
From King Philip's War to September 11

Religion, Violence, and the American Way

Andrew R. Murphy and Elizabeth Hanson

As a religious problem, the problem of suffering is, paradoxically, not how to avoid suffering but how to suffer, how to make of physical pain, personal loss, worldly defeat, or the helpless contemplation of others' agony something bearable, supportable—something, as we say, sufferable.

—CLIFFORD GEERTZ, "RELIGION AS A CULTURAL SYSTEM"

Clifford Geertz suggests an intimate connection between religion and suffering, a problem of interpretation central to any consideration of the relationship between religion and violence more generally.¹ This chapter examines key episodes in America's nearly 400-year history of turning to the jeremiad to explain violence endured and sometimes to justify violence inflicted.² The jeremiad is part of a longstanding American rhetorical tradition, one that understands the nation as existing in a special, covenanted relationship with God, with special purposes to accomplish in the world. Although the jeremiad did not originate in America, and is not unique to the American experience—other peoples, in many different times and places, have proven all too eager to claim sacred status for their own communities³—it has played a key role in Americans' self-understandings since the early days of colonization. The jeremiad draws its inspiration from the Hebrew prophets, who frequently lamented Israel's violation of its covenant with God. Through the jeremiad, prophets called Israelites to repent of their sins and rededicate themselves to their covenant with God; they predicted blessings if the people reformed, and catastrophes if they did not.⁴ In like manner, many Americans, from the earliest days of colonial settlement down to the twenty-first century, have understood their nation as chosen to carry out God's purposes in human history. Thus Americans have often interpreted their nation's successes

(including the successful exercise of violence against other peoples) as signs that God approves of the nation's spiritual state. But a special relationship and special purposes imply special responsibilities; and thus Americans have also often interpreted episodes of violence and other misfortunes as punishment sent by God in order to chastise this chosen people for failing to live up to the terms of their covenant.

The jeremiad (and the view of history that undergirds it⁵) is based on two crucial claims. First, the *epistemological* aspect of the jeremiad involves a claim that humans, with some degree of certainty, can read God's purposes in earthly events; these events, properly interpreted, provide a way to assess the spiritual health of a given community. Second, the *ethical-theological* component of the jeremiad presumes that God's purposes encompass the use of violence in the pursuit of religious and divinely ordained political ends. Somewhere in the convergence of these two assumptions lies the power of the jeremiad to accomplish what Geertz saw as religion's central power, that of making suffering sufferable. At the same time, it can become deeply problematic when such certainty about God's will is combined with exhortation about the moral and religious dimensions of violence. Decoupling the epistemological from the ethical-theological claims makes possible important variations on the standard jeremiadic formula, as becomes evident through a consideration of Abraham Lincoln (who questioned the jeremiad's epistemological pillar) and Martin Luther King Jr. (who questioned its ethical-theological one). These latter variations suggest novel and creative ways of reframing how the jeremiad relates religion and violence in the American tradition.

WINTHROP'S MODEL AND THE CITY ON A HILL

Notions of a chosen America go back to the earliest days of colonization. John Winthrop's sermon *A Model of Christian Charity*, delivered on board the *Arbella* in 1630, provides the most famous reference to the American settlement as a "city on a hill."⁶ But Winthrop's sermon did not simply proclaim that New England was a city on a hill. Rather, it laid out two possible scenarios for the unfolding of New England's future. Having entered into a covenant with God, Winthrop reports, the colonists of the Massachusetts Bay Company must decide whether or not to honor that covenant: "[I]f we shall neglect the observation of these articles . . . and, dissembling with our God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us, and be revenged of such a people, and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant."⁷ Failure to observe the covenant would put the community on the receiving end of holy violence, the wrath of God "break[ing] out against us." Winthrop's goal

was to avoid this outcome, and the *Model* continues with a striking evocation of the social harmony and mutual forbearance that God expected of his saints in New England. In this scenario, the community will be able to overcome the violence of its enemies and to earn the praise and envy of surrounding lands: "We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, 'May the Lord make it like that of New England.' For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us."⁸ These settlements about which Winthrop was so concerned grew and flourished over the subsequent decades. But the covenant was always on the minds of the colony's ruling elite, and, given their providentialist worldview, New Englanders often interpreted their misfortunes—crop failures, Indian attacks, diseases, and epidemics—as signs of God's wrath at their failure to live up to the godly standards set by the founding generation. Thus was born the American jeremiad, an American variant on the long-standing rhetorical form that the Puritans brought with them from England.

