed back into it.”⁶⁹ Instead, he was simply summarizing the implicit premises of the positive conception of democracy

⁶⁸On Tocqueville’s “pragmatist” philosophy of religion, see statements like “Though it is very important for man as an individual that his religion should be true, that is not the case for society” (*Democracy in America*, p. 290), and “one must recognize, whether or not [religions] save men’s souls in the next world, that they greatly contribute to their happiness and dignity in this” (p. 444). On Tocqueville’s distaste for U.S. civil religion, see pp. 235–37, and for his critique of religious materialism, see p. 530.

⁶⁹Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 292, 294, 246, 60.

that had seized the American mind during the years of the early republic.

Like the Puritans he nostalgically recalled, Tocqueville was concerned that “omnipotence in itself seems a bad and dangerous thing. I think that its exercise is beyond man’s strength, whoever he be, and that only God can be omnipotent without danger because His wisdom and justice are always equal to His power.” Perhaps because his absolutist conception of power was firmly ensconced within a Christian orthodoxy that defined power as the prerogative of God alone, Tocqueville understood what many of his American counterparts did not: that the problem of democracy in the early republic lay in “the nature of the power itself,” or, rather, in Americans’ inability to theorize power—even in its seemingly most diffuse incarnation, democratic power—in anything but absolutist terms. As he later prophesied, “If democratic peoples substituted the absolute power of a majority for all the various powers that used excessively to impede or hold back the upsurge of individual thought, the evil itself would only have changed its form.”⁷⁰

Tocqueville’s democratic theory, like that of the Puritans he found so inspiring, thus doubled as a theodicy, one that, like theirs, traced evil to man’s grasping for an “omnipotence” for which God alone is fit. As a safeguard against this evil, Tocqueville reasserted a negative conception of democracy that steadfastly refused to countenance any such transcendentalizing of politics. Perhaps as a result of this “*lack* of congruence between [its] ideas and those prevailing in American politics at any time,” *Democracy in America* serves as an invaluable compendium of the transformations of Anglo-American democratic theory across two centuries as well as a provocation to subsequent thinkers. In taking up Tocqueville’s challenge to examine “the nature of the power itself,” they would shake the theological foundations upon which democratic theory had, until then, rested.⁷¹

⁷⁰Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, pp. 252, 256, 436.

⁷¹Kloppenber, *The Virtues of Liberalism*, p. 76.

Part 3: Pragmatists

Until the late nineteenth century, Anglo-American democratic theory remained grounded in an antidemocratic conception of the divine as Absolute, with all its trappings of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence. John Dewey made the point in *A Common Faith*:

Natural religion no more denied the intellectual validity of supernatural ideas than did the growth of independent congregations. It attempted rather to justify theism and immortality on the basis of the natural reason of the individual. The transcendentalism of the nineteenth century was a further move in the same general direction, a movement in which "reason" took on a more romantic, more colorful, and more collective form. It asserted the diffusion of the supernatural through secular life.⁷²

In seeking to articulate a thoroughgoing, philosophically based commitment to democracy, pragmatist philosophers like Dewey and William James set out to dismantle this all-consuming obsession to posit an encompassing ideal order, the "quest for certainty," as Dewey dubbed it.

Their project had an epistemological dimension. For pragmatists, demystifying the ideal of idealist knowledge became the launching pad rather than the crash site of human meaning making. The pragmatists' goal of "providing reliable, even if provisional, knowledge that can make a difference in how we understand our culture and how we live" exposes the ideal of idealist knowledge to be not only impossible but unnecessary for attaining a consequential existence.⁷³ In other words, pragmatism found a way to delineate a suitable source of authority *within* the fallible human order—in "the process of experience as end and as means," as Dewey would put it—and so,

⁷²Dewey, *A Common Faith*, pp. 64–65.

