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~~This Land is Your Land~~, This Land is My Land: A Quest for Civil Religious Understanding within
the Defining Attitudes of American Values

Cathryn Kinde

Maren Morris puts a cigarette out on the steps of a church and drives away in her car. Through these actions, the music video for the song *My Church* has the potential to develop two very different interpretations. As Morris drives further and further away from the church, meeting several different strangers along the journey, it could be seen as Morris turning away from her faith in God, physically leaving the physical representation of Christianity, the church, in favor of something else. However, another interpretation could be that rather than leaving Christianity behind, instead Morris is realizing her faith through other means outside of the church grounds, helping strangers along her drive out of the goodness of her heart. The lyrics of the song, such as a section of the chorus, “Can I get a hallelujah/ Can I get an amen/ Feels like the Holy Ghost running through ya/When I play the highway FM,”¹ lends itself to the second interpretation rather than the first. However, the duality of the start of the music video and the lyrics of *My Church* show that religious understanding and interpretation is incredibly complicated.

Religion can be both a blessing and a curse, an answer for everything while simultaneously leaving one with more questions than they started out with. Despite the baffling and frustrating complexities, religion continues to be an inherent part of humanity’s makeup. Whether or not one believes in religion is inconsequential—if one does believe, religion is obviously a part of their lives. However, if one does not believe, that person is still constantly

¹ Maren Morris, “My Church,” track 3 on *HERO*, Columbia Nashville, 2016, YouTube.

being impacted by religion and religious individuals all the time, or even by the very songs playing on the radio, such as Maren Morris' *My Church*.² With enough passion and drive, people within a country can make their own citizenship into a religious notion, emphasizing the importance of inherent national values (freedom, justice, land) until these ideals become as sacred as any religion. This concept is known as civil religion, an idea first started by French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, which then became popular in America in the 1960s thanks to sociologist Robert Bellah.

The United States of America is particularly religious, both in terms of faithfulness to religious doctrine as well as civil religion. The latter is shown by the emphasis and importance placed on the National Anthem, the flag, and the Inauguration of presidents, to name a few important American symbols. However, these symbols and the inherent civil religion in America, are neither as strong nor as stable as Americans make it out to be. The instability of America's values has caused the very idea of what it means to be American to be questioned. To compensate for this insecurity over American identity, Americans fall into two broad schools of thought in regard to this concept or fall somewhere between these two extremes. These concepts will be expanded on later on. However, before that an exploration of the main sources used in this thesis will be done. Since the argument in this essay revolves around the concept of

² When President Joe Biden was sworn in on January 20th, 2021, a question was posed during the inauguration ceremony. What would happen if an atheist was elected president? Prior to this question, there had been the assumption that if—a very big if— the country ever elected a non-Christian president, at the very least they would still be a member of a different religion. But an atheist? Somehow, an atheist president seemed more unheard of than an Islamic one, despite the events of 9/11 still fresh even two decades later. Nonetheless, if an atheist president was elected, whether or not they were sworn in on a holy text, most likely there would still be some type of religious element to the ceremony, for example, a prayer of some kind. The inherent religious value everyday Americans place on such a concept, especially revolving around a sacred ceremony like the Presidential Inauguration, would demand nothing less.

American identity, and how people view the best version of that to be, the works curated follow this line of thought.

A Most Civil Historiography

In a discussion about American identity and civil religion, works from Robert Bellah must be consulted. Bellah was a professor of sociology at the University of California. His research made civil religion popular in America.³ Bellah argued that every country has this inherent religion that is based off the strength and fervor they place on their values, and that this idea should be taken just as seriously as any other religion.⁴ It is this theory that the argument in this paper is based on. Although Bellah has written several works, there are two in particular that will be pulled from. They are *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*,⁵ and *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment to American Life*,⁶ which Bellah co-authored with Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton.

In *The Broken Covenant*, Bellah explains how American's broad religious and moral foundation was established using different sources from the 18th century. Additionally, Bellah

³ Bellah revitalized the theory of civil religion from Alexis de Tocqueville, a 19th century French philosopher. In 1966, Bellah presented his ideas on American civil religion at a conference, claiming that Americans had inherent religious tendencies that coexisted naturally beside Christianity and Judaism. For more information see: Robert Bellah, "Religion in America," *Dædalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 96, no. 1, (Winter, 1967).

⁴ Robert Bellah, "Religion in America," *Dædalus: Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* 96, no. 1, (Winter, 1967): 1.

⁵ Robert Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁶ Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment to American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

shows how those values were being questioned when he first wrote *The Broken Covenant* in 1975, and again in 1992 when the second edition of the book was published. This is helpful in creating a baseline understanding of civil religion in America, and the problems American identity has wrestled with in the past, so that further detail can be given on different issues civil religion faces in the present. *Habits of the Heart* is similarly helpful as it directly pulls from the words of American citizens.