In New England, the jeremiad most often appeared in the form of an occasional sermon. Authorized by the civil government, occasional sermons were delivered during significant public events. They were "solidarity rituals" that cemented religious piety and politics in one public event.⁹ Occasional sermons delivered on days of thanksgiving or of fasting and humiliation sought to express either the community's gratitude to God for blessings, or contrition in hopes of regaining God's favor through public acts of penitence. According to Harry S. Stout, the speaker's goals were "not to be innovative or entertaining, but to recall for his audience the vision that first impelled New England's mission."¹⁰ During election-day sermons, another variety of the occasional sermon, New Englanders were called upon to reflect on their collective past, to rededicate themselves as a community based on a common faith, and to choose godly leaders.¹¹ On more somber occasions, clergy inveighed against a society that had fallen away from its religious roots and was reaping the consequences in faction, pride, and vanity, in Indian wars and natural disasters. By restricting public oration on such important occasions to the clergy, New England civil magistrates ensured that the sermon would occupy a prominent, virtually unchallenged, status on that day.¹²

KING PHILIP'S WAR: RELIGION AND VIOLENCE IN EARLY NEW ENGLAND

Of the clergy likely to be called on to deliver occasional sermons in the generation following Winthrop, none played a more significant role in the colonies' public life than Increase Mather. Mather, the son of Richard Mather and son-in-law of John Cotton, both celebrated figures of early Massachusetts Bay, was a

towering figure in New England society. And though he spoke in the style of a prophet, it is unlikely that Mather knew how prophetic his 1674 sermon *The Day of Trouble Is Near* would turn out to be.¹³ For December of that year would see the beginning of King Philip's War, a series of catastrophic conflicts with the natives. This war, so named for the chief of the Wampanoag tribe who spearheaded the native tribes' armed resistance to the English colonists in 1675 and 1676, has been called "the great crisis of the early period of New England history."¹⁴ By war's end fully half of the towns in New England were damaged severely, and twelve were completely laid waste; the economy was in shambles, with the colonial treasuries near bankruptcy. Hundreds of English colonists (and far more Native Americans) were dead, wounded, or in captivity.

These grim details were in the future on the day that Mather preached in Boston. What Mather saw all around him were the sins of a once-godly people and their breach of the covenant into which the colony's founders had entered. Mather called attention to "a great decay as to the power of godliness amongst us"; spiritual and carnal pride "in apparel, fashions, and the like"; disobedience within families, churches, and the commonwealth; insensitivity to the poor; and growing contentiousness and disunity.¹⁵ Not only did Mather see his own generation falling short of the godliness of its parents; he feared that such a pattern was getting worse among the colony's youth. "Churches have not so performed covenant-duties towards their children, as should have been, and especially, the rising generation have many of them broken the covenant themselves, in that they do not endeavour to come up to that which their solemn vow in baptism doth engage them to before the Lord."¹⁶

Mather took his sermon text from Ezekiel and noted that, although in scripture the Chaldeans had inflicted judgment on Israel, the ultimate source of their punishment was God, who sent the Chaldeans as punishment for the Israelites' sins.¹⁷ God's punishment was intended for a specific purpose: "that which the Lord intends by bringing his people into the furnace of affliction, is that he may make pure metal of them, yea, that they may be purged and sanctified, and become vessels meet for the master's use."¹⁸ The reason for such a spiritual declension, in Mather's view, was clear: what was once a religiously based settlement had become infected with the poison of worldliness. "Alas! We have changed our interest. The interest of New England was religion, which did distinguish us from other English plantations; they were built upon a worldly design, but we upon a religious design, whereas now we begin to espouse a worldly interest, and so to chase a new God, therefore no wonder that war is like to be in the gates."¹⁹ And yet, amidst the signs of trouble all around, Mather drew on his faith in God's promises and his reverence for the founding generation as he voiced hope for the colony's relationship with its God: "Our fathers have built sanctuaries for his

name therein, and therefore he will not destroy us."²⁰ Not destroy, perhaps, but Mather felt sure that God was preparing to afflict New England.

Affliction came when armed hostilities began in 1675. By the spring of 1676, the Wampanoags and their allies were within ten miles of Boston. Although the jeremiadic emphasis on divine punishment had been a staple of New England public life for decades, the experience of King Philip's War pointed out just how terrible God's punishments could be. Between the spring of 1675 and the summer of 1676 scores of New England towns were burned, their inhabitants attacked and killed. When King Philip himself was killed in August 1676, hostilities came to a rapid conclusion. Shortly thereafter New Englanders began to produce histories of the war, trying to understand what had happened and why. One of the first came from the pen of Increase Mather. Mather's account painted a portrait of the violence unleashed on both sides: for Mather, New England had been both a recipient of God's violence, delivered by the Wampanoags, and an agent of divinely sanctioned violence inflicted upon the natives.

In such a providential framework, God rewarded righteousness with military victory, peace, and prosperity—and punished pride and disobedience with violence at the hands of the Indians.²¹ New Englanders ascribed any victory they enjoyed to God's favor, rather than to their own military prowess, as when one author reported that "God (whose tender mercies are over all his works) in compassion to the English Nation in this Wilderness, [did] wonderfully appear for our deliverance. . . . great numbers have surrendered themselves when by our own strength or outward Circumstances we could least expect it."²² To claim success for one's good fortune or well-being was the height of pride. All good things flowed from God. Even in the midst of the war, they lived in the hope "that (if our sins obstruct not so great a blessing) we may shortly once again see peace and safety restored to our (lately disconsolate) habitations in this Wilderness."²³ The rhetorical connections between New England's righteousness, God's will, and the outcome of the conflict played out more concretely after a Day of Public Thanksgiving in Massachusetts on June 29, 1676, when one author noted that "God himself hath sent from Heaven and saved us (for we see nothing of man, but God to be all in all) by Wasting [the Indians] with Sickness, Starving them through want of Provisions, Leaving them to their own Divisions, Taking away their Spirits, putting the Dread of us upon them, Cutting off their Principal men, Sachems and others. Blessed be his Great and Glorious Name."²⁴