⁷³James T. Kloppenberg, "Pragmatism: An Old Name for Some New Ways of Thinking?" in *The Revival of Pragmatism*, p. 116.

arguably, gave democracy its first real airing as a truly viable social, political, and moral system.⁷⁴

Hilary Putnam distills this achievement into a single aphorism when he asserts that the awareness that “one can be both fallibilistic *and* antiskeptical is perhaps *the* unique insight of American pragmatism.”⁷⁵ Putnam’s terms are extremely useful in fleshing out how the pragmatist conception of democracy relates to the earlier negative and positive conceptions of it as previously discussed. The thoroughgoing fallibilism of pragmatism would certainly seem to vindicate the claim of Paul Conkin, Bruce Kuklick, and William Dean, among others, that pragmatism has deep roots in Puritan theology.⁷⁶ As Dean cleverly puts it, “Calvinism provided the world for which pragmatism was the method.”⁷⁷ Indeed, we would do well to note that Dewey’s “epistemological justification of democracy,” as Putnam describes it elsewhere, echoes that of Milton and Williams.⁷⁸ Like them, Dewey is keenly aware that human knowledge is fallible, and so he advocates democratic values that will facilitate the emergence of the best possible solutions.

But whereas Milton and Williams rued democracy as the temporary lot of a fallen humankind and anticipated that it would be eclipsed in the millennium, the pragmatists afforded themselves no such supernatural refuge. In his exhaustive study of Dewey’s religious life, Steven Rockefeller argues that the

⁷⁴See Kloppenber, “Pragmatism,” p. 102, and John Dewey, “Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us,” in vol. 14 of *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boylston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), pp. 224–30.

⁷⁵Hilary Putnam, “Pragmatism and Moral Objectivity,” in *Words and Life*, ed. Putnam (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 152.

⁷⁶See Conkin, *Puritans and Pragmatists*; Bruce Kuklick, *Churchmen and Philosophers: From Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985); William Dean, “Pragmatism, History and Theology,” in *Pragmatism and Religion: Classical Sources and Original Essays*, ed. Stuart Rosenbaum (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), pp. 153–74; and Steven C. Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious Faith and Democratic Humanism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

⁷⁷Dean, “Pragmatism, History and Theology,” p. 159.

⁷⁸Hilary Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 217.

Calvinism in which the philosopher was raised “gave symbolic expression to what disturbed Dewey most about himself and his world: the absence of the divine, that is, of harmony, self-acceptance, intimacy, and real community,” and that understanding served as the point of departure for his pragmatism.⁷⁹ What is striking, however, is that unlike the Revolutionaries and romantics who preceded him, Dewey collapsed Calvinist dualism in favor of the human rather than the divine. He did not divinize the human so much as humanize the divine. He did not align American democracy with the Absolute God so much as democratize the notion of the divine in such a way as to eliminate the antidemocratic Absolute as an available category. Paradoxically, then, Dewey’s thoroughgoing fallibilism and this-worldly “secularism” might be seen as a sort of Calvinism *in extremis*, a Calvinism pursued to the unremitting end of involving “God” in the “fallenness” of the world.

But for Dewey the conditions of what Christians might identify as fallenness were simply a given, conditions one could not assume were preceded or would be followed by transcendence. Insofar as it purges fallenness of any exceptional quality, as it were, Dewey’s fallibilism dovetails with a chastened Enlightenment liberalism, which held that human beings, especially in the collective, could be, while not omnipotent, potent in changing the world. As Dewey would declare on his eightieth birthday, “What is the faith of democracy . . . except faith in the capacity of the intelligence of the common man to respond with common sense to the free play of facts and ideas which are secured by effective guarantees of free inquiry, free assembly, and free communication?”⁸⁰ Needless to say, this “working faith in the possibilities of human nature” was a far cry from Calvinist orthodoxy. Those who mischaracterize Dewey, as well as James, as inveterate optimists who placed undue confidence in human capacity must remember how indebted they were to their Calvinist heritage, which had effectively stripped any such idealist pretension from them. Seemingly in direct response to

⁷⁹Rockefeller, *John Dewey*, p. 45.