Habits of the Heart is a conglomeration of research Bellah and his co-authors created on their quest to answer the question “how to preserve a morally coherent life.” In short, these scholars were trying to establish how to live a life dedicated to the ideals of America. Throughout this survey, listening to the personal stories of over 200 white, middle-class Americans,⁷ three themes kept coming up again and again over the course of their research: Success, justice, and freedom. The emphasis on these three concepts have been strong in American society, with the importance of freedom considered an especially sacred piece of American identity. The responses of this survey show what a portion of Americans valued in the 1980s, which will assist in analyzing events in the Americas in the 2000s and onwards, comparing and contrasting what values have stayed the same, and what has morphed over time. Like Bellah and his fellow researchers, Professor Grace Hale focuses on the white, middle class American as well, although in a vastly different way.

⁷ Bellah makes it clear in *Habits of the Heart* that although the survey predominately interviewed white, middle class Americans, that in no way makes up the entirety of the United States population. However, Bellah and his constituents found that the middle class have been central to American thought for centuries, and therefore found it best to focus the survey on this group. For more information see: Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment to American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), ix-x. Those who most embody the two schools of thought that established in this paper similarly follow this line of reasoning, that primarily middle-class Americans, particularly white Americans, are involved in this style of logic.

In *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America*, Hale looks at the way being an outsider, a minority group, has been romanticized by the white middle class for decades.⁸ Hale argues that there is this feeling of plainness amongst white Americans, which makes them wish to be included in cultures of other races and ethnicities, even if white Americans do not necessarily have any affiliation with them outside of this desire. The second school of thought falls directly in line with Hale's line of reasoning presented in this text. Hale argues that in some Americans there is this quest to seek out more, to look for identity outside of what it means to American alone, hoping to lay claim to something a little bit extra as well. Hale further notes that one way this outsider, rebellious nature comes to light is through different types of music. Music is one of the most impactful ways of sharing culture and ideas, which is why *Sacred Song in America: Religion, Music, and Public Culture* by Stephen Marini is another text relied on in this essay.⁹

Although hymns and other religious songs are obvious ways music can spread religious ideas, typical songs that would be found on the radio have also been known to carry symbolic meaning in their lyrics or chord choices. In particular, the folk and country genre have been known for their heavier handed religious characterization. Marini's *Sacred Song in America* analyzes a variety of different types of music in America, from Native American song traditions to the power of gospel in the Black church to the transformation of Christian hymns to more current music. Marini's focus on Native American traditions with song and the morphing of

⁸ Grace Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁹ Stephen Marini, *Sacred Song in America: Religion, Music, and Public Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

music and religion in the contemporary world are helpful in supporting my own argument about the cultural impact of music on civil religion. Acting as both a separator and communal ground alongside music, the political sphere also has a way of showing the divide in civil religion.

Uncivil Religion: Interreligious Hostility in America includes a series of essays that establish tensions between older and newer groups, and any other types of groups have been a constant part of American life since its founding, almost traditional in a sense.¹⁰ The essays focus on a number of hostilities between different groups, but particular interest is in essays by George Marsden, Anson Shupe, and Robert Bellah. Marsden uses the theory of evolution to describe how polarized Americans have become, only accepting an “either/or” way of thinking, rather than willing to compromise and meet on middle ground.¹¹ Shupe discusses the construction of evil outside of a religious setting, not only theological but rather an inherent evil that exists as a violation against anything of sacred value.¹² For instance, something that hindered an American’s sense of freedom might fall into this category, as it would be going against civil religious values. Lastly, Bellah looks at how groups identify themselves, which usually comes about by creating a clear divide between what you are, and what you are not.¹³

¹⁰ Frederick Greenspahn and Robert Bellah, eds., *Uncivil Religion: Interreligious Hostility in America* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1987).

¹¹ George Marsden, “A Case of the Excluded Middle: Creation Versus Evolution in America,” in *Uncivil Religion: Interreligious Hostility in America*, ed. Frederick Greenspahn and Robert Bellah (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1987), 132-155. Additionally, this is a concept many Americans are probably familiar with when thinking about the political climate over the last four years at least.

¹² Anson Shupe, “Constructing Evil as a Social Process: The Unification Church and the Media,” in *Uncivil Religion*, ed. Greenspahn and Bellah (New York, 1987), 205-218.

¹³ Robert Bellah, “Competing Visions of the Role of Religion in American Society,” in *Uncivil Religion*, ed. Greenspahn and Bellah (New York, 1987), 219-232.

Unfortunately, sometimes answering that question can lead to hostile feelings and actions against those who are deemed not what you are. Jeffrey Goldfarb continues the analysis of aggressive ways civil religion is undermined that Marsden, Shupe, and Bellah lay out in their essays in his own work.

The Cynical Society: The Culture of Politics and the Politics of Culture in American Life by Jeffrey Goldfarb argues that Americans have become so cynical that they are hindering their way of life.¹⁴ There is nothing wrong with healthy cynicism—far from it. It is important to question the information you are receiving to make sure accurate knowledge is being transferred. However, Goldfarb argues that Americans have taken this notion a step too far, paralyzing themselves from being able to fix the problems they see because of their cynical nature. Cynicism has led to a refusal to understand or listen to those with opposing viewpoints, creating larger and larger divides that have led Americans to the atmosphere they exist in today. The level of tension is so strong because American identity itself is being called into question, Americans deciding whether or not it should change or remain the same.