When New Englanders found themselves on the receiving end of violence, they sought to understand it by way of the same providential framework. At times God seemed to be punishing New Englanders for their waywardness by inflicting violence upon them at the hands of King Philip's warriors. In one incident, a settler named Wright refused to seek shelter at the garrison with the other

inhabitants of his town when the Indians arrived; instead, “he had a strange confidence or rather conceit, that whilst he held his Bible in his hand, he looked upon himself as secure from all kinde of violence; and that the Enemy finding him in that posture, deriding his groundlesse apprehension or folly therein, ript him open, and put his Bible in his belly.”²⁵ Wright’s prideful approach to scripture provoked God’s wrath against him, making him the object of divine violence, and a cautionary example to others.

Although the example of Wright’s disembowelment made for sensational moral instruction, more typically, and in keeping with the social emphasis of the jeremiad tradition, chastening violence was interpreted by the entire community as punishment for collective sins. Even as they endeavored to mend their ways, their misfortunes at the hands of the Indians served as a yardstick by which to measure God’s anger with them. Mather noted that a “day of prayer and humiliation was observed Dec. 2, when also something happened intimating as if the Lord were still angry with our prayers, for this day all the houses in Quonsickamuck were burnt by the Indians.”²⁶ Similarly, on April 20, 1676, as the churches in Boston prayed for God’s mercy in a day of humiliation, colonists in nearby Sudbury faced a grim judgment. Indians captured a number of them, “stripped them naked, and caused them to run the gauntlet, whipping them after a cruel and bloody manner, and then threw hot ashes upon them, cut out the flesh of their legs, and put fire into their wounds, delighting to see the miserable torments of wretched creatures.”²⁷

In some cases, New Englanders found themselves simultaneously the agents and the recipients of divine violence, a situation that required a more nuanced explanation. After a victory at Hadley and Northampton, the New Englanders destroyed the Indians’ forges and lead supply, thus preventing the natives from making weapons, only to see their fortunes quickly reversed: “This great Success was not altogether without its allay, as if Providence had designed to checker our joys and sorrows; and lest we should sacrifice to our own Nets, and say, Our own Arms or prowess hath done this, to permit the Enemy presently after to take an advantage against us; For as our men were returning to Hadly [*sic*] in a dangerous Passe, which they were not sufficiently aware of, the skulking Indians . . . killed, at one Volley, the said Captain, and Eight and Thirty of his men.”²⁸ On another occasion, fighting Philip’s forces in a swamp, the English colonists were having considerable success but did not realize it and, in the heat of battle, called a retreat. As Mather interpreted it, “God saw that we were not yet fit for deliverance, nor could health be restored unto us except a great deal more blood be first taken from us.”²⁹ The failure of this expedition later served to embolden the enemy and precipitated several murders by the Indians at Mendham. Even in the midst of apparent success, New Englanders were enjoined not to forget the source of their help. God might punish pride at any time.

New Englanders commonly regarded Indians not simply as a military enemy, but as the agent of divine violence, the instrument by which God punished their sins and urged them back toward righteousness. God's choice to use Indians as agents of violence was not arbitrary. A crucial feature of New England's punishment was that it was enacted by the people they had promised to convert, but had in fact led further into sin. Increase Mather reprinted a letter from Plymouth governor Josiah Winslow, which reminded his readers that "God is just and hath punished us far less than our iniquities have deserved; yea just in using as a rod, whose enlightening and conversion we have not endeavored as we might and should have done, but on the contrary have taught them new sins that they knew not."³⁰ The setbacks and tragedies of war were part of a broader cosmic framework of divine justice.

The New England jeremiad did not vanish after its heyday in the second half of the seventeenth century. Fast-day and election-day sermons continued, and clergy continued to lament perceived spiritual decline. "There was once a very distinguishing work of God's grace in the midst of us," preached John Webb in 1734, but "[t]his work of divine grace . . . is fallen into a languishing state for the present."³¹ In 1740 Joseph Sewall took the example of the Ninevites in Jonah 3:10 as a fast-day sermon text, listing a familiar litany of sins (disrespect of the Sabbath, oppression, the abuse of taverns) and calling on his compatriots to "seek . . . God with prayer and fasting . . . with true repentance, and sincere endeavours after reformation." "[I]f we refuse to repent and reform," he continued, "we shall be condemned out of our own mouths."³² The title of Samuel Wales's 1785 *The Dangers of Our National Prosperity; and the Ways to Avoid Them* illustrates how concerns over worldliness and wealth gave way to ongoing calls for repentance.

Clergy in early New England possessed, if not a monopoly on religious speech, a near monopoly on institutional resources to promote that speech, as well as control over educational and social institutions. Having such speakers selected and invited by the civil magistrates—and having their sermons reprinted and distributed by order of the General Court—was an effective way to shape public discourse and to present a unified set of guidelines for acceptable public behavior. Social critique, when it arose, came largely from within the colony's ruling elite.