⁸⁰Dewey, “Creative Democracy,” p. 227.

such charges, Dewey made clear in *A Common Faith* that his “emphasis on exercising our own powers for good” is neither

an egoistical [nor] a sentimentally optimistic recourse. It is not the first, for it does not isolate man, either individually or collectively, from nature. It is not the second, because it makes no assumption beyond that of the need and responsibility of human endeavor, and beyond the conviction that, if human desire and endeavor were enlisted in behalf of natural ends, conditions would be bettered. It involves no expectation of a millennium of good.⁸¹

The point, as Giles Gunn has it, is that pragmatism is a concoction of America’s “two moral, intellectual, and spiritual legacies,” religion and Enlightenment, but one whose composition is quite different from the Christian-republican synthesis. As he puts it, “the pragmatist project [is precisely] the project of regrafting those parts of the liberal, if not rationalist, heritage that survived the seductions of essentialism onto those elements of the religious heritage that resisted the soporifics of certainty.”⁸² Gunn’s account of what pragmatism filtered out of these legacies—“essentialism” and “certainty,” respectively—suggests that within the alembic of pragmatism, religion and Enlightenment effectively deconstructed and dissolved each other’s idealist claims, leaving nothing but a Jamesian stream of pure experience. For pragmatists, the penetrating fallibilism of Calvinist theology checked Enlightenment confidence in objective truth, just as the thoroughgoing humanism of the Enlightenment paradigm undercut the Calvinist condemnation of human aspiration. The net result was a clear-eyed “common faith” in democracy as “a way of life” that would enable the widest spectrum of humanity to enjoy the highest levels of individual and collective fulfillment before a future always pregnant with unforeseen possibilities.⁸³ The pragmatist conception of democracy construed the salvation of the world in only the most concrete, tough-minded terms.

⁸¹Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 46.

⁸²Giles Gunn, *Thinking across the American Grain: Ideology, Intellect, and the New Pragmatism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 145.

⁸³Dewey, “Creative Democracy,” p. 226.

Dewey's fallibilism represents a signal democratization of epistemology. However, because, as Kloppenberg argues, "knowledge and belief have been inseparable in American public life from the colonial period through the present," in order to theologize democracy as "a kind of religion," as William James described it, one would ultimately have to democratize the theology within which that epistemology was inscribed.⁸⁴ Both Dewey and James, albeit in very different ways, set out to accomplish that task. Dewey approached the problem by developing a pragmatist philosophy of religion that relocated the religious in human aspiration and redefined "God" as the "active relation between ideal and actual," in other words, as the ongoing process of relentlessly realizing and reframing human aspirations.⁸⁵ Implicit in Dewey's reconceptualization was an even more radical and fundamental democratization of theology: the disentanglement of the divine from the supernatural conception of the ideal as an "antecedent reality." Earlier visions of democracy, as we have seen, would all finally collapse into an antidemocratic, transcendent divine order. In Dewey's mind, the reliance on such an order represented the "hypostatization" of the ideal into a "particular Being," a Being who could only function as an autocrat whose decrees would preempt and overwhelm any democratic striving on the part of human beings. This hypostatization thus destined the "idealism of action," as embodied in that striving, to eternal second-class status, requiring properly passive assent to whatever "system of beliefs" purported to give voice to the theocratic pronouncement of the sovereign Truth or an Absolute God.⁸⁶

Dewey dared to cut against the grain of this ingrained equation of the divine with the omniscient otherness of a

⁸⁴William James, "The Social Value of the College Bred," in *Writings, 1902-1910*, ed. Bruce Kuklick (New York: Library of America, 1987), p. 1245.

⁸⁵On Dewey's conception of the "religious," see Carl G. Vaught, "John Dewey's Conception of the Religious Dimension of Experience," and Robert Westbrook, "An Uncommon Faith: Pragmatism and Religious Experience," both in *Pragmatism and Religion*, pp. 265-76 and 190-205.