I'm Proud to be an American? A Crisis of Faith in American Ideals

Originally written in 1984, “God Bless the U.S.A.,” more commonly known as I’m Proud to be an American, is one of the best symbols of an American identity diluted into a single song.¹⁵ The song has been covered by a number of different artists, has millions upon millions

¹⁴ Jeffrey Goldfarb, *The Cynical Society: The Culture of Politics and the Politics of Culture in American Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991).

¹⁵ Lee Greenwood, “God Bless the U.S.A.” Side Two, Track 5 on *You’ve Got a Good Love Comin’*, MCA, 1984, Youtube.

of views, and was used as a symbol of comfort and solidarity among Americans after the events of 9/11.¹⁶ “God Bless the U.S.A” has lyrics that showcase rooted, classic American values, emphasizing key characteristics like land, strength, and above all else, freedom. Listening to this song evokes a common collective American memory: that America has always been on top of the world, and always will be. It is this concept that has been causing friction amongst Americans, particularly in the last twenty years or so.

Post 9/11 Americans had the foundation of their identity shattered. It showed that the United States was not infallible and could in fact be hurt as badly as any other country. In a survey conducted by Qiong Li and Marilynn B. Brewer almost immediately after the attacks, the two wanted to know how this event impacted the American identity.¹⁷ In particular, the two discovered that patriotism and nationalism rose sharply after 9/11, having most statements regarding both firmly in agreement. Additionally, it became clear that “extreme levels of patriotism were associated with greater cultural intolerance.”¹⁸ This was especially shown in Americans who had been given surveys with “priming conditions,” information prior to the

¹⁶ Taste of Country Editors, “Home Free's 'God Bless the U.S.A.' Cover Feat. Lee Greenwood, Air Force Sergeants Is Packed With American Pride,” *Taste of Country*, July 2, 2020, <https://tasteofcountry.com/home-free-lee-greenwood-united-states-air-force-band-god-bless-the-usa/>. In July of 2020, Lee Greenwood, the original singer of God Bless the U.S.A, released an acapella version of the song with the United States Air Force band in July of 2020. The song has almost three million views and counting.

¹⁷ Qiong Li and Marilynn B. Brewer, “What Does It Mean to Be an American? Patriotism, Nationalism, and American Identity after 9/11,” *Political Psychology* 25, no. 5 (2004): 727-39. The survey was completed by roughly 220 people in Ohio, the majority of whom were white. The survey asked several questions that touched on American patriotism, nationalism, and tolerance, with statements such as: “The fact I am an American is an important part of my identity.” “The first duty of every young American is to honor the national American history and heritage.” “People should support their country even if the country is in the wrong.” “We should be more tolerant of people who choose to live according to their own standards, even if they are very different from our own.” Along with several others that people were expected to rank on a scale of 1-7, from disagree to agree.

¹⁸ Qiong Li and Marilynn B. Brewer, “What Does It Mean to Be an American? Patriotism, Nationalism, and American Identity after 9/11,” *Political Psychology* 25, no. 5 (2004): 735.

survey meant to manipulate, invoking a sense of grief or remembrance over the recent 9/11 attacks.¹⁹ Extreme events create extreme emotion. To think outside the established terms of American identity was considered un-American, rejected firmly and unequivocally. This mindset has shaped post- 9/11 Americans in almost every way. Those born in the mid-to-late 1990s most likely have few to no pre-9/11 memories—their entire understanding of American identity is through this lens of hyperawareness and aggression against outsiders, because 9/11 showed outsiders are a threat to American ideals. But this rejection of difference is dangerous, because the assumption is that not only is different bad, but that it does not even exist.

Habits of the Heart scholars argue that a true community is one that memorializes and carries on the traditions of the past.²⁰ However, for that group to truly be sincere in its duty and honor to the past, both the amazing and the heart wrenching, guilt-ridden parts of their past must be preserved with equal attention.²¹ America has always done an excellent job at preserving the parts of their history they are proud of—and a rather abysmal job at highlighting where they have failed.²² However, like before, in part this lack of recognition results from a willingness to ignore these issues, or even that they have been reconstructed in the American narrative. This change in perception furthers the idea that things that are different, or paint America in a bad light, are not allowed.

¹⁹ Qiong Li and Marilyn B. Brewer, "What Does It Mean to Be an American? Patriotism, Nationalism, and American Identity after 9/11," *Political Psychology* 25, no. 5 (2004): 732.

²⁰ Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment to American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 153.

²¹ *Ibid*, 153.

²² In the defense of Americans, no one likes to be reminded of their failures. However, covering for bruised egos has a much larger impact when done on a national scale rather than the individual.

It is not far off to define American values as sacred.²³ If something is considered sacred, it stands to reason there is an opposing idea, symbol, or object that would be considered anti-sacred. Since this other notion is the exact opposite of that which is sacred, it additionally holds the same level of power as what is sacred, but instead of instilling love, pride, happiness, the anti-sacred produces hatred, fear, and disgust.²⁴ This is why it seems almost impossible to gain recognition for any type of narrative that even slightly views America or any of the founding fathers in a negative light—it is simply anathema from a certain American viewpoint. Tension has been rising steadily in America, as this rejection of a differing viewpoint different from the expected has become less and less acceptable over the years, leading to a full-scale divide amongst Americans potentially unseen since the Civil War. This has led to the creation of two schools of thought mentioned earlier in this paper. These two groups are known as the Hyphenators and the Red Hots.