The idea of America as the New Israel echoed down through the Great Awakening and into the Revolutionary period, providing powerful rhetorical support for the struggle for independence and providing preachers numerous opportunities to frame crises in jeremiadic terms. In 1777 Nicholas Street compared George III with Pharaoh, but reminded his listeners that God humbled the Israelites in the wilderness as punishment for their sins. True to the jeremiadic tradition, Street pointed to Americans' greed, selfishness, disregard for the Sabbath, profaneness, and corruption, and assured them that such judgments would increase

“till we are brought to a repentance and reformation.”³³ As in prophetic warnings to the ancient Israelites, America’s Jeremiahs would continue to lament the inability or unwillingness of American Israelites to live up to their covenantal obligations. We can follow this distinction between suffering sacred violence and inflicting it down through one of the most traumatic episodes of American history: the American Civil War.

CARNAGE AND CHOSENNESS IN CIVIL WAR AMERICA

As in colonial New England, antebellum and Civil War-era jeremiads often appeared first in the form of fast, thanksgiving, or election sermons, and were then republished and circulated to a wider audience. But the United States, now a sovereign nation, had disestablished churches and ensured freedom of the press, association, and peaceful assembly. State establishments of religion, though not outlawed, were clearly declining in influence. There is no denying, of course, that many Protestant leaders occupied powerful public positions during the antebellum period, but they were leading players in a lively religious marketplace rather than an elite marked off from the people by distinctions of education and literacy. Religious discourse during the early national period came from increasingly diverse corners: revivals, lecture tours, newspapers, and a host of other opportunities for religious and political leaders to weigh in on public issues.³⁴

Despite the radical transformations of American society from the early eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries, the United States remained in many important ways a deeply Christian nation throughout the Civil War years. With the outbreak of the Civil War, many Northern thinkers and critics came to see the Union army as the instrument of God’s holy vengeance—and purging justice—on the South, for the sin of slavery and rebellion. In 1864, looking back over three years of war and carnage, clergyman S. A. Hodgman explained the tragedy of the war by linking the suffering of God’s chosen people with God’s judgments: “It was not because the Lord abhorred us as a people, but because of his great favor towards us, that he hath purged us, as gold is purified in a furnace. We have a great mission to perform, and there is a bright destiny before us, in the future; and it was necessary that we should receive a discipline to prepare us for both. . . . It is to be our destiny, to teach all tyrants and oppressors, that their days are numbered. We are to be a city set on a hill, whose light can not be hid.”³⁵

As in early New England, jeremiadic thinking—chosen people, covenanted with God, with a special mission to fulfill, judged by God and found to be wanting—provided a meaningful guide for interpreting battlefield results. Victory proved God’s favor. Defeat represented a sign of lingering sin in need of

purgation. In their efforts to understand the reasons for the triumphs and terrible sufferings of the war, Southerners, too, drew on jeremiadic language. Preaching in 1862, Confederate supporter J. W. Tucker argued that "God is on our side—is with us in this conflict—because we have had reverses. 'Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth.' . . . God sent our reverses for our good. They were necessary to humble our pride; to stop our foolish and absurd boasting, and to make us feel the importance of the conflict in which we are engaged."³⁶

Jeremiahs on both sides alternated between elation and deflation depending on news from the battlefield. But common to all were two fairly straightforward assumptions, shared with New Englanders such as Increase Mather and John Winthrop: (1) the outcomes of battles provided a relatively clear window onto the will of God, and the spiritual health of the communities involved; and (2) God used the violence of human agents to achieve God's ultimate purposes. Perhaps the most vivid example of these two concepts came from Henry Ward Beecher, who delivered an oration on the occasion of the raising of the Stars and Stripes over Fort Sumter as the war wound down in April 1865. Looking across Charleston Harbor, Beecher observed: "Desolation broods in yonder sad city: solemn retribution hath avenged our dishonoured banner. . . . [The wreckage is a sign that] God hath set such a mark upon treason that all ages shall dread and abhor it. . . . We exult . . . not that *our* will is done, but that God's will hath been done!"³⁷

Jeremiadic interpretations of violence in early New England were undergirded by twin epistemological and ethical-theological pillars, which claimed certainty about God's intentions and understood the moral appropriateness of violence in carrying out those intentions. Abraham Lincoln's reflections on the war's meaning and its connection with God's purposes provided an eloquent contrast to the Puritan "model" as well as to the Unionist triumphalism epitomized by his contemporary Beecher. Lincoln thus marks an important moment in the history of the American jeremiad. Given his unconventional religious life, his lifelong skepticism toward creeds and dogmas, it is unsurprising that his approach to the American jeremiad would involve modifications of its basic premises.³⁸ Lincoln illustrates one way of decoupling the jeremiad's epistemological and ethical-theological foundations. He did not dissent from a theological outlook that perceived violence as a part of God's judgment and government of the world. Lincoln departed from so many of his contemporaries by rejecting the epistemological claim that earthly events provided unambiguous evidence of God's purposes.³⁹ A few examples make this clear.