⁸⁶Dewey, *A Common Faith*, pp. 51, 43, 23.

transcendent nonhuman order; in its stead, he identified the divine with the ad hoc aspirations of a fallible human order. This secularization of the divine was, despite all appearances, actually the most encompassing of sacralizations, for it democratically diffused enchantment into every corner of the world. For if we follow Dewey's logic, "Religion would then be found to have its natural place in every aspect of human experience that is concerned with estimate of possibilities, with emotional stir by possibilities as yet unrealized, and with all action in behalf of their realization. *All that is significant in human experience falls within this frame.*" Turning the tables on all who would label him a secularist, Dewey characterized revealed religion, which made the ideal a question of "intellectual creed," as shallowly cerebral; and critical inquiry, which maintained the ideal as a matter of "moral faith," as robustly religious. Rendering ideals genuinely ideal again, he conceived of them as objects of naturalistic faith to be realized by human striving rather than as matters of supernatural knowledge that entailed "the surrender of human endeavor."⁸⁷ Only by democratizing theology in such a way could Dewey truly theologize democracy as a "way of life," a form that offered the widest and freest scope of operation for human beings' sacred striving. For Dewey, democracy thus "embodies the religious," and "religion has no existence independent of the human community's struggle to achieve . . . 'the democratic idea,'" as Kloppenberg writes.⁸⁸ The religious humanism of Dewey's *A Common Faith* thus furnishes something like a theological justification for democracy.

Dewey's religio-humanistic redefinition of "God" in non-theistic terms suggests that he doubted that any invocation of a theistic God could resist the antidemocratic tendencies for which such a God had historically stood. He did, however, open one door through which a theistic God might enter a pragmatist universe. "What I have been criticizing," he wrote, "is the *identification* of the ideal with a particular Being, especially when that identification makes necessary the conclusion

⁸⁷Dewey, *A Common Faith*, pp. 57, 21–22, 46; my italics.

⁸⁸Kloppenberg, *The Virtues of Liberalism*, p. 53.

that this Being is *outside of nature*.⁸⁹ Insofar as a theistic God could be conceived of in naturalistic terms, Dewey implied, it might well still serve a function. William James, as he approached the problem of democratizing theology, attempted to imagine just such a God.⁹⁰

James's insistent critique of the unitary "block universe" of the idealists led him archly to advocate the "crasser," "piecemeal" supernaturalism that "went with that older theology which to-day is supposed to reign only among uneducated people." His understanding of this piecemeal supernaturalism eventually culminated, in *A Pluralistic Universe*, in the theorization of a finite God.⁹¹ In James's estimation, the "superhuman consciousness" that conventionally went by the name of God "might conceivably . . . be only a larger and more godlike self."⁹² James thus embraced (at least pragmatically) "the man-like God of the common people," which Dewey had seen as an *obstacle* to the democratization of theology, as a *means* to that democratization.⁹³ However, James saw this God as other than a hypostatization of the Absolute in a particular being. As David Paulsen has recently highlighted, in James's mind, the "God" of popular imagination was not a synonym for the "Absolute."⁹⁴ Indeed, for James the two were antonyms and desperately needed decoupling:

⁸⁹Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 48.

⁹⁰On Deweyan "atheism," or nontheism, and Jamesian theism's common affirmation of "the relational, qualitative, value-laden richness of human existence and the universe in which it is embedded," see Sandra B. Rosenthal, "Spirituality and the Spirit of American Pragmatism: Beyond the Theism-Atheism Split," in *Pragmatism and Religion*, pp. 229-42.

⁹¹Scholars have often not known what to do with this extravagant "over-belief" of James's. One who provides some serious discussion is Robert J. Vandenberg, *The Religious Philosophy of William James* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981). Most of the scholarship on pragmatism and religion is concerned with its articulation of rational grounds for belief rooted in the pragmatist method, which James recognized his theological speculations exceeded.

⁹²William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience, a Study in Human Nature* [1903] (New York: Touchstone, 1997), pp. 403-5.

⁹³William James, *Pragmatism* [1907], ed. Bruce Kuklick (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), p. 67.

⁹⁴David W. Paulsen, "The God of Abraham, Isaac, and (William) James," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (1999): 114-46.