Fighters, To Your Corners: A Discussion of the Various Groups

At first look, the two groups established in this essay could easily be thought of as liberals and conservatives. However, identifying with those monikers is limiting due to the preconceived notions and beliefs associated with each of those groups. Additionally, politics certainly play a large role in defining these categories, but it is not the only defining feature. Therefore, although a certain type of political leaning could be argued for the groups discussed,

²³ Or as philosopher Emile Durkheim argued that people deify the things that are important to their specific group. For more information see: Charles E. Marske, "Durkheim's "Cult of the Individual" and the Moral Reconstitution of Society," *Sociological Theory* 5, no. 1 (1987): 1-14.

²⁴ Anson Shupe, "Constructing Evil as a Social Process: The Unification Church and the Media," in *Uncivil Religion*, ed. Greenspahn and Bellah (New York, 1987), 206.

they are not the be all, end all. This is why two new schools of thought have been created for this essay to showcase the all-encompassing nature of different definitions of American identity. The first group to be explored is the Hyphenators.

Hyphenators stem from Americans wanting to know more about their ancestry and genetic makeup. As Europeans founded the United States, this leads people to branches of their family tree that exist outside of America. By learning more about their families, they are stepping away from what makes them singularly American. There is something about this that draws people in, especially white Americans.

In many instances the knowledge of genetic ancestry, while fascinating, has become more and more of an interesting gimmick rather than anything else. After finding out they are 23% Italian, 43% German, or 18% Scottish, rarely do these people seek out anything more than a casual relationship with these new ethnicities. This information has now become something fun and exciting to share with friends and coworkers more than anything else, rather than actively embracing and engaging this previously unknown ancestry. It is a proud boast that can be shared without any follow through. Not only is someone “just” American, but rather they are Italian-American, someone exotic rather than bland. Alia Crum and Bradley Turnwald completed a study on the mindset around genetic testing that studied this theory.

Using 200 people as a case study, Crum and Turnwald studied the placebo effect in relation to genetic DNA information.²⁵ The 200 people were genetically tested, and then

²⁵ Robin Young, “How DNA Test Results Can Change People's Behavior and Physiology,” WBUR: Boston's NPR New's Station. WBUR, January 9, 2019. <https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2019/01/09/dna-results-change-behavior-physiology>.

separated into two groups; 100 people who showed potentially risky physical attributes, and 100 people who showed no genetic symptoms. In the first group 50 people were told that they showed health risks, and 50 people were told they had no issues. The same information was given to the second group. The study revealed that the people who were told they were predisposed to have dietary or physical problems had worse results than those who were told nothing, regardless of what the DNA results actually showed. Although this experiment mainly focused on dietary habits, the discovery Crum and Turnwald made on the impact of one's mindset on DNA results applies to the genealogy aspects of genetic testing as well.

As Crum says in their interview, the baseline takeaway from this experiment is not that DNA testing is harmful or should not be done, but rather to caution individuals about their mindset when they complete testing.²⁶ Hyphenators do not necessarily care where their results say they are from—so long as their genetic makeup proves they are something other than American, they are overjoyed. On one hand, it may seem obvious that unless someone had Native American ancestry, of course an American's DNA test results would show ancestry from around the world, most notably Europe. However, going back to the importance of mindset from Crum and Turnwald's experiment, Hyphenators are typically from a group of Americans who are aggressively pushing back against the traditional version of American identity, believing it to be filled with too many untruths and false promises to ignore.

The mentality behind the Hyphenators focuses on Americans that are unsatisfied with current Americanism. Although the values of America—justice, freedom, equality— are good

²⁶ Robin Young, "How DNA Test Results Can Change People's Behavior and Physiology," WBUR: Boston's NPR New's Station. WBUR, January 9, 2019. <https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2019/01/09/dna-results-change-behavior-physiology>.

standards to align with, Hyphenators believe that these values are followed in abstract ways rather than actual action. Or more specifically, that these ideals are only fully recognized for white Americans rather than all Americans. Hyphenators seek to change this, creating a more equal nation for everyone regardless of how they define themselves. This feeling of injustice leads Hyphenators to seek out causes that will create balance and equality amongst all Americans. While a worthy goal, this can also be potentially dangerous, with some instances of white Americans taking on racial inequality as their own. Rather than acting as a supportive role in the fight for equality, white Americans risk taking on a more dominant role, leading to cultural appropriation. Or, in the case of protests such as the Black Lives Matter movement, Hyphenators need to be careful that white Americans are the main voice of the movement despite the fact that they are not the group being targeted by the injustice occurring. Grace Hale has dubbed this idea “romancing the outsider.”²⁷

What can start out as a genuine desire to help others in need can transform into something all-encompassing and uncomfortable, moving from a white ally into something else entirely. Some white Americans can be so afraid of being considered ordinary or uninteresting, that they latch on to other cultures and races in order to feel a part of something bigger.²⁸ By trying to make everyone equal, extreme Hyphenators end up obscuring the differences they are

²⁷ Grace Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

²⁸ Ibid, 3. A severe example of this is Rachel Dolezal, a former professor and NAACP chapter president. Dolezal was claiming to be an African American woman despite having no African American ancestry whatsoever. This is not only misappropriating culture; this is outright lying and abuse to make someone feel better about themselves. For more information see: Doreen St. Felix, “‘The Rachel Divide’ Review: A Disturbing Portrait of Dolezal’s Racial Fraudulence,” *The New Yorker*, April 26, 2018. <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-rachel-divide-review-a-disturbing-portrait-of-dolezals-racial-fraudulence>.

trying to celebrate, which is ironically one of the reasons they were established in the first place. America has had similar movements that have started out with good intentions but then had instances of seeking justice into seeking vengeance. An example of this overzealousness can be shown through Cancel Culture.