In September 1862 Lincoln entertained a delegation of Chicago Christians who urged him to issue an emancipation proclamation. Lincoln's response speaks directly to these issues of epistemological foundations of the jeremiad:

I am approached with the most opposite opinions and advice, and that by religious men, who are equally certain that they represent the Divine will. I am sure that either the one or the other class is mistaken in that belief, and perhaps in some respects both. I hope it will not be irreverent for me to say that if it is probable that God would reveal his will to others, on a point so connected with my duty, it might be supposed he would reveal it directly to me; for, unless I am more deceived in myself than I often am, it is my earnest desire to know the will of Providence in this matter. And if I can learn what it is I will do it! These are not, however, the days of miracles, and I suppose it will be granted that I am not to expect a direct revelation. I must study the plain physical facts of the case, ascertain what is possible and learn what appears to be wise and right. The subject is difficult, and good men do not agree. . . . the rebel soldiers are praying with a great deal more earnestness, I fear, than our own troops, and expecting God to favor their side.⁴⁰

But Lincoln's position was more complicated than this passage suggests. In the same month Lincoln penned (apparently for private purposes) a document that has come to be known as the "Meditation on the Divine Will." It is worth quoting in its entirety:

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be wrong. God can not be for, and against the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party—and yet the human instrumentalities, working just as they do, are of the best adaptation to effect His purpose. I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. By his mere quiet power, on the minds of the now contestants, He could have either saved or destroyed the Union without a human contest. Yet the contest began. And having begun He could give the final victory to either side any day. Yet the contest proceeds.⁴¹

Note the tentative and ambivalent nature of Lincoln's analysis: he proposes that it is "quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purposes of either party" and pronounces himself "almost ready" to say that it is "probably" the case that God's will differs from that of the combatants. If God was speaking through earthly events, Lincoln suggests, God was doing so in a way that frustrated the efforts of partisans on both sides to claim God's unequivocal favor.

In his Second Inaugural, Lincoln further developed the reflections he had begun in the "Meditation." Distinctive in its lack of triumphalism, in its charity for the foe, in its intertwining of Lincoln's fatalism with a grander notion of the mysteries of God's providence, the Second Inaugural shows Lincoln "propound[ing] a thick, complex view of God's rule over the world and a morally nuanced picture of America's destiny."⁴² Of course, Lincoln did suggest in the Second Inaugural that the war might be God's punishment for American slavery, and he certainly

did not shrink from sanctioning violence in pursuit of his own war aims. Yet he did so hypothetically: "If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offenses which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through his appointed time, he now wills to remove . . . shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a living God ascribe to Him?"⁴³ Such a theologically tentative formulation mirrors that of the "Meditation on the Divine Will," and reinforces Mark Noll's view of Lincoln as a "holdout" from the more popular understandings of providential certainty common among his contemporaries.⁴⁴ In other words, compared with his more triumphalist fellow Americans—Northerners eager to see divine blessing in the Union's military triumph and Southerners consoled by a "Lost Cause" mythology, in which God allowed the Confederacy to be defeated in order to humble it for its own sins—"Lincoln . . . bowed to a different God."⁴⁵

Lincoln's jeremiad took issue with the epistemological claims of its more traditional formulation. He made few claims that he could know God's will sufficiently to declare that the violence of Union forces against the South was somehow an enactment of that will. Yet Lincoln did affirm the theological-ethical component of jeremiad, which perceived that the violence of the Civil War was indeed an instrument of God's providence or even punishment for which the nation *as a whole* bore responsibility. In spite of differences from Puritan jeremiads, there were enduring continuities as well. For in both periods, violence and war created occasions for reflection, contrition, and, ultimately, rededication to the community's founding ideals, whether those of a budding colony drifting from its covenantal origins or a fractured body of states consolidating its identity as a nation around founding principles of inalienable rights to life and liberty.

THE POST-SEPTEMBER 11 JEREMIAD AND BEYOND

The success of a concerted political (and military) effort to purge the nation of the "national sin" of slavery was followed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by other American "prophets" and reformers who employed jeremiadic discourse to target other sources of moral decline or to initiate moral renewal.⁴⁶ Social movements associated with temperance, suffrage, civil rights, and desegregation come most immediately to mind. The reemergence of conservative Protestants in American civic life during the 1970s and 1980s was driven by a backlash against the social protests and counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s, Supreme Court decisions on school prayer and abortion, and an increasingly powerful federal government with a long reach into areas previously left to local institutions. Many conservative Christians saw these developments as proof of a deep-seated corruption in American culture. Given their past reservations about engaging in

politics, fundamentalist leaders framed their reentry into political life as a defensive one—a response to a hostile mainstream culture increasingly dominated by secularism and liberalism. James Findlay points out that the “tactics of the liberal churches were a double-edged sword, which could be used to advance conservative as well as liberal ends. It was not long before exactly that happened. Perhaps ironically, then, the political successes of the mainline churches in the 1960s served as a precondition for the emergence of Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and the Moral Majority in the 1980s.”⁴⁷

Clergy played a key role in convincing skeptical evangelical and fundamentalist congregations that political engagement need not come at the expense of their spiritual health. Jerry Falwell was perhaps the most influential of those clergy. Falwell built bridges between fundamentalist and evangelical Protestant communities by crafting a public language of American moral decline to which both groups could subscribe. Besides preaching sermons at countless conservative churches around the country, Falwell spearheaded the formation of the Moral Majority in 1979, building that organization into a formidable public voice in American politics. In 1980, disappointed with the presidency of Jimmy Carter (especially given the high hopes with which many born-again Christians had welcomed him, one of their own, to the White House), many Christian Right leaders supported Ronald Reagan. His personal religiosity was far more ambiguous than Carter’s (and his personal life included a divorce), but Reagan was skilled at evoking the imagery of American chosenness. Although scholars have long pointed to the Christian Right’s lack of concrete policy successes, this amorphous and increasingly diverse movement proved enormously effective in mobilizing traditionalist Americans concerned with the secularization of public life. The internal politics of the Republican Party have been transformed by this mobilization, and the presidency of George W. Bush made abundantly clear how evangelical ideas and rhetoric continue to influence the highest levels of American government.