I must parenthetically ask you to distinguish the notion of the absolute carefully from that of another object with which it is liable to become heedlessly entangled. That other object is the “God” of common people in their religion. . . . The God of our popular Christianity is but one member of a pluralistic system. He and we stand outside of each other, just as the devil, the saints and the angels stand outside of both of us. I can hardly conceive of anything more different from the absolute than the God, say, of David or of Isaiah. *That* God is an essentially finite being *in* the cosmos, not with the cosmos in him. . . . If it should prove probable that the absolute does not exist, it will not follow in the slightest degree that a God like that of David, Isaiah, or Jesus may not exist, or may not be the most important existence in the universe for us to acknowledge.⁹⁵

James thus cleverly couches his turn to the finite God as a democratic faith in the faith of the “common man,” whom he claimed had always envisioned such a God.

More than that, this turn is definitively in the direction of cosmic democracy. James explicitly stated the political-theological stakes: taking divine finitude seriously was an act of cosmic revolution insofar as it required a rejection of “monarchical theism” and a reconstitution of the universe as a “federal republic.” It posited a “common *socius*” for God and human beings that disallowed “unilateral” action on the part of God.⁹⁶ Although few scholars seem to have recognized it, the political “radicalization” James experienced in his last decade—evident, for example, in his critique of U.S. imperialism in the Philippines—is inextricably linked with his theological radicalization, which takes the form of a critique of theological imperialism in the cosmos at large.⁹⁷ “Damn great empires!” he wrote to Elizabeth G. Evans, “including that of the Absolute.”⁹⁸ James democratized theology by transforming the theistic God into “but one

⁹⁵William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909) (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), pp. 110–11.

⁹⁶James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, pp. 25–31, 321–22.

⁹⁷See Deborah J. Coon, “‘One Moment in the World’s Salvation’: Anarchism and the Radicalization of William James,” *Journal of American History* 83, no.1 (June 1996): 70–99.

⁹⁸Quoted in Coon, “‘One Moment in the World’s Salvation,’” p. 87.

member of a pluralistic system,” a being among beings who was implicated in “a morally ambiguous human history,” limited in power, “not metaphysically transcendent,” possessed of an identity, and living through the progress of the universe along with us, indeed, as dependent upon us as we are on him.⁹⁹ Such a God provided for the realization of an ideal of cosmic “intimacy” by entering into “reciprocal” relations with humanity. Ultimately, James theologized democracy by installing an “ethic of reciprocity” as the necessary stance for all—even God—who would survive and succeed within his dynamic and pluralistic universe.¹⁰⁰

Nowhere were the full democratic implications of James’s finite God more evident than in the tantalizing challenge he offered near the end of *Pragmatism*:

Suppose that the world’s author put the case to you before creation, saying: “I am going to make a world not certain to be saved, a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each several agent does its own ‘level best.’ I offer you the chance of taking part in such a world. Its safety, you see, is unwarranted. It is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through. It is a social scheme of co-operative work genuinely to be done. Will you join the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents enough to face the risk?”¹⁰¹

Here, James essentially constructs an origin myth for democracy, a contractarian theodicy in which the evils we experience in the world represent risks we agreed to take on in the course of a prior process of democratic decision making with a finite God. For James, democracy serves as the theological ground upon which the world and humanity were created, and

⁹⁹I draw this list of attributes of a pragmatist God from Dean, “Pragmatism, History and Theology,” pp. 163–65.

¹⁰⁰On Jamesian intimacy, see *A Pluralistic Universe*, pp. 31–40, as well as David C. Lamberth, “Interpreting the Universe after a Social Analogy: Intimacy, Panpsychism, and the Finite God of a Pluralistic Universe,” in *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, ed. Ruth Anna Putnam (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 237–59. On an “ethic of reciprocity” as a defining attribute of democratic life, see Kloppenber, *The Virtues of Liberalism*, p. 77.