Swiping Left or Right on Civil Religion:

Over the last few years, political correctness has become more and more mainstream in America. This has been a wonderful change in society, as it has allowed more and more people to be comfortable in their identity as they interact with those around them, both in person and online. With the explosion of the internet in the last twenty years, the way people interact on the internet is especially monitored, with immediate reactions from potentially millions of people in a matter of seconds.²⁹ Of course, as with all types of change, the level of political correctness expected today was not always the case, which can make individuals look at the past with a more critical lens that is expected in today.

Certain jokes that were acceptable in the early 2000s are no longer acceptable twenty years later, which is natural as time changes and people's perceptions change. Not every American wants to accept this change, which creates issues. Further complications occur when people are held to this current standard in relation to their past actions. For sexual harassment, physical violence, verbal abuse, and other severe times of harm, this has brought about good

²⁹ According to a recent Pew Research Center survey, roughly seven out of ten Americans have some type of social media account, be it Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or any other platform. Of that group of users, at least half of them is using these platforms on a daily basis. That is almost constant communication and watchfulness from a large portion of American citizens. For more information see: "Social Media Fact Sheet," *Pew Research Center*, April 7, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/>.

change because it has forced people to be held accountable for their actions after years of neglect.³⁰ Due to the power of the internet, minorities and other groups who previously did not have power are finally being given a platform to present their injustices and be heard without having to wade through bureaucratic processes that can take years and make cases and public interest stagnate. As Princeton University Professor Omar Wasow said in an interview, “as injustices become visible, meaningful change follows.”³¹ With immediate coverage, real change can happen in real time.³² This is the America Hyphenators are attempting to create, with equality that is not only stated, but backed with progressive changes and action. As wonderful and empowering as this can be, there are also potential dangers that that can occur through Cancel Culture.

With the internet’s ability to act as judge, jury, and executioner, questions are being raised on how far society is willing to go in order to judge or condemn individuals based on past actions. This becomes an incredibly difficult and complex discussion, because every single instance must be looked at individually to ensure everyone is treated fairly. Unfortunately, that does not always happen, and due to the speed of the internet many people base their decisions

³⁰ Examples of this include Bill Cosby and Harvey Weinstein, both of whom have been accused and guilty of sexual assault crimes. See: Eric Levenson, “Harvey Weinstein’s Trial is Closely Tracking Bill Cosby’s. But there’s 1 Major Difference,” *CNN*, January 28, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/28/us/harvey-weinstein-bill-cosby-trial/index.html>.

³¹ Shira Ovide, “How Social Media Has Changed Civil Rights Protests,” *The New York Times*, June 18, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/18/technology/social-media-protests.html>.

³² In early 2019, Rahaf Al-Qunun was seeking asylum from Saudi Arabia. She had been attempted to flee to Australia but had been stopped by officials. Qunun barricaded herself in her hotel room, tweeting about the experience and begging people to spread the word, asking several different countries for help. Her case was noticed by Human Rights Watch, and within days Canada had granted Qunun asylum. For more information see: “Rahaf al-Qunun: Saudi teen granted asylum in Canada,” *BBC*, January 11, 2019. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-46844431>.

off of a headline or summed of version of events rather than an in-depth analysis of the conflict. How far are Americans willing to condemn without context, or to judge for past moments in people's lives they no longer agree with? In this potentially volatile atmosphere, something as innocuous as a decades-old tweet could define an entire lifetime.³³ The internet is both wonderful in its ability to provide immediate coverage over questionable behavior while also being damning by remembering past mistakes forever, making it seem like statements made years ago happened only yesterday. Whether good or bad, they exist forever in the public consciousness. As these occurrences happen in the public space of the internet, Americans need to ask themselves what ideals they wish to uphold, what should be discarded, and how they want to proceed going forward.

Is public ostracization the mark for anyone, regardless of the crime committed or perceived? Does contextualization matter? If Americans, specifically Hyphenators, are trying to build a better America, should these people be kept on the outskirts of these new perceptions, or reformed into them? These are tough questions Hyphenators are having to ask themselves as they attempt to change the minds and perceptions of those around them. Minorities are slowly gaining more and more power and voice. A further question that arises then, is how will this power be used responsibly to create an America with accountability, equality, and justice, rather than vengeance for the sake of it? Unfortunately for Hyphenators, this is the stance many Red Hots take in this argument about American civil religion: that a terrible witch hunt is

³³ Or, with how rapidly events progress, what if that information is actually wrong? In 2011, in Vancouver a drunk man stabbed a teenager in the neck. As people turned to social media to seek justice, the wrong name was posted, and an innocent man lost his job and received multiple death threats. For more information see: Devika Khandelwal, "The Marriage of Social Media and Social Justice," *Modern Diplomacy*, January 18, 2019. <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2019/01/18/the-marriage-of-social-media-and-social-justice/>.

occurring, attacking good, innocent Americans and ruining the ideals of the nation.