Appearing on Pat Robertson’s television program *The 700 Club* just days after the September 11 attacks, Jerry Falwell uttered the following memorable words:

[W]hat we saw on [September 11], as terrible as it is, could be minuscule if, in fact—if, in fact—God continues to lift the curtain and allow the enemies of America to give us probably what we deserve. . . . The ACLU’s got to take a lot of blame for this. . . . throwing God out successfully with the help of the federal court system, throwing God out of the public square, out of the schools. The abortionists have got to bear some burden for this because God will not be mocked. . . . [along with] the pagans . . . and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way.⁴⁸

Falwell's remarks made clear that the United States was on the receiving end of divinely ordained violence and destruction because, through its moral decline, it had failed to honor its covenant with God.

These remarks were highly controversial, and public outrage led Falwell to retract them, though less than convincingly. But his interpretation of the events of September 11 are not nearly as far out of the American mainstream, historically speaking, as one might think. (Many on the political left, too, saw the terrorist attacks as fitting punishment for the U.S. government's foreign policy failures—an instance of “chickens coming home to roost” or the necessity for the United States to be taken down a peg or two.) Falwell's jeremiad follows directly from the epistemological claim that we can know God's will by reading earthly events. The call for national repentance accompanying Falwell's remarks about September 11 also suggests an embrace of God's use of sacred violence. Moreover, the strong (initial) support among American evangelicals for the Bush administration's “war on terror” and military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq often drew on the ethical-theological foundations of the jeremiad. In earlier jeremiads, this dimension was an occasion for interpreting military victory or defeat as a sign of God's blessing or punishment. In the war on terror, though, some on the religious right asserted the appropriateness of instrumental violence in pursuit of God's causes.

Among many other responses to Falwell's remarks, those of President George W. Bush warrant special note. Bush rejected Falwell's particular interpretation of the events of September 11 (the first pillar) without denying its underlying premise, namely that earthly events reflect God's assessment of a community's spiritual health. In fact, Bush actually inverted Falwell's logic and claimed that the United States had been attacked not because of its moral decadence and decline, but because of its virtue. Furthermore, Bush connected America's goodness to the nation's relationship with God: “In every generation, the world has produced enemies of human freedom. They have attacked America because we are freedom's home and defender. . . . The advance of human freedom . . . now depends on us. . . . Freedom and fear . . . have always been at war, and we know that God is not neutral between them. . . . [America's] responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of evil.”⁴⁹

The president made clear that God was central to any interpretation of the events surrounding 9/11. He saw an opportunity for a chosen America, through the use of force in Afghanistan, to inflict divinely sanctioned violence on those who had attacked God's favored nation and, by extension, God's defender of freedom. In other words, God is not neutral between freedom and fear. Note how Bush's Second Inaugural Address, which beckons toward a post-September 11 world and was delivered as American forces were being deployed in Iraq, declines the mantle of chosen nation in one sentence, yet in the next lines reclaims

the idea of America as indispensable to following the direction and will of the divine “Author of Liberty”:

We go forward with complete confidence in the eventual triumph of freedom. Not because history runs on the wheels of inevitability; it is human choices that move events. Not because we consider ourselves a chosen nation; God moves and chooses as He wills. We have confidence because freedom is the permanent hope of mankind, the hunger in dark places, the longing of the soul. When our Founders declared a new order of the ages; when soldiers died in wave upon wave for a union based on liberty; when citizens marched in peaceful outrage under the banner “Freedom Now”—they were acting on an ancient hope that is meant to be fulfilled. History has an ebb and flow of justice, but history also has a visible direction, set by liberty and the Author of Liberty.⁵⁰

Four hundred years after the Puritans first invoked what would become the American jeremiad as their way of interpreting the intersections of religion and violence, much of their call for humility and contrition seemed to have been lost along the way.

CONCLUSION: A JEREMIAD BEYOND VIOLENCE?

The covenant theory behind the jeremiad holds that, as God’s chosen people, covenanted with God, Americans have a responsibility to behave in certain ways, to honor certain religious principles, and to affirm publicly certain religious behaviors. The failure to do so can lead God to use violence—carried out by proxies, surrogates, and agents—to chastise the nation and restore it to righteousness. We have seen examples of this in colonists’ responses to King Philip’s War, the Civil War, and the September 11 attacks. Conversely, the triumph over one’s foes has often been used—from Winthrop, to Mather, to Hodgman and Tucker, to Falwell—to provide evidence of the right ordering of the national soul. But are there other ways of conceiving the jeremiad or understanding the connections between religion and conflict in American history that reject the legitimacy of violence? If Abraham Lincoln provided an example of a jeremiad deeply skeptical about the ability of humans to discern God’s will and intentions through precise and partisan interpretations of historical events, Martin Luther King Jr. provides a different example, one coming from deep within the Christian tradition that nonetheless rejects the moral-theological legitimacy of violence.