¹⁰¹James, *Pragmatism*, p. 130.

it dictates the terms for their continued existence. By contrast, Puritan theologians like Milton and Williams located the creation of the world and of humanity in the absolute authority of divine fiat, and their theodicy traced evil to transgressions against that autocratic sovereignty. For them, democracy remained a necessary evil in the face of the evil brought into the world by the Fall, a symbolic retribution for humans' usurpation of properly divine power for human ends. Whereas Puritanism construed democracy as an inevitable and unfortunate default position in an ineradicably evil world, pragmatism traced democracy to the active and courageous decision to enter an unpredictable world in the hope of eradicating as much of that evil as possible.

This difference between the Puritan origin myth of democracy as *a postlapsarian contract among fallen human beings in the absence of God* and the pragmatist origin myth of democracy as *a premortal council between divine human beings and God* nicely encapsulates the paradoxical essence of our story of the theology of democracy: namely, that the theologically-based conception of democracy that emerged out of seventeenth-century Puritanism was actually *more secular* in its conclusions than the sacred conceptions of democracy that subsequently emerged out of the supposedly secular philosophies of the American Enlightenment and American pragmatism. However, while the American Enlightenment sacralized its Christian republic in the patently antidemocratic terms of supernatural idealism and so made of the United States an imperial theocracy, American pragmatism managed to sacralize secular democracy upon the premises of a democratized theology. In so doing, pragmatism could finally lend ultimate credence and philosophical support to democracy as "a way of life."

If my own metanarrative has careened—I hope not too carelessly—between theological critique and historical analysis, it has done so because the theology of American democracy presents a "major interpretive problem." As Mark Noll writes, the historical force of America's merger of Christianity and democracy has tended to "obscure" the fact that the

“internal logic” of democratic theory may entail heretical departures from Christian orthodoxy.¹⁰² It is no accident, certainly, that republicanism and traditional religion have been at odds almost everywhere except in the United States. James’s finite God presents an interesting case in this regard. On the one hand, James’s gravitation toward “the God of our popular Christianity” may seem like yet another instance of American Christian-republican synthesis. Yet, on the other, the finite God he theorizes is utterly foreign to America’s triumphalist theology. As James himself increasingly emphasized toward the end of his life, the finite God was more akin to the deities of polytheistic traditions with which he had become enthusiastically familiar through his early immersion in the Greek classics and their romantic interpreters, his formative encounters with indigenous peoples when he served as an assistant to Louis Agassiz on an expedition to Brazil, and his later interest in contemporary anthropology. It was to “savages,” who were not “troubled by ‘the aboriginal appearance of things,’” that James looked for a model of how to cope with a pluralistic universe and finite Gods. James cautiously invoked “polytheism” as the right descriptor for his religious view because he recognized that, in light of the official triumph of monotheism, the word “usually gives offence.”¹⁰³ This is a primitivism altogether

¹⁰²Noll, *America’s God*, p. 62.

¹⁰³On polytheism, see James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 407, and *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 310. At the same time as James hedged on polytheism, he was keen to point out that “the original polytheism of mankind has only imperfectly and vaguely sublimated itself into monotheism” (*Pragmatism*, p. 133). On “savages” as exemplars, see James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, pp. 21–22, 33–34. One of Santayana’s ever ambivalent tributes to James is especially relevant here: “He retained the primitive feeling that death *might* open new worlds to us . . . also the primitive feeling that invisible spirits *might* be floating about among us, and might suddenly do something to hurt or help us” (*Persons and Places* [London: Constable, 1944], p. 249). John J. McDermott has noted that “James’s stress on relations rather than on objects and on percepts rather than concepts is congenial to cultures other than that of Western civilization” (*Streams of Experience: Reflections on the History and Philosophy of American Culture* [Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986], pp. 109–10). Bruce Wilshire has recently lent credence to this claim by engaging in a systematic philosophical comparison of James and the early-twentieth-century Sioux shaman Black Elk, in *The Primal Roots of American Philosophy: Pragmatism, Phenomenology, and Native American Thought* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000). In a similar vein, see

different from the primitivism of many of America's Christian republicans.