Bleeding Red, White, and Blue: An Analysis of the Red Hots

Surprisingly, although vastly different, both of these groups tend to operate under the same banner: fear for what their country is or may become. However, one major separation between these two groups is how they act on that fear. The Red Hots gain their name because these Americans act violently and aggressively in the face of threats to their version of American civil religion. The Red Hots are categorized as people who are downright furious with Hyphenators for trying to change America's status quo. A system of beliefs that they would argue have existed since America was founded. A simple and strong mandate that this is the way it has been, and this is the way it always will be. Changes in ideals are not a sign of progress, but rather a sign of corruption that need to be weeded out.

Red Hots would be Americans that consider these values sacred, with any criticism seen as a threat.³⁴ Additional emphasis is placed on the fact that these are not merely different ideas trying to coexist, but that the other is wrong for believing the way that they do. With this reasoning, it is simply impossible to believe that one cannot exist peacefully with the other. This theory stems from the belief that the founding fathers rejected Great Britain's sovereignty, or any type of difference against the United States first principles, and they did so through fighting. Since the founders fought for their freedom against persecution, Red Hots argue they

³⁴ Ironically, neither group takes criticism well, but both believe they are doing what is best for America to succeed. This is why democracy is both wonderful and immensely frustrating. Everyone has the right to speak their opinion, but that also means when there are millions of voices shouting at once, it can be difficult to parse anything out of the noise and into a concrete plan. At the end of the day, everyone cannot be pleased, as much as people in power may try to accomplish this.

should act accordingly. However, while early colonists did fight for the right to be an independent nation, President James Madison actually believed that freedom to express different opinions created a thriving nation.

The fourth president of the United States and known as the father of the constitution, James Madison argued that the establishment of religion was harmful to the nation, suppressing creative minds that would go on to strengthen the citizens of their new republic.³⁵ Allowing one school of thought to reign supreme over the others is stifling, and does not allow for new avenues of thought to progress and potentially improve the community as a whole. Madison believed that without these discussions and introductions of new ideas, the country would stagnate. Discourse is good, as it shows a thriving metropolis—discord is not. However, similar to the way some extreme Hyphenators look at Cancel Culture, some Red Hots look no further than fighting for a cause, using this as permission to provoke physical altercations to defend their beliefs. While the Hyphenators face verbal dangers fracturing their group, the Red Hots have revealed a shorter fuse that can easily be sparked with the right kind of leverage.

Li and Brewer's survey analysis discusses the concept of a "priming effect," or "priming condition."³⁶ Priming conditions are moments in time or verbal terminology that leads people to a certain set of actions, typically resulting in more polarizing and aggressive thinking and behavior. Throughout President Donald Trump's term this type of language was heavily used in

³⁵ Ralph Ketcham, "James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and the Meaning of "Establishment of Religion" in Eighteenth-Century Virginia, in *No Establishment of Religion: America's Original Contribution to Religious Liberty*, ed. T. Jeremy Gunn and John Witte, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 160.

³⁶ Qiong Li and Marilyn B. Brewer, "What Does It Mean to Be an American? Patriotism, Nationalism, and American Identity after 9/11," *Political Psychology* 25, no. 5 (2004): 732.

speeches and tweets put out by the President as well as his cabinet.³⁷ Different terminology President Donald Trump used prior to the day was antagonistic rhetoric, which can incite people into a specific set of responses. In the case of the 2020 election, it can cause already upset Americans to become utterly enraged, causing the violent insurrection that occurred at the Capitol on January 6, 2021.

The name of the rally alone, “The Save America Rally,” showed how the people in the crowd that day felt about President Joe Biden winning the 2020 election. It was not simply that one candidate had lost against another—America and all its people hold dear was in danger because of this action. Trump’s speech that day, that the movements “boldest endeavors have not yet begun” were proven true when later that day those who were at the rally surrounded and stormed the Capitol building, attempting to stop the counting of the election votes. Taking this event and expanding it outward defines the behavior of the Red Hots. When provoked they respond with hostile action, refusing to back down unless their demands are met, or unless they are forced to. One of the reasons Red Hots feel like they are being attacked is due to the

³⁷ On the day of the insurrection, President Trump said: “We fight like Hell and if you don’t fight like Hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore. Our exciting adventures and boldest endeavors have not yet begun. My fellow Americans for our movement, for our children and for our beloved country and I say this, despite all that’s happened, the best is yet to come. So we’re going to, we’re going to walk down Pennsylvania Avenue, I love Pennsylvania Avenue, and we’re going to the Capitol and we’re going to try and give... The Democrats are hopeless. They’re never voting for anything, not even one vote. But we’re going to try and give our Republicans, the weak ones, because the strong ones don’t need any of our help, we’re going to try and give them the kind of pride and boldness that they need to take back our country. So let’s walk down Pennsylvania Avenue.” Whether or not he intended it to be taken this way, President Trump’s speech acted as thorough approval and permission for protestors to attack the Capitol. Additionally, his follow up statements even after damage had been done showed the same thing, claiming love and support for those attacking. For more see: “Donald Trump Speech ‘Save America’ Rally Transcript January 6,” *REV*, January 6, 2021. <https://www.rev.com/blog/transcripts/donald-trump-speech-save-america-rally-transcript-january-6>. As well as: WBUR Newsroom, “‘Go Home’: Trump Tells Supporters Who Mobbed Capitol To Leave, Again Falsely Claiming Election Victory,” *WBUR News*, January 6, 2021. <https://www.wbur.org/news/2021/01/06/go-home-trump-supporters-us-capitol-transcript>.