Like Lincoln, King complicates the tendency of other American prophets who simultaneously claimed epistemological privilege (knowing the mind of God, as read from historical events) and situated these claims about God’s intentions in a theology of instrumental violence. King’s approach, however, differs from that of Lincoln in that he showed little epistemological skepticism; he grounded his civil

rights activism in a claim that he and God were on the same side in seeking justice for the excluded and marginalized. "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice," King pronounced.⁵¹ One's obligations to God demand disobedience to unjust laws, which can be identified (rather unproblematically, it seems) by comparing them with God's just laws. As he put it in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," "A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law."⁵² Yet King, unlike Lincoln, eschewed the second pillar of the jeremiadic tradition, the sacralization of violence. At the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, King did suggest the possibility of future violence: "Those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges."⁵³ But rather than reinforce any justification for violence, King then turned to his supporters and offered a different message. King linked the civil rights movement—grounded deeply in the American tradition, the African American tradition, and the Christian tradition—to the overcoming of violence. "We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. . . . You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive."⁵⁴ King's call, then, was to break the cycle of violence—"to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression."⁵⁵ Indeed, part of breaking the cycle of violence, King's writings make clear, entails a willingness to suffer violence and to reciprocate such violence with love.

King's 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech is familiar to Americans and remains instructive in the context of this exploration of religion and violence in America. Recall the contents of his dream, the images he evokes:

[T]he sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will . . . sit down together.

[L]ittle black boys and black girls will . . . join hands with little white boys and white girls.

[A]ll of God's children will . . . sing with a new meaning, "My country, 'tis of thee."

[A]ll of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will . . . join hands and sing "Free at last!"⁵⁶

King offered a vision of the American future, as he put it, "deeply rooted in the American dream," but deeply rooted in quite a different notion of America from the one we have encountered above. It is a vision in which religion offers a way of

knowing God's will with a reasonable degree of certainty but a way out of the cycle of violence, between winners and losers, between conquerors and conquered. After all, those who are sitting down together, joining hands, and singing are members of two communities locked in a deep struggle over their individual identities and the identity of the nation they share. King's vision sanctifies "unearned" or "creative" suffering: not the violence unleashed by God in punishment for sin, not the victorious triumph of a godly people over a defeated foe. King offered a vision of a future in which Americans neither suffer divine violence at the hands of others, nor inflict it upon less powerful populations, but ultimately transcend it through a soul force deeply rooted in religion. The role of religion in this framework is one of transcendence and of redemption: King sought to make suffering not merely sufferable, but redemptive.

NOTES

1. Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a Cultural System," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973), 104.

2. The historical material for this chapter is presented in greater depth in Andrew R. Murphy, *Prodigal Nation: Moral Decline and Divine Punishment from New England to 9/11* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), chaps. 2–4.

3. There is nothing uniquely American about a group of people claiming to be chosen by and in covenant with God. See, for example, the work of Anthony Smith, especially his *Chosen Peoples* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). See also William R. Hutchinson and Hartmut Lehmann, eds., *Many Are Chosen: Divine Election and Western Nationalism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

4. See Walter Brueggemann, *Old Testament Theology: The Theology of the Book of Jeremiah* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and John van Seters, "Historiography in Ancient Israel," in *A Companion to Western Historical Thought*, ed. Lloyd Kramer and Sarah Maza (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

5. See Winthrop S. Hudson, "Fast Days and Civil Religion," in *Theology in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England. Papers Read at a Clark Library Seminar, February 6, 1971* (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1971).

6. The image of America as a "city on a hill" has been employed repeatedly from early Puritan writings through the Civil War (see the example of S. A. Hodgman, discussed later) and beyond. It was invoked repeatedly by President Ronald Reagan.

7. Winthrop's *Model* has been extensively anthologized, originally appearing in *The Winthrop Papers*, vol. 2 (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1931), 282; and, more recently, Matthew S. Holland, *Bonds of Affection: Civic Charity and the Making of America—Winthrop, Jefferson, Lincoln* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007), appendix A; quotations at p. 274.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Richard P. Gildrie, "The Ceremonial Puritan: Days of Humiliation and Thanksgiving," *New England Historical and Genealogical Review* 136 (1982): 4.

10. Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 29.

11. T. H. Breen, *Character of a Good Ruler: A Study of Puritan Political Ideas in New England, 1630–1730* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), chap. 3.