As the example of James suggests, a richer theology and history of democracy may require us to reconsider the basic assumption of Western political theology, laid bare in Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*: that the very possibility of Freedom is premised on the Euro-Christian notion of the Absolute. It is no mistake that, in *A Pluralistic Universe*, James registered his preference for the finite gods of "savage" cosmologies while he was critiquing Hegel, for in Hegel's mind, "primitive" peoples, like Africans, were prevented from entering the History of Freedom precisely because they related to their finite gods with a shocking freedom. Ironically, their more democratic cosmos rendered them unfit for the benefits of democracy in the here and now. From the standpoint of "our conception of religion," Hegel self-righteously proclaimed, which "requires that man should recognise a supreme being which exists in and for itself as a completely objective and absolute being or higher power," African "sorcery," with its core conviction in the ability of human beings to manipulate the cosmos, even to make and break Gods, was irredeemably blasphemous: "As a spiritual being, the African arrogates to himself a power over nature. . . . Man . . . alone occupies a position of authority over the powers of nature. There is therefore no question of a spiritual adoration of God." "In short," Hegel complained, the religion of primitive peoples "does not involve any relationship of dependence," which demanded their dependence on Euro-Christian civilization.¹⁰⁴ The—to many, elegant—Christian paradox that true freedom consists in submission to the Absolute God here spills into a "kettle logic" driven by the imperative to justify European imperialism.¹⁰⁵

Jo Pearson, "Ritual and Religious Experience: William James and the Study of 'Alternative Spiritualities,'" *Crosscurrents* 53, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 413–23.

¹⁰⁴George Wilhelm Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 179–81.

¹⁰⁵David Farrell Krell, "The Bodies of Black Folk: From Kant to Hegel to Du Bois and Baldwin," *boundary 2* 27, no. 3 (2000): 115–26.

What we encounter in Hegel's formulation is the overcompensatory repression of a liberatory alternative offered by the "savage," who in modernity has been an indispensable point of reference not only for what was right but also for what might be wrong with Euro-Christian civilization. David Farrell Krell perceptively draws out the excruciating irony inherent in Hegel's critique of primitive peoples' relationship to their gods: "it is as though the benighted and compact black, who, will never advance to self-consciousness and history, has anticipated the next two centuries of European history, having achieved a freedom and radical independence with respect to traditional gods, a freedom that one might have supposed possible only for an enlightened philosopher of spirit."¹⁰⁶ By anxiously designating such theological nonabsolutism as the very antithesis of modernity, Western political theology, particularly in the Christian republic of the United States, has perhaps dismissed sources to which we might want—and need—to resort if we are truly to exalt democracy to a degree that will prevent self-righteous antidemocratic abuses in its name. James's finite God(s) thus represent a return of the repressed. They also should remind us that the democratization of theology does not amount to anti-religious secularism but, rather, involves new, post-Christian forms of religiosity—modern polytheism, or religious humanism, or radical forms of the Social Gospel—that might furnish the basis for a "Spiritual Left."¹⁰⁷ If we are serious about giving democracy the religious foundation it may need—or that we may want to give it—then we may have seriously to consider such religious alternatives, even though they may challenge social and theological orthodoxies

¹⁰⁶Krell, "The Bodies of Black Folk," p. 119.

¹⁰⁷On the ludicrousness of conceiving of pragmatism as anti-religious just because it is heterodox, see Richard J. Bernstein, "Pragmatism's Common Faith," in *Pragmatism and Religion*, pp. 129–41. On the sources of an American Spiritual Left, see Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), esp. pp. 285–90. Catherine L. Albanese's recent synthesis, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), also takes seriously many of these traditions.

and force us to reconceptualize the very category of the “religious.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸On the question of why modern democracy “needs God,” see Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy*, pp. 9–44. In another vein, see Cornel West, “Religion and the Left,” in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), pp. 372–80, which argues that serious consideration of religion must be a central component of any theory and praxis of radical democracy.

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