fact they are being asked to change the way they have existed for generations. Red Hots do not see a problem with the way America has existed, because in some way those values have always benefited the Red Hots. Now, they are being asked to share their power, and since it feels like they are being forced to give something up without any personal gain, it makes Red Hot Americans feel attacked and upset. A volatile mixture, these people act because they fear what America will become, just as Hyphenators fear what will happen if America remains as is. Although perhaps the most recent cultural influence, President Trump's language is far from the first priming condition that has led to acts of anger and violence. As already shown several times throughout this work, popular culture, specifically songs, have the power to influence people like nothing else.

Sweet Land of Liberty, of Thee I Sing: How Song Promotes Ideology

Christian hymns have been instrumental in creating spiritual moments. Often times hymns are the face of denominations, revealing important symbols and identifying markers through melodies and harmonies.³⁸ Mainstream music, in particular country music, has been entertaining the American public with religious imagery without citizens ever needing to step foot into a church, or step out of their car. Furthermore, these songs will often tie Christianity with patriotic language, creating strong civil religious synergy. Slipping religious and patriotic doctrine into songs heard on the radio every day is a way to ensure Americans remain righteous and religious in their day to day lives. Blake Shelton's "God's Country" shows this coming

³⁸ Stephen Marini, *Sacred Song in America: Religion, Music, and Public Culture* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 184.

together perfectly.³⁹ The lyrics of “God’s Country” embody the beauty of the American south, the pride people take in working the land, and the song title makes it plain that the United States is strong and true because of its religious affiliation.⁴⁰ Compared to “God Bless the U.S.A,” which was written in 1984, “God’s Country” was written in 2019. This shows that while the concept of country songs influencing American listeners into having more classic patriotic ideals, this strategy is very much in use.⁴¹ Even songs that do not seem overly patriotic or religious still invoke this feeling, like Zac Brown Band’s “Chicken Fried.”⁴²

At first glance, Zac Brown Band’s “Chicken Friend” leaves little to the imagination. “You know I like my chicken fried/ cold beer on a Friday night,” the song seems like it is fairly stereotypical country song about food, alcohol, and women. In some ways, “Chicken Fried” does fit that mold. However, it surprisingly also has lyrics that touch on those same American qualities that “God’s Country” does, although in a less overt way. Once more, this song has lyrics that touch on the loveliness of the American country, the stability of a family raised right on wholesome American values, and the most obvious of all—graciousness towards the American flag and U.S. troops.⁴³ The overt symbolism in “God’s Country” in comparison to the

³⁹ Blake Shelton, “God’s Country,” Track 1 on *Fully Loaded: God’s Country*, Warner Records, 2019, YouTube.

⁴⁰ Lyrics like “We turned the dirt and worked until the week’s done/ We take a break and break bread on Sunday,” and the refrain of “Getting’ baptized in holy water and ‘shine,” bring to mind strong patriots, and classic southern stereotypes with the addition of moonshine. Together, the song creates pride in the American identity.

⁴¹ Not only is this method still active, but it is still very effective, as God’s Country has over two million views on YouTube alone.

⁴² Zac Brown Band, “Chicken Fried,” Track 7 on *The Foundation*, Big Picture Records, 2008, YouTube.

⁴³ The majority of “Chicken Fried” has a fairly upbeat tempo, but towards the end of the song it slows down just in time for listeners to take a moment and reflect on important American ideals. “I thank god for my life/ and for the stars and stripes/ May freedom forever fly, let it ring. / Salute the ones who died/ The ones that give

more hidden representation in “Chicken Fried” shows that there is Patriotic representation across the broad genre of country music. Whether or not Americans are looking for these examples of American-hood in their downtime is unimportant—if someone is listening to country music, they are more than likely being primed to respond positively to the expected ideals of the nation. This is why it is not uncommon for many Red Hots to primarily live in the south, where country music is more often listened to. Americans have been and are continuing to be conditioned to behave a certain way by almost every aspect of their lives. Whether it be from the news, politics, or even entertainment designed to get away from these discussions, it is becoming less and less possible to practice escapism as the divide between Hyphenators and Red Hots grows deeper and deeper.

Where do Americans Go from Here?

More and more Polarization has occurred between the Hyphenators and the Red Hots, until the divide between the two groups seems insurmountable. It feels as though there is no longer room for Americans to believe in a blending of these two schools of thought, despite the fact that most Americans do live in this middle ground between these two extremes in a type of no man’s land.⁴⁴ Though many citizens fall somewhere in the middle of these two ideas, even what is considered the “middle” has moved further and further apart. A 2014 Pew Research

their lives so we don’t have to sacrifice.” It is a moment that cannot be missed to do the melody choices in the song, and it is very clearly stating what should matter most to the American people. As of 2019, “Chicken Fried” has over 27 million views.