12. Darren Staloff, *The Making of an American Thinking Class: Intellectuals and Intelligentsia in Puritan Massachusetts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
13. Mather's sermon was delivered on the occasion of a day of humiliation, 12 mo 11 1673 (that is, February 11, 1674, under the Julian calendar used throughout colonial America before 1751), and published the following year.
14. Richard Slotkin and James K. Folsom, *So Dreadful a Judgment: Puritan Responses to King Philip's War, 1676–1677* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1978), 3.
15. Increase Mather, *The Day of Trouble Is Near* (Cambridge, MA, 1674), 22.
16. *Ibid.*, 24.
17. *Ibid.*, 1, 15–17.
18. *Ibid.*, 17.
19. *Ibid.*, 23.
20. *Ibid.*, 27.
21. See Nicholas Guyatt, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607–1686* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Michael P. Winship, *Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Early Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); and Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
22. *A new and further narrative of the state of New-England being a continued account of the bloody Indian war* (1676), in *King Philip's War Narratives*. March of America Facsimile Series, no. 29 (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1966), 2–3.
23. *Ibid.*, 14.
24. *A true account of the most considerable occurrences that have hapned in the warre between the English and the Indians in New-England* (1676), in *King Philip's War Narratives*, 5.
25. *New and further narrative*, 7.
26. Increase Mather, *A Brief History of the Warr with the Indians in New-England* (Boston, 1676), 19.
27. *Ibid.*, 27.
28. *New and further narrative*, 12.
29. Mather, *Brief History*, 5.
30. *Ibid.*, Postscript, 3.
31. John Webb, *The Duty of a Degenerate People to Pray for the Reviving of God's Work* (Boston, 1734), 5–6.
32. Joseph Sewall, *Nineveh's Repentance and Deliverance* (Boston, 1740), 13, 17; also 18, 29–33.
33. Nicholas Street, *The American States Acting Over the Part of the Children of Israel in the Wilderness* (New Haven, 1777), 31.
34. See George M. Fredrickson, "The Coming of the Lord: The Northern Protestant Clergy and the Civil War Crisis," in *Religion and the American Civil War*, ed. Randall M. Miller, Harry S. Stout, and Charles Reagan Wilson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Phillip Shaw Paludan, "Religion and the American Civil War," also in *Religion and the American Civil War*; Mark Y. Hanley, *Beyond a Christian Commonwealth: The Protestant Quarrel with the American Republic, 1830–1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); and Terrie Dopp Aamodt, *Righteous Armies, Holy Cause: Apocalyptic Imagery and the Civil War* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002), H 53.
35. S. A. Hodgman, *The Great Republic Judged, but Not Destroyed*, 2d ed. (New York, 1865).
36. J. W. Tucker, "God's Providence in War" (1862). In *"God Ordained this War": Sermons on the Sectional Crisis, 1830–1865*, ed. David B. Chesebrough (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 229, 233–234

37. Henry Ward Beecher, *Oration at the Raising of the 'Old Flag' at Sumter; and Sermon on the Death of Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States* (Manchester: Alexander Ireland, 1865), 12–13.

38. See Andrew R. Murphy, "Religion and the Presidency of Abraham Lincoln," in *Religion and the American Presidency*, ed. Gaston Espinosa (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

39. One important exception is worth noting. When Lincoln announced to his Cabinet his intention to issue the Emancipation Proclamation, he claimed that, on the basis of a vow he had made to himself and to God, he interpreted the Union victory at Antietam as indicative of a divine will in favor of emancipation. The Cabinet's response to Lincoln's announcement was, predictably, one of surprise and confusion. See Allen Guelzo, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation: The End of Slavery in America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 153; see also Allen Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln: Redeemer President* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 341; David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 374–375; William J. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People: A Study of the Religion of Abraham Lincoln* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1959), 17.

40. Abraham Lincoln, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 5: 419–420.

41. *Ibid.*, 403–404.

42. Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 434.

43. Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address" (March 4, 1865), in *Collected Works*, 8: 333 (emphasis added). On the scale of violence, see Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2006).

44. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation*, 86.

45. *Ibid.*, 426; also 145–146.

46. Gaines M. Foster, *Moral Reconstruction: Christian Lobbyists and the Federal Legislation of Morality, 1865–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 223.

47. James F. Findlay, "Religion and Politics in the Sixties: The Churches and the Civil Rights Act of 1964," *Journal of American History* 77 (1990): 90; Carl F. Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization: The Drift toward Neo-paganism* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1988), 172. Richard John Neuhaus draws on Seymour Martin Lipset's notion of "aggressive defense": "Their defense is against what they perceive as governmental actions dictated by 'secular humanists' in control of American public life"; see Neuhaus, "What the Fundamentalists Want," in *Piety and Politics: Evangelicals and Fundamentalists Confront the World*, ed. Richard John Neuhaus and Michael Cromartie (Washington, DC: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1987), 16.

48. Jerry Falwell, *The 700 Club*, Sept. 13, 2001.

49. George W. Bush, Remarks at National Day of Prayer and Remembrance for the Victims of the Terrorist Attacks on September 11, 2001, Sept. 14, 2001, <http://www.opm.gov/guidance/09-14-01gw.htm> (accessed 29 December 2011).

50. George W. Bush, "Second Inaugural Address," <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/20/politics/20BUSH-TEXT.htm>.

51. Martin Luther King Jr., "Where Do We Go from Here?" Address to the 11th Annual Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 16 August 1967, Atlanta, Georgia, http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/where_do_we_go_from_here_delivered_at_the_11th_annual_sclc_convention/.

52. Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in *Why We Can't Wait* (reissue; Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 93.

53. Martin Luther King Jr., Speech at the Lincoln Memorial (1963), <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihaveadream.htm>.
54. Ibid.
55. Martin Luther King Jr., Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech (1964), http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-acceptance.html.
56. King, Speech at the Lincoln Memorial.