⁴⁴ Martin E. Marty, “Getting Beyond ‘The Myth of Christian America,’ in *No Establishment of Religion: America’s Original Contribution to Religious Liberty*, ed. T. Jeremy Gunn and John Witte, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 366.

Center Survey showed three different charts, each one ten years apart, dating from 1994, 2004, and 2014.⁴⁵ Each graph showed that every ten years, the overlap between political groups has gotten smaller and smaller. Additionally, the survey showed that each group has continued to view the other as more and more of a threat to the nation, rather than a fellow American who believes differently than them.⁴⁶ This aggression and nastiness towards each other has made it impossible for either side to further their ambitious goals for the nation. But if either side feels so strongly negative about the other, how could there possibly be any type of compromise between them?

Change never comes easy. At the end of the day, these clashes are about power, and who holds it. Previously, power was dominated by older, white, heteronormative men. Now, these individuals are being forced to share that power with others who do not necessarily fit neatly into any of those categories, making their way into all manner of institutions in order to make reforms and spread that power even further afield. But how does that change come about while still taking care not to completely ostracize any one group? By viewing the other as completely illogical, outright demonizing them in some instances, is the idea of a middle ground even fathomable anymore? Hyphenators want to transform America into what they believe will be a more honestly equal nation, while the Red Hots do not want to give up what they believe to be their Constitutional, God-given rights. Hyphenators argue that America is not as perfect as

⁴⁵ Pew Research Center, Democrats and Republicans More Ideologically Divided than in the Past Chart, in "Political Polarization in the American Public," *Pew Research Center*, June 12, 2014. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>.

⁴⁶ Pew Research Center, A Rising Tide of Mutual Antipathy Graph, in "Political Polarization in the American Public," *Pew Research Center*, June 12, 2014. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2014/06/12/political-polarization-in-the-american-public/>.

some citizens have been led to believe, empowering a few and leaving everyone else to struggle. It is not fair for those who have been abused to wait for society to change for them to seek justice, and so Hyphenators wish for immediate alternatives to the current way of life. Just because people are different does not mean they are not American. America was supposedly founded on this very notion.⁴⁷ But instead there are those who behave as though citizens have always been uniform and singular in every possible way.

According to the Red Hots America is meant to be the most exceptional country in the world. The values of the United States have worked in their favor for centuries, always unchanging and uncompromising in their stalwart beliefs, and they cannot imagine anyone else having the kinds of problems people claim to have. If people have issues with the principles of the nation, that is their problem to deal with.⁴⁸ This becomes incredibly complicated the defined way to deal with these issues is centuries old, and shockingly Americans only seem to ever want to use the Constitution to defend their argument when it best benefits them to do so. Additionally, everyone has a different definition for what the founding fathers intended

⁴⁷ A well-known children's educational program, *School House Rock* taught many different important subjects they felt young Americans should know. Airing from 1973 to 2009, *School House Rock* featured a popular song meant to highlight this proud, mixed heritage. "The Great American Melting Pot" was released in 1996, and emphasized the idea that Americans came from many different backgrounds, and those unique characteristics made the United States stronger. However, even this song implies that even though these people started in different places, when they came to America, they left all that behind to become uniformly American. For more information see: "School House Rock—Great American Melting Pot," *Critical Media Project*, 2017. <https://criticalmediaproject.org/schoolhouse-rock-great-american-melting-pot/>.

⁴⁸ The United States version of exceptionalism has existed almost as long as the country itself has, but it gained heavy traction during the Cold War. Christianity and American values were used to combat communism. America was on high alert for what they viewed as different, or even abnormal. Democracy was more important than individual liberties in the quest to banish communism from the world, even though it is those freedoms Red Hots now so viciously defend. For more information see: Martin E. Marty, "Getting Beyond 'The Myth of Christian America,'" in *No Establishment of Religion: America's Original Contribution to Religious Liberty*, ed. T. Jeremy Gunn and John Witte, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 373.

when they wrote the Constitution, so the words can be morphed in any number of ways depending on the perspective. These groups view the other as totally alien, either shameful to call themselves American in the case of the Hyphenators, or a disgrace to call themselves anything but for the Red Hots. This intense demonizing of the other is leading America down an unprecedented path.

There is a high level of tension that has snapped several times over the last few years, from the murder of George Floyd to the Insurrection at the Capitol. At the moment no one is necessarily pleased with the definition of what it means to be American regardless of what they believe. Outright antagonism shown by both groups, and an unwillingness to compromise when they are equally adamant that they are in the right over the other, has led to an outright shattering of American identity. Citizens are either forced into “for” or “against,” and when an immediate response is not given, they are cast aside as weak or cowardice for refusing to take a side by extremists of both the Hyphenators and the Red Hots. The United States is no longer on a precipice of change, but rather it has been forceably shoved right off the cliff, plunging into the unknown and hitting every possible outcropping and jagged edge on their way to the bottom. It is still unclear what is going to happen when they land, or which group is going to rise victorious when the dust settles, if either of them will. Right now, the only true certainty in America is that change is occurring. Whether it is for better or for worse has yet to be seen.

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